

# blue rondo a la talk

David Price checks out Ortofon's latest range of affordable moving coil cartridges - and visits the factory.

**T**he best cartridge body is no cartridge body – this much we know. There are several, ultra high end designs, such as Dynavector's Te Ketora, which are as naked as the day they were born, untainted by metals, resins or plastics. The trouble is, bodies are there for a purpose – and this is to protect the ultra delicate and sensitive inner mechanism of a moving coil cartridge. Very little in life, except I would imagine, heart bypass surgery, requires as steady a hand to prevent tragic, grief-inducing consequences...

So, as with human beings, the body is there for a purpose. It keeps the inner stuff apart from the outside world, provides useful dirt and shock protection, and even (occasionally) makes things look nice to boot. Question is: which material to use?

Thanks to millions of years of evolution, we humans have pretty effective covering, which satisfies most (if not all) requirements put upon it. Moving coil cartridges have had considerably less time to develop, and people are still experimenting...

The case for metal (invariably aluminium) is strong, inasmuch as it's light and very rigid. If it can be shaped intelligently, then its natural propensity to resonate can be assuaged. Result: decent sound despite itself. Plastic is cheap, and clever formulations (i.e. Pocan) can be conjured up to get round the fact that it's not very rigid and generally gives a vague, nasal sound.

What then of wood? Well, if you're making the odd body in your spare time, it's near ideal. Contrary to the prejudices of the modern

world, wood is an extremely advanced 'bio' material which has been in development, by Mother Nature, for many millions of years. The right choice of wood gives you an extremely rigid, light and resonance-free body – which is why it's so popular in marine applications, and even loudspeakers. Indeed – it has the edge on most rival materials in all ways but one. First, it's not possible to get total, unerring acoustic consistency time after time. Second, you can easily fell a tree outside your house, but finding the right wood for the job is a time-consuming and expensive business. Third, wood carving doesn't lend itself to high volume industrial production processes...

In its new range of mid-price moving coils, Ortofon has developed a new body material using ground Japanese wood in a resin. No, it's not a Koetsu Rosewood then, but it has many of that great cartridge's properties – lack of resonance and rigidity which, translated to the sound through your speakers, results in low, low colouration and a natural musical sound. Or so the theory goes...

As per all Ortofons, you can get different trim levels – the body and transducer are the same, but instead of leather trim and air con, your extra dosh buys you finer styli. The base Rondo Red (£300) sports the cooking Nude Elliptical with aluminium cantilever, this the (£400) Rondo Blue substitutes the rock for a Nude Fritz Geiger 70, and the top Rondo Bronze (£500) gets an FG 80 with tapered aluminium cantilever. All the other vital statistics are the same – 10.5g body, 2-2.5g recommended tracking forces (2.3g optimum), 10-

200 ohm recommended load and similar-ish compliance.

## SOUND QUALITY

Having spent many hours listening to Ortofons over the years, from the VMS20E II of the seventies to the Kontrapunkt C of last year, I was most interested to see where the Rondo Blue fitted in to the great scheme of things. My first impressions were, 'what a clean sounding cartridge this is!' Now, if you're familiar with Ortofons, you'll know they're all clean – but this was clean in a way I'd not heard at or near the price. Essentially, listening to a wood resin bodied Ortofon suddenly tells you what's wrong with all the non-wood resin bodied Ortofons, and all other similarly clad moving coils, for that matter. They're oh so clean - amazingly clean. Did I mention they're clean?

If we're honest with ourselves here – the Rondo Blue is not the world's ultimate cartridge, and nor is it meant to be. It's unashamedly a modern, do-it-all, mid-price design. With this in mind, I was befuddled by its lack of obvious character (read: colouration). It's so 'not there', that you're left wondering where it is, and secondly whether all that you can hear is now down to the cantilever and stylus combination. In the case of the MC20W, this is not a bad one, but rather like the world's best turntable running a decent mid-price arm, you can't help wondering how much more amazing it would be if it had that very dream arm. In the case of the Blue, I was aware of the stylus in a way that I rarely am with mid-price coils – and was wishing I had the Bronze variant, which is only



£100 more...

So good is the body, and indeed the generator assembly, on this MC, that what little character the Blue brings to party is the ever-so-slightly fizzy upper midband and treble. Never is it harsh; rather it paints in broad brush strokes, and because the rest of the cartridge is so damn neutral, you can hear its imprecision. That's my criticism of this cartridge (in absolute terms, you understand) – it's not finessed enough.

Now, on to the good news – and there's a lot. The Rondo Blue has a strong, even, tight and taut bass

response, with real articulation and grip. It has a wide open midband, with a genuinely panoramic soundstage – the cartridge just seems to dissolve and the recorded acoustic just falls out of the speakers effortlessly with a feeling of total immutability. Voices are strong and accurately etched, and there's a real sense of secure tracking – it feels very secure in the groove – not up to Ortofon Kontrapunkt C standards, but that's the best I've heard in this respect anywhere, ever, at all. Dynamics are also particularly good – and obviously better than the

old MC Supreme series. The W simply isn't scared of serving up vast dollops of decibels when it's commanded by the great God of the Groove. You get the sense of an extremely self-effacing, accurate and articulate cartridge.

Now – here's the interesting bit. Compared to the older range Supremes, it seems like the oldsters were singing from inside baked bean cans. They're compressed, clanky and altogether a step further away from the music compared to the Rondos. Compared to my ageing MC30 Supreme, the cheaper Rondo Blue feels dynamic, expansive and even – by Danish standards at least – faintly groovy, baby. Ortofon's are always going to have that clean, tidy, neutral (did I mention they were clean?) sound – but they're actually beginning to really get in to the groove too, now.



## FON HOME

### DAVID PRICE MEETS THE MAN BEHIND ORTOFON

I still have my first cartridge, an Ortofon VMS20E, which I purchased in 1981, and even though it's on its second stylus, it still sounds surprisingly good. It's clean, measured, neutral, even and delicate – pretty much like every Ortofon of the 'modern', post SPU-era. Perhaps this is no surprise, as they're all the brainchildren of one man, Per Windfeld.

Per is very much the grandfather of the company now, having been designer in residence since the mid-1970s, and his knowledge, expertise and indeed personality, is imprinted into every radius and curve

of an Ortofon cartridge. He's an extremely affable, considerate and charming man. Something of a Japanophile, he's in love with everything from sushi to ukiyo-e wood block printing. Yet Per is of course very Danish too, which gives him an instinctive feel for detail and design, allied to an internationalism and open-mindedness.

Per's exhaustive approach to transducer engineering, obsessed with the minutiae of everything from the rubber blends used in a cartridge's suspension and the body moulding technology to the cantilever material and stylus profile, means that his influence on the Ortofon sound is absolute. His own reference system speaks volumes about his character – Micro Seiki turntables and tonearms, Tandberg amplification, KEF 107 loudspeakers. This is all seriously neutral, dispassionate, analytical fare – and fairly reflects Per...

Of course, this comes as no great surprise to anyone who's lived with an Ortofon cartridge. Like Mercedes Benz cars, there's an unerring sense of rightness and consistency about the brand's products. It may not be to everyone's taste, but you know where you are, and where you are is with an exhaustively researched, meticulously engineered phono cartridge; one that sounds as it does because it hasn't been voiced to pander to whim or fashion. Of course, this isn't everyone's cup of tea, and as the 'post-digital' turntable market blossoms, more and more analogue addicts are looking for a little 'character'.

The new Rondo series shows this – the company is turning to new and innovative production processes, thoroughly engineered of course, to add life to the famously even and neutral Ortofon sound. The new wood resin-based Rondo has all of the brand's traditional analytical rigour, yet is obviously more musically engaging than previous models. If you're looking for euphonic colouration, then I'd respectfully suggest you go somewhere else, but for those wanting a truly immersive and enchanting musical experience, these are the best affordable Ortofon's ever.

## VERDICT

Not everyone's cup of tea of course, but if it's the most detailed, neutral and even handed sub-£500 moving coil you seek, then look no more...

**ORTOFON RONDO BLUE £400**

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## MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Even in the days of well developed digital, frequency response of a cartridge like the Ortofon Rondo Blue is no embarrassment. Flat within 1dB limits right up to 20kHz, ignoring the usual rise to arm resonance that enhances low frequencies, it is a picture of accuracy. There were differences between the channels at high frequencies, but they were small. Inner groove losses, shown in the analysis (upper trace), were minimal up to 10kHz, with a small -2dB loss above this frequency. The stylus is exceptional at short wavelengths, so will retrieve detail and avoid dullness right to the end of a record.

Distortion was low laterally and vertically, the latter because vertical tracking angle was correctly set to 22degrees, our measurements showed. The Ortofon Rondo Blue is a low distortion cartridge by any standard.

As Moving Coils go, output was high, measuring 750uV into a 40ohm load. This is too low for an MM input but sufficiently high to keep input hiss well suppressed on a typical MC input.

Tracking was excellent at 300Hz and 1kHz, tests of amplitude and acceleration respectively. A square wave test showed some ringing, as usual with MCs, indicative of extended response with discrete structural resonances. A sweep to 50kHz (lower trace) showed the Ortofon Rondo Blue peaks at 25kHz and is only -5dB down at 35kHz, so it has enormous bandwidth.

The new Ortofon Rondo Blue measures superbly in every area. It has virtually no weaknesses, showing just how capable a modern, refined cartridge can be. NK

Tracking force	2gms - 2.5gms
Weight	7gms
Vertical tracking angle	22degrees
Frequency response	20Hz - 20kHz
Channel separation	31dB
Tracking ability (300Hz)	
lateral	85µm
vertical	45µm
lateral (1kHz)	22cms/sec.
Distortion (45µm)	
lateral	1.1%
vertical	1%
Output (5cms/sec rms)	0.75mV

