

Charisma Audio MC-2  
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Music is a universal language, whatever its form, colour or origin. For people of my generation, this fact reminds us too that playing recorded music at home has required us to use several different technologies since, say, the beginning of the 80s. Vinyl, magnetic tape, CD and now portable digital files via streaming or read from a server, all controlled with fingertips on a touchscreen.

Whatever the fashion, there will always be enthusiastic users, because we can't go without music. You have doubtless noticed that vinyl is still popular and even seems to inspire collectors, DJs and others. Its quality and especially its low price appeals to a younger and younger crowd, just as it did for us in the 70s and 80s.

The interesting thing to note is that while digital music quality continues to develop, analog technology, centred on an object you hold in your hands — the famous vinyl disc. Not to forget the purely mechanical side represented by the turntable itself, which in many cases holds a multitude of details which only a trained eye will perceive and appreciate for their true value.

i admit to a soft spot for the device, the precision needed to adjust the parts, the distribution of masses, the choice of materials, the type of tone arm, of platter, of cartridge. The Canadian manufacturer Oracle was and certainly still is the finest example of what the analog turntable represents in terms of design. In terms of technology, Louis Desjardins too has been able to bring his Canadian-made analog turntables to their peak.

In short, seeing the miracle of sound take place through a diamond (stylus) scraping the bottom of a vinyl groove. The miracle depends on very little, frankly, and it's fascinating when you think of it, isn't it? However, getting the performance you want depends on a few "details" of correct adjustment, and especially on the quality of the arm and cartridge you plan to use.

You have to know as well that the prices of these rotating platters, that is, turntables, can be incredible. All the same, analog has managed to adapt to and win over a new clientèle while keeping the old one, with more and more beautiful and high-performing new "toys". The market is overflowing with products for all tastes and purses.

Specifically, you can find a new analog turntable with respectable performance for \$1000 all told. Rega is in my opinion the world champion in all divisions. It seems the English don't just know how to make pretty cars and leather shoes. But like every other audio component, it's not enough all by itself and it's not unusual to squeeze out performance improvements by giving some attention to what can (and should) be bettered.

An analog turntable is made up of the rotating element, the platter, turned by an electric motor. Then there is the arm, the cartridge and the phono preamplifier, which receives and transfers the micro-signal to the main system's preamplifier. Each part is important, just as is the care devoted to setup and the azimuth and alignment settings. We'll come to this, because you don't get anything for nothing in Life.

Today we'll look at the cartridge, the famous "whatchamacallit" in the form of a stylus which scrapes the bottom of the groove, specifically the Charisma Audio model MC-2. Retail price noted January 2015 : \$1,720.00.

As a preface I'll give you my opinion on analog.

Since I was born in the 60s, I had vinyl LPs in my hands, like my father and his family before him, up until the arrival of magnetic tape in all its forms, then the digital CD and finally the "immaterial" hi-res music file. The teething troubles of the digital medium have also been corrected since the 90s and we can state that in 2015 that the industry has managed to make the software and the hardware (the DAC) of the medium work together just as well.

Honestly, vinyl is great, but it's not terribly practical. One side of an LP can hold about 15 minutes of music, and then you have to turn the record over manually, make sure the cartridge diamond sets down exactly where it's supposed to, clean it regularly and so on... which is the same as saying it's not very ergonomic. However the precise, "mechanical" aspect remains one of the attractions of vinyl. Not that the sound is better than... no, I won't go there, and no, obviously not at a realistic budget, no comparison with a good digital recording is possible, but still, once the careful setup is done, the analog result is very pleasant to listen to and in the end that's all that matters.

Before getting to the pleasure of listening, the cartridge has to be installed on the tone arm. This step is vital for subsequent events. All the necessary adjustments have to be made. A computer program allows us to check and re-check overhang settings, then we re-check visually. Place the turntable on an adequate support, systematically couple and de-couple. Now at last the music can reveal itself.

I purposely chose an entry-level turntable for this test. The reason is simple: the market is structured around this kind of product. Thousands of turntables of this type were sold worldwide in 2014, and we had to be able to present our arguments around something known and recognized.

Rega was one of the forerunners with regard to value-priced quality turntables. This RP-3, signed by the artist Zilon, is the fruit of a collaboration with the Canadian distributor Plurison through the initiative of its marketing director, Michel Plante. Zilon is a self-taught painter who has been creating graffiti on the walls of the city of Montreal since 1983, and also on any wall or object, sometimes very unusual ones.

That said, you must have guessed we would want to compare this Rega RP3 (\$1200) with the Charisma MC-2 cartridge (\$1720) to our reference Oracle Première MK IV equipped with Moerch DP8 anamorphic arm, Benz Micro Ruby 3H and modified PS Audio GCPH phono stage (\$13,000 all together).

In 1954 the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) adopted as a standard the inspired equalization curve of the RCA Victor label.

The vibrations of the stylus at the bottom of the vinyl groove generate micro-modulations at the cartridge output. These are too weak to be sent directly to a preamplifier and so they have to be pre-preamplified. This makes it important to use an appropriate phono preamplifier and especially one with good performance. They are not all equal to the task.

The phono stage impedance adjustment for your cartridge is also a performance factor not to neglect. A minimum of experience is strongly advised if you want to get the best out of a turntable. Otherwise a puzzle is guaranteed, and in such circumstances your retailer is your friend.

The Rega RP-3 is a manual turntable. No assistance is provided, whether for placing the tone arm, for lifting it at the end of the side or for shutdown. You have to do everything yourself, but because its mechanics are very simple, it is also very reliable, which is how it got its fine reputation. I chose this particular model for all these good reasons.

The Charisma MC-2 cartridge is of the type called MC (Moving Coil). Generally high-performing, cartridges of this type are much more complicated to manufacture, which is what justifies the price, beyond the fact that this model is made in small batches and not mass-produced. Such technology, if it can still be called that, is generally reserved for high end products.

It's more complicated to start up an analog turntable than a CD player, because the CD's read assembly is not adjustable. This is far from being the case with an analog tone arm, which is in continual movement, and the cartridge has to stay parallel to its axis.

### Strengths

- Overall performance
- Refined aluminum construction
- High end finish and presentation
- Attractive price for the performance offered

### Weaknesses

- None

## Conclusion

I wondered at the time whether I should have an analog system. I have to say that you develop a taste for it as you go along. The overarching value of performance never concerned me much, because whenever I have a vinyl disc in my hands it reminds me of my carefree youth, and just that makes me happy.

After a few records, I'm surprised to see that I still like it. I tap my toes to the music — a good sign. My only regret is that I don't have more LPs to listen to, and also having to turn the darn things over every 15 or 20 minutes.

I got out some great classics for the occasion and my pal Claude graciously lent me a few audiophile LPs, some really good Sheffield Labs. Vinyl really makes sense with these, and others by 2L and Stockfish Records.

I really liked the sound of the Rega RP-3 equipped with this wonderful Charisma MC-2 cartridge, because it doesn't add or colour anything. It's smooth, airy, balanced and unconstricted, voices sound perfectly natural, bass is tight, fast and deep. The music is pleasant to listen to. (By my standards of course. I don't like a coloured or flabby sound, the quirk that characterizes some analog playback, the bloated sound that that I would call "romantic" but which is really an obvious colouration. YMMV.)

Not bad for the price, I was expecting more difference than that from the Oracle Première, what with the approximately \$10,000 price spread.

Now don't go putting words in my mouth... yes it was super good, enough to keep me greedily putting on LP after LP. The little Rega grows on you when it's well equipped, the high-end Charisma MC-2 fits it like a glove. But the Oracle has much better dynamics!

Comparison is a dangerous thing to try; it has to happen in a controlled situation. We agreed that if we had not compared, the Rega RP-3 with the Charisma MC-2 cartridge remained an undoubted contender, with a balanced, quite dynamic sound which was overall a pleasure to listen to with any kind of music or recording.

My previous crush had been a setup with a Dynavector 10X5 cartridge, but when we did this test with the Charisma MC-2 the Rega RP-3 was literally transformed. If it plays so well mounted on a \$1,000 turntable, it goes without saying that it will sound even better on a more sophisticated one.

I can hardly recommend strongly enough that you try this kind of thing out for yourself, a cartridge and an arm are the key to sure success when the match is good. We found no fault with the Charisma MC-2 cartridge; packed with quality, this object was not made by amateurs, no indeed. The people who designed this cartridge drew from their own experience, to be sure, but also from most similar products already available on the

market. They eliminated certain faults, to create what we may call an excellent relationship between quality, audio performance and price.

The more inquisitive among you should know that a micro adjustment could and indeed had to be made after several months of use, when the manufacturer's recommended break-in period was finished, but you should also know that the sound was by this time very very good already, good enough that I could use it as a reference for the magazine.

In my setup, I use an inoaudio steel tripod wall support, made to measure. A turntable cannot be installed the same way as a CD player. Indeed a CD player has to be coupled to its shelf to deliver all the performance it is capable of. With an analog player, you have to find a way to isolate it as much as possible — in other words, decouple the arm, base and motor so as to limit all interfering mechanical forces. These vibrations are harmful to the optimal function of the cartridge at the end of its arm. This is why [in my system] you find an absorber set into a wooden piece under each foot of the Rega RP-3, as well as a sub-platter which is itself decoupled with high-density foam and whose lower part sits on three stainless steel points, the front two of which are semi-damped.

The phono preamp used was, as usual, the one in my Integris CD-player/preamp and the RCA cable connecting the turntable and the phono stage was 3 metres long and looks quite ordinary but... the sound is there!

One last thing... I have had the chance over several years to see and especially to hear turntables of which some cost more than my car when it was new. But it's important to understand that price is no guide to musicality whatsoever. I had as much fun listening to the Rega RP-3, with the excellent Charisma MC-2 cartridge, as I did with the Oracle Première mk IV, five times more expensive.

I recommend this Charisma cartridge without the shadow of a doubt. The fact that another, even better model has been introduced as I write these words is evidence of continuing effort to improve their products. It's a lifelong passion for Bernard Li, and you can trust him.