



# Absolute ANALOG

## Da Vinci Grand Reference Cartridge Grandezza

Grander Yet!

Jonathan Valin

In Issue 193, I sang the praises of Peter Brem's wonderful very-low-output moving-coil cartridge, the Da Vinci Reference Grandezza, ranking it—alongside the Clearaudio Goldfinger v2 and the Air Tight PC-1 Supreme—as one of the three most lifelike transducers I've heard in my system.

Now, a year later, Peter and Da Vinci have come up with a revised version of that cartridge designated the "Grand Reference" that directly and successfully addresses several areas in which the original Reference was a bit weak or, at least, weaker than the competition, and does so without sacrificing any of the original's strengths, which is an altogether good thing.

You may recall from my first review that I thought the Reference was a virtual paragon of neutrality and transparency, with less "character" of its own than any mc phono cartridge I'd yet heard. The Reference simply wasn't "there" in the way moving coils usually are. It didn't add scintillant brightness to the treble, didn't lend midrange timbres an oil-paint gloss and glow, didn't turn the soundfield dark or grainy, didn't hype details or transients (although it was incredibly detailed and fast). As a

result, it sounded to my ear less like an electro-mechanical device and more like the real thing—at least when the real thing was well recorded. When it wasn't, it told you that, too, although thanks to a sweet and forgiving treble it never made poor discs unlistenable.

Of course, one man's sweet and forgiving is another's polite and enervated. Even a fan of the Da Vinci cartridge, like me, would concede that other cartridges outdid it in large-scale dynamics. The Da Vinci Reference Grandezza (especially mounted in Da Vinci's great turntable and tonearm) may have set a new standard of naturalness and articulation on mezzopiano-to-pianississimo passages but it wasn't a world-beater on mezzoforte-to-fortississimo passages; nor did it have the deepest, most powerful bass of all the contenders. It wasn't as good a soundstager as some of its competitors, either, sacrificing a little stage width for superior depth and front-to-back clarity and perspective.

Now, if you were to try out the new Da Vinci Grand Reference on some of the same recordings that I mentioned in my review in Issue 193, you would at first be hard put to hear a difference between it and the original. Take Bruno Maderna's Serenade No.

2 [Supraphon]. With the new cartridge you would hear, once again and with the exact same limpid clarity of line and neutrality of timbre as the old Da Vinci, the way Maderna lets the freshly sounded timbre of one instrument (such as a flute) harmonize with the decaying harmonics of the previously sounded timbre of another instrument (such as a violin), turning the piece into a kind of a gentle, magical, melting sound world in which eleven disparate instruments seemingly “complete” each other’s utterances in *almost* the same voice. On Leon Redbone’s mumbly-grumbly *Branch to Branch* [Warner], you would hear, yet again, the same hard-to-decipher lyrics made perfectly understandable (and you would hear that microphone preamp clipping, too, on “Sweet Mama, Papa’s Done Gone Mad”).

## SPECS & PRICING

### Da Vinci Grand Reference

#### Cartridge Grandezza

Type: **Low-output moving-coil cartridge**

Output: **0.17mV**

Coil impedance: **3 ohms**

Matching impedance: **3 ohms**

Recommended stylus force:

**2-2.2 grams**

Weight: **20 grams**

Price: **\$7750**

### DA VINCI AUDIO LABS

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### JV'S REFERENCE SYSTEM

Loudspeakers: Magico M5, MartinLogan CLX, Magnepan 1.7

Full-function and lineage

preamps: Soudution 720, Audio Research Reference 5, BALabo BC-1 Mk-II, Audio Space Reference 2, Technical Brain TBC-Zero

Phonostage preamps: Audio Research Corporation Reference Phono 2, Lamm Industries LP-2 Deluxe, Soudution 750

Power amplifiers: Soudution 700, Audio Research Reference 610T, BALabo BP-1 Mk-II, Lamm ML-2, Technical Brain TBP-Zero/ver.2

Analog source: Walker Audio

Proscenium Black Diamond Mk II record player, AAS Gabriel/DaVinci turntable with DaVinci Grandezza tonearm

Phono cartridges: DaVinci

Reference Cartridge

Grandezza, Air Tight PC-1

Supreme, Clearaudio

Goldfinger v2

Digital source: dCS Scarlatti,

dCS Puccini, Soudution 740,

ARC Reference CDB

Cable and interconnect: Tara

Labs “Zero” Gold interconnect,

Tara Labs “Omega” Gold

speaker cable, Tara Labs “The

One” Cobalt power cords, MIT

Oracle MA-X interconnect,

MIT Oracle MA speaker

cable, Synergistics Research

Absolute Reference speaker

cables and interconnects

Accessories: Shakti

Halographs (6), Symposium

Acoustics Isis equipment

stand and Ultra equipment

platforms, Walker Prologue

Reference equipment stand,

Walker Prologue amp stands,

Shunyata Research Hydra

V-Ray power distributor and

King Cobra power cables,

Shunyata Research Dark Field

Cable Elevators, Walker Valid

Points and Resonance Control

discs, Clearaudio Double

Matrix record cleaner, HiFi-

Tuning silver/gold fuses

Even on a new LP, like Dan Hicks’ superb and superbly recorded *Tangled Tales* [Surf Dog LP], you’ll hear this same clarity of line, high resolution, and neutrality of timbre, here in the service of the marvelous way Hicks and the Hot Licks turn the 1919 fox trot “The Blues My Naughty Baby Gave to Me” into something straight out of psychedelic-cowboy/gypsy-bebop heaven, complete with Django-like mandolin, Grapelli-like violin, and those marvelous chirping (“Hi, Bill!”) Lickette backups. (FYI, a current Lickette, Darla Cohen, is married to one of us! Her husband is none other than The Lotus Group’s Joe Cohen—the guy largely responsible for the Granada speaker.)

*But...* if you were to put something less relaxed on the turntable, something with tremendous energy, like, say the Czech Philharmonic’s performance of compatriot Leos Janáček’s incomparable *Sinfonietta* [Denon], the differences between the two cartridges would immediately become obvious.

Throughout this piece, Janáček uses huge wind and brass ensembles: a piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, an English horn, an E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, a bass clarinet, four horns in F, three trumpets in F, two bass trumpets, four trombones, two tenor tubas, a tuba, and nine—count ’em—trumpets in C. Friends, when this assemblage cries out in full voice, as it does so memorably in the first, third, and last movements, it achieves an almost barbaric martial splendor that leaves something like Respighi and his evocation of the Roman Legions in the piney dust. There is very little else in modern music as thrilling, beautiful, savage, and awe-inspiring as these great wind and brass fanfares—and very few pieces of music that rise to this glorious and fearsome height.

The first version of the Da Vinci cartridge would have given you all of these instruments (and everything else in the orchestra from strings to percussion) with utter clarity and natural timbre. But it would also have robbed you of some of their power, which robs the *Sinfonietta* of some of its goosebump-raising majesty.

Mounted on the Walker Black Diamond Mk II (reviewed in Issue 202), the Grand Reference gives you Janáček’s orchestra *and* its dynamics without limitations. The huge fanfares are, indeed, huge, and mind-bogglingly powerful right through quadruple forte. The Grand Reference tracks and traces so perfectly that even the loudest trumpet blasts never turn shrill or incoherent (assuming, of course, that your speakers and amplifiers are capable of handling all the energy this cartridge is feeding them at lifelike volumes). Indeed, I don’t think I’ve heard the *Sinfonietta* to better effect on any record player.

In addition, the Grand Reference has added weight on the bottom. By this I don’t mean that it adds any spurious darkness or phony lushness to the sound; I just mean that when the timpani go off in the *Sinfonietta* (or any other piece) they will shake the walls and floors as they do in life. Add to this a newfound breadth of stage, a wall-to-wall width that makes antiphonal passages that much more, well, antiphonal, and what was already a great cartridge is now an even greater one (and, though my no means cheap, still the least expensive option among the Big Three).

Do remember that this is a very low output mc (0.17mV), which means you’re going to need a phonostage capable of boosting its output to line level without inviting excessive hum or RFI. I highly recommend the Audio Research Corporation Reference Phono 2 and the Soudution 750. **tbb**

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