

Exploring uncharted territories

X-Quisite

Extreme Exotics from Switzerland

Author | Lincoln Cheng

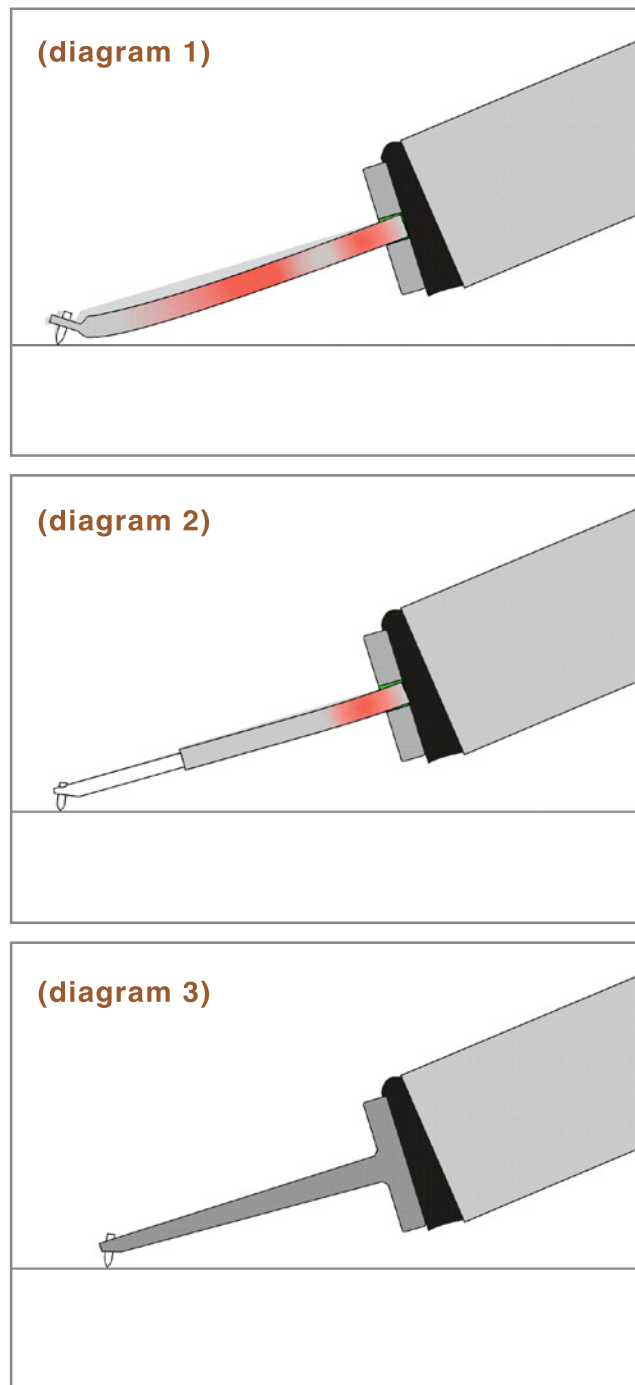
Translation | Paul Leung



Perhaps the Swiss cartridge maker “X-Quisite” sounds unfamiliar to you. However, if I tell you that it’s a new brand created as part of the HiFiction AG family who also make “Thales Tonearm”, would this rings a bell? There are currently 3 moving-coil cartridges available from this maker. All of them were designed by the young engineer, Micha Huber, and made in their factory in Switzerland. Impressive?

The new patented design

What makes X-Quisite really special is its monobloc-ceramic transducer, which is a patented technology that took Micha 3 years to research and develop. Micha believes that the conventional aluminium cantilever is relatively soft. When the stylus tracks highly dynamic passage, the cantilever easily deforms and distorts the mechanical signal. Furthermore, the part of cantilever between the stylus and the transducer is actually subject to very high stress due to lever action thus incurs distortion into the transmitted signals (diagram 1). To address this problem, high-end cartridge designers typically use hard materials like boron, sapphire or even diamond to make stylus and it does help prevent resonance in the cantilever. However, the joint between the cantilever and the transducer is nonetheless subject to even higher stress from the load and inevitably affects the signal transmission (diagram 2). X-Quisite adopts the patented “Monobloc-ceramic transducer” technology. Cantilever and transducer are made of a one-piece high strength ceramic. Since there is no joint at all, there is no part particularly under high stress and therefore it allows the signal transmitted from stylus to the transducer without any distortion or loss of the music detail (diagram 3).



Specification

■ Stylus: Monobloc ceramic transducer (patented) ■ Coil: 24k pure gold ■ Diamond tip: micro ridge ■ Magnetic system: Neodym-Armco ■ Cartridge body: bronze, aluminium, wood ■ Vertical tracking angle: 200 ■ Weight: 20.8g ■ Vertical tracking force: 1.9-2.1g ■ Output voltage: 0.33mV ■ Compliance: 12µm / mN ■ Frequency response: 20Hz - 30kHz ■ Impedance: 20Ω ■ Recommended loading: 400 - 800Ω ■ Retail Price: Contact Audio Exotics Contact: (852) 9181-8291

The Fantastic Three

There are three models in the X-Quisite series. All of them adopt a strong magnetic circuit based on Neodym-Armco, which provides a reasonable output voltage of 0.3mV without the use of icon. They are namely X-Quisite CA (8,400 Swiss Franc), X-Quisite ST (11,800 Swiss Franc) and Extreme Exotics (specially made for the Greater China, including Hong Kong and Macau, distributed by Audio Exotics). Basically, each of these three models are made of 3 parts. There is a thin wooden inlay between the cartridge and the head shell. On top of the inlay, there is an aluminium holder for keeping the transducer in position. The cartridge body is milled from a single block of metal using CNC. CA adopts pure copper coil with aluminium alloy as cartridge body. ST uses pure silver coil and titanium body. Extreme Exotics uses 24K gold coil and gold plated bronze body. Although these three model share similar technical specification (except their weight of course), they have completely different acoustical characteristics and tonal colours.

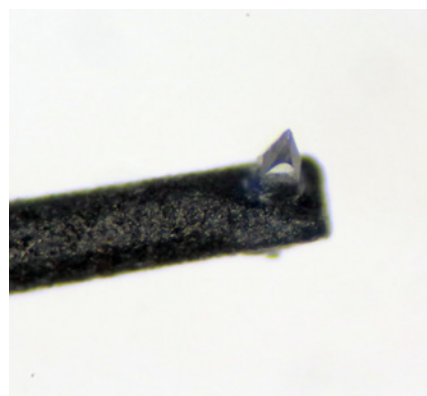
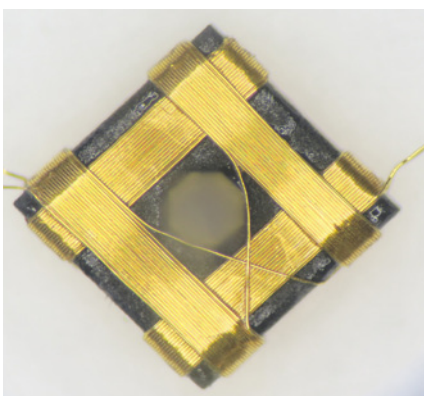
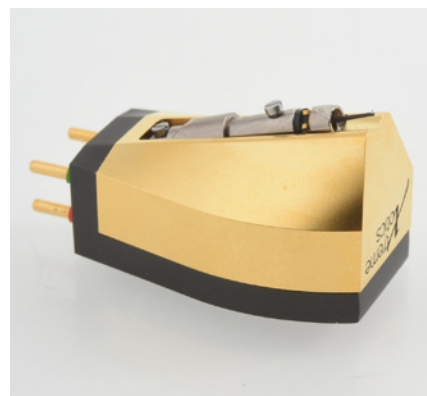
A new level

Perhaps you would find it interesting: Why did Micha distribute the flagship model of the the X-Quisite series exclusively via Audio Exotics? According to Chris Leung from Audio Exotics, at first Micha required excessive amount of funding and resources to develop the monobloc-ceramic transducer, he sought for indicate of interest from distributors globally. His

original idea was to offer only two models - X-Quisite CA and X-Quisite ST. However, when Micha engaged Chris, Chris not only expressed his full support to the development of the new cartridge, he also threw out a bold idea. If Micha could take advantage of the new design to develop an outstanding cartridge, he would offer to underwrite the sale of the new flagship model on the condition that Audio Exotics have the exclusive right to distribute it. Micha gracefully accepted Chris' proposal and started working on the project at once. After uncountable experiments, he discovered that when combining 24k gold coil which is naturally aged for 50 years with cartridge body made from monolithic bronze, one would yield superb analytical power, extremely open soundstage and very rich tonal characteristics. Micha recalled that he was shocked by the outcome when he first played music using the new flagship cartridge. Not only does it have the merits of X-Quisite ST - crystal clear, transparent, detailed, agile, smooth, fast, highly dynamic and of extended frequency bandwidth, it also takes the openness, density and transparency to the next level. Without Chris' idea (or is it a challenge?), he admitted that he would not have worked so hard to build such a super cartridge. Hence, he also took Chris' recommendation to name the new flagship "Extreme Exotics".

Immediate Acceptance

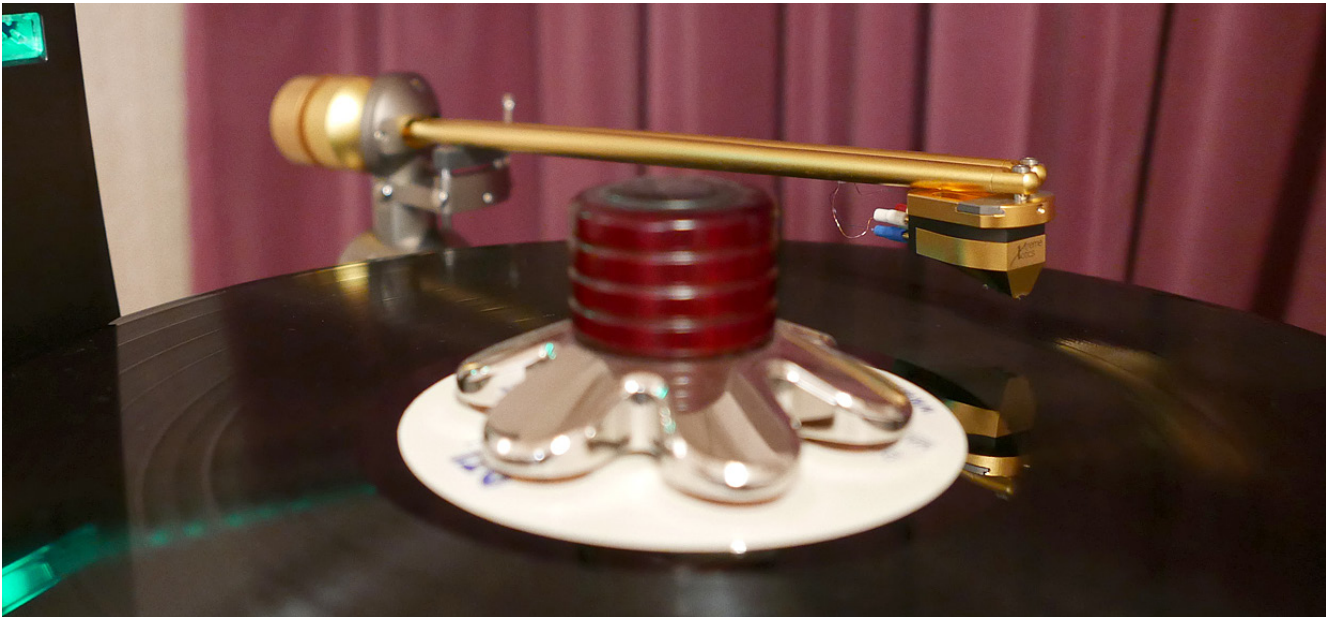
Micha and I had been good friends for years. I have been a big fan of his "chopstick" tonearm from Simplicity to today's Statement. I admire so much his smart use of



△ Monobloc-ceramic cantilever with transducer under microscope

△ Hand made 24K gold coil

△ Diamond micro ridge stylus



tetragon geometry to achieve constant tracing errors of less than 0.006 degrees. When he introduced X-Quisite ST to me, I did not hesitate to order one to have hands on experience on its power. However, when Extreme Exotics went into production, Micha set me a note saying that, "Although X-Quisite ST was a very high quality cartridge, I know that you always demand for the best. I suggest you go for Extreme Exotics instead." As the designer made such a recommendation to me directly, there was really no reason not to accept it right away. With Chris' arrangement, I received an Extreme Exotics with a serial number "X888" (a very lucky number in Chinese) in early April. The cartridge is very delicate and beautiful. Even the box carrying the cartridge is machined from a single piece of original Walnut. There was a technical specification card signed by Micha inside the box. The cartridge also came with three sets of titanium screws with different lengths, one swiss made screwdriver and one stylus cleaner. As Extreme Exotics was made of Bronze, it's the heaviest among the three in the series. The weight is 20.8g. Micha specially made a heavier counterweight for the statement tonearm. As all the Thales tonearms require the user to use the supplied tool to precisely install the cartridge onto the head shell in advance, mounting Extreme Exotics onto my Statement tonearm was very straightforward. Some patience and focus are all I needed.



All inclusive

Aside from Extreme Exotics's perfect partner, the Thales Statement tonearm, I play music with Brinkmann

Balance turntable, Siltech double crown phono cable and Harmonix TU-812MX record stabiliser. The phono stage is Acoustical Systems Evocator. Other reference equipments at my home include Audio Note M10 Signature Preamp, Gaku-On power amplifier and Tidal Akira loudspeakers. The power cords used as reference are Audio Note Sootto, Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream and Siltech Triple Crown. All interconnect and loudspeaker cables are Siltech Triple Crown.

Audiophiles would know that a new cartridge requires run-in before it can perform optimally. However, Extreme Exotics surprised me with its outstanding playback performance after playing just 5 records. When I wrote this review, I played with Extreme Exotics for approximately 60 hours. However, the calmness and fluency of the sound are almost impeccable. The inexplicable attractiveness aroused my curiosity and spurred me to play back the records that I'm very familiar for making comparisons. The more records I played, the more I appreciated the philosophy of his new cartridge design. In the following month, I finished listening tens of records of various genres, including voices, choirs, rock, jazz, country folk, classical, percussion, quartets and earthshaking orchestral musics. To be honest, judging from my experience with many cartridges (though still a very limited subset in the universe) that I have listened, there was by far no single record which Extreme Exotics let me down. By contrast, the extent of openness, liveliness, the level of detail, the elegance and the dexterity of the high frequencies, the fullness and clear outline of the mid range, the quality, quantity and speed of the low frequencies, the appeal of the music are amongst the best of all the cartridges I have listened. Besides, as the micro ridge stylus of Extreme Exotics was precisely installed in the cantilever, it tracks the grooves of the records so well that I could hardly hear any surface noise from the records. Here I quoted two records I listened to summarise my positive impression on Extreme Exotics.

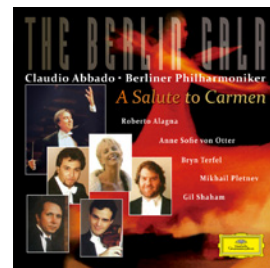
Infinite satisfaction

I played “The All Star Percussion Ensemble” which is a recording of 10 percussionists from America and Denmark conducted by Harold Farberman. It was recorded in Vanguard Record Studio in the US. These 10 percussionists were carefully positioned and playing more than 40 types of different percussion instruments. It’s challenging to your system to reproduce accurately what was recorded. Extreme Exotics reproduces crystal clear high-frequency characteristics and unique metallic texture of various types of cymbals, triangles, cowbells, chimes, xylophones, marimba, etc., and brings them to life. Although there are a variety of musical instruments and the shiny sounds are competing with each other, you can still hear vividly how every piece of them sound. The overtones fade out very naturally. All the instruments remain well positioned even in the loud and complex passages. The sound is impeccably realistic. Timpani, snare drums, African drums and bass drums sound excellent in both quality and quantity. The elasticity of the drum head and the reverberation of the drum cavity are clearly audible, raising the rhythm of the melody to a higher level. I can also hear very rich and natural reverb from the recording venue. The overall music picture is very bright and shining. The satisfaction the listening experience gave me is arguably infinite. While Farberman’s exquisite arrangement and the musicians’ fantastic performance are absolutely amazing, Extreme Exotics’s superb playback performance is nothing short of impressive.



Full of joy

Another record I played is “The Berlin Gala”. This is a live performance of Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Claudio Abbado in Berliner Philharmonie on 31 Dec 1997. It is a spectacular concert not only because of the performance but also because all guests are stars (Gil Shaham, Mikhail Pletnev, Anne Sofie von Otter, Bryn Terfel etc.). The programme are popular work (Excerpts from Carmen, Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini, “Carmen” Fantasy etc.). The sound effect of the recording is arguably on demonstration level. As Extreme Exotics perfectly tracks the grooves, Otter’s interpretation in Carmen is full of emotions. Terfel is full of confidence when acting as a bull fighter. The singing of the choirs is also very neat. Abbado’s conducting is almost perfect. Although it is a pure musical performance on the stage instead of an operatic version, the dramatic effect and the sound performance are equally phenomenal. Pletnev’s performance in the Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini and Shaham’s performance in Carmen Fantasy are stunning. These two masters seemed to be partner seamlessly with the orchestra. The dynamics of the piano and the violin, and the density and definition of the sound made me feel like teleporting to the actual venue of the event. Even though I knew this comes from the sound effect is what Extreme Exotics has to offer, my heart has already been filled with pleasure brought about by the music. I almost forgot to pay attention to the sound effects.



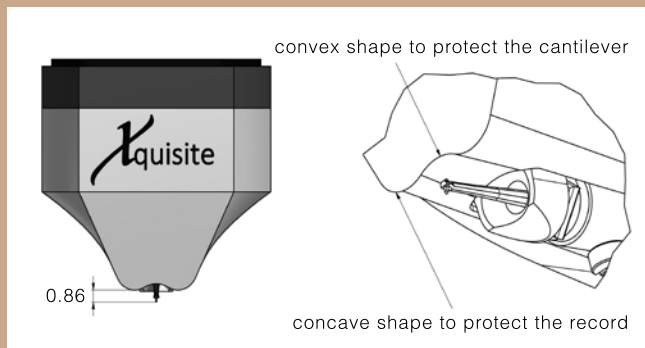


Summary

Although stereo moving coil cartridge was invented many years ago, the designs from various brands worked in pretty much similar ways. They are different only in cantilever, coil, magnetic system, material of the cartridge body and the stylus shape. Misha took it further. He discovered that the material of the cantilever as well as its connection to the transducer could have significant interference to the signal. He came up with an innovative design that addresses these requirements. This is a piece of great news to all vinyl lovers. Perhaps the price of Extreme Exotics is not consumer friendly, it does mark a breakthrough in the design of moving coil cartridge. When you have a chance to listen to it, you will understand why I'm so enthusiastic about it.

Postscript

After I put Extreme Exotics on the record, I was shocked because I realised that the gap between the cartridge body and the record was so close (actually just 0.85mm!). The body appeared to touch the record any time. Also, Extreme Exotics does not have any stylus protector at all. So I told Micha about my worries. He explained that the gap was designed to be small to protect the cantilever. If there is a strong force exerted to the cartridge from above, the two "noses" of the cartridge will touch the record or platter surface before the cantilever breaks. On the other hand, if there is a problem with the suspension (due to ageing, cleaning liquid etc...), the user will soon realise it because the noses would touch the record. This will help prevent the user from using a cartridge with broken suspension. The shape of the "noses" is rounded so the record will not be damaged. Micha also emphasised that, from his prolonged testing, the gap between the "noses" and the record leaves enough freedom for wrapped records as these records would require at most 15mm only. For the cantilever protector, Misha said many audiophiles broke the cantilever when putting on the protector. He believed that these accidents could have been avoided if there were no protector at all. He is probably right as I broke three cantilevers for this reason in the past !



You can imagine how painful my experience was. 🙄