the ear
HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review

Da Vinci, Giotto and the art of cartridge design

Monday, October 14, 2024
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Gold Note Da Vinci & Giotto cartridges

Gold Note has risen to prominence in recent years with an extensive product offering that includes turntables, cartridges, phono stages, amplifiers, CD players and DACs, the company is rapidly gaining a well deserved reputation for good sound quality.

The company was founded in Italy by Maurizio Aternini. He had been making products on an OEM basis for many big brands since 1992 and in 2012 took the decision to capitalise on that considerable experience and expertise to launch his own brand. Aternini says that Gold Note prides itself on reliability, sound quality, constant research and innovation.

The Da Vinci and Giotto cartridges are the latest additions to an extensive line-up from Gold Note, starting with the ES-78 moving magnet at £130, right up to the top-of-the-range Tuscany Gold moving coil at £7,600. The Da Vinci at £1,600 and the Giotto at £2,400 are the latest additions to the range.

The Firenze-based company is very proud that it manufactures virtually everything in house and has done so for the past 25 years. But there are some things it can't make for itself. In the case of its pickup cartridges, although it winds the signal coils onto the armatures in house, it buys in its diamond styli, cantilevers and crossbars from two well-respected specialist manufacturers in Japan: Adamant Namicki – which as well as diamond styli also produces jewels for the watch industry – and Ogura, whose claim to fame is that it invented the line contact stylus profile.

In common with all of the other moving coils from Gold Note, both the Da Vinci and the Giotto are milled from a solid block of Duralumin 7000, in which aluminium is alloyed with mainly zinc and is said to be the strongest commercial grade of aluminium. It is widely used in the aviation industry due to its strength and light weight.

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The Da Vinci and Giotto both have copper wire coils, the Da Vinci uses an aluminium cantilever with a micro elliptical stylus profile, while the more expensive Giotto has a boron cantilever and ultra micro elliptical stylus tip profile. This, says Gold Note, is the "perfect combination to ensure extended frequency response (up to 40kHz compared with 35kHz for the Da Vinci) and outstanding dynamics, fine detail and precise imaging". Both models use a samarium cobalt magnet system. Output is 0.4mV for the Da Vinci and 0.35mV for the Giotto, which is pretty typical these days. Recommended load impedance is a higher than average 220 Ohms.

In the groove

To evaluate the two cartridges, I mounted them in a Connected-Fidelity TT Hub turntable, fitted with a Sorane SA1.2 arm. The beauty of the Sorane arm is that it has a detachable headshell and as such facilitates easy comparisons. This was paired with an Avid Accent integrated amplifier, which has an excellent MC phono stage that allows precise adjustment of the load impedance, driving a pair of Russell K Red 120Se floorstanding speakers. I started out by listening to the Da Vinci, and just as a benchmark, I had another well-respected rival cartridge to hand that sells for £1,200, so that I could judge if the Da Vinci was good value for money.
I kicked off with my favourite album from singer Linda Ronstadt, namely *Hasten Down the Wind*. I chose the Lo Siento Mi Vida track as it has superbly recorded vocals and quickly spotlights the strengths and weaknesses of any piece of equipment. I am pleased to say that the Da Vinci acquitted itself with aplomb, conveying Ronstadt's vocal with more emotion, presence and power than its cheaper rival. The two guitars on the intro were also better defined, sharper and

with more leading edge detail, and when the bass line kicked in, the Da Vinci had better weight and tightness, and conveyed the rhythm of the track better. It captured the sensuousness of Ronstadt's vocals and the amazing power she has when she really lets rip.

One of my favourite jazz singer/songwriters is Ben Sidran and I decided to spin up his *The Doctor Is In* album, and the track Broad Daylight. I was very impressed with how the Da Vinci conveyed his vocals and piano, with fast runs of notes handled without blurring them together, while the vocals were open and expressive. Drums were sharper and tighter on the Da Vinci and the staccato rhythm of this delightful track was better captured on the Da Vinci, while the dynamics of the piano came across more vividly.

If its fast pace you want, what better than the track No One Emotion from George Benson's *20/20* album. Here, the Da Vinci really captured the energy and pace of the synth bass line that pumps this track along at breakneck pace, while Benson's vocals were more open, more expressive – more human. And that scorching guitar solo from Michael Sembello clinched the deal. The cheaper rival cartridge lost the edge and raunch his guitar should have, while the Giotto conveyed it with much more presence and bite.

Giotto on a mission

Just as the Giotto space probe gave us new insights into Haley's Comet, will the cartridge that shares its name (as well as the Italian Renaissance painter and architect) give us equal insights into what is in our vinyl records – or at least prove itself worth spending another £900 on over the Da Vinci?

I turned to trumpet legend Miles Davis to help me find out. On Human Nature from his *You're Under Arrest* album, it was clear that his trumpet had more bite, presence and inner detail via the Giotto, which was also more delicate, open and detailed on percussion. The bass line I felt was also tighter and more tuneful. The Giotto also had the ability to let me listen into the various layers of the music better and hear how the contributions of the various instruments gelled together as a coherent whole and just made more sense musically.

For a complete change of mood, I switched to Hurts So Good from John Cougar (Mellencamp)'s *American Fool* album. Here, the drums on the intro were much tighter, dynamic and hard-hitting and yet at the same time subtle cymbal detail was also delicately handled. His vocals were more expressive and open on the Giotto and the track just really rocked along with great drive and dynamics. The Da Vinci seemed a little less dynamic, while the Giotto just added extra life and pace.

Finally, I turned to the finest male vocalist of all time, in my book at least, Luther Vandross, and the fantastic track So Amazing from his *Give Me The Reason* album. I noticed that there was more detail and delicacy on the synth parts on the Giotto, while Marcus Miller's beautiful bass line had more growl, movement and control. Luther's voice, which is a masterclass in phrasing, delicacy and delivery, was conveyed with much more subtlety on the Giotto. Every tremor, falter, push, delicate nuance and shading of delivery came across more clearly. The Giotto also conveyed the effortless power in his voice as well as the amazing and mesmerising subtleties.

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Gold Note Da Vinci & Giotto

Striking gold

The two latest models to join the Gold Note range of cartridges have certainly proved to be worthy additions. The Da Vinci can more than hold its head up among its competitors. Its sound is detailed, dynamic, lively without being strident or harsh and capable of conveying subtle detail in the music. It allows you to hear what each musician is playing and rhythmically conveys an excellent sense of timing, helping the music to flow. It is excellent value for money and I highly recommend it.

The Giotto too is dynamic, detailed, coherent and musically compelling, allowing an even greater insight into what each musician is playing, allowing the listener to appreciate the interaction between musicians and their contribution to the music. It allows the listener to hear what makes musicians such as Mile Davis and vocalists such as Luther Vandross special. At the same time, it has a beautifully rounded tonality, offering greater subtlety and poise than the Da Vinci. It can convey the sheer punch and snap of a snare and yet still allow you to appreciate delicate subtleties in the cymbal line. You might say it offers an iron fist in a velvet glove. Is it worth the extra over the Da Vinci? Oh, yes!

Specifications

Da Vinci
Type: low output moving coil pickup cartridge
Output voltage: 0.4mV
Frequency response: 10-35,000Hz
Impedance: 4 Ohms
Channel separation: >30dB
Compliance: 12x10-6cm/dyne
Cantilever: aluminium
Stylus tip: Micro elliptical
Coil wire: Copper
Body: Duralumin 7000 alloy
Suggested tracking force: 2g
Recommended load impedance: 220 Ohms
Weight: 10g

Giotto
Type: low output moving coil pickup cartridge
Output voltage: 0.35mV
Frequency response: 10-40,000Hz
Impedance: 8 Ohms
Channel separation: >30dB
Compliance: 12x10-6cm/dyne
Cantilever: boron
Stylus tip: ultra micro elliptical
Coil wire: Copper
Body: Duralumin 7000 alloy
Suggested tracking force: 2g
Recommended load impedance: 220 Ohms
Weight: 10g

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The ear is all about great music and great sound. It is written by hard bitten audio enthusiasts who strive to find the most engaging, entertaining and great value components and music of the highest calibre. This really is what living is all about.