

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



Goldring Ethos

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Cartridge design has changed very little over the years. There have been some differences in the generator unit itself, but most still revolve around the 'wiggle a magnet inside an electrical coil' (or vice versa) principle. As with anything, exotic materials can be employed, and in some cases the magnetic field is created using field coils and an outboard supply, each with their own and pros or cons. Sitting at around £895, relatively comfortably in the 'middle ground' is Goldring's Ethos, a moving coil design with some rather nice touches.

Firstly, the cross-shaped pure soft-iron armature is hand-wound. The magnet is neodymium, and the body is a low-density precision-milled aviation-grade aluminium, which helps transmit unwanted resonances into the tonearm where they can be 'grounded'. This combination is 'precision-tuned by (our) expert craftsmen to achieve our best ever level of performance'. The stylus is also on the special side, being a polyhedral line-contact nude diamond which has a very thin 'front-to-back' profile with a claimed 'undistorted retrieval of ultrasonic frequencies in a recording'. (We'll see!).

Output-wise it sits in the middle of the moving-coil family, delivering 0.5mV at 1kHz, so should be readily compatible with the majority of step-up devices, whether passive or active. Recommended loading is 100 Ohms, but a little experimentation with different settings suggests that the Ethos is remarkably tolerant of alternative loadings without sound quality being noticeably adversely affected.

Set up

OK. That's enough of the marketing-speak. How does it perform and sound in the real world? Two arms were employed in this review; the first an aged but much-loved Heliuss Aurum on a Rega 3, the second an SME 312S on an SME 20/12. Prior to the review, the cartridges on those decks were an Audio Technica ART9 (Heliuss) and an Audio Note {Kondo} Io on the SME. Both had the Easy-VTA adjuster fitted so that minute VTA adjustments could be made to give me the best chance of getting the most out of the Ethos on each deck. Its value cannot be underestimated.

I'm always wary of jumping in to a review too quickly and 'getting things wrong', so I deliberately played no vinyl for nearly a week before fitting the cartridge to the first deck, and again gave a week's break before auditioning it in the second. As you might expect, fitting is a

straightforward exercise, with virtually every MC cartridge nowadays employing threaded inserts and pinout colours. The Ethos is no exception.

Aligning the cartridge in both arms was a relatively easy affair, as the diamond on the end of the aluminium cantilever is easy to see, so setting azimuth (which can be a pain sometimes) was very easily achieved. The cartridge body sides are also parallel which makes setting overhang and other parameters easier to check.

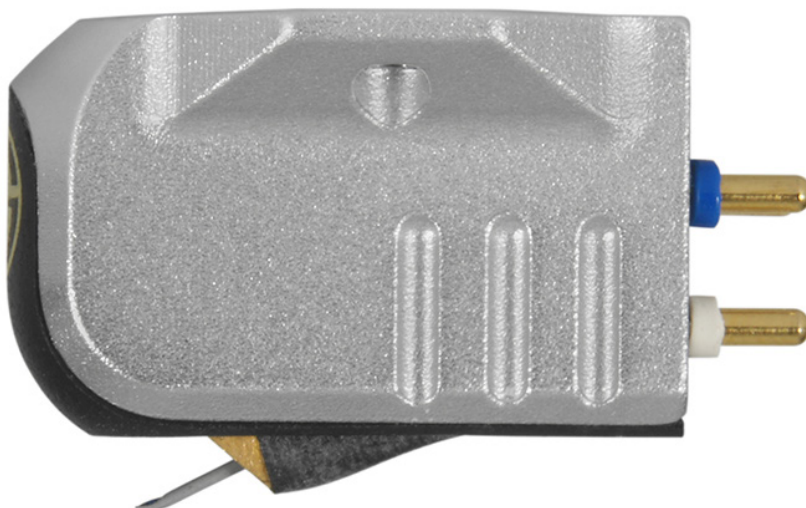


Sound quality

With downforce initially set at 1.6g I carefully lowered the Helius arm, placing the diamond into the first groove on a treasured (despite its flaws) copy of Thurston Dart's 'Dido and Aeneas' on L'Oiseau Lyre.

As expected, the opening overture was full-bodied, almost effervescent and a real joy to listen to. There was a nice weight to the bottom end, and as I was to realise with further auditioning, a bright but not harsh light on the upper reaches of the frequency range. Towards the end of the recording Belinda's dying aria was conveyed with startling realism – so much so that when I was distracted by a knock on the front door it really did sound as if someone was singing in my listening room. The reproduction was uncannily lifelike.

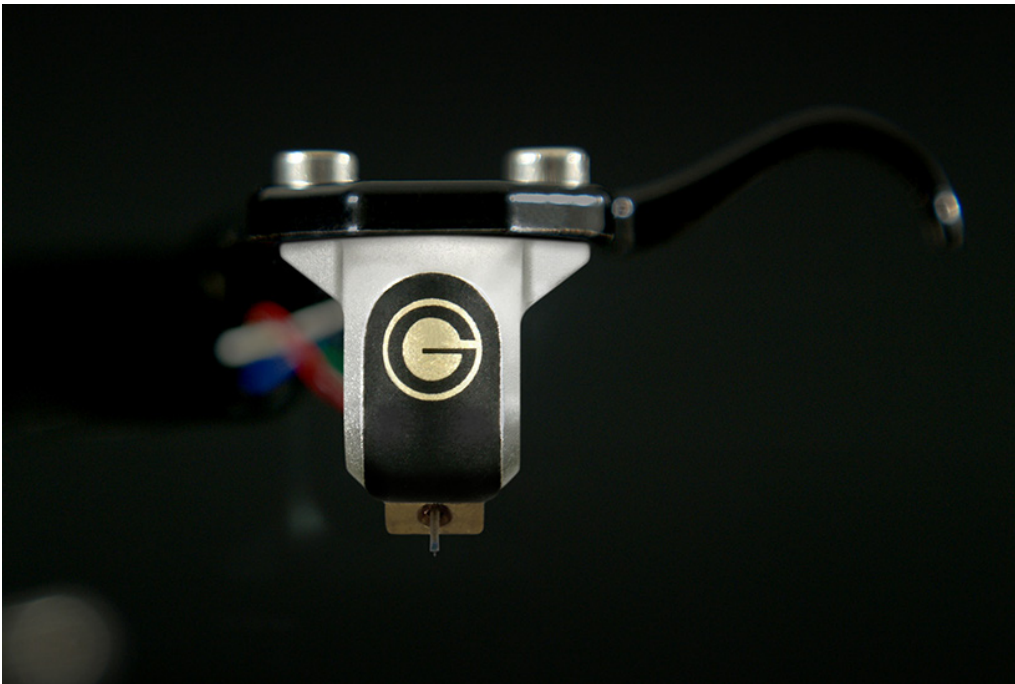
A change of genre saw Lou Reed's (in)famous 'Transformer' spinning. Despite knowing 'Walk on the Wild Side' from almost the day it was released, it was surprising how much the Ethos allowed access to the smaller intricacies of the recording, with fine details being revealed which I'd not noticed before. There was no undue emphasis, simply that the Ethos seemed to



be parting the curtains on that performance just that little bit more.

A touch of Meat Loaf added a raucous note to the proceedings, with a 'Bat Out Of Hell' making a rather loud appearance. Despite the complexity of some of the tracks the Ethos remained unfazed, and steadfastly refused to mistrack. Upper treble remained clear and tizz-free which actually made the whole performance a much more enjoyable experience. Some lesser cartridges (and some at higher price points) can become 'muddy' when the going gets tough, but the Ethos remained poised, focussed and more faithful to the groove than I expected. Moving the Ethos over to the SME there were essentially no surprises. As might be expected, the SME felt more pitch-precise, and as a result just that little bit more focussed. The bottom end was just as deep, but slightly cleaner and clearer compared with the Helius / Rega combination. I suspect that has mostly to do with the increased platter mass and considerably more sophisticated speed control on the SME than the Rega's admirable but far simpler circuitry. However, the Ethos came far more into its own in terms of reaching into the depths of recordings. In the Dido recording the listener was much more aware of the acoustic space in which the performance took place. There was 'more air', and the spatial elements were easier to discern giving the presentation a more relaxed but also more involving feel without losing touch with any of the urgency or passion of the performance. That may also be a factor attributable to the longer SME arm, but the focus, ease of presentation and ability to reveal more of the really small details certainly went up a level or two.

Although I hate the phrase, Lou Reed's 'Transformer' became far more holographic, and it was very easy to imagine a 3D soundstage in the listening room with everything taking place almost within arm's reach; all in all an almost spooky experience! And if I thought Meat Loaf sounded good on the Rega, I had to think again. Urgent, vibrant, almost aggressive – and passionate, not to mention loud, the Ethos conveyed all this and felt as if it still had more to give. I'd never say listening to a recording of 'this size' ever felt like you were there, but it was probably as close as I'd admit to.



Evaluating a cartridge is not an easy task. As with speaker placement there are just so many variables which can make (or break) the outcome of a review. As many will know, vinyl is my preferred music carrier and as a result I have spent a lot of time with a lot of cartridges, arms and turntables over the years in both formal reviewing and just 'fooling around' to see what works, and what doesn't, and then refining 'what works' to get the best out of it.

VTA seemed not to be too much of an issue. Although I could adjust it in very small increments, even largish changes seemed relatively benign. The Ethos seemed to be able to perform well with a very wide range, and exceptionally with a wide (but smaller) range of different VTA settings, so those arms with a fixed pivot height (a la Regas) should make fine partners. Downforce did make more of a difference, and although reducing the tracking weight did eventually lead to mistracking (below about 1.4g) increasing the weight above about 1.9 muddied the presentation quite markedly – I'd suggest keeping the setting around the 1.6-1.8 range for best results. As you might expect, rather more than the three sample LPs were used in the overall review, and some 200 sides passed along the tip's edges before any sensible conclusions were drawn.

Conclusion

The Ethos is a serious performer. When properly set up it can be as revealing as some of the best cartridges I have heard, regardless of price point. It is able to convey a very believable soundstage and is not easily upset. It has an uncanny ability to remain clean and focussed at the frequency extremes regardless of the complexity of the material. It is also very adept at conveying the transients and dynamics of recordings (assuming they are there in the first place). The extreme treble never became stressed or 'shouty', and the bass was agile, deft, weighty and clean regardless of signal (volume) level.



It is not an unforgiving cartridge but be prepared for poor recordings to sound poor. However, give it an excellent well-cared-for recording and the Ethos will show you every nuance, light and shade, dynamic contrast, soundstage and presence with a disarming naturalness and reality. As for system matching, I'd suggest upper end of mid-fi upwards, but if you have a super-deck and arm combo don't feel it won't perform. It has the potential to unseat some of the more revered cartridges and give them a real run for their money.

Specifications

Type: moving coil (MC) cartridge
Frequency response: 35 to 20,000 Hz (+/- 2dB)
Output voltage: 0.5 mV (1 kHz, 5 cm/sec.)
Channel separation: >30 dB (1 kHz)
Output balance: <1 dB (1 kHz)
Tracking force: 1.5g to 2g)
Coil impedance: 4 ohms
Load resistance: 100 ohms
Coil inductance: 7.5 μ H
Static compliance: 25 mm/N
Dynamic compliance: 15 mm/N
Stylus: vital line contact stylus
Cantilever: aluminium alloy
Vertical tracking angle: 20°
Weight: 7.7 g