

Transfiguration Phoenix S

by Jason Kennedy

When a hi-fi company, or any company for that matter, doesn't have a website today, you can draw one of two conclusions: it hasn't got around to making a website, or it doesn't need a website. Transfiguration maker Immutable Music Inc., of Japan would appear to be from the second group; a company that is kept busy enough by its distributors sites and word of mouth. In other words, a company with an enviable position in such a competitive market place.

Transfiguration now makes just three moving coil cartridges; the entry-level Axia, the Phoenix S seen here, and the range-topping Proteus. Sadly, it no longer makes the Orpheus, which used to be top dog. However, the S suffix on the Phoenix indicates rather more than you might expect. It differs from its predecessor by virtue of having fewer turns in its (moving) coil, which means a lower output impedance and lower moving mass; if you know anything about suspension this is always a good thing. Transfiguration MCs are quite different from the norm in that they have relatively small ring magnets that do not rely on a yoke system to channel the flux toward the coils; instead the magnets themselves are very close to the coils. It didn't take any research to notice this when setting up the Phoenix S, because I normally use a very small, circa 1mm, allen key as an indicator of alignment. Most MCs will hold this key magnetically and it gives you a precise indication of the angle of the cartridge body when used with a gauge. The Phoenix S wouldn't hold it and this

“It turns out that the shape of the aluminium body is not the result of creative whim, but was designed to combat vibrations, which in a device that's designed to measure vibrations is pretty crucial. It also features a solid boron cantilever with the same Ogura PA stylus that is used across the range.”



combined with its short cantilever and sculpted shape make it more tricky than usual to set up (if you are me, at least). The manual does, however, state that “Ultimate alignment is based on the cantilever – NOT on the cartridge body.”

It turns out that the shape of the aluminium body is not the result of creative whim, but was created to combat vibrations, which in a device that's designed to measure vibrations is pretty crucial. It also features a solid boron cantilever with the same Ogura PA stylus that is used across the range. It has neodymium magnets front and rear, and produces 0.4mV with its silver coils. The Phoenix S needs two grammes of downforce or thereabouts; the manual suggests between 1.7 and 2.2g because variations in humidity, temperature, and arm mass mean that the optimum is not entirely predictable. It is also keen to point out this cartridge is very sensitive to set up and gives in-depth instructions on how to arrive at the best starting point prior to fine tuning by ear. It's all good stuff and more than you get with some high-end models.

Listening commenced with the Phoenix S painstakingly installed in an SME 20/3 with SME V tonearm; an easier turntable than most from a set up point of view but not completely idiot proof! This I discovered after several days listening, during which I was very impressed by the bass and

tonal richness of the cartridge, but less so with its drive and timing. In an attempt to balance this equation, I tried variations in VTA and downforce. These produced notable differences, but failed to give the energy I craved. Then I wondered about bolt tightness and gave the tiny bolts a tweak. Voila, more upbeat, timely and dynamic sound. It seems that while you can be as careful as you like in some respects, all the details have to be covered, and bolt tightness is one of the crudest.

I also tried different impedance settings on my Trilogy 907 phono stage. The cartridge's manual gets a little less precise at this stage, and merely suggests a setting greater than 7 Ohms; a figure that implies a predilection for step up transformers. The Trilogy's lowest setting is 70 Ohms but I found 100 Ohms to be a good match. In this configuration, the sound was powerful and magnificent, Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies (Masur, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Eterna) sounding assuringly solid yet richly detailed.

Steely Dan's 'Pearl of the Quarter' [*Countdown to Ecstasy*, ABC] is both detailed and deluxe in that mid seventies style, with lovely lap steel sound and deeply excavated detail in the context of musical fluidity to die for. At this stage I'm getting quite excited about the Phoenix S, not many MCs have both power in the bass, high resolution across the board and top notch musicality, but this is one of them.

I also installed the Phoenix S in the RB2000 tonearm attached to a Rega RP10 turntable. This arm does not offer VTA variation, which simplifies set up at the expense of tweakability, yet it is such a compelling turntable that

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Low output moving coil phono cartridge.

Stylus/Cantilever: PA 3 x 30µm solid diamond, 0.3mm boron cantilever

Tracking Force: 1.7g – 2.2g (2g recommended)

Load: >7 Ohms

Compliance: 12 x 10⁻⁶ cm/dyne

Output (at 1 kHz @ 3.54cm/s): 0.4 mv

Weight: 7.8g (without stylus cover)

Price: £2,249

Manufacturer: Immutable Music, Inc, Tokyo, Japan

Distributor: Decent Audio

URL: www.decentaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)5602 054669

tonal issues are secondary to the overall result. None of the cartridges I've tried on the RP10 have matched Rega's Apheta MC when it comes to speed, but the Transfiguration gets close. Where it improves on Rega's cartridge is in tonal rendering and low end power, finesse too is improved. It sounded beautifully open with crisp highs and luxurious mids when playing Leo Kottke's *Great Big Boy* [Private Music], while the quality of production and engineering is really brought to the fore. The scale of the studio is revealed in a big kick drum, an instrument which also reveals the quality of dynamics on offer. The track 'Nothing Works' is particularly effective in this respect. It's quite dense, but this MC has no difficulty whatsoever in separating out the various elements in the mix and rendering the timbral character of each.

These factors become clear on the latest mastering of Patricia Barber's *Modern Cool* [Premonition]. Her voice on 'Touch of Trash' is there in the room, solid as rock, and real. I love the weight and texture of the double bass and when the band kicks, in it has all the energy and power you should demand from your vinyl.

I get it now. I understand why Transfiguration does not need a website. When you make cartridges that are this good, the world will come to your door. The Phoenix S does it all and it does it with considerable aplomb. It's not inexpensive, but it's so revealing and well balanced that it seems like good value if you truly appreciate vinyl. +

