

Analog Relax EX300

From the Japanese founder of the Zoot Sims Fan Club comes a range of artisan moving-coils, all joining distributor Absolute Sounds' TEN collection. Entry starts with the EX300
 Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

If the closure of Japanese cartridge manufacturer, Koetsu, in 2024 left a gap in the lives of analogue fans the world over, it also left a gap in the portfolio of its UK distributor, Absolute Sounds. In this case, the door led to cartridge brand Analog Relax, and the EX300 under consideration here is its entry level model, retailing in the UK for £2698.

Analog Relax is a Japanese company, based in Tokyo, and focused on 'creating handcrafted state-of-the-art moving-coil cartridges with a modern attitude, while still respecting and being faithful to the Japanese artisanal traditions'. Now, I don't know about you, but that recipe sounds somewhat familiar. Could the Koetsu-sized hole in the vinyl world have found a plug?

AND... RELAX

The brand was set up by Yasushi Yurugi, who describes himself as loving 'analogue records and coffee more than anything else' and admits to having a collection of several thousand records and eight turntables – a man after my own heart.

'Ernie Watts' saxophone sounded bold and sonorous'

Yurugi-san graduated from university, at first working in design, then product planning and marketing. Next was a transition to business development in the world of IT and network infrastructure.

The Analog Relax founder confesses to feeling 'a bit strange about the current world trends that prioritise efficiency and sales above all else', concluding that the increasing digitisation of the

world is indeed bringing convenience, but at the expense of people's sense of internal harmony and satisfaction. This led him to start his own business developing products and services to support people's 'natural

happiness', something that chimes with the Japanese ethos generally. After all, Yamaha is a huge Japanese corporation and, on first glance, makes an odd cross-section of products. But its musical instrument and motorsport portfolio makes perfect sense when you realise the company aims to make things that 'bring people joy'.

ON A MISSION

Yurugi-san is a drummer, tenor sax player and founder of the world's only fan club dedicated to American jazz saxophonist

Zoot Sims, so for his new company, analogue music reproduction was an obvious focus. The result is Analog Relax, a boutique manufacturer of MC cartridges with a mission statement of giving 'top priority to making you happy'. And Yurugi-san has even taken his enthusiasm a step

LEFT: Alloy cantilever is clear to see here [and see boxout, p57], while the coils and magnet yoke are screened from dust, and more, behind an impregnated fabric cover



ABOVE: Utilitarian, certainly, but Analog Relax's soft-covered case and alloy stylus cover offer belt-and-braces protection!

further by naming Analog Relax's parent company 'ZOOT Communication LLC'.

As it stands, the Analog Relax range is four-strong and encompasses the EX300, EX500, EX1000 and EX2000 models, retailing for £2698, £4998, £10,998 and £15,000, respectively. The main differences between each model are found in their respective stylus profiles, cantilever and body materials. The company also has an accessories side, offering two record cleaning brushes and two different types of headshell leads. Of the latter, the 'JP' types are high quality but relatively conventional, but the 'Emotional Lead Wire' variants are rather special, featuring a hand-crafted and highly polished finish to the wires similar to that used for traditional Japanese swords. Two versions of these headshell leads are available – 'Mellow' and 'Soul' – to match your musical preference.

BODY AND SOUL

The EX300 MC seen here is based around a generator using neodymium magnets, and has an elliptical diamond stylus. This is fixed to an aluminium cantilever using Analog Relax's 'IF adhesive technology' [see PM's boxout, p57]. The body material



AUDIO EPOXY

While the exact formulation of the 'IF adhesive' chosen by Analog Relax to securely bond its stylus to the cantilever is unclear, the brand says it's mixed with diamond dust 'to fill the space between the stylus tip and the cantilever hole'. Our macro photograph clearly shows a circular shank, with elliptical-profile tip, mounted into the end of a crimped alloy cantilever. This is a very cost-effective solution, though we've seen similar used on premium pick-ups including Vertere's Sabre [HFN Feb '22] and the AVID Ionic [HFN May '22]. In practice, a square shank, mounted into a laser cut hole, will typically offer a more secure connection between the stylus and cantilever while also permitting a more precise alignment of the elliptical 'cut' on the sides of a spherical tip.

The stylus fixing is evidently very neat here with no excess glue that might otherwise add to the tip mass but, however secure the fixing, it's the HF bending modes of the alloy cantilever that ultimately define the transcription accuracy between groove and moving-coils. Cartridge artisans understand that these modes typically result in a sharp dip in output between 10-15kHz and are able to 'tune' and extend the final response by careful choice of cantilever tube length, wall thickness, moving mass, fulcrum compliance and damping. That's exactly what we witness in the EX300 [see Lab Report, p59] – craftsmanship that contributes to the price. **PM**



is walnut, a wood also sometimes used for the necks and bodies of guitars. Maple, yakusugi cedar and spruce are used on the manufacturer's pricier models. The EX300's body is polished to a luxuriant finish using beeswax which, as Analog Relax quaintly puts it, 'makes you feel even more excited'.

The top of the cartridge is fitted with a metal plate containing tapped holes for easy fitment. Although the cartridge body has some very elegant angles on it, the front face with the Analog Relax badge is perpendicular to the body sides, so installation and alignment is quite straightforward. The EX300's generator impedance is 15ohm, meaning that a 'standard' MC stage's 100ohm input impedance should be fine. Tracking force is stated to be 2.0g with no suggested range given, but I found this value was about right,

with no great gains achieved by tweaking in either direction.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

With Analog Relax's EX300 fitted to the SME 309 tonearm [HFN Jan '23] on my regular Michell Gyro SE, I couldn't help

but think that the company has chosen an apt name for itself. This cartridge is very relaxing to listen to, and this inspires you to search out the sort of material that lets you hear it at its best. I had the best 'results' with jazz, smooth classical and a variety of acoustic works.

In part this is due to a tonal balance that errs towards 'warm' without sounding soft or woolly, nor particularly diminished in treble clarity or detail. Rather, the EX300's balance serves to accentuate the richness of the upper midband, which works an absolute treat on the genres favoured by Yurugi-san.

Fed this favoured musical diet, Analog Relax's entry-level MC set up a majestic swathe of information between and well beyond the placement of the loudspeakers – in fact, this is a real ace up its sleeve. Front-to-back depth perspective was perfectly acceptable, if not exceptional, while the sense of stereo 'height' was arguably a little truncated. My PMC twenty5.24 floorstanders [HFN May '17] are over a metre tall on their spikes, but they seemed to have shrunk ever so slightly with Analog Relax's cartridge at the helm!

However, this is less an impediment, more a quirk. Charlie Haden's upright bass during his take on the Miles Davis-penned 'Nardis' [The Private Collection; Naim Records LP110], appeared slightly smaller in scale than I am accustomed to but didn't lack for weight in any way. Indeed, the EX300 isn't shy or retiring when it comes to the low-end, and here added a frisson of fruitiness to the bass strings which was most welcome. All the while, Ernie Watts' saxophone sounded bold and sonorous, with a real sense of air moving.

BLOOMIN' LOVELY

Analog Relax's pick-up continued to deliver the goods with music a little more rock-oriented. The funk-infused bass line of Donald Fagen's 'Miss Marlene', from his *Sunken Condos* album [Reprise Records 93624-94784], skipped along with a deftness of touch that kept the track ➞

RIGHT: Threaded alloy mounting plate is fixed atop the EX300's faceted walnut body for a secure connection to the headshell. Cantilever is sufficiently exposed to aid cueing



CARTRIDGE

RIGHT: Well spaced and clearly colour-coded cartridge pins make for a secure connection with your headshell leads. Although the body has numerous angles, setup and alignment is not difficult

moving forward beautifully. Again, a little richness was present that added a slight 'bloom' to every note, but the rhythm and timing of the piece were never compromised. Once more, it just seemed to be a facet of the cartridge's innate tonal character – and the EX300 was no less enjoyable for it.

Treble handling was very impressive, with an agreeable balance struck between insight and smoothness. The cymbals being repetitively hit at the beginning of 'Sea Within A Sea', the closing track on Brit band The Horrors' *Primary Colours* LP [XL Recordings XLLP418], enjoyed a fine metallic 'ring' and plenty of clarity. The EX300 delivered them with a little less impact than I am used to, though – almost as if drummer Joe Spurgeon had been told to tone it down just a bit for this one play.

The rest of this MC's performance held together brilliantly until this seven-minute epic started to get a little 'busier'. Now the EX300 seemed a little less sure-footed. Previously it had laid the band musicians out well but as the composition became more densely packed, the soundstage seemed to shrink in on itself. The overall musical message was still strong but it became less easy to pick out individual aspects – until the pace slowed, the soundstage spread out and the cartridge's performance became more authoritative again.

RAVEL 'N' RAFFERTY

Perhaps this says something about the EX300's temperament. It is very confident in capturing the heart of both instruments and vocalists when they are playing more steadily, but seems to struggle to keep up when things get more boisterous. Neither is this observation material-dependent. The magnificent climax to the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra's recording of Ravel's *Boléro* [TACET L207], conducted by Carlo Rizzi, experienced the same effect as The Horrors' psyche-rock.

All this being said, when the EX300 finds its happy place, it really



does give a joyous presentation. Its rendition of Gerry Rafferty's 'On A Night Like This' [North And South; London Records LONLP55] kept things just the right side of lively to ensure that the well spaced and clearly defined production remained stable and focused. I was also thrilled by the natural timbre and delightful weight of the piano notes during the introduction.

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

Better still was the jazz trumpet of Quentin Collins that established the pace of 'Paxos/Antipaxos' from Chasing The Dragon's *Audiophile Recordings III* sampler [Chasing The Dragon VALLP018]. This had a lifelike rasp, and was delicately but definitively underpinned by the backing instrumentation. Analog Relax's founder genuinely seems to have voiced this cartridge for the type of music he appreciates. This results in a distinctive sound, but I cannot fault him for that. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The Analog Relax EX300 is appropriately named, giving a superb account of itself when playing quieter, more considered and sophisticated material where it offers up a detailed and, yes, 'relaxing' presentation. Outside of this comfort zone there's a tendency for it to be a little less sure-footed, even if the balance is never less than pleasant. This newcomer is very definitely worth seeking out for audition.

Sound Quality: 82%

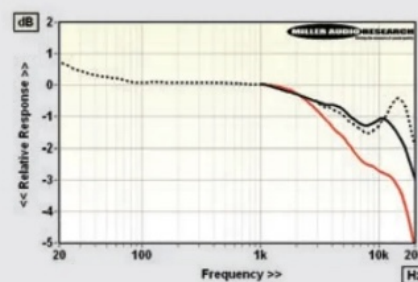


LAB REPORT

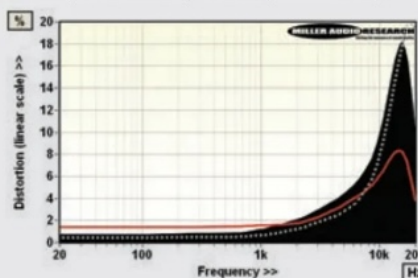
ANALOG RELAX EX300

Exotic glue notwithstanding [see boxout, p57], Analog Relax's elliptical diamond is precisely aligned on the end of its alloy tube cantilever to achieve a 23° VTA. Compliance is low at 10cu but within the expected range for a 10g MC destined to track at a 2g recommended downforce in medium/high effective mass arms. Tracking is sufficient if not super-secure, achieving 60-65µm via the left/right channels and just letting go at the penultimate +15dB groove modulation (re. 315Hz/5cm/sec) at 1.5% THD. Analog Relax quotes a high-ish 15ohm coil impedance for the EX300, suggesting a generous number of 6N copper turns and this, in conjunction with the potent fixed neodymium magnets, fuels its higher-than-specified 0.62mV output. This very compatible result is complemented by a very tight 0.09dB channel balance and excellent 35dB midband stereo separation.

The specific resonances and damping properties of the alloy tube cantilever are revealed in an extended, if gently downturned stereo HF response [dashed trace, Graph 1] and in the relatively high HF distortion, reaching ~20%/19kHz, also on the stereo cut [-8dB re. 5cm/sec; dashed trace, Graph 2]. However, compared with most pick-ups equipped with alloy cantilevers, the EX300 offers a sufficiently strong treble allied, in this instance, with a subtle bass boost (+0.8dB/20Hz). There's a slight asymmetry in the MC generator seen here in the 1-2dB dip in presence band output on vertical (L-R) grooves versus lateral (L+R) cuts [red vs. solid black trace, Graph 1]. This will be heard in the slight prominence given to centrally-focused images over instruments and performers ranged to the left and right of the stereo soundstage. PM



ABOVE: Freq. resp. curves (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, black) vs. vertical (L-R, red) vs. stereo (dashed)



ABOVE: Lateral (L+R, black), vertical (L-R, red), stereo (dashed) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harms) vs. freq. from 20Hz-20kHz (-8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving-Coil / 10g
Recommended tracking force	19-21mN (20mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	616µV / 0.09dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	10cu / 12cu
Vertical tracking angle	23 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	65µm / 60µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.6-16.5% / 0.5-19.5%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.4 to -5.4dB / +0.7 to -1.9dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	35dB / 25dB