

Ortofon Quintet Blue



From the world's largest pick-up producer comes a new range of budget moving-coils, and this middle-ranking model highlights what's on offer for a very modest outlay
 Review: **Andrew Simpson** Lab: **Paul Miller**

There's long been a presumption that if you want a decent low-output moving-coil cartridge able to give its moving-magnet rivals a run for their money you'll need to spend north of £500. Thankfully Ortofon doesn't subscribe to this thinking, as this new Quintet Blue illustrates, at £325. At this price point you're in the company of only a handful of low-output MCs, with Denon's well established DL-103R the obvious rival at £319, alongside Benz Micro's entry level MC Gold at £275.

INSIDE THE SHELL

Ortofon's new Quintet range replaces both of its outgoing Vivo and Rondo ranges, by offering a single series of budget MCs with obvious improvements at each price point [see boxout]. While these ranges employ entirely different approaches to body material, with metal/plastic bodies for the Vivos and wood shells for the Rondos, the Quintets all get protective bodies made from a special thermoplastic material called acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS), chosen for its strong yet lightweight and anti-resonant properties.

This ABS body acts as a shell for the pick-up's inner workings, which are fixed only to its aluminium mounting plate and back plate, but not to its plastic outer body. And if you were to pull the ABS



body away from its inner workings, you would see a very minimal cartridge design, similar to Ortofon's stripped-back OM models.

At the end of the Blue's aluminium cantilever sits a nude elliptical stylus – the whole stylus is a solid diamond bonded to the cantilever, instead of having an elliptical tip bonded to a metal shank, that's then bonded to the cantilever.

The Blue's internals pack lightweight coil wires made from pure 4-nines copper and powerful neodymium magnets, a

LEFT: An aluminium cantilever and nude elliptical stylus are key features of the Blue model. Closely spaced pins means care is needed when connecting tonearm wiring tags

combination intended to offer a wide response and generous output. And because Ortofon has its own rubber making facilities, the Blue's suspension is designed entirely in-house and benefits from the company's DJ division's research into the development of the Concorde S-120 pick-up, which Ortofon says has led to greater levels of compliancy, meaning the Blue should be suitable for a wider range of tonearms.

The Blue's straight-sided body and threaded mounting holes makes it easy to align, although its output pins could do with being more widely spaced to make wiring it up less of a challenge, as extra care is needed to ensure none of your cartridge tags are touching.

Weighing in at 9g, the Blue should be suitable for most tonearms, although it's a little taller than most cartridges (18mm), so it's worth checking that your tonearm's height can be adjusted should you need to raise it for optimal VTA.

Ortofon also includes a hard plastic stylus cover that slides over the cartridge body to provide plenty of protection.

BALANCED PERFORMER

While you're not able to see the Blue's innards, given its plastic shell, you're certainly presented with a window into its soul thanks to how open-sounding this cartridge is. Installed on a VPI Scout 1.1 turntable [HFN Oct '14] and feeding my Primare R32 phono stage [HFN Jan '12], the Ortofon seemed to relish the freedom afforded by the VPI's unipivot tonearm.

A few bars into Little Dragon's 'Paris' from their *Nabuma Rubberband* album [Because Music BEC5161771] lets the Blue show how it can pull out plenty of detail from the track with ease, which it presents with real dynamism. The synthesised percussion has ample depth and attack, and I could feel each note's texture as they

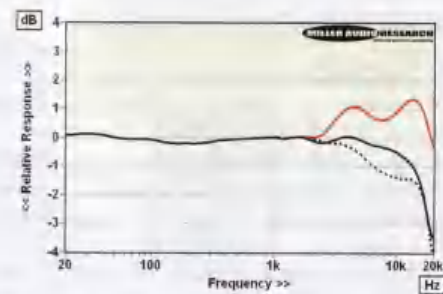
FAMOUS FIVE

The Quintet range follows the same colour-coded structure as the company's 2M MM and Cadenza premium MC ranges, whereby models from Red through to Black represent improvements in performance at ascending price points. All Quintets get plastic ABS bodies packed with fixed neodymium magnets, and each step up the ladder brings refinements to coil wires, cantilever material and stylus profile. The Blue improves on the Red (£200) by using a nude elliptical stylus and pure 4-nines copper coil wires over the Red's polished elliptical diamond and standard copper coils. The Bronze (£500) gets the Blue's internals married to a nude fine line stylus, while the range-topping Black (£650) boasts the company's Aucurum coil wires (gold plated 6-nines copper) and a nude Shibata-shaped stylus affixed to a boron cantilever. A White mono variant (£325) completes the line-up.

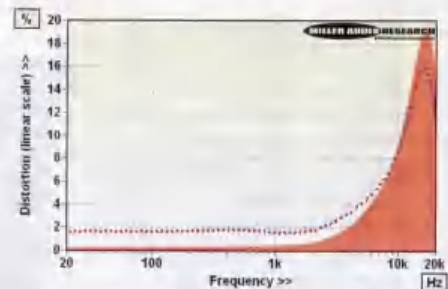
ORTOFON QUINTET BLUE

Ortofon's new Quintet Blue is a traditional medium-output MC, besting its claimed 0.5mV/100ohm at 0.62mV with a superb 0.1dB channel balance and very acceptable >25dB separation through the midrange. In practice, its performance is not dissimilar to Ortofon's own Vivo Blue MC [*HFV* May '11] albeit with slightly improved output and tracking ability, both features of the Quintet's increased recommended downforce up from 1.8g (Vivo) to 2.3g (Quintet). With this in mind the Quintet Blue's compliance is a symmetrical 16/16cu (vertical/horizontal), offering secure tracking up to ~70µm groove modulations before just losing its grip at +18dB (315Hz).

Just like the Vivo Blue, the Quintet Blue's high frequency distortion and response are both lifted with lateral L+R cuts, reaching +1dB through the presence band and mid-treble principally on the right channel [red trace, Graph 1 below]. The general depression through this same region with L-R cuts [dashed trace] suggests that its soundfield may still be emphasised stage front while pulling slightly to the right. Equalised distortion (-8dB) is low at <1.5% up to 2kHz but climbs to a peak of 16% (left) and 19% (right) at an inaudible 17kHz [see Graph 2]. These are features of the Quintet's very extended ultrasonic response (which 'reveals' the harmonics) more than an inherently high THD, the former aided by a very fine 8x18µm diamond, a low moving mass and fractionally high 26° VTA. All in all, this latest Blue is a very accomplished MC. Readers may view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for Ortofon's Quintet Blue MC by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE: Frequency response curves (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, solid) versus vertical (L-R, dashed)



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

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving coil / 9.0g
Recommended tracking force	2.0-2.5mN (2.3mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	620µV / 0.12dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	16cu / 16cu
Vertical tracking angle	26 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	80µm / 70µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.75-16.2% / 0.34-19.4%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.5 to -3.4dB / -0.25 to +1.35dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	33dB / 26dB

were served up in rapid succession by my Dynaudio Focus 260 floorstanders.

Despite the soundstage being filled with multiple drum rhythms of varying pitch, the Blue's even delivery means I could still enjoy the contrastingly slow, drawn-out vocals of lead singer Yukimi Nagano as they floated within the song's buoyant beats.

A MEASURED APPROACH

The Blue isn't as revealing as some of the more ruthless pick-ups at this price point: what it offers is a measured approach that's more forgiving across a range of recordings and of varying SQ.

The opening riff to REM's 'Turn You Inside-Out'

[*Green* - Warner Bros WX 234 925 795-1] always makes a grand entrance, and with a 'hot' sounding cartridge Peter Buck's lead guitar can sound a little too

ripped open and shrill across the treble. Under the Blue's influence, the track's guitars are still given free rein to sound raw and edgy, but without being allowed to become 'spitty', especially at high SPLs.

While the Blue takes full advantage of the expansive soundstage it's afforded by the VPI deck, what's more striking is the Ortofon's talent for separating out instruments within it. Turning to Nick Drake's 'Fly' from *Bryter Layter* [Simply Vinyl SVLP 094] shows how well this cartridge copes with

'Guitars sound raw and edgy without any spittiness'

ABOVE: Ortofon's anti-resonant 'ABS' thermoplastic body protects the Blue's internals while its alloy mounting plate is threaded for easy installation

more challenging material. Each instrument is given plenty of air and space to let the notes form with convincing realism, which the Ortofon then knits together into a cohesive whole, while ensuring their edges don't blur into each other.

Bass is also nicely articulate and evenly presented without being over-emphasised or lacking in tangibility.

The 'Paris' track underlines how the Blue likes to show its hand in the lower registers, not just trying to impress through lots of low-down wallop, but by making sure the bass sounds natural and fully formed - neither overly dominant nor hollow, resulting in low notes with genuine substance.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

While there may be alternative pick-ups out there for similar cash that shine brighter with detail or strive for a grander presentation, you'll be very hard-pressed to find a better alternative that's as well balanced across the board as the Blue. This pick-up offers a sound that's both refined and yet bags of fun, guaranteeing its place as a fantastic all-rounder for those wanting a quality moving-coil on a budget.

Sound Quality: 85%

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