

## Lyra • Etna Phono Cartridge

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*" . . . Jonathan Carr's finest work -- and certainly his most musically complete."*

by [Roy Gregory](#) | October 27, 2017

I'm not sure if it's a male thing or an audiophile thing, but it's remarkable just how much time and effort the hi-fi industry and its customers spend on the task of trying to list, organize and generally arrange things into recognizable and orderly patterns. At its most obvious, this might take the form of buying guides or product-of-the-year lists, but nearly as simplistic and deterministic is the range of almost subliminal assumptions that we apply to audio equipment and systems, everything from our likes, dislikes and prejudices to the heard-one-heard-'em-all reductionism with which we happily dismiss entire brands and technologies.



Indeed, the very nature of such assumptions means that the underlying behavior that generates them creates a situation in which the more entrenched the opinion, the more likely you are to discover an exception. By far the most pervasive and limiting (and therefore the least supportable) of all our assumptions is the association of quality with cost, especially when that price is distorted by the need to hit specific price points or match the price of key competitors. Look at most product ranges and you'll see a nice, evenly spaced range of offerings, normally with some sort of size, technology and performance logic to explain the steps. The problem is that technology and materials don't work in such neat, linear ways. Deploy a specific material or technology at one point in a design and all too often that immediately places a critical demand elsewhere, like an 845 output tube that needs upwards of 1000 volts to drive it, or a large aluminum cabinet panel that needs multiple braces and damping to stop it from ringing like a bell.

If you start with a bill of materials and price your product from there, then if you get everything right and if it is a perfectly balanced design (a pair of mighty big "ifs"), there could, and perhaps should, be some equivalence between price and performance. But as soon as price is defined by external factors, all bets are off -- which is why all those nice, evenly spaced product ranges suffer peaks and troughs in their value curve. Indeed, the longer the line, the more likely it is to have standout performers and a few also-rans.

Yet, despite this, it's incredibly difficult to convince people that the more expensive product in a company's range isn't necessarily better -- or might not be better for them. The Lyra Etna is a case in point. Look at Lyra's product line and the flagship model is very definitely the Atlas, a status underpinned by its \$11,995 ticket. Next down the line is the Etna, a veritable bargain at a mere \$8995. That's a pretty unequivocal situation, at least on paper. But once you start listening to the two cartridges, you discover that, rather than occupying nice, naturally spaced points on a single, linear performance continuum -- one in which the Atlas sounds the same as the Etna, just better -- the two cartridges sound really quite different in nature and character, with different strengths and weaknesses that are likely to work in very different systems and appeal to different listeners. In fact, rather than a nice, single, clearly defined product line, Lyra is in effect, offering two alternative flagships, at two quite different price points. What's more, it's a deliberate choice on the part of Lyra's designer, Jonathan Carr. At first sight that might seem like commercial suicide. After all, the first rule of retail is, *Don't confuse the customer*; in practice, what this means is that it is impossible to review one cartridge without reference to the other. But once you get to grips with the differences between these two cartridges and understand just why they are going to work for different owners and in different systems, this starts to make an awful lot of sense. It just happens to defy the simple equation of price and performance.

Internally, these two cartridges have an awful lot in common: same tip, cantilever, suspension, X-shaped coil former and coils. Not surprisingly, they also have identical output levels, electrical characteristics and loading requirements, physical dimensions and geometry. Indeed, the Lyra design path couldn't be further from the old "We'll stick a gem-stone cantilever and some gold wire in this one to justify the higher price" strategy that's so common elsewhere. Look at the Etna and Atlas spec sheets side by side and the two cartridges really are non-identical twins, which raises the questions, *Why the difference in sound, and why the difference in price?*

Well, the latter at least is pretty easy. The Atlas uses a monolithic body structure, precision milled from a solid block of titanium using both contact and non-contact (surface erosion) techniques. What's more, the structure itself is asymmetrical, with different angles and dimensions to its various facets, all designed to inhibit resonance within what is a precise, vibration-measuring device.

But as well as measuring vibrations generated by the movement of the stylus in the groove, any cartridge is also a *transducer* that converts those vibrations into electrical output. To that end, it is designed to both present a stable reference against which the cantilever can move, but also to connect the supporting structure as directly to the headshell as possible, thus providing the shortest exit path for spurious mechanical energy that enters the cartridge structure via the cantilever. Given that, according to Lyra, only around 10% of the energy generated by the groove makes it into electrical signal. That's a serious consideration. Of course, using a solid block of titanium certainly helps in that regard, as does offsetting the front magnet fixing to one side, meaning that it no longer impedes the direct path between the cantilever's anchor and the headshell. It's an undeniably effective but somewhat brutal approach to the problem that, despite the naked nature of the cartridge body, results in a pretty portly overall mass of 11.6 grams. (By way of comparison, the original Koetsu Rosewood, with its massive, boat-like body, weighed 12 grams, while the contemporary, blocky, but fully shrouded Black was a svelte 9.5 grams.)

In stark contrast, the Etna is altogether smaller and more minimalist in appearance. Rather than the monolithic construction of the Atlas it employs a composite construction in which an aluminum alloy "saddle" is used to clamp the generator's titanium spine firmly against the tonearm headshell, delivering the necessary mechanical intimacy. Similar result, different path. It's also lighter, with an overall mass of 9.2 grams -- 2.4 grams (or around 20%) less than its bigger brother. Look a little closer and you discover that it too employs asymmetrical elements, but perhaps more crucially, the resonant characteristics of the structure are further tuned or controlled using small bronze or stainless-steel rods inserted at key points. So, where the Atlas strives to come as close to the one-piece ideal as possible, the Etna employs a genuinely composite approach to the problem of resonance within the cartridge body, seeking to minimize it rather than simply evacuate it. It's impossible to say which approach is technically more appropriate or effective, other than by the evidence of our ears, but it is remarkable the extent to which there's an almost intuitive correlation between the sound and the physical nature of Lyra's two flagship designs.

Using the Atlas as the point of departure might seem to cast the Etna into its shadow, but nothing could be further from the truth. One way of distinguishing between these two cartridges is to define the Atlas in terms of what it does -- its considerable strengths -- and the Etna in terms of what it doesn't -- its astonishing lack of audibly intrusive weaknesses; or to put it another way, one is all about the outer limits of performance and the other is all about inner balance. Few cartridges in my experience can match either the sheer resolution of the Atlas or its explosive dynamics and speed; none do both. This is a lean, mean, fighting machine, a champ of the cartridge world, all about ripped physique, sudden dramatic contrasts and almost visual impact. It's loud (when it needs to be), proud (in its detail and projection) and demanding to know (you really need to dial in the setup -- more so even than with its predecessor, the Titan i). It certainly comes as no surprise that the Atlas finds such favor with Audio Research owners, its character dovetailing perfectly with the rich, expansive nature of the electronics.

That's the background against which the Etna entered the market, and in many ways it couldn't have been a greater contrast. Where the Atlas was all vim, vigor and snarling attitude, the Etna is a sweetheart. But don't let that fool you. Its quality may not be as obvious, but it is just as substantial and musically compelling, just in a more subtle and understated way. And let's get something else out of the way right now: the Etna might not be as brutally demanding as the Atlas when it comes to setup and alignment, sounding an awful lot sweeter straight from the off, but it takes just as much care and attention if you are really going to get the best from it, with microscopic adjustments of VTF and VTA/SRA being absolutely crucial to extracting its dynamic capabilities and full musical authority. Once you've established an initial setup, just try adjusting the counterweight as little as possible to increase the tracking force -- you know, so little that you are not even sure you moved it -- and listen to the results. That alone should convince you that the Etna is super critical of setup, even if this cartridge doesn't slap you round the chops just to make the point.

How does the Etna sound? In a word, *complete*, or *comfortable*, or *coherent*, *concise*, *contiguous*, or *comprehensible*. Perhaps, ultimately I should simply settle for *compelling* - although even that might more accurately be termed *persuasive*. That's right -- this is the cartridge that does everything well and many things better than a lot of the competition, the very definition of the ultimate all-'rounder. If the Atlas raises the bar in the realms of speed and resolution, the Etna sets it dead level, but then hoists it really, really high. That makes it a capable, communicative and versatile musical performer, while its sensible mechanical characteristics ensure that it will play nice with a whole host of tonearms -- so much so that since its arrival, the Etna has become my "go to" cartridge, the first one that gets mounted on any record player or tonearm, a genuine benchmark that has become, somewhat to its own disadvantage, part of the system

wallpaper, a totally dependable "given" that simply gets taken for granted, which helps explain why this review has been quite so long in gestation.

The quality that casts the Etna in this role, that makes it such an effective bridesmaid, is its preternatural sense of proportion. Its presentation offers such a natural perspective, with a perfectly balanced sense of width, depth and height, that the conceit of stereo -- that we can reconstruct a three-dimensional event -- passes almost unnoticed. Dimensionality is simply an extension of the performance rather than an end in itself. You don't marvel at the width, the depth or the walk-in soundstage; instead, the acoustic space created simply adds to the sense of presence and performance, another facet in the reconstructed environment, the one you are invited to enter and enjoy.

Listen to Kit Downes' album *Tricko* [Coup Perdu CPLP003], and the juxtaposition of piano and cello is almost subliminally distinct. Yes, cellist Lucy Railton is in front of the piano, and, yes, the placement of the instruments is utterly distinct, but what really matters isn't where they are but that their locations relative to the microphones establishes the balance between them. This is music of supreme delicacy, a complex, intimate conversation between just two instruments, where relative level is crucial.

The Etna's natural sense of proportion and perspective preserves both the different scale of the two voices and the relationship between them, evoking that subtle fragility that makes a track like "Jinn" so captivatingly beautiful. But that delicate balance extends way beyond, and depends on more than just, the spatial presentation. That same sense of proportion must govern both the dynamic and harmonic realms too, the level of the instruments, their character and decay. Any exaggeration, any rude discontinuity, any sudden steps or flabby bloating would be the audio equivalent of a moustache drawn on the *Mona Lisa*, just as any shift in perspective, an instrument lunging forward, upwards or juddering in place, would destroy the intricate illusion created in time and space. It's remarkable how often we happily accept and adapt to such aberrations; it's even more remarkable when you can listen without having to.

Reproducing two instruments is hard enough; reproducing a complete band or orchestra is exponentially more difficult. It involves more space, more complex relationships and both greater energy and more subtle variations in its presentation. The Etna's sense of proportion doesn't desert it when presented with larger-scale pieces. Instead, it really comes into its own. Just as the proportions on *Tricko* are preserved, so are the perspective and relative scale of more complex recordings. Play discs or tracks with a natural acoustic, such as the Barbirolli/Sinfonia recording of *English String Music* [EMI ASD 521] or "True Love Ways" from the *Buddy Holly - Legend* [MCA MCMD7003] and that sense of both the scale of individual instruments or performers, their location and the space between them add significantly to the intelligibility of the performance. On the Tallis *Fantasia*, the fragile structure and instrumental interactions are laid bare, the placement of the instruments clearly defined, the offstage location of the string quartet unmistakable. Whilst it might be tempting to ask *So what?* this is about how easy it is for your brain to understand what it's hearing. So having instruments where you expect them (and having them stay there) is actually significant.

But it goes further than that. Take the basses on the Tallis as an example: they can sound lifted, thick and slightly thuddy in the opening pizzicato, which might sound wrong until you realize that they are

centrally positioned on a hollow riser behind the orchestra. The Etna leaves you in no

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doubt as to either the nature of their support or their height; but more importantly, it integrates this information into the whole, rather than creating a disjointed or disconnected element within the soundfield. In the same way, the various studio announcements and incidental noises that preface the Holly track add to the sense of soundscape and event, rather than distracting from it. Resolution is all very well, but we've all heard systems and components that pull recordings apart rather than leading you into them -- and that's not good. Information is great, but only when you can make sense of what it means, and that's the Etna's ace in the hole. Few cartridges I've heard sound as natural as this one; fewer still make as much sense of the recordings and performances they play.

Which raises an interesting question: what happens when the recording incorporates discontinuities, intentional or otherwise? Perhaps the most obvious example would be those concerto LPs that, for reasons of balance or vanity, overvoice the solo instrument. The legendary Du Pré/Elgar Cello Concerto [EMI ASD 655] is a classic example. Our Jacqui may have delivered a big, bold and compelling performance, but with the Etna there's no missing the fact that her cello is unnaturally large and forward, adding to the effect. Likewise the voicing of Starker's instrument on the Dorati/LSO recording of the Dvorak Cello Concerto [Mercury SR 90303], which is even more exaggerated. Does this destroy the illusion of these performances? No, because it's a deliberate choice or shift in perspective. You are aware of it and you can make your own mind up about whether it's appropriate or not, but to a large extent that will depend on the skill of the producer/engineer.

While it leaves you in no doubt about the nature of the manipulation, what the Etna does is give it the best chance of achieving its aim. It's all a question of balance -- and the Etna's sense of internal balance is pretty near perfect. So, just as the Du Pré gains power and drama (and the Starker is arguably just a little over the top, very much in the Mercury house style) when "the colored girls go doo de doo de doo" on "Walk on the Wild Side" (Lou Reed, *Transformer* [RCA LSP 4807]) their steady advance up to and on either side of the lead vocal has rarely been as studied, deliberate or impressive -- even if it is entirely synthetic. This is pan-potting with attitude, and it both adds to and is an integral part of the musical whole. Play something like the Barbirolli or the Buddy Holly and the word that springs to mind in describing the Etna's presentation is *natural* -- but in reality, a better word (witness the Elgar, the Dvorak or the Lou Reed) would actually be *correct*: the intended relationships within the recording are preserved (as is their intent), rather than exaggerated or distorted. Either way, the Etna makes for an engaging and compelling listening experience, helping to reconstitute the power of the performance.

A lot of that musical impact and power come from the weight, presence and carry of its performance. Weight and presence are notions that are doubtless familiar from a multitude of audio reviews, but what of carry? That's how I tend to think of the relationship between the sense of the physical and the sense of pace or momentum. It's not just what the music weighs, but how far and how fast that weight moves. Although the Etna holds instruments and voices stable in space (and especially height), there's nothing static or earthbound about its musical delivery. You can argue that cartridges like the top Clearaudios or Koetsus deliver more low-frequency weight and possibly impact too, but the impressive thing about the Etna's nether regions is just how fleet of foot they are. Think back to the Barbirolli and those opening plucked bass notes. The Goldfinger Statement delivers more sheer substance, but it cannot match the texture or the sense of pluck and release that you get with the Lyra, qualities that inform both the nature and the pitch of the notes. Just as real bass, whether in a concert hall or a club stage, floats effortlessly independent of the floor, the Etna's bottom end never reaches your feet first, but it is of -- and offers essential underpinning to -- the acoustic space itself. In turn that means that bass notes never drag or slow the tempo, while rhythmic transitions are both musical effective and unimpeded -- be it the rising mandolin riff on "Forget About It" (Alison Krauss, *Forget About It* [Rounder/Diverse Records DIV 002LP])

or those little hitch kicks that Basie is so fond of, rhythmic prompts that lift a whole track.

The deft way this cartridge reveals textural nuance speaks volumes about its tonal and harmonic qualities. Neither lean nor etched, overly warm or bloated, the Etna's sense of balance extends into the area of instrumental color, sitting just enough on the warm, sweet side of neutral to add a touch of forgiveness to proceedings, pardoning patchy recordings and poor pressings. Once again, that inner calm that is such a part of this cartridge allows the recording (any recording) the opportunity to speak for itself. The top-to-toe linearity and lack of excess padding make for a lucid, articulate and intelligible performer, one that never lets the wrappings obscure the essential core message in the music. Lines and phrases are clean without being clinical, and structures are clear and scale stretches from delicate to monumental without apparent constraint.

As I've already written, there are cartridges that go bigger and there are cartridges that dig deeper; there are richer, warmer cartridges, and there are cartridges that are simply more impressive. But the Etna's special quality lies in the unimpeded way in which it lets the music breathe and the musicians express themselves. If the heart of the music lies in the midrange, that's also where the Etna starts, growing outwards, upwards and downwards from that central core, rather than starting with the top, the bottom or both, and trying to fill in the gaps.

If the Clearaudio Statement delivers an audio fireworks display and the Atlas impresses with its sheer speed and dexterity, the Etna is, at least by comparison, a veritable wallflower. Now, don't get me wrong -- I enjoy (and have enjoyed for years) the sheer drama and sudden contrasts of the big Clearaudios, just as I have enjoyed the larger-than-life presentation of Mercury's "Living Presence." Likewise, I regularly marvel at the gymnastic capabilities and explosive dynamics of the Atlas. And despite the arrival of the Etna SL, with its promise of greater speed and resolution, the higher output of the standard model more often than not delivers ample compensation in terms of body and presence.

At the end of the day, it's no surprise that it is the Etna that has slipped so quietly and effortlessly into the role of benchmark provider, the go-to cartridge in so many circumstances. Walk around any audio show and you'll discover that it's a reliance that extends well beyond these four walls. In fact, if a company doesn't have a cartridge to sell, odds on they'll be using an Etna. Of course, you might assume that's just because Lyra will lend cartridges to all and sundry, but nothing could be further from the truth. Just try ordering an Etna and see how long you'll need to wait before it arrives. No company that's keeping paying customers waiting for several months is going to be handing out freebies. Instead, the fact that supply is constantly outstripped by demand demonstrates the universal regard in which the Etna is held.

**S**pend time with the Etna and what you really appreciate is just how little of itself this cartridge leaves in the music. You simply don't hear it at work, so much of what it does being expressed instead in terms of what it allows to emerge from the recording. It's a double-edged sword, making for a product with no handle for prospective purchasers to grab hold of. Instead, you notice the Etna's contribution when you take it out of the system, rather than when it's in use. Once they're gone, that's when you really appreciate the considerable strengths and holistic quality.

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It's also why, irrespective of the price difference, Lyra suggests that the Atlas and Etna actually represent twin flagships, equal but different. Just because the Etna doesn't shout about its capabilities, don't make the mistake of underestimating them. In many respects I consider this Jonathan Carr's finest work -- and certainly his most musically complete. If ever a product as subjective and personal as a cartridge were worthy of almost universal recommendation, then the Etna is it. Would I recommend it to a friend? I already have -- on more than one occasion. Really? A \$9000 phono cartridge? Yep, and if you are going to do that, you need to be certain you're right. 🍷

### Associated Equipment

Analog: VPI Classic 4 with SDS and VPI JMW 12.7 and Tri-Planar Mk VII tonearms; Kuzma Stabi M turntable with 4Point 14 tonearm; Allnic Puritas and Puritas Mono, Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement, Fuuga, Kuzma CAR-50, Lyra Atlas, Dorian, and Dorian Mono cartridges; DS Audio DS-W1 cartridge with matching equalizer; Stillpoints Ultra LP Isolator record weight; Connoisseur 4.2 PLE and Tom Evans Audio Designs Master Groove phono stages.

Digital: Wadia S7i and Neodeo Origine S1 CD players, CEC TL-3N CD transport.

Preamplifiers: Connoisseur 4.2 LE, Tom Evans Audio Designs The Vibe and VTL TL-7.5 Series III Reference.

Power amplifiers: Berning Quadrature Z and Jadis JA30 monoblocks, two VTL S-400 Series II Signature stereo amps.

Speakers: Wilson Audio Sasha W/P Series 2 and two WATCH Dog subwoofers, Wilson Benesch Square Five and Endeavour.

Cables: Complete looms of Nordost Odin or Valhalla 2, or Crystal Cable Absolute Dream from AC socket to speaker terminals. Power distribution was via Quantum QB8s or Crystal Cable Power Strip Diamonds, with a mix of Quantum Qx2 and Qx4 power purifiers and Qv2 AC harmonizers.

Supports: Harmonic Resolution Systems RXR, Hutter Racktime or Quadraspire SVT Bamboo racks. These are used with Nordost SortKone or HRS Nimbus equipment couplers and damping plates throughout. Cables are elevated on HECC Panda Feet.

Acoustic treatment: As well as the broadband absorption placed behind the listening seat, I employ a combination of RPG Skyline and LeadingEdge D Panel and Flat Panel microperforated acoustic devices.

Accessories: Essential accessories include the SmarTractor protractor, a USB microscope (so that I can see what I'm doing, *not* for attempting to measure stylus rake angle) and Aesthetix cartridge demagnetizer, a precision spirit level and laser, a really long tape measure and plenty of low-tack masking tape. I also make extensive use of the Furutech anti-static and demagnetizing devices and the VPI Typhoon record-cleaning machine. The Dr. Feikert PlatterSpeed app has to be the best ever case of digital aiding analog.