

Miyajima Laboratory MC Cartridge

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Iwashimizu Hachiman-gu Shrine (jap. 石清水八幡宮) is one of the three most important Hachiman-gu Shintō shrines in Japan. It was founded in 859 by the monk Gyokyo on the instructions of the Emperor Seiwa in Yawata. Iwashimizu Hachiman-gu enshrines Hachiman, the God of War, associated with the mythical Emperor Ojin. Iwashimizu Hachiman-gu was built for the protection of the Emperor in Kyoto and grew to be one of the most powerful shrines in the country. Shrine's main festival is held on September 15th. During elaborate rituals fish are released into the shrine pond and the nearby Hojo River and young children perform a "butterfly dance" on the Angobashi Bridge.

So it is a place that's been a religious center for almost 12 centuries, that was founded before Polish state was even created (which happened only hundred years later). Exactly 110 years later (in 966) our country became a Christian state.

Iwashimizu Hachiman-gu is interesting for us not only because what I already described, but because of connections with Thomas Alva Edison (1847 - 1931), one of the most important, most brilliant scientist and inventors of modern times. Have you noticed that Miyajima Laboratory brand belongs to a company called Otono-Edison Labs? The company was founded by Mr Noriyuki Miyajima, and the name was sort of a tribute to the inventor he admired most.

As it turns out, connections between Edison and Japan were much closer than the ones implicated by a simple admiration for his achievements. As you might know, the founder of Edison Lab. used a carbonized bamboo filament for his first, long working bulb (in 1880). Together with his assistants he experimented with 1200 types of a bamboo to finally select the one called Madake. Using this material allowed his bulb to work for over 1000 hours. This particular kind of bamboo was brought to US by Edison's assistant, Mr William H. Moore, who brought it from Japan, from Iwashimizu to be exact. The inventor of the electrical bulb visited this place himself in 1922. Yet another interesting fact—two of Edison's assistants in his Californian laboratory were Japanese, who later became known as founders of two gigantic corporations—NEC (Mr Iwadare Kunihiko, 1886) and Toshiba (Mr Ichisuke Fujioka, 1884).

A stone memorial is dedicated to Edison in the grounds of the Iwashimizu Hachiman-gu Shrine. Visitors can also buy a lot of souvenirs Edison related there. Every year, on May the 4th, a "Festival of Light" is held and 1000s of bamboo lanterns are lit in Edison's honor.

The "King of inventions" seems to be a particularly important figure for Mr Miyajima. Mr Edison seems to be "connected" to Japan, to Iwashimizu Shrine in particular. The Madake bamboo, that comes from this place, creates a stronger bond between these two worlds than one could expect even from such a strong, durable material. So using a small portion of this material for the latest Miyajima Labs' cartridge seems to be symbolic, as is its name -

Madake. Portion of this material might be tiny, but it is used in the very heart of the place, where sound is born—it is a part of a cantilever. Stylus is glued to an aluminum element which is fixed together with a very thin piece of Madake bamboo.



Despite the fact, that only a very tiny piece of bamboo is used for each unit, only a limited number of this cartridge will be manufactured, as this material can not be bought. Some small quantity was given to Mr Miyajima. This particular type of bamboo exhibits some very particular attributes like stiffness and durability. It grows in the mountains on a very particular soil rich with minerals and iron. Mr Miyajima claims that its particular mechanical properties make it an ideal material for cartridge cantilever.

A few simple words...

NORIYUKI MIYAJIMA

Miyajima-Lab [Otono-Edison]

The owner, designer

A stone memorial dedicated to Edison in Iwashimizu Hachiman-gu.

I think that what I regard as important about the development of the cartridge most is to pick up a feeble signal.

It needs complete right working structure. It is not important that a cartridge picks up a meaningless excessive signal. Currently most cartridge engineers do an effort not to cause the distortion with the excessive signal eagerly. However, an engineer does not notice that the effort extinguishes an impression of the music.

I think that the most of the audio product have not been yet completed. The most important development is structure development. Precision and materials have a meaning on complete structure.

Noriyuki-san's system, used in his shop: a tube preamplifier EC 5 + OTL MODEL2010 power amp, both made by himself. He uses them with horn speakers.

A musician playing the splendid musical instrument, the vocalist of the splendid voice use various kinds of sounds properly. And a feeble signal is the most important to the expression of feelings in particular.

I think that I am greatly influenced by the reproduction power of the feeble signal how much value is got by one piece of LP. When I was impressed by the performance of my favorite LP again, I judge that my cartridge evolved.

Modern machines used to wind coils for Miyajima-Lab's cartridges.

SOUND

The world of Miyajima-Lab's sound is a separate one. It's orbit might be close to ones of companies like Koetsu or Ikeda Sound Labs., but the distance between these orbits are still big enough to consider it too small to be taken into account. I think that if I really wanted to name other product that sounds, to some extent, similar, it would be the Ortofon SPU.

There is no such thing as a "Japanese" sound. On one hand one can get a very precise, well defined sound from Dynavector, Shelter and TechDAS carts, on the other there is warm sound of Ikeda and Miyajima Laboratory pickups. But they all have something in common—they all try to deliver a coherent, logical presentation. One can achieve that using one or another set of features but ultimately they should lead to the same result (I mean general result).

And yet there are sonic differences even between cartridges coming from the same manufacturer and sometimes these differences can be quite significant. In particular case of Mr Noriyuki Miyajima's pickups the differences focus mostly on whether it is the attack or the decay phase that hold more energy. It is also clear to me that some of them are more and other bit less selective. But I think that in fact it is rather my interpretation of the accents related to accumulation of energy in one of these two phases of the sound.

First of expensive products of this company I had a chance to listen to was **Shilabe**. Wonderful tonality, dense background, palpable foreground—long story short, a classic example of a rich Japanese sound. I also realized quickly that it wasn't a "perfect sound" as the top Dynavector model, DRT-XV1t, delivered a better performance proving that there was much more information written in album's grooves, it delivered more distinct, more "live-like" sound. And yet Shilabe was (and still is) a remarkable proposal for those, who value a rich, warm sound.



The next model I reviewed, **Kansui** was sort of an answer to my previous comparison, as it offered more open, faster, more 'forward' sound. Yet, it was still a "modification" of a "Miyajima-Lab's sound". I keep using it on regular bases, as it delivers a very good combination of a resolving and yet very rich sound.

Considering the above comparison, the latest, most expensive model offered by Noriyuki-san, seems to be rather related to Shilabe. But only in one regard—in a way that it "shapes" tonality, timbre of the sound. When it comes to dynamics it is surely the best pickup this company has ever made. Also treble extension and bass definition—an element that some users (although not me) of Shilabe and Kansui complained about—are improved. Also spacing is simply extraordinary. This is definitely the best cartridge of Miyajima, and one of the best I've ever listened to.

The sound delivered by it is at the same time very coherent, homogeneous and multidimensional. Density and warmth of the sound appeal to us, music fans, allow us to enjoy the music, to relax while listening. But in most cases it will ultimately lead to a one-

dimensional experience, that is focus exclusively on pleasure and relaxation. And that's OK as long as that's what one expects. Madake offers that but also so much more. It allows us to immerse deeply in the music, to "walk among" sounds. I don't mean a brutal cut through the fabric of music to see what's inside but rather smooth "sneaking in" and enjoying it from within.

The remarkable density of the sound is beyond discussion. That's what I love about Miyajima's cartridges. But the point is that this particular model is also amazingly resolving. The musical picture painted in front of a listener becomes a true breathtaking spectacle, I mean that kind that keeps you on your toes while waiting for what will happen next, how the recordings you know very well will sound when played by Madake. The key elements here are: spectacular soundstage and remarkable extension of both range extremes, especially of the lower one. Bass is powerful, rich but presented also with great definition throughout the whole range, to the very lowest notes.

Bartek, the longtime graphic designer of "High Fidelity", is a great fan of a band called Skalpel. He brought me the latest album, that he bought and got signed during recent concert he attended in Cracow's club Fabryka. Surely an autographed cover doesn't really make the album sound better, but it's nice to keep it in your hand while listening. But in fact this album needed no "enhancements" as it sounded really good. It surprised me with a great timbre differentiation and a very low, powerful, well defined bass. Samples had a common denominator, but differences in timbre and resolution of different tracks were quite easy to spot.

Such a well extended and defined low range came also handy when I played an acoustic (!) album *Buk—akustycznie* by KAT. I remember perfectly the atmosphere of the concert in Rotunda that promoted this album. I remember it so well as it seemed then that the guys responsible for the sound and light were not there. Despite that the sound was quite good, especially the sound of guitars. And it was the energy, the directness of guitars that impressed me when I listened to the album with Madake. I also loved how this pickup conveyed the remarkable out-of-phase effects included in the recording.

With 9" tonearm, like Schroeder CB for example, sound seemed more energetic, more live-like, on the other hand with 12" (like Reed 3P) it was more multidimensional and sounded more like a material recorded in studio. Both presentations were brilliant, but it was the longer arm combined with Miyajima that impressed me most as it was able to better differentiate a "temperature" of music.



The flagship Miyajima Laboratory cartridge allows its user to enjoy any record. It exceeds in sound differentiation, but at the same time offers amazing smoothness and liquidity. And yet, while listening to the latest release of Skaldowie with material that was never released before, that I got from Kameleon Records (limited series on color vinyl) I had no doubt that they were pressed using a material of a CD quality, which resulted in not that good sound quality. But it didn't really matter. I mean it didn't matter for me as with this pickup I simply disregarded sound quality and focused completely on fantastic music, wishing that fans would have had a chance to discover this, much more progressive, rock "face" of this band sooner.

Strictly analogue recordings, like a mono version of Niemen's "red" album (official name of the album is, of course, *Niemen*, but nobody really uses it) sounded amazingly expressive. It's a powerful, progressive music after all, so it is supposed to sound like that! That should be achieved not by emphasis of a leading edge, not by cranking up dynamics, but by an immediate release of a full range information, with quick hand-over between attack and decay phase of the sound. And what's important is that also this decay phase is truly taken care of here, it is, which is quite rare, remarkably accurate. A reverb added to Niemen's voice in an opening piece, *Człowiek jam niewdzięczny* (with Niemen's text) was very rich, deep and the decay was very long.

Summary

The best cartridge so far from this legendary brand. It offers everything that Shilabe and Kansui do and than some more. It is perfect.

GOLD FINGERPRINT

I am not sure why I've decided only now to award Miyajima cartridge, and not before, to Zero for example, but I guess it was meant to be so. Madake is one of these cartridges that define "high-end" term, that bring us closer to the music, closer than many, some even more expensive, pickups. A proprietary mechanical design, very unusual material used for cantilever—one will find these elements only in this brand's particular product. Mr Noriyuki Miyajima is a true master, true artist.

TEST METHODOLOGY

I've had Madake for quite some time now. Mine carries a serial number 0026 and it is the first unit that came to Europe. But I needed to make sure over a longer time, that my initial impressions were actually true. So I used it with several decks and arms, expensive and inexpensive ones, as well as with many different phonostages.

The actual review was conducted using two turntables and three tonearms: **Acoustic Signature Triple X** combined with Rega RB-303 (9") and **Reed 3Q** (12"), and then with TechDAS Air Force Two with Schroeder CB (9") arm. The latter was set up by Wojtek from RCM—he's really good at it!

DESIGN

Madake is a Moving Coil cartridge with a Shibata stylus. It delivers relatively low output signal of 0,23 mV, which is the same level as Kansui. Cart is quite heavy, as its body was made of African Blackwood. Recommended tracking force, 2,5g, is lower than the ones for Waza and Shilabe (3 g each), but slightly higher than for Kansui (2,3 g). The key change comparing to previous models is replacing aluminum cantilever with a one made of Madake bamboo.



Other elements are very similar to those used for Kansui. One of Mr Miyajima's proprietary solutions, that was patented for mono carts in 2002 and for stereo ones in 2005, is so called cross ring method. In both cases it improves precision of tracking and contact with records groove. In this method the cantilever is supported on a pin coming from the back magnet and tightened to the front yoke. Here the absorber is placed between the coil and the front yoke. The clear advantage of this solution is the support point for the cantilever. It's exactly in the coil's axis. This allows for more effective transformation of movement to electric current. This type of suspension does not introduce additional resistance. It also has much lower inertia. The core of the coil is made from resin, which does not interfere with the magnetic flux. This solution allows to avoid additional distortion.

Specifications (according to manufacturer)

Weight: 9,7 g

Material: African Blackwood

Recommended tracking force: 2,5 g

Internal impedance: around 16 Ω

Output signal: around 0,23 mV

Compliance (10 Hz): around 9×10^{-6} cm/dyne

Recommended working temperature: 20-30° C (perfect temp.: - 25° C)

Stylus: Shibata

Frequency response: 20 Hz – 32 kHz

Price (in Poland): 23 900 PLN

MADAKE

Otono-Edison Labs

<http://www.miyajima-lab.com>

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MADE IN JAPAN

Product delivered for test by:

RCM

<http://rcm.com.pl>



Only the music

YASUNAO TONE + TALIBAM! + SAM KULIK *Double Automatism*. Label: Karlrecords KR022

Premiered: March 13th 2015

As we've already mentioned in our **News** section, the audiophile label Karlrecords released recently the *Double Automatism* album—a result of cooperation between Talibam! Duo, playing experimental music, an avantgarde artist Yasunao Tone and Sam Kulik.

As you one can read on label's official website, an idea that lead to creation of this album was born already in 2012, when a New York duo Talibam! and Sam Kulik were invited to interpret works of Yasunao Tone for a great exhibition of 1955-1970 Japanese avantgarde art in Museum Of Modern Art in New York. Six months later Tone invited all three musicians to participate in a common project.

This project resulted in an original album, multidimensional, difficult to perceive, where rough, electronic experiments were supported with a live sound of a trumpet. It is very original, unique, interesting, it is a rare opportunity for fans of modern electronic music in its avantgarde form.

The album was released on March 13th in three formats: CD, LP and as music files. If you're interested in LP you should know that its edition is limited to 500 pcs only. It is not the first release of electronic music, that would rather never appear on radio, for Karlrecords label. Company is run by Mr Thomas Herbst, whom I had a chance to interview when gathering material for my article about Karlrecords (see **HERE**).

I am not so sure, whether I should recommend this album to all fans. Its perception requires a sort of preparation. It is a difficult music, immensely dense, you won't find there any of the elements usually associated with musical piece. The closest music to this album I can come up with is *Cybernetic Serendipity Music*, early electronic music experiments of, among others, John Cage, that covers a period of 1957-1968. For me the material on *Double Automatism* was very convincing and involving.



Even though it is a very difficult musical material, it was recorded in a very well-balanced way, without any roughness or dryness. The trumpet that plays in the background sounds wonderful, and the combination of aggressive, rough electronic sound with a live instrument is simply extraordinary! I had a chance to compare a commercial release with a test pressing (no II) and I had to say they were pretty close. A very fine release indeed!

SOUND QUALITY: 9/10

karlrecords.bandcamp.com

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