

POWER CHORD

GOLD NOTE'S VASARI GOLD

By Jeff Dorgay

With so much happening at the pinnacle of the analog world these days, and so much excitement around the mega dollar turntables, phonostages, and cartridges, there hasn't been much buzz on the entry level. Many of us lament the days of walking into a record store and finding some great records for four bucks, but the same goes for phono cartridges. With decent cartridges in the four-figure range, what's the new audio enthusiast to do?

Four words: Gold Note Vasari Gold. And you can get one for \$385. Too often the moving magnet cartridge is overlooked, and with this example, the team at Gold Note has put a lot of the ethos that is in their top range cartridges into a cartridge for the enthusiast on a bit of a budget.

When super size won't do.

Getting great sound in a smaller space requires extra placement and planning. Large speakers usually won't do, components often need to be stealthier and neighbors in close proximity might not appreciate your need to rock out at all hours of the day and night.

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FEATURE

Forgoing the boron cantilever and a few other exotic bits, the Vasari Gold is still assembled by the same staff of craftspeople that produce the entire Gold Note line, and it shows. Comparing it directly with the Machiavelli Gold (\$3,000) and the Donatello Gold (\$1,075), the family resemblance is clear. The Gold Note cartridges all share similar sonic attributes: a full-bodied sound, with high dynamic swing, solid tonal contrast, and saturation.

Directly comparing the Vasari to the other two Gold Note offerings reveals less fine resolution and extension at the frequency extremes as well as less delineation of fine detail, but this is to be expected. If the \$385 cartridge sounded as good as the \$3,000 cartridge, what would the point be? Comparing the Vasari to a few cartridges in its price range, such as the Ortofon 2M blue, the Ortofon Quintet Blue, and my other favorite, the Denon DL-103r is illuminating.

If you find the sound of the Denon a bit too warm and the Ortofon offerings a bit cold, the Vasari will be your Goldilocks – just right. And it doesn't need a step up device. Not that it's a bad thing, per se, but when you are trying to put a top notch analog rig together as cost effectively as possible, adding an MC phono stage or a step up transformer isn't terribly frugal. *(continued)*

FEATURE

There is an immediacy to moving magnet cartridges that most music lovers find engaging. What the Vasari lacks in ultimate resolution, it makes up for in jump factor. The Vasari captures all of the raw energy of Oingo Boingo's classic, "Only a Lad," mounted to the current Rega Planar 3 just reviewed. Staying in the 80s groove, the Sincero's "Take Me To Your Leader" is equally punchy and engaging. Slowing the pace with Nick Drake's classic album, *Pink Moon*, the Vasari brings out the depth in Drake's vocal work here, producing an expansive sonic landscape for this acoustic adventure to unfold between your speakers.

The Vasari is an excellent tracker, zipping through the peaks of Stanley Turrentine's *Sugar*, keeping the sax, drum and bass bits all in perspective, allowing each instrument to shine individually, yet not letting the stereo image fall apart when all four musicians are playing at full tilt. Not every MM cartridge can handle this, yet throwing all of my tortures at the Vasari proves no problem.

You can get all the Vasari's specs here, but most important to get you up and rolling is the 2.0-gram tracking force suggestion. This proves perfect on both the Planar 3 and the VPI Traveler (That I use for portable applications, but I'm NOT a DJ!) turntables. The Vasari also proved an excellent update to the cartridges mounted to those tables, so if you are currently sporting an entry level MM cartridge, this could be a quick and easy upgrade to your system.



FEATURE

With 4.0 mV of output, the Vasari should provide no problem to any MM input. We put it through its paces with everything from a recently restored Marantz 2245 receiver, all the way up to the mighty Pass XS Phono. While you probably won't be using the Vasari as the top dog in your arsenal on a mega system, it proves an excellent daily driver cartridge. Even at this level, and I was surprised when putting either the Pass XS Phono or the Audio Research REF Phono 3 in the system, how much music the Vasari can reveal.

The Vasari is easy to set up, and using merely the supplied VPI and Rega tools works well. Should you have more accurate tools, the Vasari will reward you with better channel separation and an even smoother top end. So, if you can talk your dealer into setting it up, or you have access to the right tools, the Vasari is a finer paintbrush than its modest price suggests.

As good as digital is getting, modest analog gear doesn't always convey the elusive analog magic, but it's a pleasure to report that the Vasari Gold delivers on all levels. Whether you are building a frugal analog front end or just upgrading that \$99 cartridge your turntable might have come with, I suggest putting the Vasari on your list. It's just right.

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