Low-output moving-coil cartridge
Made by: Dynavector Systems Ltd, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan
Supplied by: Pear Audio Ltd, Alnwick, UK
Telephone: 01665 830862
Web: www.dynavector.com; www.pearaudio.com
Price: £449

AUDIO FILE

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

Dynavector Aska-L

One cartridge platform and a choice of high- and low- output versions as Dynavector launches its Aska moving-coil, a pick-up replete with electromagnetic innovation
Review: **Jamie Biesemans** Lab: **Paul Miller**

For the last half-century or so, Dynavector has doggedly entrenched itself in vinyl replay's moving-coil camp. The company, founded in 1974 by Dr. Noboru Tominari upon his retirement from the position of professor in mechanical engineering at the Tokyo Metropolitan University, never built a moving-magnet cartridge. Commercially courageous, bearing in mind the popularity of MMs, it is also indicative of a company staying true to its core tenets.

MAKING AN ENTRY

The Aska-L is the latest cartridge from this Japanese brand, and the entry point into Dynavector's assortment, situated beneath the 10X5 MkII and 20X2. At £449 it's not the cheapest MC 'starter' cartridge (Audio-Technica and Ortofon kick-off even lower) but promises to make the brand's custom technologies such as its Flux Damper, Softened Magnet and special annealing all accessible at a lower price point. At the same time, Dynavector explicitly states it wanted to offer an MC cart that wasn't too tricky to setup but still offered the genre's insightful sound quality.

LEFT: Dynavector's little blue box keeps the Aska securely packaged while clearly distinguishing between the high- (2.8mV) and low- (0.3mV) output versions

Most MCs fall into the low-output category, with some brands offering high-output MCs for use into a 47kohm MM input. Intriguingly, Dynavector offers both options for the Aska. While this review looks at the 'L' version, requiring a suitable high-gain phono preamplifier, an Aska-H is available for vinyl buffs in search of a quick fix. The H edition adds extra coils of very fine wire around the square former, bringing the output voltage to 2.8mV, which is significantly higher than from a regular moving-coil.

'On the back roads of Nevada, the car running on fumes...'

Dynavector suggests selecting at least a 1kohm load impedance for the Aska-H, adding it too can also be used with 'regular' phono inputs on amps designed with a 47kohm load in mind. Having low- and high-output options is unusual but, again, is very much on-brand – the company was the first to produce a high-output MC, way back in 1978.

The Aska-L arrives in a little box enclosed in a display case with a clear top [see pic, left]. Cartridge manufacturers wanting to stay in business quickly learn they need to pack carts safely, so they can survive former rally pilots turned delivery drivers, tasked with getting a package into your hands pronto (or the bushes in the front garden, on a bad day). Still, it's nice when a brand puts a bit more effort into presentation, certainly at this price point. That said, Dynavector doesn't offer a version of the Aska-L pre-mounted in a detachable headshell, as do some rivals.

ABOVE: The Aska-L's annealed pole piece/yokes are mounted into a translucent plastic body with lightweight headshell mount. The 6mm alloy cantilever is fitted with an elliptical tip

Fitting the cartridge is straightforward. The slender body of the Aska-L is typical Dynavector, with a flat 'shoe' (or should that be 'hat'?) with threaded inserts on top. It's a small detail, but it means you don't need to faff around with tiny nuts and bolts. Selecting the wrong length of screw isn't fatal either, as the ends of the pins run next to the body.

LEGACY TECH

Dynavector is a company that in many ways is traditional, hand-assembling its cartridges in-house (although Japanese partner companies are involved in part production) and deploying technologies that were crafted under Tominari and his descendants. The Flux Damper, introduced in the '90s, and at the core of the Aska-L [see PM's boxout, p89], is one example. Dynavector also applies its new annealing ⇨

process to the entry-level cartridge, which uses a careful heating and cooling process to regularise the crystal structure of metal used in the rear and front yoke, and the pole piece, all of which are part of the magnetic circuit.

Vinyl connoisseurs will remember Dynavector's high-end Karat range, noted for the use of extremely short cantilevers made from diamond and ruby. At 6mm, the Aska-L's cantilever doesn't go to the extremes of the Karats – the original Diamond model [*HFN* Nov '80] possessed a 1.7mm cantilever to push resonant frequencies above 50Hz. Instead, as the Aska-L is an 'entry-level' MC, no precious stones were required, instead opting for a cantilever made from hardened aluminium.

ABOVE: The Aska-L's exposed, hardened alloy cantilever ensures cueing is a dream and despite the curved body shape, initial alignment is still easy. Also, short screws are still recommended for the threaded headshell holes

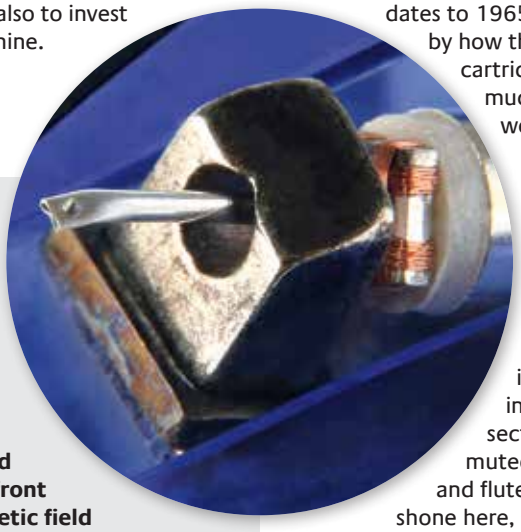
SYMPHONIC SOUNDS

For my listening, the Aska-L was used with a Technics SL-1200GR2 turntable [*HFN* Sep '24] connected to Musical Fidelity's M8x Vinyl phono preamp [*HFN* Mar '25]. I experimented with loading, wavering between 50ohm and 100ohm, while the base-level MC gain on the M8x Vinyl (+60dB) seemed suited to Dynavector's 0.3mV output [see PM's Lab Report, p91].

The Aska-L's low 5.8g bodyweight also complemented the medium effective-mass arm on Technics' deck, and mounting the cartridge on the SME-style headshell was stress-free. The Aska-L's elongated body shape lets you easily check the alignment and VTA with a protractor, so even on more 'fiddly' tonearms installation shouldn't be too challenging.

Most of the vinyl I use for testing is in good-as-new state, but some of my secondhand LPs have seen better times. The Aska-L's elliptical stylus generally tracked each record satisfactorily, extracting fine detail to a high level for a cartridge in its price range. A downside, though, is that neglected vinyl seemed to crackle a bit more than usual so, perhaps, it's time also to invest in a cleaning machine.

An old copy of Dvorák's *New World Symphony* [Deutsche Grammophon 138 922 SLPM], with Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic, wasn't without some 'pops', although the stirring portrayal of the strings and horns of the first movement more than made up for it. Considering this edition of the frequently re-released album dates to 1965, I was impressed by how the Dynavector cartridge extracted so much detail from its well-travelled grooves. This resolving quality made for engaging listening during the symphony's well-known *Largo* movement, which after a short brass introduction segues into a mournful section laced with muted English horns and flutes. The Aska-L really shone here, able to convey even the quiet passages in their full splendour. I also appreciated the cohesive nature of its presentation, savouring not only the main theme, but all the supporting instruments in play.



TRIP-HOP HERO

Listening to *ISON*, the 2017 debut from Iranian-Dutch singer Sevdaliza [Music On Vinyl MOVLP1973], the Aska-L endowed the second track 'Libertine' with a strong focus on her vocals, and maintained their pleasant, rounded character even when she reached for the highest notes. At the ⇨

MAGNETIC THINKING

While the Aska's elliptical stylus, crimped alloy cantilever, square former and copper coil windings (and polymer damper behind, see inset picture) are reminiscent of many other MC cartridges, Dynavector has squeezed more performance from this formula by paying extra attention to the 'magnetic circuit'. All MCs operate on the same simple principle, governed by Faraday's Law of Electromagnetic Induction, whereby a signal current is induced in the coils as they are moved by the cantilever and cut the lines of magnetic flux between the pole piece and front yoke. However, this current also sets up an opposing magnetic field that resists the very motion these 'moving coils' require. On a far grander scale, this magnetic damping effect is used in non-contact braking systems (roller coasters, *etc*) and vibration stabilisation solutions for research and industry.

On the micro scale of an MC cartridge, this magnetic resistance to the free motion of the coils sets up resonances within the armature and surrounding structures, adding intermodulation distortion to the (audio) signal. Dynavector mitigates this phenomenon by winding a coil on the front yoke in an attempt to induce an equal but opposite force that will suppress these dynamic variations in magnetic flux. This patented 'Flux Damper' is one part of Dynavector's comprehensive 'Magnetic Circuit Stabiliser'. Another is its 'Softened Magnet' where an additional, permeable metal block is added to the Aska's high intensity rare-earth magnet (above the coils and between the front and rear yokes) to further linearise the magnetic flux experienced by the moving coils. PM

RIGHT: Another shot clearly revealing the Aska-L's coils and square iron former mounted onto a compliant damper. At the cartridge rear, gold-plated pins are angled upwards for accessibility

same time, the track's 1990s-trip-hop-style production, all sparse slow beats and instruments framed by a dark background, was present and correct. As with the albums of trip-hop pioneers Portishead, precision and the ability to extract environmental cues to create the music's small-room feel are a requisite for *ISON*'s tracks. The Aska-L delivered both, ensuring the melancholic mood of the album was communicated well.

Comparing its performance to the Nagaoka MP-700 MP (Moving-Permalloy) cartridge [*HFN* Aug '25] that's usually mounted in my Technics deck, Dynavector's more affordable MC both increased the sense of ambience and depicted certain instruments, including the piano, in a more forward manner. The Aska-L's low-frequency delivery is certainly not lacklustre, but I did feel Sevdaliza's pieces would have benefitted from a bit more bass dynamism and 'oomph'.

MORE TO CHERISH

The cartridge is more confident a little further up the audio band. During 'Pas Vraiment' on Side 2 of Stromae's *Multitude* [Mosaert 450794-2], low flute notes in the background sounded natural and well-resolved, a nice textural counterpoint to the many artificial effects in this glossily produced pop track. And there was more to cherish during the refrain of 'Mon Amour', where Stromae is joined by a group of male vocalists (either that, or it's an overdub), above low bass notes.

The Aska-L really brought out the richness of the sound, delivering the track's recurring theme with warmth and impact. And there was nothing to fault in how this new Dynavector pick-up highlighted the guitar licks, whistles, samples and percussion elements that are strewn around the soundstage, both here and elsewhere on the album.

Every time I play *The Black Light* from Calexico [20th Anniversary Edition; City Slang SLANG50166LP], my mind returns to a middle-of-the-night drive many years ago. It was on the back roads of Nevada, the rental running on fumes, and me desperately looking for a gas station as the album, on CD, played through the in-car system. This was quite exciting and apt, too, as this release from the Arizona-based band mixes jazz, Tex-Mex and mariachi traditions to create the ultimate desert-themed album. Each track has the same general vibe, but features different instruments, distinctly layered across a broad stereo stage.

SLIDE RULES

The Aska-L wasn't fazed by its complexity. The woody, percussive 'tocks' on the brief instrumental 'Fake Fur' sounded clear and precise, but what I especially appreciated were the drawn-out slide guitar notes ringing in the far background, transforming this piece into something very atmospheric. Clarity is a strong suit of Dynavector's moving-coil cartridge, and combined with the open presentation, the Aska-L has all the cards in hand to grab and hold your attention.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

If you are looking to transition from an MM to an MC without breaking the bank, the Aska-L has you covered. But it is not merely defined by its accessible price tag. Wielding proven Dynavector technologies while making the right compromises, the Aska-L affirms the clarity and stereo imaging that MC devotees adore. Its sonic performance is certainly not entry-level, making this innovative pick-up a bit of a steal.

Sound Quality: 87%

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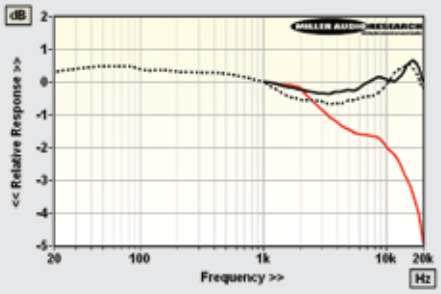
LAB REPORT

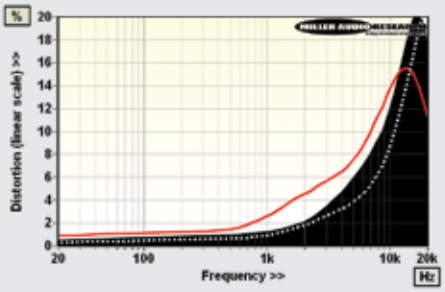
DYNAVECTOR ASKA-L

For a low-output MC without a 'fancy' cantilever or line contact diamond, Dynavector's Aska-L puts in a worthy performance. That cantilever – a full 6mm in length – is a hardened alloy tube, crimped and fitted with a shank-mounted elliptical diamond [see inset pic, p89], a combination that would typically betray a limited HF response and often with a dip preceding a resonance around 14kHz [*HFN* Feb '22]. Not so here as, possibly proof of its 'Flux Damper' and other technologies [see boxout, p89], the Aska-L delivers a remarkably flat stereo response that's true to within ±0.75dB from 20Hz-20kHz [dashed trace, Graph 1]. The symmetry of the generator is slightly less impressive, however, as lateral cuts are reproduced with a stronger presence and treble than vertical cuts [black vs. red traces, Graph 1], favouring centrally-mic'd performers, for example. Distortion is no lower than we might see with a top-flight pick-up, although the increase from 1%/1kHz to 20%/20kHz [stereo, –8dB re. 5cm/sec; Graph 2] is merely a function of the Aska-L's extended response.

The reduced 5ohm coil impedance (versus 150ohm for the Aska-H) delivers a lower, but still very useable, 355µV output (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec) alongside a slightly 'loose' 0.75dB channel balance and >23dB separation (all re. 20Hz-20kHz). VTA looks closer to 26° than 20° while the 15-20cu compliance – softer than the rated 12cu – combined with the low 5.8g bodyweight, renders it very compatible with a range of low/medium mass tonearms. Finally, the Aska-L is a very secure tracker at its recommended 2.0g downforce, tracing up to ~70-75µm and keeping hold of the penultimate (+15dB) test groove modulation at 0.5% THD (re. 315Hz/5cm/sec). **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 / 5.8g
Recommended tracking force	2.0mN (18-22mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	355µV / 0.75dB (75ohm load)
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	15cu / 20cu
Vertical tracking angle	26 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	75µm / 70µm
L/R Distortion (–8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	1.3-14.9% / 0.65-21.5%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.1 to –2.4dB / –0.45 to +0.5dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	30dB / 23dB