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Going Color Blind: Exploring Ortofon's 2M Lineup

by [Marc Mickelson](#) | August 1, 2016

Like many audiophiles, especially ones who spend a lot of time sitting in front of a keyboard and monitor, I have a second turntable -- indeed, a second audio system in my office. The turntable is a Technics SP-15 with an Audio-Technica ATP-12T tonearm, both in a Technics SH-15B2 base. I have actually found three of these 'tables and tonearms locally. The first two I sold, because they didn't come with a base and I didn't foresee making or buying one. In 20/20 hindsight, I should have kept those first two turntables and tonearms, just to use with this Technics base, which is heavy, inert and perfect for the application.

I've used a few cartridges with this 'table, and by far the best fit with the entire audio system was an Ortofon 2M Blue. The 2M line has become a de facto reference for moving-magnet cartridges, wresting that title from various Shure cartridges omnipresent throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This is no small feat, and it is due to both the sound quality of the various 2M models as well as the wide price range across the line. The 2M cartridges are the best-known high-performance budget phono cartridges available today, although "budget" is somewhat misleading, because while the 2M Red costs just \$99, the 2M Black is \$755 -- out of budget range, at least as I see it. Sitting just above the Red, the 2M Blue (\$236) may be the most revered model in the line. It does so much right for so little money.

With all of this in mind, I discussed a blog on the 2M line with folks at Ortofon USA, thinking it might be interesting to compare the Blue, which I own, to the Black and reporting the results. Because Ortofon provided a 2M Bronze (\$440) for me to hear and I've heard the Red and the Black with my Technics/Audio-Technica turntable at various times over the past few years, I decided instead to opine about all of the 2M cartridges. Which one represents that fattest part of the 2M line's price/performance ratio? The answer surprised me.

The four-model 2M line debuted in 2008, and since then it has grown to include dedicated mono and 78-compatible cartridges, as well as models that expand the mounting options for the four main cartridges. All of the styli are user-replaceable and interchangeable, which only adds to the appeal. The differences among the four stereo 2M models occur in three primary areas: stylus profile, body material, and engine.



The 2M Red uses an elliptical diamond stylus, while the 2M Blue features a nude elliptical. The 2M Bronze features a nude fine line diamond stylus, which tracks high-frequency information better, and its larger footprint is said to reduce distortion and record wear. The 2M Black uses a Shibata stylus. Its slim, highly polished profile provides a wider contact area to the groove walls and produces notably detailed sound throughout the spectrum, including into the very highest frequencies.

The body of the 2M Red and Blue is identical (other than the color) and made of plastic, to keep the cost low. But the cartridge body used for the 2M Bronze and Black is manufactured from Lexan DMX, an advanced composite material that's highly rigid and eliminates resonances. It goes without saying but I'll say it anyway: resonances are bad for the performance of any audio equipment but especially harmful to the tiny analog signal. The 2M Red and Blue have the same engine with slit pole pins, which Ortofon calls "improved." Output is increased to 5.5mV. The 2M Bronze and 2M Black use an upgraded version of this engine that features split pole pins and silver-plated copper wire.

We've covered the 2M Black as part of [a survey of moving-magnet cartridges](#), and I agree with the points made. The 2M Black is "open, fast, detailed, vivid, full of vitality and sonically spectacular." It is a true high-resolution transducer that consequently puts great demands on the downstream electronics and speakers. This is exactly what makes it unsuitable for systems like that in my office, made up of lower-end electronics and speakers. Oh, I am able to hear how it does what it does, but in my office system this translates to a ruthless spectral balance that emphasizes the treble. With a better phono stage -- perhaps one that's much better -- I suspect this cartridge would shine, outpacing even some moving-coil cartridges in terms of its ability to extract information from the groove. With a lesser phono stage, that information doesn't always become music.

On the other end, the 2M Red is far more forgiving than the 2M Black, but also less involving, at least in the context of my system. *Blunt* would be the single word I'd use to describe its sonic character; it's almost unemphatic to a fault, although it definitely does make music, just not the full extent that LPs are capable of making. If you're spending hundreds of dollars on LPs each year, you are much better off with the 2M Blue. Here you get the audiophile treatment: a full-range, highly resolving presentation that sounds neither stiff nor unforgiving. In fact, the 2M Blue's balance, both tonally and in terms of overall resolution, may be its greatest feat. It's an easy cartridge to listen to, and even novice listeners, like one of my friends who plays lots of LPs but doesn't own any high-end components, can hear how it is not just better than the 2M Red (which, at my urging, my friend replaced with the Blue) but moving-magnet cartridges costing twice as much from other makers. The 2M Blue pushes hard for audio-classic status.

Where does that leave the Bronze, with its improvements in stylus profile, body material *and* engine over the 2M Blue? While the 2M Black sounds more immediately impressive, the Bronze is the more satisfying over the long haul, halving the difference between the Black's speed and resolution and the Blue's balance. In fact, what I would say about the Bronze is that it is a mixture of all of these sonic virtues. It's fast, but not ostentatiously so; it turns information

