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# the absolute sound

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Jonathan Valin on three outstanding moving coils from Benz, H&S and Clearaudio.  
He sums up:

The Ice Blue is an exceptional soundstager, on a par with the Benz and the A90, though, as you will soon discover, not quite the equal of the best soundstaging cartridge in this remarkable group. As with the A90, it has a little tighter focus than the Benz, making for sharp definition (and high clarity) on large ensembles spread out on the stage, side to side, foreground and back. It is also among the best trackers in this bunch, sailing through an overmodulated passage on the RCA disc *Venice* that caused several of the other cartridges in my little reference collection to stumble.

The Ice Blue is not quiet as much of a snap to set up as the Benz, however. Its low output of 0.2mV may try the patience (and the gain limits) of your phonostage. It didn't faze the ARC Reference Phono 2, but be aware that this is a very-low-output moving coil. The Ice Blue also likes to be loaded down to 100 ohms, where its frequency balance comes closest to flat, colorless neutrality. (You don't seem to pay the same penalty in dynamic range and transient speed by loading the Ice Blue down that you sometimes do with other moving-coil cartridges.) It is happiest tracking at the recommended 2.3 grams with the tonearm parallel to the record surface. At \$9k, it is nearly twice the money of the Benz and Ortofon, but it does something that neither of these other do – it combines their virtues almost equally and completely, making for an option that you can't get by simply choosing one or the other.

[Another worldclass cartridge – and another reference.](#)

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