

Clearaudio Performance Record Player

by Alan Sircom

Clearaudio, turntablists par excellence, seem unable to sit still for a moment. The range of products is vast and ever expanding (in the time taken to pen this sentence, three new arms, two decks and a half dozen cartridges have popped out of the German brand), and the technology lives up to the reputation. The company is 'into' almost every single innovation in turntable design of the last few years, implementing in new models and – where possible – retrofitting innovations into pre-existing designs and offering upgrades for users.

This is a new design, but demonstrates a significant development that applies across the Clearaudio board. Clearaudio's new Performance deck appears roughly mid way up the extensive range, yet is notable for being the first new product with Clearaudio's ceramic/magnetic bearing, engineering which is retrofittable right across the Clearaudio range, save for the entry-level Emotion (not the same bearing, of course; there are five different sizes for different decks and upgrades cost from £325-£725 if retrofitted, and from £215 to £475 if fitted with a new deck).

A magnetically opposed bearing 'floats' the platter, eliminating the thrust pad and should be a good idea in theory, but is often a dreadful idea in reality. The good part is that it drastically reduces friction and thereby mechanical noise in the bearing. The bad part is two fold: keeping the magnetic field even (a series of repulsing magnets must give an even field strength, otherwise the platter will start to wobble, pitch and roll – which wasn't a Bill Haley song) and keeping the magnetic field from influencing the

cartridge. This last is key; the magnetic field strength near the bearing has to be strong enough to keep the repulsor action going, but not so much as to send the cartridge crazy. Fortunately, Clearaudio managed to keep the good points and shuck off the bad points in one hit.

The trick is in the shaft and platter. The turntable main bearing shaft is non-magnetic. Clearaudio uses a ceramic alloy, claimed to be exclusive to the company, with a much finer surface than that previously used in bearings. This is claimed to reduce lateral friction in the bearing by a factor of 10, compared to conventional designs. This also prevents magnetic field being transferred to the spindle itself while Clearaudio uses a special shielding material between the bearing housing and the upper magnet, to prevent stray magnetic field from influencing the cartridge. How does the platter help? The lightweight acrylic disc simply reduces the magnetic force required, making the side effects easier to deal with.

But there's more to a deck than a bearing and the family similarities are clear here. The shape of the deck is similar to the Champion range, with the free-standing motor housing sitting in a cut out at the back left of the deck. The plinth itself looks more like the Ambient (only without the separate motor and speed control block), as it's made from a sandwich of white Corian-like synthetic marble and MDF

(wrapped in a band of aluminium) with the trademark clear acrylic platter. The deck sits on three clear plastic squiddy feet.

The turntable was supplied as a complete kit, with the Satisfy Carbon Fibre tonearm and an optional Clearaudio Maestro cartridge (£410 on its own), but we went upmarket and opted for the £1230 Concerto.

All up, a beautiful package,



brilliantly presented, both solidly and cleverly built. It demanded big guns in the phono-stage stakes, so I went with one of the best; the excellent Karan Acoustics Phono 2.

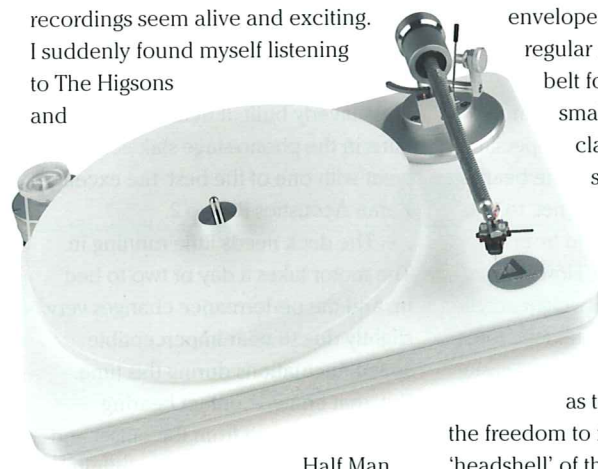
The deck needs little running in. The motor takes a day or two to bed in, and the performance changes very slightly due to near imperceptible speed fluctuations during this time. But, that limited-contact bearing seems good to go from the outset and that's just the start. This is an infinitely adjustable set-up, especially when it comes to the arm and cartridge. Close inspection of the headshell reveals it to be nothing more than a cross-member, joined to the armtube by a single mounting screw. This makes adjustment of off-set, overhang and downforce all interdependent and all prone to inadvertent adjustment ▶

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▶ as you tighten that one screw. Cue hour upon hour of compensation, over-compensation and downright frustration. But it's worth persevering...

You see, the deck introduces a level of freedom to the sound of vinyl you'd be hard pressed to find from anything this side of a Platine Verdier (another mag-bearing deck). A whole noise floor we have all become accustomed to simply falls away, leaving behind... well nothing. No inky black silences or pellucid depths, just an absence of anything not on the disc. It's sort of spooky and almost vertiginous, like walking across a tall glass bridge. It seems those inky black silences people praise when discussing very good decks are a function of the turntable introducing its own character to the sound. Once that goes away, all you are left with is the recording studio, a squashed billet of vinyl and you.

This makes even grotty mid-1980s recordings seem alive and exciting. I suddenly found myself listening to The Higsons and



Half Man Half Biscuit albums, just because that jarring rawness to the sound suddenly became honest no-bover studio work. Of course, putting those away and listening to Pablo Casals playing Bach *Cello Suites* on an original pressing is a far more edifying and moving experience, but there's something exciting about the

vivacity of those hitherto unlistenable penny dreadful recordings. On a good, live recording, the soundstage takes on exactly the proportions cut in production. No artificially big sound,

no slimmed down or beefed up dynamics, nothing except what the disc has to say: What You Play Is What You Get.

Still more freedom: this time freedom from temporal imperfections. With a bearing that is, for practical purposes free from friction, the motor runs without stress and the speed seems more accurate than many decks. I'd be tempted to push the envelope a little and swap the regular round section plastic belt for something altogether smaller, like a top E classical guitar string or similar. But as it stands, it's one of the most speed-precise decks you can buy without spending a fortune.

But there's such a thing as too much freedom: the freedom to futz about with the 'headshell' of the Satisfy tonearm, coupled with the seemingly limitless performance potential of the deck meant that at times you seemed to be approaching the outer limits of LP replay, while at others it felt like you were roller skating on an ice rink. While drunk. And blindfolded. Despite that it's clear that the Concerto moving-coil is a honey. Clearaudio cartridges

still have the zing they had in the days of classics like the Insider, but now come with a richness and harmonic structure that is reminiscent of Benz-Micro designs. A good combination.

If you can bear to leave the arm alone, this player has the potential to deliver a brilliant performance. The deck is a liberating influence, with a hard (non) sound to give up. All those points about musicality or dynamic range seem to fall flat here, because the 'table just plays exactly what's on the vinyl and most other decks don't. Its performance needn't be hampered by the arm, but the potential for emerging obsessive/compulsive disorder must not be overlooked. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Rigid turntable with standalone motor
Plinth:	Composite MDF/artificial marble
Bearing:	Magnetically opposed with ceramic shaft
Platter:	40mm acrylic
Speeds:	33/45 manually adjustable via pulley
Dimensions (WxHxD):	420 x 130 x 330mm
Weight:	9kg
Tonearm:	Satisfy Carbon Fibre arm
Type:	Gimbal Bearing
Effective Mass:	Medium
Bias Compensation:	Magnetic
Price:	Performance deck with Carbon Satisfy tonearm and Maestro cartridge – £1670

UK Distributor:
Audio Reference
Tel. (44)(0)1252 702705
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REFERENCE

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