

## Affordable Focus

# Clearaudio Concept Signature Turntable

## Music Takes the Stage

Neil Gader

**T**he original Clearaudio Concept turntable, launched in 2009, was conceived as an affordable and user-friendly high-performance deck and was roundly embraced by audiophiles. It has since racked up a staggering 20,000 units sold. Over the years, there have been upgrades, but the Clearaudio team from Erlangen in Bavaria, Germany, have outdone themselves this time with the Concept Signature, a special edition for the U.S. market only. The term “special” only begins to describe its charms.

The philosophy behind the Concept Signature is consistent with that of its predecessors. The clean minimalist look will be familiar to most Clearaudio fans. The suspension-less design may look basic, but under the hood are decades of experience and innovation. There’s a redesigned plinth with an illuminated rotary touch controller that sets speed (33.3 or 45rpm) and returns the

platter to standby. For now, it’s only pushbutton activated, but Clearaudio has teased the news that the rotary aspect will be used down the road as a volume control. Perhaps hinting that for the Concept Signature there might be a headphone jack in its future? Time will tell.

The core of the turntable chassis is made of medium-density fiberboard. The top layer of the turntable is made of special satin-finished plastic. This combination minimizes resonances and ensures a smooth visual appearance. The 30mm or 1.18" main platter, is made from polyoxymethylene (POM), a high-density synthetic material that sits atop a CNC machined aluminum subplatter. It’s driven by a polished flat

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belt from a completely decoupled direct-current motor to minimize the transmission of noise.

The Signature makes use of the advancements—both technological and material—from the entire Clearaudio turntable line. These include the AiR 12v DC coreless motor with a new speed-control circuitry derived from the Reference Jubilee turntable. Further isolating the AiR DC and enhancing vibration control is



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### Specs & Pricing

**Speeds:** 33.33 & 45rpm  
**Bearing:** Polished and tempered steel spindle in a sintered bronze bushing, running on a Teflon thrust-pad  
**Dimensions:** 16.54" x 13.78" x 4.92" (with tonearm)  
**Weight:** 16.5 lbs.  
**Price:** \$2500 without tonearm and PP12 linear power supply; Tracer tonearm, \$3800; PP12 Professional Power Supply 12v, \$1000;

package price as tested, \$6200 (with Twister clamp)

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a modified version of the O-Ring IMS (improved motor suspension), once again derived from the Reference Jubilee turntable.

Rounding out the Signature package is the Professional Power 12v (a \$1000 value)—an outboard, transformer-based, linear power supply developed to assure purer power and maximize the AiR motor and sophisticated self-regulating electronics. Signature also borrows the leveling feet from the Performance DC turntable for better isolation.

The Signature provides a pair of tonearm options—the Tracer Black (\$3800) used in this evaluation and the Signature Black Satisfy Carbon Fiber (\$2800), a version of which I used when I reviewed the Concept Active (Issue 284). Both tonearms feature black carbon-fiber arm tubes, exceptionally lightweight and rigid for reduced resonance and enhanced clarity. The Tracer Black tonearm features a precision bearing and an aluminum headshell with a large mounting surface for easy and finely tuned azimuth alignment. For this reason, Garth Leerer of Musical Surroundings, Clearaudio's U.S. distributor, considers the Tracer more compatible with a wider range of higher-performance cartridges.

The counterweight is underslung, providing an optimal center of gravity and allowing fine adjustment of the tracking force. It features a higher-mass bearing housing and a high-precision, low-friction jeweled bearing, crafted from tungsten and sapphire. The precision bearing is 90 degrees to the angle of the cartridge offset, beneficial for more accurate tracking and stereo separation. The carbon-fiber tonearm tube is both extremely rigid and very lightweight, providing a perfect combination of stability and agility. The magnetic anti-skating force is mechanically decoupled and adjustable with a simple dial. The Tracer Black is hardwired with Clearaudio Sixstream cables terminating in gold-plated RCA plugs.

If a new owner is still up in the air about cartridge selection, Musical Surroundings offers Concept Signature buyers up to a 20% discount on any of its stable of cartridges, including Clearaudio, Hana, or DS Audio. For this evaluation, I listened with two cartridges—Hana Umami Blue (\$2500, boron/Microline) and

the recently reviewed Ortofon MC X40 (\$1149, boron/Shibata). Both have a 0.4mV output and a suggested 2g tracking force. The Concept Signature demonstrated a fine sensitivity, conveying the differences between these two excellent cartridges and giving the pricier Blue a very subtle edge in overall transparency.

Concerned about setup? Don't be. Concept Signature eliminates most of the installation anxiety from the get-go. I point this out because not everyone lives in proximity to a dealer who can come to the rescue if setup proves too difficult, although I doubt that will be the case with this smartly conceived package. It unpacks easily (critical items are carefully enclosed and padded and protected in the main shipping box; excellent step-by-step instructions to fit the platter on the base (footers are already installed), slip the tonearm into place, and affix the cartridge are included. Even the more delicate adjustments like setting stylus overhang, tracking force, and vertical tracking angle are easily accomplished on a first attempt and can be fussed over later after a few hours of break-in. An alignment protractor, all the necessary screws, a mini screwdriver, and a bubble level are provided. For tracking pressure, I'd suggest using a digital gauge or something along the lines of the Ortofon DS-3, particularly if you're into swapping cartridges on more than a casual basis. It's worth the extra expense to have an instrument that you can use repeatedly.

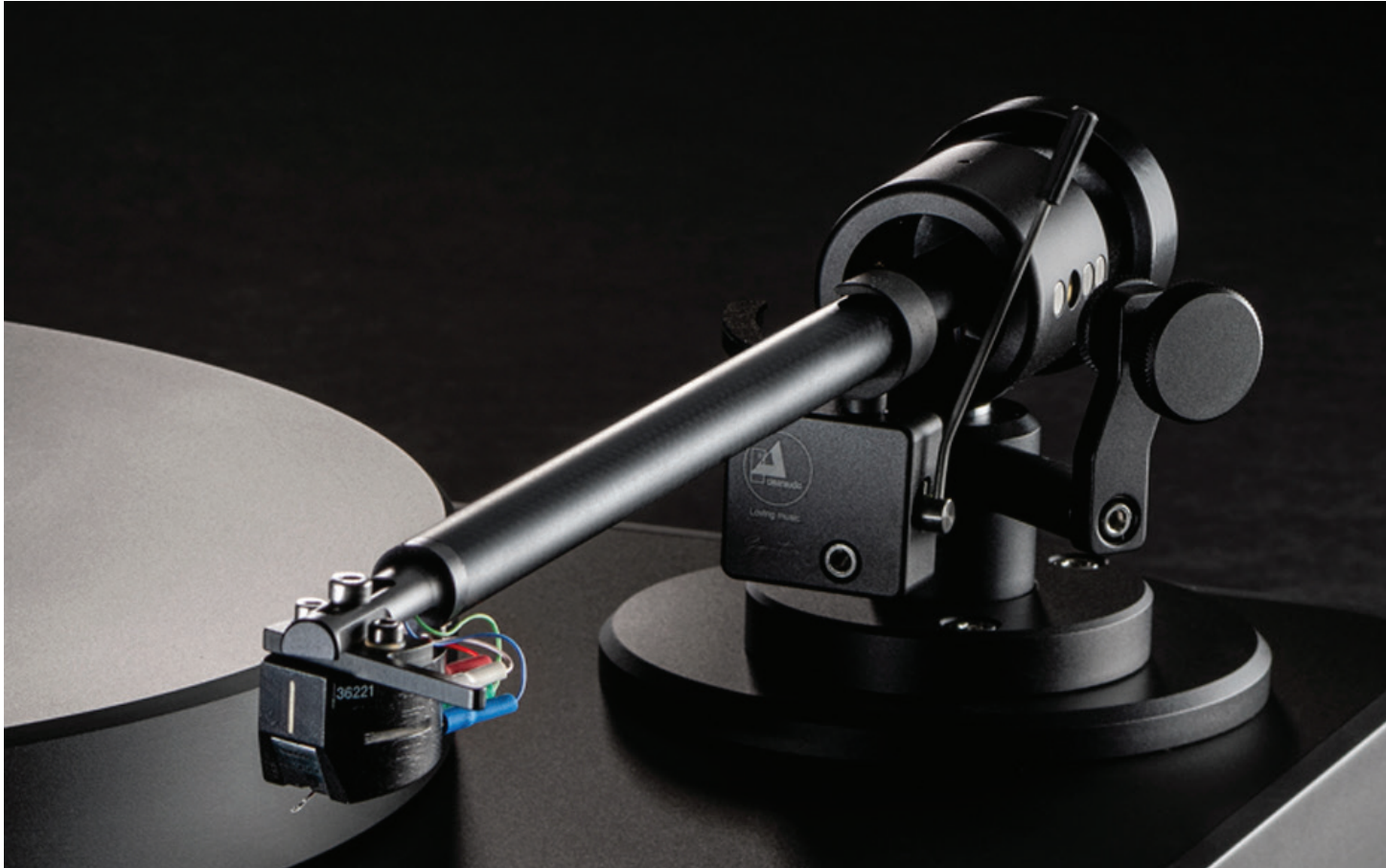
Throughout the setup and listening phases of this review, there were no glitches

### High-contrast and full-bodied musicality and a finely focused sense of detail.

or quality-control issues. Fit and finish were flat-out superb. Operationally, the Concept Sig has a pleasant tactile feel. A press of the controller brings the platter up to speed quickly and quietly—no belt slip or noise, just dead silence. Operation is whisper quiet. I was especially fond of the firm linear and sensitive cueing mechanism. Finally, no turntable is fully dressed without a record clamp. There are plenty of after-market choices and costs rise quickly. But my sample arrived with Clearaudio's optional "Twister" record clamp. The Twister's body is machined from polyoxymethylene (POM), the same material as the platter, with a stainless-steel twist-lock knob. Easy to use and easily worth the \$200 added cost.

A couple of thoughts about LP playback. Turntables are essentially launching platforms. And it begins with the platter and motor. Together they provide a neutral and accurate springboard that interfaces with the tonearm/cartridge. And while dropping a needle into a vinyl groove may look simple—even quaint—in reality, it takes a sophisticated and finely tuned mechanical/electrical dance to decode and transmit the delicate signal up the stylus down the tonearm and out to a phono amp with maximum speed and minimum sonic degradation. At their best, all

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these elements should be unaffected by acoustic, mechanical, and airborne vibrations or resonances. Otherwise, a turntable would tend to absorb or overdamp, and everything downstream, from transient cues to low-level details and dynamics, suffers as a result. Further, motor isolation and unerring speed accuracy are prerequisites for a tonearm and cartridge to faithfully track the grooves of a record.

In terms of isolation from airborne or acoustic interference, the stock footers did a more than credible job. But as is the case in the high end, there is always some room for improvements. I'd encourage most owners to consider optional turntable platforms to further reduce the impact from footfalls or any other energy transmitted up from the floor or through the air. One example I've recently used is the active isolation stand from German company Seismion (review forthcoming). When placed atop Seismion's Reactio 2 model, even the Concept Signature benefitted in areas of micro-dynamics, three-dimensionality, transparency, and clarity. True, Seismion's technology is an expensive option, but others can be had at lower prices and are often available for audition. It's all part of the fine-tuning process.

In terms of sonic performance, what I immediately heard when the Tracer Black/Hana Blue touched down in the groove was a high-contrast and full-bodied musicality and a finely fo-

cused sense of detail. There's a lively, bouncy step to this rig that encourages the transient and dynamic energy of the music to spring off the table. It tracks with precision, and image focus is unwavering. Belying its physically small footprint are weighty dynamics and superb bass reproduction. It's often assumed that smaller-platform turntables play lean and "small," truncate bass extension, and otherwise lack the grander scale that only über-pricy, high-mass tables provide. But someone didn't give Concept Signature the message. It not only reproduces thickly resonant instruments like bass violins or driving low brass and winds with rich textures and righ-

teous extension; it never flips such instruments into diminutive version of themselves. Musical images were portraits of stability, laden with foundational weight, heft, and a sense of the physical backdrop within the contours of the recording venue. This trait is exactly what I encountered when I turned to a favorite Sheffield Labs direct-to-disc vinyl, Thelma Houston's *I've Got The Music in Me*. Released in 1975, the tracks were engineered and mastered by legends Bill Schnee and Doug Sax. The LP tracks exactly and confidently with high pressure trumpet/sax leading-edge transients that are fast and crisp but not harsh. Backup singers arrive on a

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wave of acoustic air—the unique timbre and personality of their voices plain to experience. And “watch out!” Clearly, there was zero gain-riding on Houston’s vocal for “Don’t Misunderstand”; her voice goes from almost *sotto voce* to a full-throated, dynamic, high-pressure wail. Mind your volume control!

Nor were there any tracking issues, even on some of the biggest dynamics I have on vinyl, like *The Power and the Glory*, the Wilson Audiophile LP *Winds of War and Peace*, or Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man*. The Concept Signature skated smoothly through these challenging sequences like a walk in the park.

It wouldn’t be a turntable review if I didn’t invite the 1993 Keith O. Johnson-engineered Reference Recording *Däfos* to the platter. Led by Grateful Dead drummer/percussionist Mickey Hart, the track “The Gates of Däfos” features that Hart creation, The Beast—a collection of tuned bass drums (that were also featured in the film *Apocalypse Now*). It’s a cut that challenges the tracking ability and transient and dynamic limits of an LP-playback system. As more drums are struck, a whipped cauldron of air immerses the soundstage in resonant and reverberant currents. It’s a great test to challenge a turntable’s ability to reproduce tonal sustains and the lengths of the reverb tails. I had to conclude Concept Signature cleared all the tracking hurdles this cut could throw at it. Keep in mind that to hear Hart’s Beast, the track begs for subwoofer-level bass extension and output, or the movement of air simply doesn’t materialize.

I’d recently reviewed MoFi’s superb OneStep pressing of Miles Davis’ *Sketches of Spain*, the 1960 Columbia release. As I listened to arranger Gil Evans’ stunning 16-minute opener—an adaptation and expansion of the Adagio from Joaquín Rodrigo’s guitar concerto, *Concierto de Aranjuez* (a recording that continues to dazzle with its odd mix of complex and mysterious rhythmic and symphonic elements)—the mix of brass, woodwinds, percussion plus harp was reproduced with a sense of openness and spatiality behind and above and around the players. These images were not just flatly and clinically presented to the ear. The Concept Signature does a lot of things well, but its ability to impart immediacy and speed are at the top of the list. Davis’ flugel horn and trumpet jumped with micro-energy, detail, and timbral authenticity, the orchestra framed in a vast dimensional soundstage.

Other examples that are worth having another listen to are Joni Mitchell’s “A Case of You,” which explores the wider dimensions of the dulcimer—its vibrato and the buzz of the drone strings. On a naturalistic recording like Rickie Lee Jones *Pop Pop*, the Concept Signature reveals the rich natural timbres of acoustic instruments like clarinet and guitar (“I’ll Be Seeing You”). And there’s Tom Petty’s “Wildflowers,” a warm-hearted, delicately layered tune that captures Petty’s fondness and hopes. If you listen closely, you’ll hear that instruments drift into the mix almost subliminally—guitar, doubled guitar, a soft touch of piano, a dash of bass, then a high vocal harmony, and a tambourine, way back in this acoustically dimensional mix.

In my recent review of the Ortofon MC X40 (Issue 367), I teased out the arrival of the re-release of *The Beatles Anthology*, a 12-LP set boxed in four triple gatefold album covers. Cut on heavy 180-gram vinyl, the collection of tracks features demos,

outtakes, covers, essentially the artistic and roller-coaster like journey of the band. What captured my attention were the two instrumental tracks from “She’s Leaving Home” and “I Am The Walrus.” Isolated as they are from the finished track, these pure orchestrations perked up my ears as remarkably well-recorded, beautifully imaged, and lush with detail and invention. To hear them standing on their own was a real treat for this fan, and most especially the definitive harp performance by Sheila Bromberg that runs throughout “She’s Leaving Home.”

With the release of Bruce Springsteen’s *Nebraska ’82 Expanded Edition*, I was inspired to pull my original 1982 Columbia out for a listen. As Bruce fans know, these songs were recorded as “demos” onto a Teac 144 Portastudio four-track cassette recorder of the day. The songs were raw and unadorned. No assist from the E-Street Band either. They did not go through the usual mixing boards and EQ of a professional recording studio. But somehow, when all was said and done, they worked, and no amount of sweetening could improve them. When you listen to this album, it’s the honesty pouring from this minimalism, the *lack* of so-called production values, that draws you in. The music, mostly voice, guitar, and harmonica, have a wavering spatial quality, an instability, a ghostly sense of past lives and dark losses, and ultimately of artistry triumphing over technology. What it came down to in the end was the Concept Signature’s absence of artifacts or colorations that allowed me to suspend any

sense of *reproduced* music and settle into a realm of performance believability.

There’s little doubt that, as audiophiles, we are living in another golden era of analog. The range of choices at virtually all price levels make the turntable segment accessible to almost anyone hankering to take some vinyl for a spin. But audiophiles are also a diverse lot. Some want to fully immerse themselves in the analog experience—the minutiae, the tweaks, the tech. The deep dive. But most of us are somewhere in the middle. We desire the engagement, but we also just want to get the gear home and up and running with a minimum of fuss and angst. This is Concept Signature’s mission. A classic high-performance turntable, attractive, appealing, and unassuming. A truly easy to use and easy to live with everyday LP rig. Plus, its no-drama ease of setup shows that ownership of an LP rig needn’t be intimidating or time consuming. I couldn’t have been more impressed had this table cost twice as much. This is the affordable, musically rewarding analog rig you were waiting for. Highly recommended. **tas**