

Small Talk

Clearaudio's new Innovation Compact isn't quite as petite as a Pro-ject Debut, but by the standards of this prolific German turntable maker it's certainly modestly proportioned. But how does it sound? Rafael Todes fits the matching Magnify tonearm to find out...

Despite their vast range of turntables, tonearms, cartridges and accessories – and having been around longer than most other big vinyl names – Clearaudio still haven't quite made the name for themselves in the UK that they surely deserve. Perhaps it's the sheer number of rivals here, many of which are well established (and highly able) home grown names? Anyway, the Erlangen (in Germany)-based company continues its prolific

run of new models, with over twenty current vinyl spinners to show for its thirty three years of life.

It's also pioneered a few clever technologies in its time, too. The new Innovation Compact turntable you see before you has a patented Ceramic Magnetic Bearing (CMB), which uses the opposition of two differently polarised magnets to reduce friction and rumble. There is an inverted and polished ceramic bearing shaft, with a polished sintered bronze insert for what should make

for a very quiet deck. Giving the Delrin platter a spin from 33 1/3rpm takes two minutes fifty three seconds to come to a halt, according to my watch. That shows an impressively-engineered bearing in my books. The same test with many other decks I've tried has come in at around one minute...

The Clearaudio offers three speeds, including 78rpm. This would require a special cartridge, but as the deck has the capacity to run two arms, having a separate arm



and cartridge for the playing of 78s is possible. The motor is powered from a disappointingly cheap looking wall wart. I think for four and a half thousand pounds Clearaudio could offer a more elegant solution than this. Yet according to my ears at least, the speed stability sounded very good, in part no doubt due to the Optical Speed Control, which via an infra-red sensor on the platter, controls the actual speed [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE]. A transparent belt connects the motor, which sits on the tripod boomerang-like construction, to the platter.

The belt was slightly enlarged where the two ends had been joined, and I noticed the motor wobble each time this section came around. A second belt performed much better. Such are the vagaries of belt drive; on this detail point at least, you can't help thinking direct drive is an altogether more sophisticated solution.

The turntable legs are fully adjustable spikes, which go into small cups that are provided. The substantial 70mm Delrin platter takes the weight of the deck to around 12kg without tonearm and power supply. Its dimensions are: 479x485x141mm. Overall build quality and finish is very good – as you'd expect at the price – notwithstanding the belt and power supply gripes.

The tonearm fitted is the Cleartone Magnify, a £2,375 unipivot design which uses vertical precision ball races with magnetic horizontal arm bearings. The two-piece carbon fibre arm tube incorporates micrometer adjustment of tracking force and azimuth. Bias is changed by rotating the dial above the bearing. There is no scale for either the tracking force or the bias, so a balance is required for the tracking force, and a test record for the bias. It's certainly a slick product which

feels nice to use, but the SME Series V feels an altogether higher quality instrument, despite its similar price point.

SOUND QUALITY

Not having tried a Clearaudio turntable/arm cartridge combination before, I was fascinated to hear the Innovation Compact/Magnify. The deck properly set up and the listener nicely settled down, I was struck by some remarkable qualities that the combination had. For example, its midrange is quite beautiful in some respects, with an ability to reproduce strings which is up with the very best I've heard. It's also important to note the excellent pitch stability, which gives a solidity to the sound which is tremendously satisfying.

For example, Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue', played and conducted by Leonard Bernstein, showed the woodwind sounding really full, the clarinet solo at the



beginning getting the clarinet sound just right, with a bit of magic dust on it for good measure. There was a touch of loss of clarity from the brass; I'd have liked more separation, but it wasn't bad. When the orchestra got going, I was impressed by the way the turntable/arm combination held the big orchestral sound together. The piano proved slightly less percussive than I heard on the Technics 1210Mk2 as modified by Timestep with an SME Series V; the latter had more front end bite to the note. The violin solo in the middle of the piece showed fine body and richness to the sound, when often this can sound brittle. This was very commendable as it's quite hard to get this right. Spatially, the Innovation Compact's soundstage was impressive, giving a good idea where the instruments are located in the recorded acoustic.

The Mozart String Quintets played by the Amadeus Quartet with Cecil Aronowitz 2nd viola are quintessential chamber music. They have some of the loveliest string sounds that I know. In the Eb Quintet, the Clearaudio did really well. The collection of mainly Stradivarius instruments positively glowed with warmth, while the speed stability of the deck was impressive too, and its rendition of the music brimmed with vitality. Cello sounded surprisingly good; I have heard Martin Lovett's cello croak on lesser decks. Here it has sweetness and clarity. But problems came when the audio spectrum goes lower than a cello. In Benjamin Britten's 'Frank Bridge Variations' (conducted by the composer, a classic golden-age Decca effort), the upper strings sounded rich and resonant, more sonorous than I am used to (not oozing with detail resonant, but pleasant resonant). In the 'Aria Italiana' a pizzicato fest when the cellos strum like a banjo, the arm and deck seemed to have problems lining up the timing on the bass fitting with the treble. I suspected this to be down to the Magnify tonearm, which apparently has both unipivot strengths and weaknesses; an airy

midrange but soggy down below. The deep bass notes seemed to run over slightly, as opposed to having a crisp finish to them. Overall, it proved an inviting sound to listen to, which was euphonious rather than analytical.

Turning now to a classic recording of the 'Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis' by Vaughan-Williams, with the Allegri Quartet playing the solo parts (this recording was made when I was minus three years old, thirty eight years before I joined the quartet!). It is fabulous playing, but extremely difficult for a turntable to reproduce well. The registers are thickly scored, lots of string instruments with similar timbres playing at similar pitch-ranges, the recording was not over spot-miked, so there isn't quite the level of detail as today, and much of the recording is very quiet. On a lesser turntable this can sound like soup, and it can be difficult to discern the musical line, but the Clearaudio combination did a very good job. It's a quiet deck, so the hushed beginning came across well. It does string timbres well, so that for example the 1st violin Eli Goren's tone shone forth beautifully. The orchestra had weight and authority to it, and the deck succeeded in communicating the passion of this remarkable performance. Yes, the double bass pizzicati could have been tighter, but the deck and arm were doing a lot that worked really well.

For reference purposes, switching to the Townshend Rock 7, (£1,800 plus £2,000 for the Excalibur tonearm) which works with the proprietary trough with viscous oil, showed more clarity still. I could hear a wider depth of field and a Garrard 401-like bass solidity, making the Clearaudio combination sound a little loose and euphonic. Still, some of that marvellous midrange 'glow' was missing, giving a less romantic and more matter of fact rendition.

Swapping the Clearaudio Magnify tonearm to my reference SME Series V, and sure enough the bass achieved a new found grip; double bass pizzicati were now under firm contra. Yet still the combination lacked that last degree of control compared to say, the Timestep Technics SLI200 and

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Townshend Rock 7/Excalibur turntable
Timestep Technics SLI210/SME Series V turntable
Ortofon Cadenza Bronze cartridge
Icon Audio PS3 phono stage
VAC Auricle Musicbloc power amplifiers

SME V, which did the same passages of the problematic Thomas Tallis Fantasia with much greater dynamism. The downside of the SME Series V was that magical midrange of the Magnify Tonearm had gone, which actually left me feeling that in the round, the Magnify is probably a better partner for this deck than the SME.

CONCLUSION

The Clearaudio Innovation Compact is a highly capable high end turntable with some very fine qualities; it's stable, delicate and musical, with a lovely midband. Marry the matching Magnify tonearm to it and this becomes truly magical, the combo sounding wonderfully lucid and lyrical with many types of music. The pair isn't famously capable in the bass however, with the Magnify contributing a little blur to lower frequencies which sounds nice and full bodied but isn't strictly accurate. Put a tighter sounding arm on the Innovation however and this issue is resolved but you've lost the charm of the Magnify's midrange! Overall then, an excellent combination with a distinct blend of strengths; I'd recommend you listen and see if it's for you.

VERDICT

Lyrical and lucid, yet stable and surefooted, this is a fine compact high end turntable.

CLEARAUDIO INNOVATION

COMPACT £4,550

CLEARAUDIO

MAGNIFY £2,375

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FOR

- lucid, lyrical midband
- timbral reproduction
- speed stability
- build, finish, style

AGAINST

- tonearm bass grip
- turntable power supply

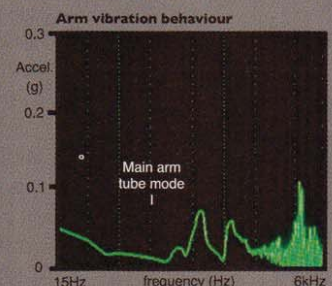
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Innovation Compact's arm is both stiff and well damped. The small peak at 600Hz is likely the common third order bending mode, placing the main bending mode at 200Hz. There is no sign of a response at this frequency, suggesting the arm will have a well defined bass and lower midband, in terms of dynamics and stage spread. The tube is clean at higher frequencies too and energy levels are low above 1kHz so there should be little character to treble or mush behind it.

The Innovation Compact's turntable was running 0.76% fast as delivered and adjustment was difficult because the supplied screwdriver would not engage with the hidden screws; we managed -0.4% error in the end. Initially the turntable suffered peculiar bursts of speed instability. Oiling, cleaning and running for an hour seemed to settle it (even though it had been used) and basic speed stability was then excellent, with negligible drift or cyclic wow. There were some high rate flutter components, one at 9Hz, but they were small. NK

Speed accuracy	-0.4%
Wow & flutter unwrtd	0.12%
Wow & flutter DIN weighted	0.1%

ARM VIBRATION



WOW & FLUTTER

