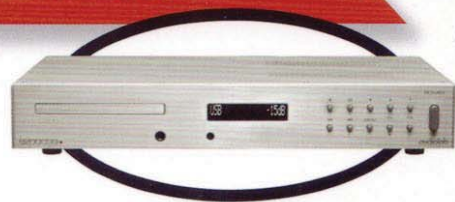


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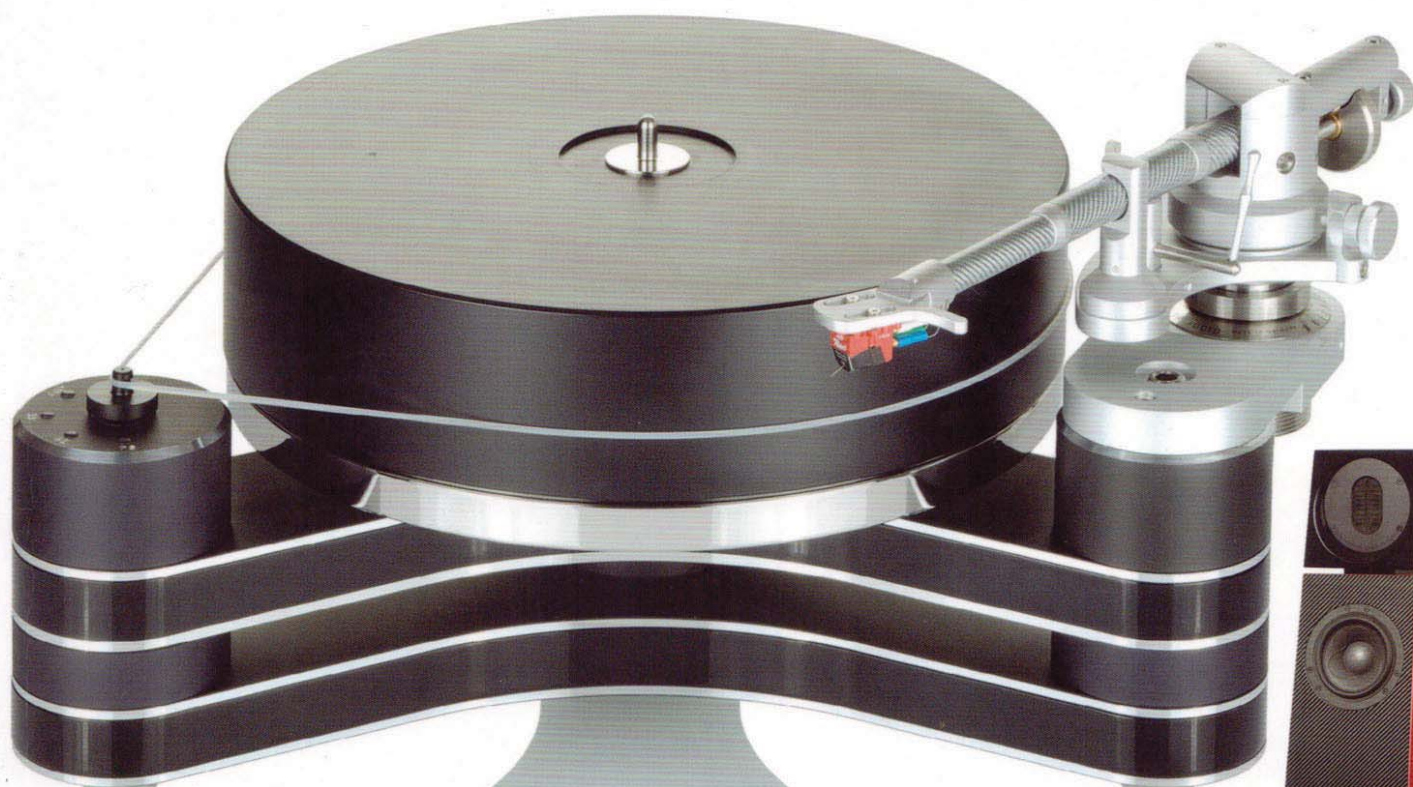


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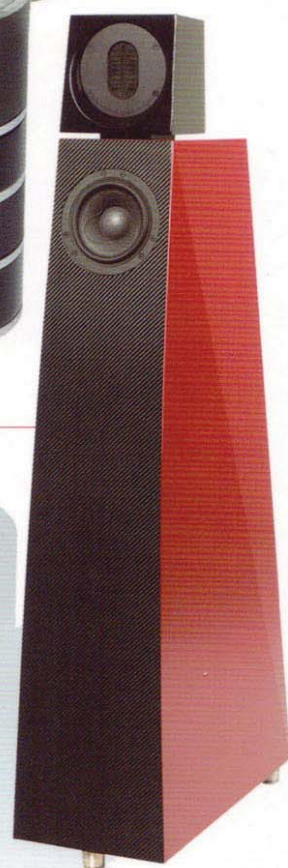
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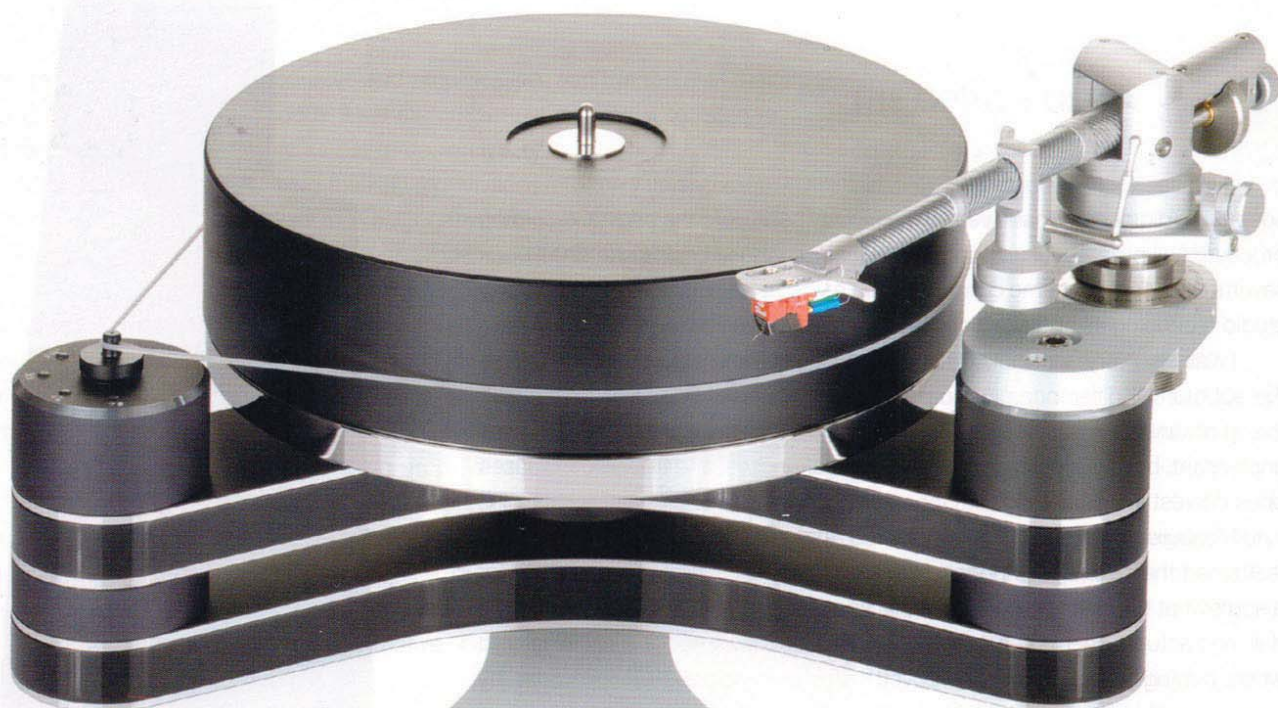
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ClearAudio Innovation Turntable

By Roy Gregory

When ClearAudio introduced their Reference turntable it represented a dramatic departure from more conventional design paths. It wasn't the first 'table to dispense with suspension or to use acrylic, but it was certainly the first I came across with an Acrylic platter THAT thick, while the bizarre, boomerang shaped chassis offended those conservative tastes that weren't already outraged by the Souther tonearm with which it was fitted. Not surprisingly it divided opinion, whilst in the US, competing egos and internecine politics added to the controversy – a furore that only seemed to heighten with the subsequent introduction of the even more elaborate (and far more expensive) Master Reference turntable and TQI tonearm.

Well, despite all the wailing and gnashing of teeth, the Master Reference has steadily evolved across the years, cementing its place in the high-end firmament and spawning a successful line of more modest (and more conventional) siblings – as well as an even more ostentatious flagship, at many times its own elevated price.* Along the way, ClearAudio have remained true to their early adopter roots, embracing new materials and developments and introducing a host of retrofittable upgrades and refinements available for the earlier versions. In fact, there are so many different decks and upgrades that it can be difficult to keep up with what's pertinent to the real world – especially with a range topping out at close to £100K! Fortunately, there's an elegant solution to this particular problem. Like most long product lines, there's a sweet spot where all the important bits seem to come together and in this case it takes the shape of the appropriately named Innovation.

The Souther arm is another matter, perhaps demonstrating that there really are two sides to every story.

If the ClearAudio Innovation looks familiar, that should come as no surprise. It shares the same basic chassis design as the Master Reference, along with most of the technology and materials now used in that model. But where its big brother uses two, interlocking three-pointed chassis modules (one supporting three motors, the other up to three tonearms) the Innovation uses a single chassis, with a single motor taking the place of one of the tonearm towers. Of course, that still leaves room for two tonearms, but more on that later.

The chassis itself is designed specifically to dissipate vibration, both through its shape and also its dual sandwich construction. The two layers are each constructed from 20mm of acrylic with a slab of aluminium bonded top and bottom. They are then spaced apart by aluminium bosses in each corner, again 20mm thick. The result is remarkably inert (which isn't particularly clever) yet at the same time, elegant (which is)*. The front boss carries the DC motor and the buttons to switch speed (33, 45 and 78), while tiny apertures in the side of the chassis allow you to make fine pitch adjustments (essential for 78), the speed held by an optically coupled servo reading a strobe pattern on the underside of the platter. The motor is fed from a standard wall-wart supply while nicely engineered and easily adjusted spikes below each boss allow for precise leveling.

The platter follows ClearAudio tradition – a 70mm thick slab of POM plastic – but supported in this case on a 15mm stainless steel flywheel base to aid the speed stability of the belt drive. The whole thing floats on a magnetically opposed bearing running on a ceramic shaft, an arrangement that is fast becoming the benchmark against which all main bearings are judged. The remaining “legs” of the chassis can both carry armboards and Clearaudio can supply a wide variety of such, cut to suit myriad different arms. The skeletal chassis also means that accommodating long arms is no problem, and keen to hear the deck itself (isolated from the sound of a matching ClearAudio arm) I elected to mount an SME 312, which made for a handsome match with the contrasting gloss and matt black finish of the Innovation.

With any solid plinth deck, the supporting surface will be critical and I placed the Innovation on the heavy-duty top shelf of a finite element HD03, which worked well. Of course the floating bearing and the additional isolation it offers from acoustic feedback clearly helps. Other than that, setting up the Innovation consists of getting it really, really level, with the arm and cartridge correctly mounted and aligned. This review only covers the table, so I'll leave the details of arm mounting aside, save to say that the supplied armboard was perfectly cut, while the single bolt fixing made achieving the correct spindle to bearing distance simplicity itself.

One other aspect of set up should be mentioned; most turntables that run from a plug-top supply benefit from the addition of a more sophisticated interface with the mains and the innovation is no exception. Inserting the plug-top supply into a PS Audio PPP brought a significant improvement in transparency, focus, detail and stability – mainly associated with a drop in noise floor. It also delivered a richer harmonic balance and greater weight, these last two being the most significant. That's because, straight out of the box, the Innovation is all ClearAudio, its sound just as unmistakable as its appearance. None of that warm, woolly bloom that characterizes old-style analogue here; ClearAudio's turntable production post-dates CD, and it shows. It shows in the evenness of the top to bottom balance and the lack of added warmth or padding in the sound. There are those who will be appalled by that prospect, but there's little doubt that the almost CD-esque spectral balance of the Innovation is both more accurate than the lumps and bumps you'll find in the response of many other decks, as well as more tractable when it comes to a system that needs to play both formats. It also means that stepping into the shoes of a previous deck could leave the Innovation sounding somewhat lean and exposed. Give yourself some time to adjust – you might just find that you like it. Here's why...

Play the Monteux/LSO Enigma and you'll hear the spread of the instruments, the space between, behind and around them. Add some extra muscle to the power supply and you'll hear the soundstage boundaries, extra layering within the stage (and better delineation of the tube trains running under the hall). The carefully structured dynamic steps that make ►

“The chassis itself is designed specifically to dissipate vibration, both through its shape and also its dual sandwich construction. The two layers are each constructed from 20mm of acrylic with a slab of aluminium bonded top and bottom.”

There is also a second version of the Innovation, the Innovation Wood, which uses the dense, composite Panzerholz in place of the acrylic slabs for even greater energy dissipation at the price of a small cost increase (£335).

► this such an emotive work are laid bare, delivering both the drama and the dynamic contrasts that underpin this great performance. The clarity and purpose that the ClearAudio bring to proceedings make it clear why it has stood the test of time.

This unfussy, stable and unobtrusive musical access is the hallmark of the Innovation. Just don't pair it with an arm and cartridge combination that is too thin or lean in balance or it could be too much of a good thing. Bass-light or overly etched transducers should be avoided – which is another way of saying, don't skimp on the cartridge. This is a £6K 'table, treat it with the respect it deserves and it will repay you in kind. I got particularly good results from the vdH Condor and ClearAudio's own Da Vinci and that's the sort of level you should be shopping at. With a suitable cartridge up front, the Innovation delivers a direct window onto the musical performance.

'Perfect Day' is a perfect example. Lou Reed's voice is held separate and intimate, the piano poised, the bass perfectly paced and fulsome, the whole swelling convincingly into the chorus. The ClearAudio may not match the sheer substance, vivid body and power that typify a deck like the VPI TNT, but its uncluttered, unflustered and above all, uncoloured presentation is a welcome alternative. Add the 'table's excellent speed stability, its ability to mount a second arm (essential for proper replay of mono or 78 RPM discs) and its long term stability and the Innovation demands serious consideration. Pay attention to the power supply (and ClearAudio offer their own regenerative supply for the Master Reference which would well worth trying) and this turntable will deliver a beautifully measured, polished and musically prudent performance ideally suited to the listener looking for a fuss-free and versatile record player to sit comfortably alongside a high-quality digital front-end. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid plinth, belt drive turntable

Motor: DC with servo lock

Platter: 70mm POM with 15mm stainless steel base

Speeds: 33, 45, 78 – user adjustable

Tonearms: Mounts for two arms up to 12" each

Lid: None

Weight: 23kg

Dimensions (WxDxH): 479 x 225 x 485mm

Price:

Innovation: £5930

Innovation Wood: £6265

UK Distributor: Audio Reference

Tel: +44(0) 1252 702705

URL: www.audioreference.co.uk

Manufacturer: ClearAudio Electronic GmbH

URL: www.clearaudio.de