



Performance Art

Featuring a fiendishly clever new bearing, Clearaudio's new Performance attempts to be both an easy-to-use package and an audiophile turntable. David Price decides whether it delivers...

Clearaudio is an interesting company. Making moving coil cartridges since 1978, it has progressively grown its range to its present capacious state – lest we forget – as overall vinyl sales went south throughout the eighties and nineties. Now in 2007, it makes some of the most stunning vinyl disc spinners I've heard – not least the Clearaudio Reference that I reviewed in February 2004's edition of *Hi-Fi World*. I actually think that, in this country at least, the vast expanses

of beautiful translucent acrylic that these turntables use are not helpful. The problem is that the decks look so good that some, more dyed-in-the-grain, British audiophiles think of them of as 'all show and no go', which couldn't be further from the truth.

In truth, Clearaudio are very serious about mechanical engineering. Unlike many UK turntable specialists, as well as doing motor units they manufacture their own tonearms and continue to make cartridges – all of which show very clever use

of materials technology. Despite being a relatively low end product (for Clearaudio), the new £1,670 Performance turntable package exemplifies this – there's acrylic in the platter and base, carbon fibre in the tonearm and wood in the cartridge, plus the company's new ceramic magnetic bearing. Not bad for what's supposed to be a basic 'fit and forget' all-in-one package.

Starting with the chassis, and it's a non-sprung sandwich design, but with more ingredients than a Burger King Double Whopper. It's essentially



High Density Fibreboard set within an aluminium frame, which is then sandwiched between two layers of 'Staron' artificial stone (sourced from Samsung), not too dissimilar to ARCB used in Trio's classic L-07D turntable, no less. Vital statistics are 420x330x130mm and 10kg.

Into this is set the main bearing shaft, which is machined from an exclusive new ceramic alloy, allowing a much finer polished surface than that previously obtainable in turntable bearings, claims Clearaudio. As the bearing does not use a ball bearing or thrust pad of any kind, it should theoretically be immune to friction, wear and noise.

The motor is a separate affair, which is modern belt drive best-practice. It drives the precision-

machined 40mm thick GS-PMMA acrylic platter via a Clearaudio 'silent belt', a joint-less silicon based design which is claimed to transfer significantly less noise into the platter than traditional rubber types.

The tonearm is Clearaudio's own Satisfy Carbon Directwire, which is a beautifully finished straight tube design, with a woven carbon fibre arm tube that's both extremely rigid yet light. The vertical bearing uses a shaft made out of wolfram, the polished ends of which run in sapphire watch bearings, and the twin horizontal bearings are of ceramic type. Wiring is an unbroken run of Clearaudio's own Direct Wire from the cartridge to phono plugs, and cartridge pins are Clearaudio's own impedance-matched sprung

connectors. Bias compensation is magnetic. Completing the Performance package is Clearaudio's Maestro Wood cartridge, the company's top moving magnet that boasts a satiné wood body holding a Boron cantilever.

SET UP

Despite being an 'all-in-one' turntable package, unfortunately you still have to assemble it as it comes in semi-kit form, as per Michell turntables. Putting it together is quite a long process, although certainly not complex – dare I say, it's easy enough without resorting to the instruction manual, as per standard hi-fi reviewer practice!

The main thing is the tonearm installation, which requires three allen

bolts to be pushed through its base onto the plinth; you then run the arm lead through the recess and slot the arm into position. I then fitted the cartridge, which is easier than usual thanks to the Clearaudio's clever cartridge mounting bolt arrangement – you secure it to the carrier with then moves up and down with one allen bolt for tracking angle adjustment. It's not quite up to SME levels of finesse, but it's way better than average.

You then place the bearing top on the shaft, after applying a few dabs of oil, and the platter on the bearing top, ensuring two little dots line up to give the platter a snug fit. You can then adjust the tracking angle, arm height and tracking weight and bias accurately with a record on the platter, using the supplied (excellent) gauge. Then it's time to move the deck into position, and position the motor, before which you have to secure the pulley wheel about 3mm above the base of the motor shaft. Easy stuff, but lots of fiddling.

Finally, you put the supplied white cotton gloves on, and position the belt around the rim of the platter. A choice of three fine speed settings are provided per speed (i.e. 45RPM-, 45RPM, 45RPM+).

The whole assembly process took about one hour. Duly fettled it proved a nice deck to use, although I wasn't best impressed by the way the pulley scrabbles around at switch on – I presume you're supposed to manually rotate it slightly first. The Satisfy arm feels good too, although I dare say Michell's Tecnoarm seemed smoother to use and slightly better constructed. As a devoted hand-cueer, I really didn't like the Clearaudio's Noddy fingerlift.

SOUND QUALITY

The first few hours with the Performance proved most promising, the deck having the brand's trademark, erm, clear sound. This is a light, spry sounding deck that will do nothing for those seeking a quintessentially 'warm and woolly' (i.e. romantic) analogue sound. It has very large incisors, which bite right into the mix and throw out massive amounts of detail in a way that is very impressive for what's essentially a £1,000 deck (minus arm and cartridge).

After the deck had a good twenty four hours' use, I kicked off listening-a-

proper with UB40's 'Don't Let it Pass You By'. I was greeted to a slightly more bass-light sound than the similarly priced reference Michell GyroDec/Tecno Arm combination. Bass guitar was decently taut and controlled, and the bassist's left hand seemed to move up and down the fretboard with greater ease than the Michell, but it lacked some of the slam all the same. The upside of this was that where the Gyro sounded a tad ponderous with this track's very dominant bassline, the Performance was snappier.

This tallied with the midband, which was a touch better detailed on the Clearaudio, which threw out vast amounts of information into the speakers about the percussive instruments. This meant better microdynamics, showing the subtle accenting of the drummer's stick work better. The Gyro, by contrast, was also detailed but sounded a touch more diffuse and seemed to sit on small dynamic accents slightly. It was actually no less pleasurable to listen to – indeed some might prefer it – because the Michell mustered a large 'swell' of sound, whereas the Clearaudio seemed more analytical but slightly smaller in scale.

One reason for this was the Clearaudio's marginally less expansive imaging; whereas the Michell pushed the images way out to the sides of the room, almost unnaturally so some might say, the Clearaudio was a tad more constrained left to right. This is not so much a criticism as an observation, as the British deck can sometimes sound like someone pressed the 'stereo wide' button.

Supertramp's 'Dreamer' was an ear-opener, the Performance throwing out masses of detail with an incredibly low noise floor. Again it was better on subtle low level detailing and dynamic accents – the electric piano work that 'drives' this song was superbly carried, the deck getting an obviously better grip on the attack transients of the instrument. However, once again the Gyro seemed happier with the left handed piano work, giving greater heft to the bass notes and pushing the song along better, and again engendering a better sense of scale.

Up top, the Clearaudio deck was a joy – partly helped by its synergistic match with a cartridge that's a tad on the bright side – giving a very clean, explicit cymbal sound that really showcases vinyl's superbly airy treble.

Its superior attack also meant that struck cymbals seemed more life-like and believable.

This became a recurring theme with whatever discs

I tried, from the classic acoustic Blue Note jazz outing that is Lou Donaldson's 'Alligator Bogaloo' to a Mercury Living Presence pressing of Stravinsky's 'The Firebird' ballet (Dorati/LSO).

CONCLUSION

Having just heard the Kuzma Stabi S/Stogi S last month, I was most interested to hear this, almost direct rival. It's a different kettle of fish, with a more solid and analytical sound against the very lyrical Kuzma, and offers better value too with its bundled Maestro cartridge. Although this by no means stretches the deck, nor does it hold it back. Properly positioned (this is important, given its lack of suspension) on a Base SPI0 platform and carefully set up (taking special care to keep the drive belt/pulley/outer

REFERENCE SYSTEM:

Michell GyroDec/Tecno Arm
Lyra Dorian moving coil cartridge
Linn Linto phono preamp
MF Audio Silver Passive Preamp
World Audio K5881 power amplifier (modified)
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

TECH SPECS

CLEARAUDIO SATISFY CA DW TONEARM

Overhang	17.31 mm
Offset angle	23°
Effective length	222 mm
Weight (including arm lead)	340g

CLEARAUDIO MAESTRO WOOD CARTRIDGE

Output Voltage (1kHz, 5cm/s)	3.6mV
Load capacitance	100pF
Load resistance	47kOhm
Coil inductivity	0.42H
Recommended tracking force	2.2g
Total mass	7.0g

platter meticulously clean – otherwise speed stability suffers all too easily), it's a very impressive package.

In absolute terms, it could do with being a tad more speed-stable and having a touch more bass push, but at the price it makes a convincing case for itself. Although I'd fall to the bigger, more powerful sound of the Gyro, many would not – and for them this, with its simple, fuss free set-up (no springs – hurrah!) will be a joy. Essentially, this turntable attempts to give the best of both worlds (a fuss-free all in one package and no-compromise sonics at the price), and pretty much succeeds.

VERDICT

Accomplished all-in-one turntable package that's both impressive sonically and easy to set-up and use. Superb value.

CLEARAUDIO

PERFORMANCE £1,670

Audio Reference

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FOR

- excellent detail retrieval
- cohesive yet incisive sound
- build
- value

AGAINST

- nasty hand cueing lever

