

Groove armada

Turntables continue to sail their own course defying predictions that they would disappear. *Inside hi-fi* cuts through the spin and finds out how the market is really doing.

In an industry where passion is paramount, few subjects drum up as much enthusiasm as the continued survival of the turntable. Dismissed by many major record labels as old technology, the format of course continues to have its die hard fans, but the market is doing more than just preaching to the converted. In answer to the question of market performance, Laurence Armstrong, managing director, Henley Designs, which carries the Roksan and Pro-Ject brands, explains that sales are slightly up on last year with profitability stable. Craig Milnes, director, Wilson Benesch says: "Sales have actually been buoyant for Wilson Benesch, but the current level of interest in the UK is now equal to that of Germany and Japan where serious audiophiles have always demanded the best from the systems."

David Denyer, PR manager, Audio Reference, which distributes the Clear Audio brand, adds: "Reference has products in many



The Radius from Roksan is helping to maintain a healthy market

Hi-Fi areas (CDs, amplifiers, loudspeakers etc) but the best performing are those in the analogue/vinyl sector." Both Linn and Armour Home Electronics (which is now supplying the NAD C555 turntable) also report that sales are steady and profitability is holding up.

There are also other signs that point to continued robustness. Mr Milnes says: "It was noticeable at this year's Bristol show how many companies were using vinyl again. Wilson Benesch has always used vinyl and in fact all our loudspeakers have always been appraised and voiced using a vinyl source from day one."

One reason for this perhaps surprising market strength is the revival of interest in Vinyl itself. It seems like an obvious point, but increased interest in Vinyl might not have necessarily resulted in increased turntable sales. However, Mr Armstrong is positive that the rise in popularity of Vinyl has had an effect on turntable sales. He expects this to continue as more people are seeing products in use and the format can target a wider audience. Brian Morris, PR manager at Linn, sums up: "Overall, there is more interest in vinyl and turntables than ever before since the 1970s!"

It would be interesting, for reasons of market strategy, to discover what type of consumers are fueling the performance. Mr Milnes says: "On a global scale I would say that it is not possible for one to pigeon-hole the type of client who buys a Wilson Benesch turntable." However, Mr Armstrong believes he can add a little more detail: "There are three main markets. Old duffers who have treasured record collections. Yuppies (or recently graduated) who realise that the coolest piece of Hi-Fi is a turntable. Last, there are archivers, those who simply wish to transfer their vinyl on to CD." OK, so the last category does not bode well for future sales perhaps, but at least people are using the format and, who knows, archivers may even, in the act of digitising collections, develop a lasting relationship with the format. Other companies argue that sales demographics are a little more predictable, Mr Denyer says: "Clearaudio turntables mainly appeal to the age group of 30 and up. The starting price is £690 for a turntable/arm/cartridge combination, which may explain the relative lack of sales to '20 somethings'. Les Wong, director of Walrus, one of the most experienced retail turntable specialists around, hopes that another phenomenon will help. He says: "I am hoping that DJ culture will help. Many DJs do invest in a decent home deck and vinyl could spread to younger consumers in this way. We do sell a significant amount of products to these guys."

The Circle from Wilson Benesch has many fans, but the company says it will soon have news that will be of interest to all Vinyl fans



Needles and spins

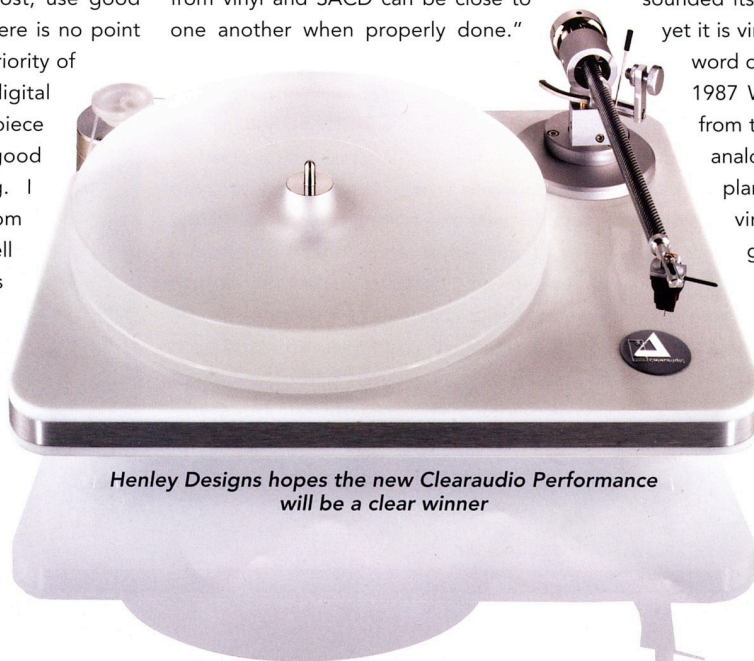
By the very definition of its simplicity, turntable technology does not develop in the same way as newer formats. Mostly improvements are made in build quality and design. However, the sector has not been without recent technical development. Mr Denyer says: "The biggest recent development is the Clearaudio Ceramic Magnetic Bearing. This solves the problems inherent in magnetic bearing designs and allows the technology of a virtually friction free (there is no load bearing point of contact) turntable main bearing." Linn has not been idle either and the company recently announced upgrades in the form of the new LP12 SE series. Linn says the product comprises three new upgrades, the EKOS SE tonearm, KEEL one-piece sub-chassis, armboard and collar, and new metal TRAMPOLIN base board. The company says each upgrade benefits from design and craftsmanship of the highest standard, developed over 35 years of precision engineering experience, and represents the highest performance product of its type ever produced by Linn. Other companies have plans in the pipeline, but as yet cannot reveal details. Mr Milnes says: "We cannot make any announcements in advance of dates that we have committed to. All I can say is keep an eye on the news page on the Wilson Benesch web site! We don't release new designs every year because we already use the best materials in the world, carbon fibre, so this announcement will be of great interest to the vinyl community."

So there is new product and a healthy audience. But how does the retailer make sure the products are presented in the best possible way? In terms of successful demonstrations Mr Denyer says: "First and foremost, use good quality analogue recordings, there is no point trying to demonstrate the superiority of vinyl with a nasty 80s digital recording pressed onto a thin piece of recycled plastic. Use a good condition analogue recording. I tend towards first pressings from the late 60s or early 70s, on a well set up (this is key) turntable. This should easily redefine what most people think is real high fidelity."

Mr Wong of Walrus adds: "The most important part of a demonstration is getting the product set up right. Lots of the older hi-fi guys know how to do it, but some of the younger ones do not. We could do with the manufacturers going on the

road again to provide in-store support. You also have to offer a simple solution to the customer. The formula in terms of the amount spent should be, start with the table, then arm, phono stage and then cartridge. Stick to that and you should not go far wrong." Mr Morris of Linn also believes in set-up: "Proper set up is paramount - parallel the arm with platter and listen to the tune, not tone - no one knows how much bass etc. there should be for example."

Of course a good demonstration is key for all product areas, but to be really successful a format also needs a story. So what is it that makes vinyl so special? Mr Milnes says: "Simple, the information is massively superior. The more bandwidth and resolution, the better the reproduction. This is not rocket science, just common sense. CD is limited from 20Hz to 20kHz that is sampled. With vinyl you are talking about infinite sampling and bandwidth, that is a staggering 4Hz to 80kHz + these are not minor differences! Mr Morris adds: "Linn's approach is to start with the premise that we do not know how much information is contained in the vinyl grooves. Each time we upgrade the LP12 for example, we hear more detail and better music performance. The new LP12 SE upgrades show exactly what is possible at this point in time. In terms of the current music formats, playback from vinyl and SACD can be close to one another when properly done."



Henley Designs hopes the new Clearaudio Performance will be a clear winner

Linn has recently updated the Sondek LP12 turntable to LP12SE status and continues to hold its Linn Cliniks product showcases

Steve Riechert, PR manager for Armour sums up: "Turntables can deliver a 'naturalness' of sound that even the very best CD players cannot attain. I guess the bottom line is sound is analogue and not digital."

If the market has a healthy immediate future, what does the longer term hold? Mr Armstrong says: "Considering the current availability of software and the dedication of the users, there are no signs of the format dying out. CD sounded its death knell around 25 years ago, yet it is vinyl that is the growing market. Last

word on the future goes to Mr Milnes: "In 1987 Wilson Benesch won its first grant from the DTI to fund research into a new analogue replay system. In the business plan we described how the market for vinyl would not diminish but would grow. "It might be more esoteric and may become more so in the future, but twenty years later we can sit back with a smile on our faces knowing that we were right and all the marketing people were completely wrong."

"It is amusing to see the decline of CD and its imminent death due to the advent of downloads whilst vinyl simply marches on despite every effort of some of the big labels to push people away from it." ■