



Clearaudio Ambient

Clearaudio has turned to laminated wood and metal to get the most out of the Ambient turntable

PRICE £4,210 (turntable, arm and cartridge) CONTACT Audio Reference, Unit 8 Enterprise Park, Slyfield Industrial Estate, Guilford, Surrey GU1 1RB ☎ 01252 702705 🌐 www.audioreference.co.uk

With the £2,630 Ambient turntable, Clearaudio replaced its trademark acrylic with a so-called AMG plinth. This is a sandwich of precision machined aluminium around a wooden laminate which Clearaudio dubs Panzerholz. It is a 70-layer, high-density engineering plywood that is apparently bulletproof. But it wasn't chosen as protection for gangsta rap records; it's used because it is extremely stiff and dense and remains inert up to quite high frequencies, so should offer good self damping.

It is also extremely attractive when sandwiched between matt finished aluminium sheets and fully deserves the AMG moniker, although there's no relation to the tweaked Mercedes cars. The Ambient's main bearing consists of a hardened steel shaft running in a polished sintered bronze precision cap, the combination requiring only a small amount of oil to run freely. This supports a 40mm-thick acrylic platter, which is driven by a silicon belt from a motor mounted in a separate AMG plinth. The combination makes the deck unusually wide, but it just about fits on a standard equipment rack. The motor unit incorporates a 'custom' version of Clearaudio's Syncro power regenerator, and houses the on/off and speed change switches and an LCD speed read-out.

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The arm supplied for this review was the £570 carbon fibre tubed version of Clearaudio's Satisfy. This is a fairly simple gimbaled-bearing type with chunky aluminium parts and an almost magical magnetic anti-skate system. The vertical bearing runs on sapphire watch jewels, while the horizontal runs on ceramic, offering long life and high precision. The unusual headshell fixes the cartridge to a platform that cleverly can be adjusted with just one bolt. This helps to make a tricky job a whole lot easier.

On the cartridge front, Clearaudio supplied its £1,230 Concerto to match the Satisfy. This is the base model in the company's latest range of

moving coils, all of which all feature a flower-shaped top plate. The idea behind the twelve 'fingers', as they are called, is that because each is a slightly different shape, they will disperse resonance produced by the stylus/groove interface. The Concerto has a satinee hardwood body, 24ct gold coil wire, boron cantilever and a miniscule stylus profile. If you buy the whole system as a package, you get a five per cent discount, too (see above for the package price).

SOUND QUALITY

The hardwood and metal AMG sandwich undoubtedly makes a stiffer plinth than acrylic and the Ambient has a lean balance as a result. Lean in this instance also means fast – the transient response is lightning quick, which makes for highly engaging listening and an ability to cut to the musical chase. We have yet to come across another essentially 'off the shelf' turntable, arm and cartridge combination that betters the Ambient in this respect. Fortunately, it doesn't mean that the bass is light, rather that the upper bass isn't as full as one finds with other designs. It's also a balance that suits lower level listening as it reveals plenty of detail without having to be cranked.

The Ambient revels in the drive and energy in a recording thanks to an ability to extract dynamics, even if they are well hidden in the mix. It also differentiates recordings with ease – sometimes the mix on two adjacent tracks can be so different that it's hard to believe they came from the same studio. It's also not unusual for successful artists to use multiple studios... this is not unlikely, but you rarely hear the evidence so clearly as through the Ambient.

The Ambient's bass is particularly nice. The articulation and speed that results from the excellent definition of leading edges means that bass instruments are always tuneful and notes are well differentiated.

This remains one of the most entertaining and exciting turntable, arm and cartridge combinations available for less than £5,000. With its high quality of build and great looks, you'll be hard pressed to find a stronger sonic and visual aesthetic. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

See HFC 271 (September 2005) for our original review of this product