



# The Clearaudio Emotion Start Smart Turntable package

by Jimmy Hughes

Over the years a number of Clearaudio record players have come my way. In every instance I've been impressed both by the essential simplicity of the design, and the way each one produced excellent results with a minimum of fuss and drama. My sense is that the requirements for turntables have shifted dramatically. Back in the '80s, when most of us knew no better, we were tolerant of designs that needed careful installation and regular (constant!) setting up.

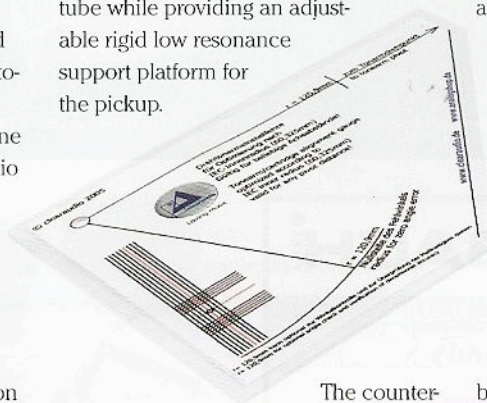
Inevitably, CD made us all lazy. Even if it didn't always sound pure and perfect, CD offered an attractive night-to-night consistency. It wasn't like certain turntables, which could sound great one night and poor the next. The Clearaudio Emotion is certainly consistent and will appeal to anyone wishing to add high quality vinyl replay to a CD based system without breaking the bank – and without being overly complicated to install.

To this end, the Clearaudio Emotion offers straightforwardness and genuine ease of installation. The most 'difficult' part of the whole procedure is setting the playing weight of the pickup cartridge – and fitting the belt. Beyond that there's little else worth commenting on. Simplicity rules here. There are no tricky suspension systems to align – no uni-pivot arms to balance. Thus, many of the tweaks and adjustments sometimes necessary with turntables are not relevant here.

Essentially, the turntable consists of an acrylic plinth that sits on three acrylic cones. The centre bearing supports a 20mm thick acrylic platter, and this is driven by a stand-alone synchronous motor housed in a massive casting. Unusually, the turntable is supplied with

a lift-off clear acrylic lid – a useful accessory that helps protect the table and stylus when not in use. There's no suspension, and no mat for the platter. 33 and 45 speeds are offered, with 78rpm an option too.

The Satisfy tonearm is a simple yet well-made gimbal pivot design that uses low friction Swiss made sapphire-cup bearings with no perceptible free-play. The 'headshell' arrangement is both simple and effective, ensuring that the cartridge is in good contact with the arm tube while providing an adjustable rigid low resonance support platform for the pickup.



The counterweight adjusts back and forth to set stylus playing weight, and is locked in place once the correct force is found. Bias force is applied magnetically, and the arm is internally wired with Clearaudio's Directwire. The specification implies that there are no breaks between the cartridge tags and the phono-plugs – a very important detail that improves the cleanliness and purity of the sound significantly.

The Aurum Classics cartridge is a magnetic type giving 3.3mV output, and it too produces a very crisp, open sound, firmly in the Clearaudio tradition. Some cartridges of this kind sound a little closed-in and 'hard' tonally, but not this one – it's very airy and neutral. It tracks

cleanly (80um is given as the maximum amplitude) and is kind to surface noise. Optimum tracking weight is given as 2.25g, with 2g to 2.5g as the acceptable limits. This is slightly higher than average, but I think it helps improve the overall stability and cleanliness of the sound, as well as lowering surface noise. In many respects the Aurum Classics cartridge mimics a good moving coil. It sounds focussed and immediate, yet relaxed and open, with a smooth, wide frequency response and no obvious resonances.



The wood bodied version (tested here) weighs 6g, but there's also a heavier (10g) stainless steel bodied version available.

Like many turntables that feature an acrylic platter, the Clearaudio Emotion has an attractive, open tonality. It produces a smooth natural tonal balance that's free from hardness and obvious colorations. Compared to most CD players, the sound produced by the Clearaudio is attractively neutral, yet tactile and immediate. Dynamics are crisp, and the sound has excellent attack and plenty of bite. Yet there's a sweet, deliciously relaxed neutrality almost at odds with this.

There's no suspension and therefore little if any filtering of structure-borne noise and vibration. I sat my review sample on an old steel-framed/glass ▶



▶ topped Origin Live stand with spiked feet going into a hard concrete floor. The floor itself is very solid, but I could still detect a certain amount of foot-fall noise through the loudspeakers when a record was playing and I walked by.

something thrust in your face.

Some very expensive turntables – those with huge powerful motors (engines!) and heavy platters – exude a rock-like stability and security that makes the music sound very solid. The Clearaudio doesn't quite aspire to these giddy heights, yet by all but the highest

highly critical ears. But when you get accustomed to a source like CD that has no pitch wobble, your standards tend to become more exacting. Going back to vinyl, you're occasionally made aware of subtle fluctuations in pitch that are almost subliminal. In this respect the Clearaudio is very, very good, but short of perfect – though much depends on the music being played. Certain instruments – harpsichord, classical guitar, piano – tend to highlight speed fluctuations. Of course all this presupposes a record pressing that's perfectly centred – it's easy to blame a turntable for cyclic wow when the fault is down to the LP itself – the grooves swing, causing wow, because the spindle hole is not perfectly in the centre! While it might not be totally perfect, the Clearaudio is probably as good as it needs to be for the vast majority of listeners. Of

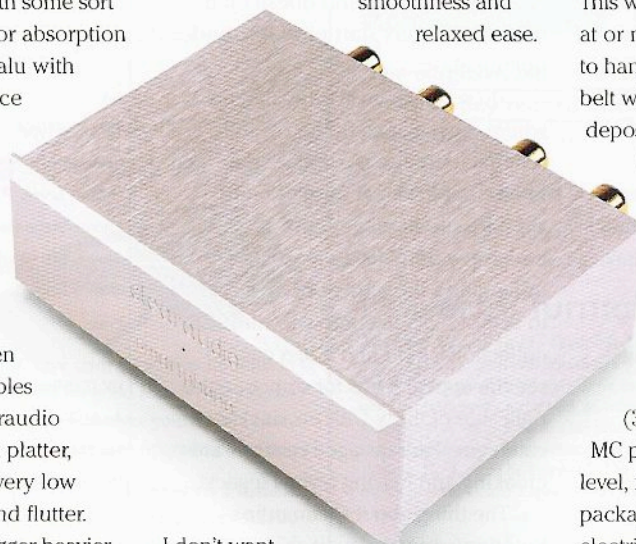
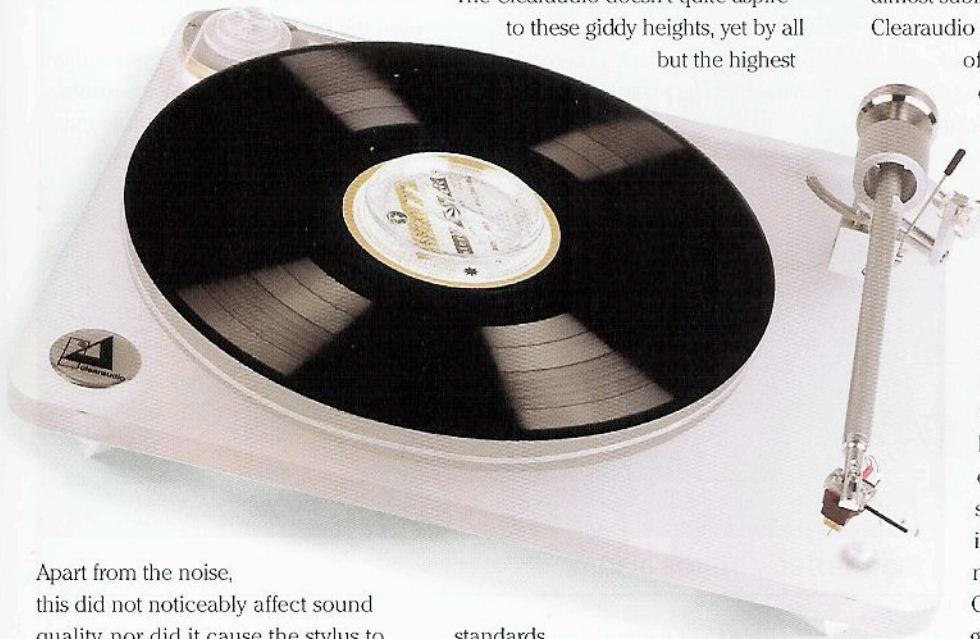
Apart from the noise, this did not noticeably affect sound quality, nor did it cause the stylus to jump – the whole arm/cartridge assembly is admirably stable. One way of combating this low-frequency noise breakthrough would be to mount the turntable on a platform with some sort of decoupling suspension or absorption – a Vertex AQ Super Kinibalu with its cones and tripod in place of the 'table's acrylic feet would be a fascinating – if expensive – option. Alternatively, you could put the turntable on a wall-mounted shelf.

One of the more tangible differences between good and very good turntables is speed stability. The Clearaudio only has a medium weight platter, but nonetheless achieves very low subjective levels of wow and flutter. Compared to something bigger heavier and significantly more expensive, there's just a hint of speed fluctuation. But often this is more of a fleeting impression than

standards it does sound clean, focussed, and stable. It's at once sharp and controlled, yet relaxed and open-sounding, with a lovely smoothness and relaxed ease.

I don't want to over-play the speed stability thing because the Clearaudio is good enough for even

course it also helps enormously if you make sure the belt and motor/platter driving surfaces are spotlessly clean. This will ensure the turntable performs at or near its theoretical best. So try not to handle the edges of the platter or the belt with your fingers – any small greasy deposits left will slightly impair the evenness of the drive, leading to speed fluctuations. Because vinyl replay is something of a minority sport these days, Clearaudio include a small phono-stage called The Smart. This is switchable between high (53dB) and low (34dB) gain for MM or low-output MC pickups, amplifying either to line-level, making the Emotion turntable package a plug and play option electrically equivalent to a CD player. It performed admirably with the Aurum Classics cartridge, though bear in mind that the input impedance is fixed at ▶





▶ 47k Ohms regardless of gain – so some MC cartridges may sound a shade frisky and overlit as a result.

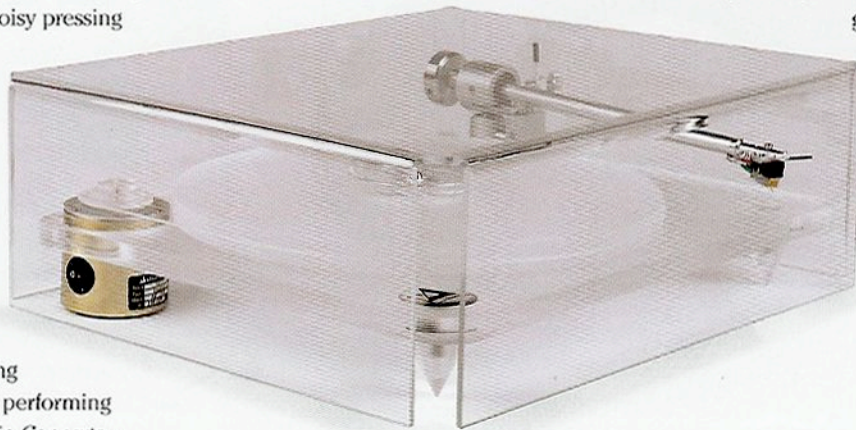
Pitting the Clearaudio Emotion against quality CD players like the Consonance Linear 2.2 or a transport partnered by Chord's DAC-64, I was struck by how well vinyl held its own. For the most part the Clearaudio sounded comparably clean to CD, with similar (low) levels of background noise – the odd noisy pressing excepted of course. Where it scored was in a certain relaxed openness, allied to its delicate ease and subtlety.

Playing an early '60s recording of David Oistrakh performing Mozart's *First Violin Concerto* – an LP I'd totally forgotten was in my collection! – I was struck by the lovely openness of Oistrakh's tone, and the sharp yet refined orchestral sound – Bernard Haitink conducting the Orchestre Des Concerts Lamoureux. I mean, here's a 1962 Philips recording – hardly in the top-flight technically – yet it sounded gorgeous.

The stylus proved very kind to surface noise. Indeed, had I not known I'd probably have assumed I was listening to a very expensive Japanese moving coil – it had something of that inky-blackness and subtle inner clarity. Usefully, I think the Smart phono-stage reins the cartridge in slightly – compared to better, more revealing phono-stages the extreme top-end is slightly curtailed, making things sound cleaner and better integrated.

Getting a proper lid with the package was a real, and unexpected bonus. Lids have all but become an endangered species, so many turntables (even very expensive ones) are supplied without. And while I

appreciate the sonic arguments about how hinged lids act as a source of resonance and worsen sound quality, it's nice to have the turntable (and stylus) protected, especially when small children are present. This is especially important with cartridges that don't have stylus guards. I appreciate that the open body design of many pickups makes it virtually



impossible to fit a guard, but on a purely practical level it's nice to have some protection. Again, the Clearaudio package is exemplary, including a nice wrap-around plastic guard that really protects the stylus and doesn't fall off if tiny fingers start prodding and poking about.

These days I'm slightly unsure where vinyl stands in the overall scheme of things. It surprises me when I hear that listeners in their early twenties are buying record players and collecting LPs. I mean, I can understand the appeal of turntables to sad old gits like me with huge LP collections, but I find it less easy to see the appeal it has for someone the right side of thirty with no vinyl back catalogue. Perhaps aged relatives are croaking and leaving a vinyl legacy!

The thing about Clearaudio's Emotion package is – it should appeal to both camps. For someone committed to CD but with a big collection of LPs lying idle it would

provide an excellent source that would need no excuses making for it. No matter how good your CD player is, this turntable will give it a contest – and (dare I say it?) better it in certain key areas. There's still a definite 'something' about good vinyl that even the best CD lacks. For those new to vinyl and looking for something to get started with, this package would be the perfect place to begin. It sounds

good, is easy to install and maintain, and won't break the bank. It looks way cool, and does what it says on the tin. Brilliant! ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Belt-drive record player and phono-stage
Speeds:	33 and 45 RPM, manually adjusted (78 option)
Lid:	Yes
Tonearm Type:	Gimbal bearing
Cartridge Type:	Moving-magnet
Output Level:	3.3mV
Phono-Stage Gain:	34 or 53dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	400 x 130 x 360mm w/o cover
Price:	£1050

UK Distributor:  
Audio Reference  
Tel. (44)(0)1252 702705  
Net. [www.audioreference.co.uk](http://www.audioreference.co.uk)

Manufacturer:  
Clearaudio GmbH  
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