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A MAGNETIC PERFORMER

Clearaudio Performance Turntable

Jim Hannon

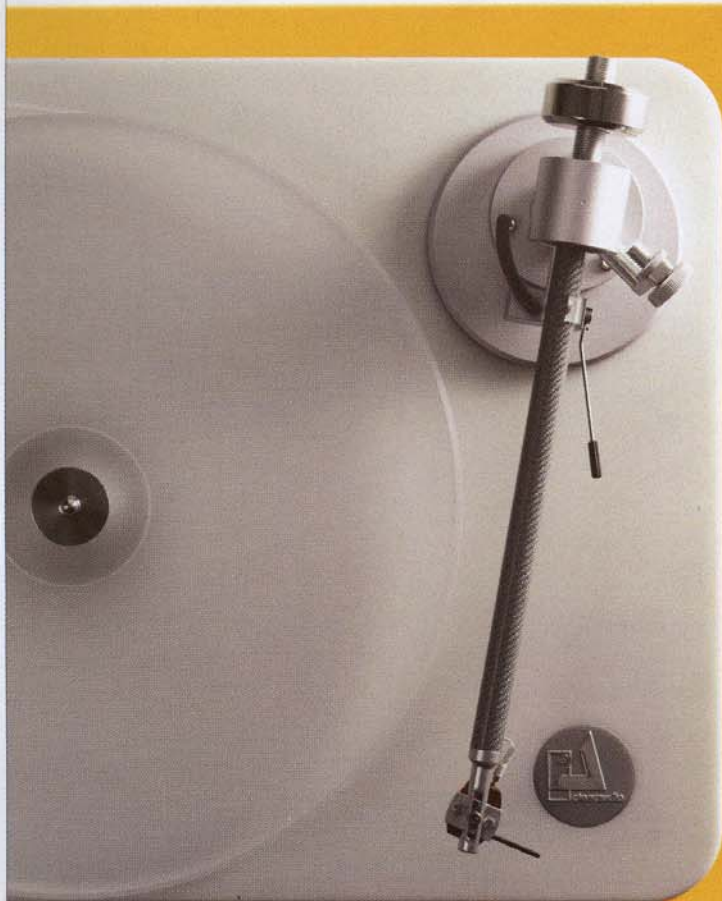
Floating the platter of a turntable on a cushion of air has been an approach used by some designers of high-performance turntables to reduce bearing friction, improve speed stability and isolation, and lower the noise floor. Although air jets were employed decades ago in turntables from Micro Seiki and Maplenoll, among others, reference turntables from Forsell, Rockport, and Walker Audio have used them to great effect in more ambitious and fully realized designs. Another technique to float the platter is to use magnetic repulsion, as in the Verdier Platine, introduced more than twenty years ago. Two rings of magnets with the same polarity are precisely aligned in opposition in the base and the underside of the bearing. The magnetic repulsion supplies the lift. Yet magnetic bearings have not been widely em-

ployed, perhaps because of concerns that the magnetic field used to float the platter can harm sensitive cartridges, the challenge of floating the platter evenly, and the problem of effectively dissipating the energy created by the stylus in the groove.

But times are changing, largely due to advances in materials science, precision mechanical engineering, and, yes, in making thicker platters to contain the magnetic field. The Pro-Ject RM-10 was my first direct experience with a turntable using magnetic repulsion, and it was a honey. While it does not completely float the platter (a design choice so that energy in the pickup/platter is dissipated via a single point through the bearing), it takes most of the platter's weight off the bearing, yielding a lower noise floor, enhanced clarity, greater dynamic impact, and a more natural presentation. Now comes Clearaudio using a ceramic magnetic bearing (CMB) across its entire line of turntables, save for the entry-level Emotion. I wondered how the new Clearaudio Performance turntable with its floating platter might compare to the older, more expensive Ambient without it, and to the Pro-Ject RM-10 that I nominated for a 2007 Editors' Choice award.

The short answer is that the Performance, with its wonderful clarity and naturalness, sounds like a mini-Ambient and shares many of the best sonic attributes of the RM-10, too. Coupled with the Maestro, Clearaudio's top moving-magnet cartridge, the sound of the Performance was highly engaging, rich, and dynamic. The noise floor was very low, allowing more low-level information to emerge and helping to draw me into the music. Coleman Hawkins' tenor sax on *In a Mellow Tone* [Prestige OJC] was seductive, with its sweet, airy tone. On Mark Knopfler's *Kill to Get Crimson* [Warner] and Eric Bibb's *Rainbow People* [Opus 3], music flowed naturally, with a notable absence of stress and strain, and surprisingly good detail. It's enough to make folks seriously consider moving-magnet cartridges. While falling somewhat short of the superlative SME 20/12, the Performance's sense of ease and engagement made me think, at times, that I was listening to a reference 'table.

While the Performance and Maestro make for a synergistic and highly cost-effective combination, using a first-rate moving coil is not out of place on this turntable system and can elevate its performance still further. The included Satisfy tonearm, which boasts an aluminum armtube with a vaporized layer of carbon fiber and a three-point bearing with hardened steel points into



ruby thrust-pads, certainly seemed up to the task. Unfortunately, I didn't have the Clearaudio Concerto that worked so well with the Ambient on hand, but I was able to mate the Performance with the Benz Ebony H, the best high-output moving coil I have heard. The sound was clean and clear without being sterile, and images were quite stable. As with the original Ambient, the leading edge of transients was very well preserved and the percussion section came alive on Stravinsky's *Petrushka* [Decca/Speakers Corner] and *The Rite of Spring* [London]. Tympani strikes, in particular, were reproduced with thrilling impact and explosiveness, and without any blurring. This level of transient quickness, coupled with a lot of fine inner detail and that wonderful clarity, helped me to appreciate the artistry of drummer Philly Joe Jones even more on Ben Webster's and the late Joe Zawinul's collaboration, *Soulmates* [Riverside/OJC]. Webster's haunting tenor sax had me floating away.

The Performance and Benz combo produced a wide, open soundstage, providing a good sense of the recorded space, like the effect of the dome overhead on Berlioz's *Requiem* [Vanguard/Classic Records]. The sound was rich and full without feeling bloated or slow, and massed strings sounded both gorgeous and realistic. Indeed, this combination lets the natural timbre of instruments fully bloom, like David Oistrakh's Guarneri viola on Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* [Decca/Speakers Corner]. Its exquisite tonal richness might fool you into thinking that he is playing a cello. Vice nice, indeed.

Although the original Ambient had very good transparency, the Performance may be even more transparent, making this 'table very special. On Prokofiev's *Symphonic Suite of Waltzes* [Cisco Music], veils were lifted, and it was almost as if one could reach out and touch the orchestra. This level of transparency is simply stunning in a turntable system in this price range. Undoubtedly this

SPECS & PRICING

Clearaudio Performance
 Bearing: Ceramic magnetic
 Type of drive: Belt
 Tonearm: "Satisfy" (aluminum and carbon-fiber)
 Motor: External synchronous motor
 Speeds: 33-1/3 and 45 rpm
 Dimensions: 16.55" x 13" x 5.12"
 Weight: 22.05 lbs. (including motor)
 Price: \$2799 (with arm)

Clearaudio Maestro cartridge
 Type: Moving-magnet
 Output: 3.6mV
 Weight: 6.0 grams (with Satine body)
 Recommended tracking force: 2.2 grams
 Price: \$1000 (sold separately, but \$900 with Performance)

Benz Ebony H cartridge
 Type: Moving-coil
 Output: 2.5mV
 Weight: 10.7 grams
 Recommended tracking force: 1.8 to 2.2 grams
 Price: \$3000 (\$2800 when purchased with any Clearaudio turntable)

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Associated Equipment
 VPI Aries turntable (TNT V platter & bearing), Graham 1.5 arm (w/2.2 bearing), and Koetsu Black cartridge; MFA Venusian preamp (Frankland modified); PrimaLuna DiaLogue Two integrated amplifier; Hyperion HPS-938 and Quad ESL-57 (PK modified) loudspeakers



Clearaudio Performance Turntable

clear window on the soundstage is related to the Performance's magnetic bearing. The good news is that most Clearaudio 'tables can be upgraded to include the CMB, but the acrylic platter must be at least 30mm thick, as it is part of the overall "system," along with a high-precision ceramic shaft that fits perfectly into a bronze bearing and special shielding material that helps protect your expensive cartridge. If I owned an original Ambient, adding the CMB is the first upgrade I'd make!

The Performance does fall short of the original Ambient in a couple of areas. First, it doesn't have the degree of isolation from external vibrations afforded by the Ambient's lightweight yet extremely dense Panzerholz plinth. The Performance uses a highly compressed MDF core, sandwiched by a top and bottom plate made of a synthetic-marble material called Staron. Like Corian, it is used in a lot of kitchen countertops and has found its way into high-end audio. However, the Performance absolutely must be placed upon a stable, rigid platform or you won't get close to the remarkable performance this 'table can yield. On my CWD rack, which served me well when I owned a SOTA Star, the Performance's bass was bloated and the sound was muddled. However, adding the Gingko isolation platform really helped clean up these problems, and when I transferred the Performance to my Rix Rax, a very rigid and stable platform, they disappeared.

Second, the Performance lacks the Ambient's precise outboard speed controller/motor. With most 'tables that don't have external speed controllers, I go running for my trusty VPI SDS, but with the Performance I didn't feel compelled to use it. Indeed, this CMB-outfitted Clearaudio has the best native speed stability of any belt-drive table without an external speed controller I've experienced. It totally trumps my VPI Aries (*sans* SDS) here. Admittedly, if you listen to a lot of solo violin or piano (and I do), you can occasionally hear some minute pitch wobble on sustained notes on masterful recordings like Johanna Martzy's *Bach* and Clifford Cuzon's *A Liszt Recital* [Decca/Alto]. With the addition of Clearaudio's own external speed controller, the Syncro Power Generator,

the Performance's speed stability equaled that of the excellent Ambient.

At a minimum, Clearaudio's Performance turntable system, with its outstanding ceramic-magnetic-bearing technology, certainly rivals the Pro-Ject RM-10, another 'table that uses magnetic repulsion. By dramatically reducing bearing friction and isolating the stylus in the groove, this new Clearaudio 'table allows lots of low-level information to emerge and produces a transparency, clarity, and speed stability that are pretty shocking in a modestly priced unit. The music flows effortlessly, with an engaging and addictive openness and palpability. Since most Clearaudio turntables will benefit from the addition of the CMB technology, floating the platter will no longer be the exclusive province of exotic and expensive turntables. That's great news for analog lovers everywhere! **TAS**



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