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TURNING THE TABLES

Can a trio of quality turntables upset digital's sonic superiority? We put on some vinyl to find out



Part of the Concept's charm lies in the neat simplicity of its design and those chunky looks

If sheer endurance is anything to go by, vinyl records are the most successful of all audio formats. The demise of the record player has been confidently predicted, on-and-off, for the past 30 years – yet sales of records and turntables continue to tick over nicely. Surely, though, the current digital revolution, with its wireless-streaming, 10,000-songs-stored-in-the-space-of-a-hardback-book, downloadable convenience, will finally warp the vinyl format once and for all? Not necessarily.

Better decks win out musically

There are persuasive arguments for vinyl's sonic primacy: the format's talent with tempos and timing, and its sonic warmth when compared with digital formats. But why spend more than a few hundred quid? We've gathered together three four-figure turntables to find out if a not-inconsiderable spend on a record player could (re)promote vinyl to your musical format of choice.

CLEARAUDIO CONCEPT

£1050 ★★★★★

WHENEVER WE'VE HAD cause to bring out our 2009 Product of the Year since its coronation, the Clearaudio Concept has been very quick to reveal that all the talent that made it such a persuasive proposition back then hasn't diminished.

Nice and simple

Its simplicity is a big part of its charm. Unlike some rival designs, which require patience, a steady hand and a passable grasp of mathematics to get working, the Concept is a 'plug and play' product straight from the box. The company's own Aurum Classics cartridge is fitted to the Verify tonearm, and Clearaudio sets everything, up to and including cartridge weight and bias, before the turntable leaves the factory. You can fit a platter and a drive belt, can't you? Of course you can – and then the Clearaudio's ready to play.

Before dropping a record into place, though, it's worth taking a moment to admire the Concept's clean design and chunky substantial finish. Speed (33.3, 45 and 78rpm) is controlled by a hefty rotary dial, and the whole thing operates with the sort of solidity more readily associated with outside water closets. With a copy of The Pharcyde's *Bizarre Ride II* in place,

“It thunders through the low-frequency action with poise”

the Clearaudio is little short of thrilling. It thunders through the plentiful low-frequency action with poise and pace to spare, combining punch, extension and tonal variance in equal measure. The livid, hectoring rapping is detailed and insistent, front-and-centre of the coherent, roomy soundstage but neatly integrated into the whole. At

TECH SPECS

SPEEDS 33.3, 45, 78 • ELECTRIC SPEED CHANGE Yes • OPERATION Manual • TONEARM INCLUDED Yes • CARTRIDGE Yes • DRIVE Belt • USB PORT No • SUSPENSION No • FINISHES 1 • DIMENSIONS (HWD) 14x42x35cm

the top of the frequency range there's nicely judged attack, and the Concept maintains a stance part-way between red-toothed aggression and unflappable poise throughout.

Crisp timing, neat composure

Dynamic potency is never in doubt, and the Concept's timing is crisp enough to grant momentum and drive to the trickiest of recordings without losing composure or focus. In fact, this Clearaudio has the speed and manoeuvrability to give the lie to those who believe vinyl reproduction can only be warm and wallowing – it's got the sort of alacrity digital formats offer without sacrificing their mastery of tempo.

It's not all that long until Awards time again around these parts, and given the Clearaudio Concept's mighty showing here, it seems odds-on to make the shortlist at the very least. If you feel the need for an outstanding turntable between now and then though, don't think twice.

OPERA-CONSONANCE DROPLET LP3.1

£1200 ★★★★★

Although the most expensive deck here, this is Chinese company Opera-Consonance's most affordable design. And, unlike the other two the price doesn't include a cartridge. It does, however, include the company's ST100 tonearm, to which we fitted a Goldring 2400 (£200).

It looks a treat *in situ*, but lacks the beefcake precision of the other two tables here and feels a little approximate in the way it all fits together – there's altogether more play in the cut-outs for the motor and the tonearm than we'd like.

Still, there's redemption in the way the Droplet plays a record. Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures* enjoys a spacious soundstage, the choppy tempos unflustered, even when the band's foot is hard to the floor. The LP3.1 pays fanatical attention to the lugubrious vocals, and there's good body and tonal variation to low frequencies.

It's in joining these elements together that the Opera comes apart. Integration is far from perfect, and the overall presentation is relatively confused as a result. Capable, but in all, a sound that's rather less than the sum of its parts.



TECH SPECS

- SPEEDS** 33.3, 45 • **ELECTRIC SPEED CHANGE** No • **OPERATION** Manual
- **TO NEARM** Yes • **CARTRIDGE** No
- **DRIVE** Belt • **USB PORT** No
- **SUSPENSION** No • **FINISHES** 4
- **DIMENSIONS (HWD)** 14x48x32cm

You'll have to add a cartridge, but when you do there's a spacious soundstage and subtle bass tones



TECH SPECS

- SPEEDS** 33.3, 45 • **ELECTRIC SPEED CHANGE** Yes • **OPERATION** Manual
- **TO NEARM** Yes • **CARTRIDGE** Yes
- **DRIVE** Belt • **USB PORT** No
- **SUSPENSION** Yes • **FINISHES** 1
- **DIMENSIONS (HWD)** 14x46x39cm

It's no spring chicken, but the Pro-ject has the precision and integration to keep it among the top players

PRO-JECT 2 XPERIENCE X-PACK

£1000 ★★★★★

Unlike a five-year-old TV, a record player such as this Pro-ject 2 Xperience, which last made it onto these pages in May 2005, can be considered to be maturing nicely rather than on its last legs.

Assembly of this elegant deck is mercifully straightforward – the cartridge is fitted to the tonearm, the tonearm to the baseboard.

With a heavyweight repressing of Nick Drake's *Bryter Layter* spinning, the 2 Xperience X-Pack describes a precise, unified soundstage with plenty of breathing space between instruments, but also manages to integrate them into a convincing whole. It's scrupulous where detail is concerned, manages tempos in an authoritative manner and snaps through the jaunty stuff as happily as it ambles through down-tempo tunes. Stereo focus is first-rate, and the Pro-ject churns through significant dynamic upheavals with something approaching disdain.

The only drawback here concerns a neurotic desire not to give offense, making listening less invigorating than it sometimes should be. But then, that might be what you want.