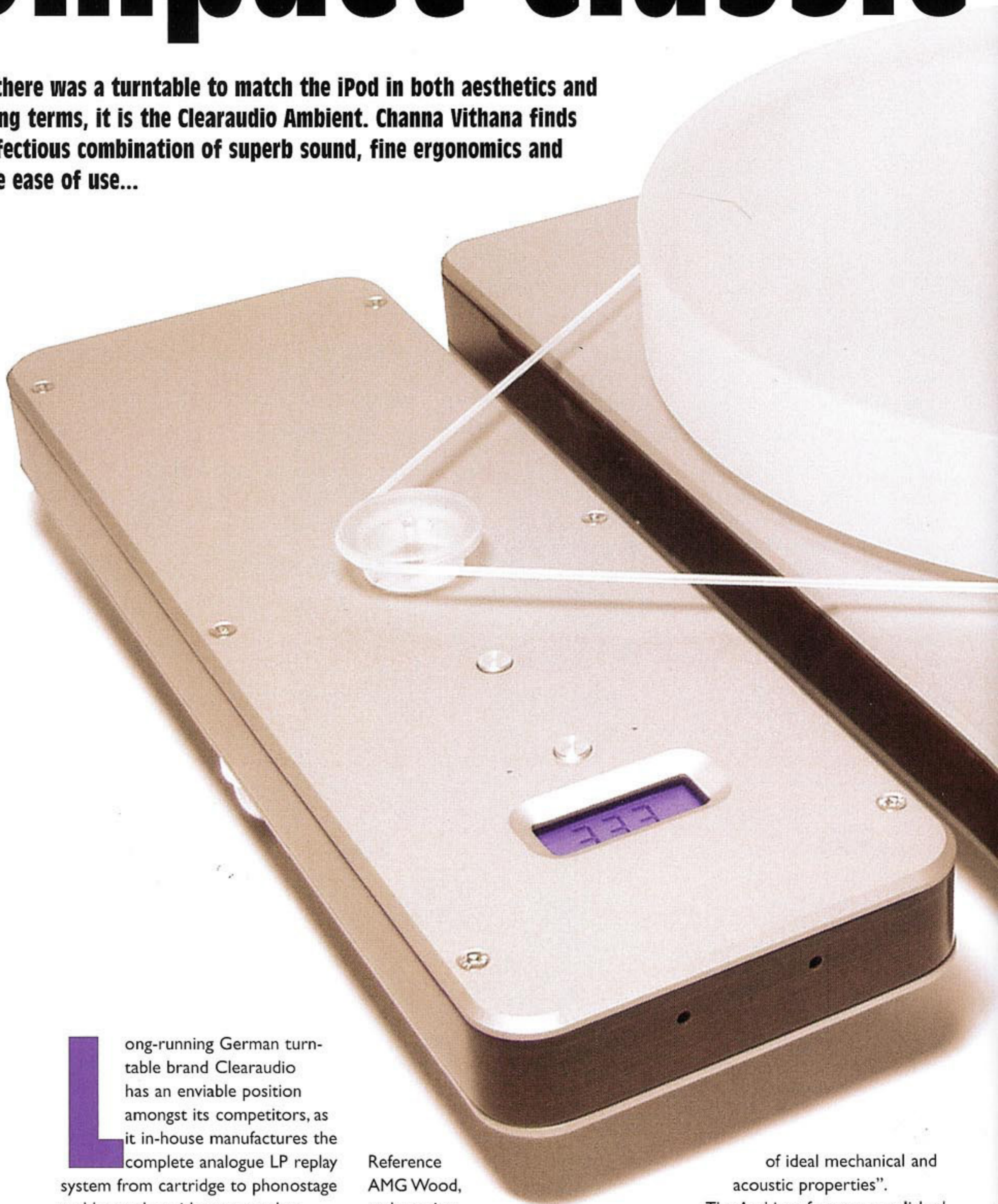


Compact classic

If ever there was a turntable to match the iPod in both aesthetics and packaging terms, it is the Clearaudio Ambient. Channa Vithana finds it an infectious combination of superb sound, fine ergonomics and supreme ease of use...



Long-running German turntable brand Clearaudio has an enviable position amongst its competitors, as it in-house manufactures the complete analogue LP replay system from cartridge to phonostage and beyond – with near-peerless construction quality. Lately, the new Ambient turntable takes things even further, as it represents a pioneering method of construction for claimed superior sound quality. As a result of this, I'd call it Clearaudio's most beautifully realised design to date.

The £2,630 Ambient turntable came as a stylish package with optional £570 Satisfy Carbon Direct Wire tonearm and £1,230 Concerto MC cartridge. Clearaudio says the Ambient Chassis is developed from the (flagship £11,100) Master

Reference AMG Wood, and consists of a high-tech sandwich of 'Panzerholz' between two precision-machined aluminium plates. The 'Panzerholz' is formed by highly compressing 70 fine layers of wood and synthetic resin under massive pressure resulting in a high density, acoustically dead and (incidentally) bullet-proof material (!). Panzerholz is extremely hard and more difficult to machine than stainless steel but when sandwiched between the aluminium plates, it produces "a combination

of ideal mechanical and acoustic properties".

The Ambient features a polished, hardened steel bearing with a sintered bronze insert and a 40mm thick "precision CNC machined and polished GS-PMMA acrylic" platter. The motor is housed in a matching detached Panzerholz plinth, and includes a customised version of the Syncro Power Generator power supply (which costs £635 individually) that provides a selectable electronic 33.3/45rpm speed control via an attractive backlit blue display. The Ambient has a claimed 84dB S/N ratio, measures 535x330x150mm and



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weighs approximately 14kg.

The £570 Satisfy Carbon Direct Wire tonearm is a new iteration on the established Satisfy model and is distinguished from it by a silver-coloured higher-performance carbon-fibre arm tube. It features Swiss-made sapphire vertical and lateral bearings, magnetic anti-skating screw-in/screw-out control and an uninterrupted Directwire cable that extends from cartridge pins to phono plugs, all of which are manufactured by Clearaudio.

The £1,230 Concerto MC cartridge is the entry-level model in Clearaudio's new high-end 'High Dynamic Range' which extends all the way to the £5,640 Goldfinger MC. The Concerto features 24kt gold coils, boron cantilever, Micro-HD Diamond tip, and a body made

of beautifully machined satiné wood - and has a claimed signal-to-noise ratio of greater than 85dB.

SOUND QUALITY

Some dyed-in-the-groove vinylphiles won't take this Clearaudio package seriously, for two reasons. First, it's a 'one make system', and we all know that's a no-no, isn't it? Second, it's an exceptionally pretty and compact looking device, going against the trend for massive, oversized and excessively showy vinyl replay devices. However, if you cast your 'analogue addict' preconceptions aside, you'll be rewarded with an extremely impressive sonic performer - that just happens to look superb and is easy to set up too.

Kicking off with the 'Allegro' from the 1972 LP release of Haydn's

'Sinfonia Concertante in B-flat Major for Oboe, Bassoon, Violin and Cello', and the timing was accomplished. As such, the layering of successive notes for all the stringed instruments was excellent, with a seamless transition that did not highlight any one instrument or frequency as being distinct or forward. The quality of the violins, for instance, was impressive in their pin-point placement and superb leading edges, where the melodies were clearly articulated. The Ambient was never less than enthusiastically informative and communicative. Additionally, it was able to handle the dynamic crescendos with poise and assuredness, without strain or protest.

Musically, the Ambient was super-clear, detailed and powerful in its low-frequency ferocity with 'She

Sells Sanctuary' by The Cult. I was pleasantly surprised at the ability of the Ambient, as there were no high-frequency ringing distortions via the lead guitars or cymbals from this somewhat bright recording. Consequently, I could appreciate the powerful, very clearly enunciated vocals and stunning guitar melodies for their individual qualities without strain or brittleness, as well as within the greater overall composition, of which these two elements were beautifully a part of. The Ambient was so composed in its ability to take control of the powerful, sometimes wayward dynamics of this song and it did so without stifling the music, which is the danger of some high-end hi-fi instruments that are overtly analytical – not so the Ambient. The hard rock music from 'The Cult' was very enjoyable, being completely cohesive and it was delivered with powerful bass extension also.

A relatively simple recording with an acoustic feel, 'Heal The Pain' by George Michael, from the 1990 release of 'Listen Without Prejudice Vol.1', was a delight via the Ambient as the music was of a high resolution nature with excellent balance between the lead vocals, harmony vocals and instruments. The Ambient focused on the intrinsic structure and individual instruments of this song to produce a dynamic, vibrant and powerful reproduction that maintained my undivided attention throughout. It was very communicative in its ability to locate individual elements and then reproduce cohesively, the complete composition.

The energised, ultra-pop production of 'What You Waiting For?' by Gwen Stefani from the 2004 'Love.Angel.Music.Baby' LP was powerful, clear and thrilling in its resolute dynamic ability through the Ambient. Gwen Stefani's vocals were excellent in their clarity, definition and extension - which proved a

delight. Instrumental separation was also excellent, as was the timing relationship between the individual instruments and vocals where the music was never dull or loose. Crucially, the music was not fatiguing or harsh either. Finally, the surging bass lines were powerful in their agility and extension, which helped to provide a huge dynamic quality to the Ambient's reproduction of this song.

I compared the £3,200 Clearaudio Ambient turntable and Satisfy Carbon tonearm combination with my more expensive £3,740 Origin Live turntable/arm reference where both used the same £1,230 Clearaudio Concerto MC Cartridge. With the Origin Live system, the reproduction of the 'Haydn: Sinfonia Concertante/Lira Concertos' was almost completely different. The melodies, harmonies and rhythms of the entire composition had a more free-flowing presentation in comparison to the Ambient. Here, the stringed instruments were more delicate because their successive notes became more finessed, where their timbres were better revealed. Overall, the accumulative contribution of the stringed instruments to the musical structure had even better timing than the already excellent Ambient. However, the Ambient was actually more powerful in bass extension (if no better in bass tunefulness) than the Origin Live, where it gave a bolder, structural account to the music.

With rock music by The Cult and the acoustic flavoured 'Heal The Pain' by George Michael, things were more intriguing. The Origin Live had superior timing and bass tunefulness (but not bass extension) to the Ambient on 'She Sells Sanctuary' by The Cult, with more timbral acuity to the guitars and vocals, but it was less musically cohesive and solid with all the instrumental/vocal elements, which is imperative in communicating the sometimes wayward frequencies of rock music with an appropriate

sense of dynamism. It was very close, but I preferred George Michael's 'Heal the Pain' via the Ambient than the Origin Live, because it was more expressive and animated – importantly without losing out on timing and bass tunefulness. So predominantly, the Origin Live had better timing and timbral finesse, while the Ambient had superior separation and bass extension.

CONCLUSION

The £2,630 Ambient turntable, £570 Satisfy Carbon tonearm and £1,230 Concerto MC cartridge, as a package, is an excellent LP source – and also happens to be, in its ultra-gloss wood and satin-aluminium sandwich construction, one of the most beautiful designs you'll see. It's therefore compelling as a high-end purchase, and being unsprung it isn't an annoyingly complex set-up either. Its strengths include supreme composure, outstanding instrumental separation and excellent bass extension, and crucially it didn't stifle the music or add any unwanted universal acoustical adjuncts, like sweetness or warmth, when they were not present in the recordings. It lacked the complete mastery of spatiality, timing and timbral finesse that my Origin Live reference system had, but this is logical considering it's more expensive than the Ambient and Satisfy Carbon.

REFERENCE SYSTEM:

Origin Live Resolution turntable/Ultra+P/S & Encounter mkII tonearm (£3,740)
Linn Linto phonostage (£995)
Densen B-250/B-330 amplification (£6,000)
Bosendorfer VC-2 loudspeakers (£4,750)

MUSIC USED:

Württemberg Chamber Orchestra, 'Haydn: Sinfonia Concertante/Lira Concertos' (1972)
The Cult, 'Love' (1985)
George Michael, 'Listen Without Prejudice Vol.1' (1990)
Gwen Stefani, 'Love.Angel.Music.Baby' (2004)

Compared to Clearaudio's own £11,100 Master Reference AMG Wood flagship model, the Ambient is far cheaper and nowhere near as complex in assembly. Considering it is so by being unfussy, elegant and beautifully crafted, it merits serious audition.

VERDICT

Superbly finessed sound plus beautiful build and finish make this an exceptionally high achieving 'all-in-one' turntable package.

CLEARAUDIO AMBIENT £2,630
CLEARAUDIO CONCERTO £1,230
CLEARAUDIO SATISFY
CARBON DIRECT WIRE £570
Clearaudio Electronic GmbH
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FOR

- outstanding design & build
- excellent, cohesive sound
- deep bass extension

AGAINST

- sound could be more open

