

THE ULTIMATE ANALOG ISSUE

Deutsch Delights

Clearaudio Goldfinger v2 Moving-Coil Cartridge and Clearaudio Double Matrix Record-Cleaning Machine

Jonathan Valin




It was only a few months ago that I declared the innovative Air Tight PC-1 cartridge my new mc reference, because of its standard-setting transient speed and astonishing low-level detail. Comes now the Clearaudio Goldfinger, and I'll be darned if it isn't a standard-setter in its own right.

For years the knock against Clearaudio moving coils was that they were too lean, bright, and analytical. Of course, the flip side of this was that they were also fabulously high in resolution, as well as fabulous soundstagers and imagers. How to make them fuller, more lifelike, more *gemütlich* in timbre without sacrificing that resolution, soundstaging, and imaging has been the problem that has occupied Clearaudio's brain trust—the Suchys, *Vater und Söhne*—for the past decade or so.

From the Discovery moving coil on, each subsequent iteration of Clearaudio mc has moved a little farther away from “too lean” and a little closer to “just right.” (“Too fat” was never an issue.) And with the Goldfinger v2 the balance problem has been effectively solved.

All you have to do is listen to a violin, like Nadia Salerno-Sonnenberg's Strad on her thrilling performance of the Prokofiev First Violin Sonata [MusicMasters], or the top octaves of *Mr. John Cage's Prepared Piano* [Decca Head] to hear that exceptionally lifelike tone color is now mixed with Clearaudio's extraordinary resolution, transient response, and imaging and staging. Indeed, with the proper preamplification, amplification, and speakers, the instruments on these two



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records (and many others) can sound disarmingly “realistic”—not just “there,” but there without (or with a much reduced) sense that they’re being generated by a piece of hi-fi gear.

I’m not exactly sure what is happening with the Goldfinger (and with the PC-1), although I am sure that flat (or flatter) frequency response is not the explanation. It’s not that the PC-1 or the Goldfinger don’t have the old familiar rising top end of mc’s—both do. It’s that instead of shouting their foibles at us, they’ve begun to whisper. What seem to be going away are familiar distortions, and as noise, ringing, and resonances are reduced so is the electromechanical signature of the cartridge.

With a cartridge, some customary distortion is obviously traceable to the interface between stylus and LP. Like the PC-1, the Goldfinger seems to “lock into” the grooves more firmly. Clearaudio would undoubtedly point to its new hyper-parabolic Micro-HD-Diamond stylus—with a mass (0.00016g) one-fifth that of previous Clearaudio diamond styli. Be that as it may, the hashy background noises and swimmy imaging artifacts of mistracking and mistracing are much less audible in the Goldfinger, and this in itself adds to the non-mechanical sound of the cartridge (particularly in the treble). However, it isn’t just better tracking/tracing that makes the Goldfinger “disappear” more as a sound source.

Clearaudio claims that the twelve tabs of the mounting plate at the top of the cartridge—the “fingers” that give the Goldfinger one half of its name (the other half comes from its solid-gold chassis)—minimize cartridge-body resonances. Having heard a similar reduction in coloration (and improved “disappearing act”) in Clearaudio’s Titanium Fingers mc, I have reason to think this might be true. On top of which, as with the Air Tight PC-1, the magnetic engine that translates mechanical movements of the stylus into the electrical signals fed to your phonostage has been greatly beefed up. The Goldfinger uses twice as many “Super Neodymium” magnets as previous Clearaudios, so its lighter-weight coils are operating in a much stronger magnetic field. Not only is the cartridge’s electrical output raised (0.8mV), but dynamic range is now claimed to exceed 100dB, which is another way of saying that noise has been significantly reduced.

The lessening of mechanical tracking/tracing distortion, the lowering of cartridge-body and cartridge/arm resonances, the increase in signal strength and dynamic range (or the decrease in electrical distortion), all add up to an mc that makes music sound more “there” (and its own electro-mechanical signature less “there”).

This vanishing act affects every aspect of the sound, from top to bottom. The Goldfinger is stronger (almost CD-strong on big transients, like the trumpet blasts and bass drum strikes toward the end of the second-movement Vivace of Lutoslawski’s Concerto for Orchestra [EMI]), more discerning (dig the color, detail, and definition on the harp and pizzicato doublebass seconds, thirds, and fifths at the start of the third-

movement Passacaglia of the Lutoslawski Concerto or the uncanny colors and weird little “bent” pitches of Mr. Cage’s prepared piano), more natural (the timbres of voices, strings, brass, winds, and percussion are so much closer to lifelike that, with the right records, it’s almost like listening to the real deals), and more self-effacing than virtually any other mc I’ve heard.

How does it compare to the Air Tight PC-1? Well, when all is said and done, the Goldfinger probably isn’t quite as “fast” as the PC-1. A violin pizzicato, such as one of the many in Nadia Salerno-Sonnenberg’s performance of the Prokofiev First Sonata, doesn’t have quite the uncannily realistic “snap” with the Goldfinger that it has with the PC-1. Ditto for other hard transients. On the other hand, the Goldfinger has somewhat more natural timbres, and equals the great PC-1 in resolution and staging, so I guess that choosing between them depends on whether you prioritize transients or timbres. You certainly won’t be trading off much in either case.

Clearaudio recommends a tracking force somewhere around 2.8 grams; I prefer 2.75 grams in the Walker Black Diamond record player, 2.85 in the Graham Phantom/TW Acoustic Raven AC-3.

PC-1 or Goldfinger? I can’t choose for you, but I can say with confidence that either one is reference quality—and that either one will “disappear” as a transducer better than any moving coil you’ve previously heard.

That disappearing act can be aided considerably by the second item I’m going to recommend—Clearaudio’s Double Matrix record-cleaning machine.

If you’re like me, cleaning LPs is like going to the dentist—a necessary evil. Indeed, I could happily skip both ordeals on most occasions, and regularly do with LPs. Yeah, records “sound” different when they’re cleaned, and different when you clean them with different fluids and devices. But different isn’t always better; sometimes it’s just different.

Let’s face it: No record cleaner on earth is going to heal a deep scratch, make a poorly recorded record sound like a great one, or prevent lousy vinyl from acquiring fresh ticks. What it can do, however, is loosen the rubble that has accumulated in the grooves of years-old LPs and, if you’re lucky, wash it away. Records definitely play more easily after bathing, scrubbing, and vacuuming—with fewer stumbles and lower background hashiness—and to this extent cleaning is a definite improvement.

Up until the Double Matrix, I’d been using Clearaudio’s original Matrix to clean vinyl. It was quite good—and built like a tank. However, when push came to scrub, I’d be hard-pressed to say that the Matrix cleaned a lot better than other machines. Most of them work more or less the same way—cleaning fluid is pumped from a reservoir onto the record’s surface; a micro-fiber brush is lowered onto the LP; in combo with the liquid the brush loosens the dirt in the grooves (the Matrix’s “turntable” rotates in two directions, facilitating scrubbing); and the debris is then vacuumed up along with the cleaning fluid through a

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slot in the brush's wand, via a suction pump that on the Matrix operates at two different levels of vacuum. Aside from being very noisy, the Matrix never gave me a problem.

Well, one problem, actually, which is endemic to single-sided record-cleaning machines. While you're cleaning the dusty, dirty upside of the LP, the dusty, dirty downside is necessarily pressed against the record-cleaner's cushioned platter via a clamp. To clean the downside, you then have to turn the record over. Now the newly cleaned and vacuumed side of the LP is clamped against the same cushioned platter—pressed down into whatever dust, dirt, or grime has been deposited there by the dirty side of the record. This doesn't make much sense from a sanitation standpoint, but what's an analog maven to do?

There didn't seem to be an answer to this conundrum until the Double Matrix came along.

Here's the thing: The Double Matrix cleans *both sides* of a record simultaneously. Through an ingenious clamping mechanism, the record is suspended on both sides, only at the label; neither the A-grooves nor the B-grooves ever touch a platter. Two micro-fiber wands—one for the upside of the disc and one for the down—are affixed above and below the LP, which is sandwiched between them. Cleaning fluid is dispensed equally over each record side. You might think the fluid would drip off the bottom of the LP, but surface tension apparently prevents this from happening. Both sides of the record are then scrubbed and vacuumed clean via the pair of micro-fiber wands. (Like the Matrix, the "platter" is bi-directional, allowing you to scrub and vacuum clockwise and then counterclockwise, and the vacuum pump has two levels of vacuum—roughly strong and Hoover.) The Double Matrix also includes a static-reducing brush (not on the Matrix), which runs over both sides of the record simultaneously (after vacuuming, please). Not only is cleaning time cut roughly in half, but the chance (or should I say, the certainty) of cross-

contamination when you flip the clean side onto the dirty platter is eliminated!

It may be my imagination, but I actually think that records sound better—more like fresh vinyl—cleaned via the Double Matrix than they do via the Matrix. It could be the cross-contamination thing; it could be superior brushes or vacuuming; it could be wishful thinking, although I kind of doubt it. After all these years of playing with record-cleaning machines, I think I can tell when an LP sounds "clean" and when it sounds "closer to new." To my ear, records cleaned on the Double Matrix sound closer to new. As a result, ever since acquiring the Double Matrix I've been cleaning up a storm, which, trust me, is not my usual habit.

Now for the bad news. All of this incredible technology and convenience costs. The Double Matrix is a \$5200 accessory. However, if you are heavily invested in vinyl, I cannot think of a better way to spend your money. **TAS**

SPECS & PRICING

CLEARAUDIO GOLDFINGER V2

Output: 0.8mV
Impedance: 50 ohms
Compliance: 15
Weight: 16 grams
Price: \$10,000

CLEARAUDIO DOUBLE MATRIX

Type: Two-sided record-cleaning machine, with bi-directional "platter" and two levels of vacuum

Dimensions: 470 x 370 x 235mm
Weight: 22 kg.
Price: \$5200

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