



Parallel universe

David Price is suitably impressed as he lines up Clearaudio's new entry-level tangential tracking tonearm, the TT5

From clothes to cars, consumer goods are almost invariably built down to a price because it's cheaper and/or easier to make them like that. Rarely do you find the right tool for the job and when you do, you pay for it dearly. Hi-fi is an example of this, with everything from amp to speaker design compromised to make commercial sense. Even the sacred sphere of vinyl LPs is thus afflicted. One glaringly obvious issue is the disparity between the way it is pressed – the master acetate is cut by a head that tracks across the disc in a linear motion – and the manner in which it's played back, via a pivoted tonearm that swings across the surface of the disc. Conventional arms let the stylus be dragged radially across the groove, but why not do it the same way as the original disc was cut?

Enter the tangential tonearm, or parallel tracker. This isn't a new idea – indeed Thomas Edison's Edison Triumph Phonograph sported the first tangential tracking tonearm back in 1877. But the seventies were the real high watermark of tangential tonearms, with everything from Garrard's Zero 100SB and B&O's Beogram 4000 leading the charge. Technics nailed the concept with the SL-10 in 1979, popularising the breed. Back in the specialist hi-fi world, Souther caused a big splash in the US with its SLA-3 in 1984, which duly prompted German turntable specialist Clearaudio to buy the company in 1987. Its first tangential tracking arm, the Master TQ-1, was based heavily on the Souther Tri-Quartz, and the TQ-I (Tri-Quartz Improved) tonearm duly began production a year later. So it's not as if the company has just cottoned on to the idea; Clearaudio is

an avowed fan of parallel tracking tonearms and has several decades of experience. It now has a large range, starting with the TT5. Should you wish to buy it fitted to a Clearaudio turntable, you'll find it bundled as shown with the Performance DC with a Virtuoso v2 cartridge for £3,800.

The TT5 works in a dramatically different fashion to a conventional pivoted tonearm; the cartridge moves tangentially in a linear motion, steered by the record groove with which it remains in parallel. Instead of swinging across the surface of the disc, the cartridge, headshell and short armtube assembly run on precision rollers along a polished glass rail. The result is – providing everything is properly set up – zero tracking error and no need for bias to compensate for side forces. The stylus reads both sides of the groove walls at the same time, with no change across the duration of the disc surface.

The TT5 is a thing of beauty, in a form follows function sort of way. The headshell sits on a shortened arm tube, which is counterbalanced by a weight that's secured by a grub screw; there's a built-in lift lower system that works well, but this alone isn't enough to make changing records easy as there's very little room between the turntable spindle and the cartridge. That's why Clearaudio offers an optional Swing Base (£390), which allows the whole arm assembly to pivot across out of the way while changing records. You can then swing it back and it locks into the correct position, neatly.

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Clearaudio TT5
- ORIGIN**
Germany
- TYPE**
Tangential tracking tonearm
- WEIGHT**
560g
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
200 x 140 x 150mm
- FEATURES**
 - Precision rollers, polished glass rail
 - Adjustable tracking force
 - Adjustable azimuth
 - Optional Swing Base
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Sound Foundations
- TELEPHONE**
0118 9814238
- WEBSITE**
soundfoundations.co.uk

In practice it's very simple to use, but fiddly to set up. The arm must be carefully configured and totally level (there's an integral spirit level provided), otherwise the cartridge may jump in the groove. Whereas a poorly setup conventional tonearm will allow its cartridge to plough through the groove – sounding bad admittedly – unless the TT5 is bang on, the cartridge is prone to skip. By the same token, when correctly fettled, the arm feels way more stable than a conventional tonearm design. It's also quite large, so don't forget to leave adequate clearance behind your turntable if you're planning on using the Swing Base.

Sound quality

Sometimes in life one has moments of clarity; everything falls into place and you suddenly realise how things should be. Properly setup, the TT5 makes the business of allowing a pick-up cartridge to do its job properly suddenly seem so easy. Compared with most equivalently priced pivoted arms, this sounds so much more stable, secure and solid. There's no fear of end-of-side distortion and you're furnished with a general sense of composure and calm – the music sounds less like it's being squeezed out of a tube. As the saying goes, what's not to like?

I kick off my auditioning with Steely Dan's *Home At Last*. Mounted on the aforementioned Clearaudio Performance DC turntable with Virtuoso v2 moving magnet, the TT5 sounds far more surefooted than the company's own conventional Satisfy tonearm. Not that the latter is bad, but this new parallel tracker presents the music in an obviously more relaxed way, sounding less nervous and a good deal more revealing. This arm never excerpts itself or puts a foot wrong. You feel like you're



Costing a whisker under £1,900, the SME 309 is one of the finest conventional tonearms at this price and offers serious competition for the TT5. The SME is so well engineered that it minimises so many of the problems of radial trackers; the bearing quality is excellent and it lets the cartridge track the groove as well as it's possible to do from a normal arm at this price. Sonically, it's just a little less secure sounding, with a slightly more opaque midband and subtly reduced depth perspective; but the bass is a little stronger and the SME gives a slightly punchier and more charismatic sound. It also has the benefit of being far easier to set up and less fussy to use than the Clearaudio, too.

listening to the music, rather than the hi-fi. Therein lies the most significant trait of the TT5 – the ability to provide 'mastertape' quality to the music, making everything sound stable, secure and serene.

The second thing that strikes you is the sheer size of the recorded acoustic and the accuracy of placement of elements within it. The Doors' *Riders On The Storm* is a wonderful recording and the TT5 allows its true scale to flood out. Play the CD version and everything seems a bit shut in, put a good vinyl system on and it really grows in scale and the TT5 takes it to yet another level. My speaker seems to disappear and in its place is a vast cathedral-like soundstage. The really great thing is the way everything inside the mix is located with meticulous precision. There is a great expanse of sound left to right, superb

There's loads of low-level detail across the glass-clear midband

depth perspective and instruments sound so solid they could be nailed to my rear wall. Very few high-end tonearms pull this trick off, so it's interesting to see the (relatively inexpensive) TT5 manage it so well. This combination of rhythmic ease and spatial accuracy is the very cornerstone of the performance, and this applies no matter what type of music you play. For example, the soulful strains of Isaac Hayes' cover of Burt Bacharach's *The Look Of Love* is joyful to behold. The arm doesn't have a particularly 'rhythmic' nature – in the way that some unipivots give a really beguiling swing to things – but nor is it 'mechanical'. Once again, we come back to its fuss-free, assured nature with everything handled professionally. It tracks dynamics

very well, allowing the music to really emote and yet it doesn't exaggerate anything for effect. With loads of low-level detail across its glass-clear midband, there's lots to be satisfied by but its real talent is the way it pulls every aspect of the performance together so seamlessly.

The only thing that counts against the TT5 is that it's not what some will deliberately go and buy a vinyl replay system for. There are two types of vinylista – one that wants the closest approach to the original sound and the other that wants a syrupy, sumptuous, fat wall of sound no matter what. The Clearaudio doesn't fit into this latter category. Its crisp, detailed tonality really suits classical and electronic music, and works well with finely recorded rock too. However, those into jazz seeking something to sugar their musical pill more, might feel underwhelmed. It's more of a transcription tool than a charismatic performer. The bass performance is a big part of this; it's very tight and taut and doesn't overhang much. The result is a propulsive sound, but not a sumptuous one that pads out the bottom end. At the other end of the frequency spectrum, treble is ultra precise, crisp, accurate and extended.

Conclusion

Like everything in the analogue world, tonearms are a matter of taste. The TT5 won't be universally loved, but anyone after a serious reference tool – one that's highly transparent and accurate rather than something that paints a rose-tinted picture of proceedings – will be impressed. What's so great is that it steps out of the world of compromise inhabited by radial tracking tonearms and into an exotic new place where things are done in a more civilised way. It costs a lot of money, but you get plenty of performance back in return – making it excellent value, even at this price ●



- 1 Arm lift
- 2 Bubble level
- 3 Carbon arm tube with aluminum headshell
- 4 Counterbalance weight
- 5 Aluminium armbase

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★★★
- DISLIKE:** Fiddly to set up; Swing Base is optional
- WE SAY:** Cracking-value parallel tracking tonearm

OVERALL
★★★★★