

Under the Spell of the (Analog) Moon...

Clearaudio Emotion/Satisfy Turntable & Arm, Phono Cartridges from Clearaudio & Benz

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When the Clearaudio package arrived, a manufacturer of quite wonderful audio electronics was visiting for the day. He looked at the label on the box. "Vinyl is such a pain in the neck," he sighed. "But so worth it."

In those two sentences, he wrote my review.

But I suppose you want more than that.



Set-Up

The next day, I screwed my courage to the sticking-place and went to work. Setting up a turntable system is not as easy as plugging in a CD player. Or putting in new electronics. Or installing new speakers. But it's no more complex than setting up a home-theater rig. True, you have to deal with teeny delicate wires and little screws that wickedly spring out of their bags and vanish onto the floor. For those of us who haven't been doing this since we were teenagers, setting up a turntable is a biggish deal. Even a table as basically simple as the Clearaudio Emotion.

The Emotion/Satisfy set comes carefully packed in three layers, each elegant element nestled in precisely carved, sturdy foam. I opened the box and looked down on the enigma of an LP rig. I hadn't listened to analog in my system for nearly 15 years, and had never set up a table in my life.

Clearaudio's instructions are in Germlish—the company is German and makes some of the most wonderful LP setups available. I'm sure they have no idea that anyone who wants to play LPs is a novice at this, and so a great many things one probably should intuit are either left out or expressed in language that can baffle. ("Make sure with a gently pressure that the platter is applying on the complete surface of the bearing.")

Once I got the argot down, though, and on the phone with my editor who *has* been setting up tables since the age of 15, the task became not so daunting. In about an hour, I had the table physically rigged. And the arm on it! It took me another two days to garner the nerve to connect it electrically. It's a pretty thing, so I would stand in front of it, admiringly, and then walk away again. Installing the Clearaudio Aurum Classic Wood cartridge took yet another day—bursts of wrestling with instructions punctuated with naps from psychic exhaustion. I had bought a Shure Stylus Force Gauge for the occasion. Learned how to use that too!

On the fourth day, I had music. And

it was good.

Listen: I did this setup entirely by myself, so *anyone* can. A few days later, I had to do the whole thing over—more on that in a bit—and the process was completed in under a half hour.

First a word of advice you will not get out of the manuals. When you set up a turntable, you are more than likely to get rumble and other noises you would not hear from a digital player. You can make most of those go away. First, be sure the table is isolated from the furniture. The Emotion comes with spikes and little plastic disks to go under them. Use the disks. Second, you may need to disconnect the ground wire. I haven't had to—yet. Third, the Clearaudio motor is seated in a hole in the plinth. Wiggle the motor until it no longer touches the sides of the hole anywhere. (That solved most of my problems.) Finally, clean your records.

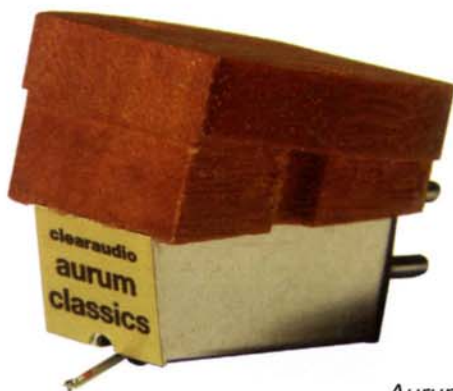
"My goosebump test for LPs comes when you set the stylus in the groove, and with that first note, the ceiling of the room lifts and music surrounds you utterly."



Listening

So. Was this neck pain going to be worth it, as the visiting fireman had suggested? I know big expensive rigs sound like heaven. This one is modest—about \$1200, including cartridge—how far could it take me on that road?

For evaluating, I first chose a series of LPs with CDs to match, and on two of these, I had attended the recording sessions. The first was a frank disappointment: Harmonia Mundi's *Arias for Senesino* (taken from Handel operas) sung by countertenor Drew Minter. I



Aurum

have heard Minter on many occasions and had attended these particular sessions. The songs ache with heroism and romance (in Handel's day, operatic protagonist roles, demanding fine control and emotive tremolo, were sung by castrati—Senesino was the most famous). They will wring a saddened heart and make you almost wish you were young again. I was poised for the glories of analog soundstage, but for reasons I cannot know, the LP of this recording is fainter and more veiled than the CD. Turning it up does not help.

None of this is the fault of the Clearaudio. I immediately put on the LP (180-gram vinyl) of *K622*, the Mozart Clarinet Concerto from Musical Fidelity, with Antony Michaelson, of MF, on clarinet, playing with the Michaelangelo Chamber Orchestra conducted by Robert Bailey (*Stereophile's* John Atkinson produced). Here the sound was powerful, clear, the highs were melting, and the bass was a marvel of clarity in the notes and of richness in the underpinning business that makes truth in the lows so important to music. I compared the LP to the CD, which is well done indeed (you can also get an SACD of this disc, but I don't have an appropriate player). But the vinyl was magic.

My goosebump test for LPs comes when you set the stylus in the groove, and with that first note, the ceiling of the room lifts and music surrounds

you utterly. CDs are wonderful. Clear, extended, easy—all those good things. But there are two sound qualities they cannot seem to get right: They never, on any system I have heard, get out from under the overhang. And they cannot quite set the players loose in a field of air and space. When the sense of being compressed from above disappears, music breathes differently. When the players are surrounded by air and space, the music is enriched. And spatial information becomes miraculously lifelike. You will surely hear tape hiss and the noise of the cartridge on the vinyl. But in the twinkling of an eye, these will be eclipsed by the music—you are *with* the musicians in a place no other recording mode can yet take you. Not SACD. Not DVD-A. Certainly not CD, even on the best systems.

The sound, specifically? This table runs smoothly, so there is no noise from the motor. With the Satisfy arm and Aurum cartridge, the music came through, lovely and clear throughout the audible range, light and airy. There was perhaps a slight tinge of grit in the highs. Nothing like the grit you get with bad CDs—more a glazy-hazy quality. And there was a touch of thinness overall. But the vinyl experience surrounds you with the ease and continuity of real music, and I found myself wondering why I have lived so many years without it.

Your recordings must be well engineered, please note. No player, analog or digital, can make a bad recording sound good. Your phono section has to be good, too. And the one on the Musical Fidelity X-150 integrated (you're surprised it's there, the unit is so small) is a honey. In fact, this is a best-buy alert: splendid amp, with the power and cleanliness to handle the best; wonderful preamp; sweet sweet phono section, all in one elegant little package now for under \$1000. Another visiting engineer, seeing the X-150, said: "You've got a *digital* amp? Well, yes, has to be, at that size, doesn't it? Can't fit analog circuitry into *that*

"My notes tell the tale:
'Lovely, lovely, lovely. Wide, deep soundstage. Air around each player magically alive (CDs just don't do this). Resonant midrange; sweet, bittersweet, and biting strings. Bass that goes through to the bones,'..."



space, can we?" And left before I could answer: No, no, and yes you can. Go out and buy one of these things, even if you think you don't need it.

To evaluate the Clearaudio package, I listened in quick succession, followed by days of close attention, to a number of excellent recordings: Ali Akbar Khan: *Indian Architecture* [Water Lily - LP, CD]; Mozart: *K622* [Musical Fidelity - LP, CD]; *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, Arturo Delmonico, violin [North Star Records - LP, CD]; Strunz & Farah: *Misterioso* [Water Lily - LP]; *Franz Liszt*, Teddy Teirup, piano [Water Lily - LP].

My notes tell the tale: "Lovely, lovely, lovely. Wide, deep soundstage. Air around each player magically alive (CDs just don't do this). Resonant midrange; sweet, bittersweet and biting strings. Bass that goes through to the bones, yet each note of it clear and musical." Across the entire musical frequency range, each LP was clearer, airier, sweeter, and fuller than the corresponding CD. The bodies of instruments were more shapely, their materials more distinctive (wood was like wood, metal like metal, skin like skin).

Soundstaging performs, for me, the true miracle of vinyl. The Khan was recorded in a cathedral in Santa Barbara. The resonance of that space is just plain *real* on the LP. On the CD, the arching interior is an echo of itself. I have been there many times, and I

produced that recording, so I know the sound well. Heard on LP, as in that place, Khan's ragas will change the pitch of your breath and the rate of your heartbeat. (This is not a metaphor. Indian ragas, tribal chants, and some bird songs have been shown to slow the heart and still the fire in the blood. 'STruth.)

So: Is the Clearaudio Emotion/Satisfy worth the money and the trouble? Entirely.

So endth part the first.

Part II: Benz Ace H Cartridge

Think about those two small problems above: a slight graininess in the highs and an overall thinness. Subtle. Not even, thought I, worth dwelling on or pointing out specific passages in various musics where I would have wanted a smidgeonally cleaner high cymbal note, say, or more body in the tuttis. On the whole, I was happy and wanted to stop where I was.

Then along came the Benz Ace H cartridge. It's more expensive (\$550 as opposed to the Aurum's \$200), but said to be a sweet deal.

Now, I had to uninstall the Aurum to put in this delicate, sapphire blue thing. And it looks so *naked* on the underside. I couldn't even see the stylus, it was so small. My hands began to shake, and sure enough, in undoing the Aurum, I felt one of those tiny *tiny* wires that connect cartridge to arm—break. Snap right off. Ah, no!

I called the distributor and got permission to take the arm (disassembling the whole rig, yes) to a goldsmith friend and beg him to resolder the parts. "Should be easy; just touch the iron to the wire," said the techie. Well, it was more complicated than that, involving carving a tiny groove in the—oh, never mind. It got done, and only cost me about 20 *caffés latté*, on promise. I came home and set up the arm again and put in the new cartridge in less time than it has taken to tell. It was *easy*!

On went *K622*, where I had heard most clearly the grain and thinness.



Benz Ace

And yes! Even with the Benz right out of the box, those aberrations were gone. You knew a cartridge needed break-in, of course. This one took 40 hours (of playing, mind you—you could wear out a record doing this). And LPs you can't just set to "repeat" and walk off. You have to play them one by one, and hop up to turn them over when the needle hits the skids. But I did it, and at the end of that time, I put on a surprise disc sent me, on brief loan, by Harry Pearson:

A 45rpm test-pressing from Classic Records, a remastered recording of a piece by Ravel played by the Chicago Symphony in the 1960s, with the great Fritz Reiner. It lasts less than 10 minutes, what snobs call Ravel fluff—"Alborada del gracioso." But it is pure heaven—its beauty is profundity itself. **No music in my house has ever sounded like this or moved me so.**

Ceiling? There was no sky! The players were surrounded by light and air, yet cohesive—breathing as one, making glorious music. The highs were so beautiful I thought I would faint. The brass was golden. And the bass, in that first stunning climax, shook the house and me, from my throat on down—and nothing rolled off or crackled or strained (told you the X-150 amp was good). **The Benz had this music's number, all right.**

Ravel's combination of power and delicacy, heard aright, melts stone. To say nothing of mere ideas about not wanting to take a certain amount of trouble. **Yes, we know that \$30,000 rigs**

do this with well-recorded 45 rpms. But—so does this particular \$1500 rig. The Clearaudio Emotion/Satisfy/Benz train got me about 80% of the way to Paradise. Close enough to feel the wind off the wings.

A note on the otherwise blank white cover of this recording says: "To Harry, from Classic Records. ... We really are loony, aren't we?"

Indeed.

SPECIFICATIONS

Clearaudio Emotion/Satisfy turntable & tonearm

Construction: Resonance-optimized chassis, belt driven
 Speeds: 33 1/3 & 45 rpm (78 rpm with optional motor pulley)
 Drive unit: decoupled synchronous motor in metal housing
 Bearing: hardened-steel, polished sinter [sic] bronze insert
 Platter: CS-PMMA acrylic precision CNC machined surface
 Speed variation: +/- 0.2 %
 Dimensions: 15.75" x 13" x 5.9"
 Warranty: 3 years
 Price: \$995

Clearaudio Aurum Classic Wood phono cartridge

Type: High Output Moving Magnet
 Output: 3.3 mV
 Weight: 10 grams
 Cantilever: Aluminum
 Stylus: Elliptical Diamond
 Tracking Force: 2.0-2.5 grams
 Price: \$200; \$170 with Emotion/Satisfy package.

Benz Ace-H phono cartridge

Type: High Output Moving Coil (medium and low-output models, respectively the Benz Ace-M and -L, also available at comparable prices)
 Output: 2.5 mV
 Weight: 8.8 grams
 Cantilever: Boron rod
 Stylus: Line-Contact Diamond
 Tracking Force: 1.8-2.2 grams
 Price: \$550; \$450 with Emotion/Satisfy package or trade-in

MANUFACTURER/DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

CLEARAUDIO ELECTRONIC GmbH

Spardorfer Str. 150
 91050 Erlangen, Germany
www.clearaudio.de

BENZ MICRO SWITZERLAND

Both firms distributed in the U.S. by:

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 Woodbridge, Ontario
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 Email: vince@tricell-ent.com

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

BeOne Audio 306 loudspeakers;
 Musical Fidelity X-150 integrated amplifier; Rotel RDV-1060 DVD Audio/Video player; Musical Fidelity X-Ray CD player; Nordost Blue Heaven speaker cables and interconnects; Monster Reference Power Center HTS 3500