

stereophile

INSIDER VIEWS ON EVERYTHING VINYL

ANALOG by MICHAEL FREMER CORNER

THIS ISSUE: Magico's QPods, phono preamps from PTE and Graham Slee, step-up transformers from Music First and Ypsilon, and an ultrasonic LP cleaner get Fremezized.

A Whole Lotta Analog Stuff!

Audio Desk System Vinyl Cleaner

Getting a review sample of this unique ultrasonic record-cleaning machine took me years; apparently, Audiodesksysteme Gläss, a small German manufacturer, couldn't keep up with demand. I've also heard from a few sources that reliability was not high in the company's early days, but that now all that's been sorted out, as has manufacturing capacity.

This compact cleaner can be thought of as a very high-tech, automatic version of the Spin Clean Record Washer (\$79.95), which I reviewed in my February 2010 column. Like the hand-cranked Spin Clean, the Audio Desk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner (\$3895) uses a vat full of fluid that can clean many records before it needs to be replaced, and the LP sits vertically in the vat as both sides

are simultaneously cleaned. But before Audiodesksysteme and their importer, Ultra Systems, have heart attacks, rest assured—those are the *only* similarities!

The Audio Desk is fully automatic and, unlike any other record-cleaning machines I know of, it uses ultrasound and a process called cavitation (*ie*, the forming of bubbles) to clean records, much as an ultrasonic jewelry cleaner does for jewels. If you've ever seen a tarnished piece of ornate silverwork go into such a machine and come out gleaming, even in its tiniest nooks and crannies, you know how well it works.

Slip an LP into the Audio Desk's slot, which is lined with soft rubber lips; on the left side, the slot widens into a vat. Push the Start button and the record begins to slowly rotate (it sometimes required a



The Audio Desk Systeme cleans LPs with ultrasound.

nudge). Fluid stored in a chamber below begins to fill the vat as four bidirectional microfiber drums adjust their proximity to the disc, then begin to rotate themselves, to spread cleaning fluid on the record.

Meanwhile, the ultrasonic condenser fires up, producing soundwaves whose amplitude is high enough to break the liquid's surface tension, causing it to tear apart and leave behind millions of microscopic vacuum bubbles that compress or implode, creating tiny liquid jets small enough to clean inside even the narrowest

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LP groove (think of the jewelry cleaner).

This micro-agitation process washes any contaminants on the record surface into the cleaning fluid. The fluid then drains off through a filter, and the rotation of the LP slows almost to a stop as two powerful fans completely dry the disc. Remove the disc by carefully lifting it vertically, to keep it from rubbing against the rollers, or you'll end up with wet spots. (That happened only a few times.) Your LP is clean and dry and ready to play. The entire process, monitored by front-panel LEDs, takes six minutes.

The designer, Reiner Gläss, contends that record-cleaning machines that use surface suction (Nitty Gritty, VPI, Clearaudio) or point suction (Keith Monks, Loricraft) rely on brushes to loosen dirt and contaminants buried in the groove, and that brushes simply can't do the job. Worse, he contends, they often press dirt *deeper* into the groove. Surface-suction vacuuming, he contends, often smears dirt across the record surface, while the friction caused by rubbing builds up static electricity. Although point suction is somewhat less prone to static

buildup, such devices can clean only one side at a time, and still rely on brushing to loosen particles embedded in the groove.

The Audio Desk Systeme was the most effective, easy-to-use record-cleaning machine I've ever tried. I cleaned records that I'd already vacuum-cleaned but were still noisy, and the noise went away. Two examples: my original UK pressing of the Beatles' *Let It Be* and my most treasured classical album, an original pressing of Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony's recording of Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra* (RCA Living Stereo LSC-1806). The latter looked clean when I bought it but was hopelessly noisy. Repeated cleanings over the decades since, using more sophisticated fluids and machines, have made it quieter—but finally, after treatment with the Audio Desk, it's just about completely silent. The machine is, too.

The six-minute cleaning cycle is not a problem because it's entirely automatic. I went on a record-cleaning spree, managing a personal best of 120 LPs cleaned in two weeks. Not having to stand there and clean one side, then turn the disc over to clean the other side, made all the difference.

Downsides? You're limited to Audio Desk's fluid, an alcohol-free, biodegradable concentrate said to have excellent antistatic properties (it does). You add a 20ml bottle (\$14.95 each, or \$75 for a six-pack) to a gallon of distilled or, much better, reverse-osmosis-purified water (eg, Aquafina, or from your own reverse-osmosis system). That's good for at least 50 records until you have to start topping it up (a flashing LED tells you when to do that). Mix up a second batch and add as needed.

The microfiber cleaning barrels (\$99.95 each) need to be replaced every 500 to 1000 LPs, depending on how dirty they were to begin with; the fluid should be drained and replaced, and the filter rinsed, every 100 to 200 records. I'm out of space, so I can't answer skeptics' other obvious questions, other than to say that *really* dirty, crusty records should be pre-cleaned. I use MicroCare's Premiér! or an Orbitrac, and I still keep Enzymatic fluid around to deal with moldy records.

I've never had so much fun cleaning LPs. I bought the review sample. ■

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