

Brinkmann Audio Spyder Turntable, 10.5 Tonearm, and Pi Moving-Coil Pickup

All-Around Excellence

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Regular readers of mine know that I place great importance on isolation, one reason I tend to prefer tuned suspensions to fixed ones. So right off, I started with the Mehta/Los Angeles/Decca-London recording of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* with its pedal point from a 32-foot stop. I selected this for two reasons. First, I wanted to see how well the Spyder, with no suspension and little mass as such, withstood the onslaught of the 32-foot organ stop that opens the piece, and, second, because the note is actually on this particular recording and in considerable strength. The Spyder acquitted itself superbly on both counts: The pedal point was clean, big, and present and was both felt and heard beneath the crashing chords of full orchestra and pounding timpani. Since I was in a big orchestral mood, I went next to the fabulous Stokowski Roumanian Rhapsody No.1 (RCA) and it was the same story: impressive bass power, big, big sound, nice definition, and thrilling rhythmic drive. Last in this first outing, side six, Act IV of my trusty Bernstein *Carmen*: The Brinkmann combination presented the breadth and depth of the soundstage with a convincing sense of air and bloom when, say, the brass sound and resound against the chorus, the comings and goings of the various performing forces (soloists, chorus, groups of singers, and children's chorus) arrayed holographically across the front of my listening room. Switching over to several jazz recordings, the deepest reaches of string bass seemed to me to be fractionally better defined and articulated from some other setups, but not by much, and on its own I doubt many will find the Brinkmann deficient.

Violins, violas, and cellos are always an acid test for neutrality, and very difficult to evaluate equipment with because much of the time they are miked too closely and thus appear too bright. A splendid exception is an old Vanguard recording by the Yale Quartet of Beethoven's A minor: The ideal miking is such that you can close your eyes and imagine the players arrayed before you. However, it's the sound of the instruments on this recording that really tells: violins sweet with just the right brilliance (maybe a bit too much—more on this soon as well), the viola the perfect alto to the violins' soprano, the cello ideally warm and mellow. In the second movement, where Beethoven has the strings imitate the sound of a bagpipe, these players essay the passages so magically it always brings

tears to my eyes, and the Brinkmann did not disappoint, with the violins and violas having maybe a smidgeon more sheen than I'm used to—but more on this later. Moving from classical quartet to jazz trio, Sonny Rollins' *Way Out West* was set forth in all its early-stereo, left/right/center miking and with Rollins' powerful sax rich, vibrant, with a slight edge (as there should be) and all the high percussion clean, clear, crystalline, and extended, with again a bit more sparkle than I hear on, say, the SACD.

A new 180-gram LP of Paul Simon's *Graceland* again brought out the setup's rhythmic strengths and quite outstanding ability to keep musical textures at once clarified yet blended. The voices in the *a capella* intro to "Diamonds on the Souls of Her Shoes" were marvelously lifelike in their roundedness and body, ditto for three very different kinds of voices: Doris Day on *Hooray for Hollywood*, Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Rogers and Hart *Songbook, Volume 1*, and Belafonte on *The Many Moods of Belafonte*. Day and Fitzgerald I've always found present particular difficulties. Day's voice is basically bright but never harsh or edgy (unless it's been recorded that way), and it also has some body to it; Fitzgerald's is a soprano but a mezzo-soprano who can get down into alto territory, but for all its body it never sounds heavy. And so they were both reproduced mostly. (I always forget how vibrant, dynamic, and lively Fitzgerald's Rodgers and Hart is, Buddy Bregman's big band arrangements opening out with tremendous panache and what I can only describe as a kind of relaxed drive that swings so naturally you don't even realize your toes are tapping, all outstandingly sent up by the Brinkmann ensemble.)

Belafonte is a pure baritone with lots of smoke in the voice and a very mild huskiness that became more pronounced as he got older (there's not all that much of it in this recording). I can't understand why this album is not more popular, as it's one of Belafonte's best, with some signature numbers including a truly lovely "Try to Remember" and a great protest song, "Dark as a Dungeon," about coal mining. Unlike some of my colleagues, I don't have a fetish about resolution, but if you do, then "Dungeon" will certainly put your system through its paces. Once the engineers started recording this particular take, an approaching thunderstorm began to sound and

then it started raining steadily with increasing intensity, the effect of the claps of thunder so powerful Belafonte kept singing. Upon playback the effect left everyone stunned (the lyric “where the rain never falls” acquiring a profound irony). In strictly sonic terms, the sound of the rain is not only captured, it is captured in such a way as to appear as if it’s emanating from outside, which of course it was, and it really sounds like rain, which is how a system with excellent resolution will reproduce it. Again, the Brinkmann did very well except for more top-end energy than I usually hear.

Loading Issues

I inquired of Helmut Brinkmann about my adventures in loading the Pi pickup with other than the recommended 600 ohms. Here is part of his reply: “We found the 600 ohms good with our own cables, phonostage, and speakers (I use Vandersteen Model 7s and my wife has Vivid B1s). The load adjusts the bandwidth of a cartridge, as the coil of an mc cartridge gets higher in impedance at high frequencies (above audio band). The lower the load (i.e., the lower the resistor value), the more limited will be the bandwidth somewhere above the audio band. A recommended load is not part of the cartridge alone but also part of the synergy of the whole system, beginning with the phonostage. It our impression that phonostages with no feedback tend to accept higher resistor-values and those with overall feedback would need lower values. Of course the alignment of the cartridge, VTA, and SRA will have an influence.”

I take no issue with any of this. It is my experience that there is an optimal load—or range of loads (the numerical value is rarely so critical that it must exactly match the theoretical ten-times-the-value of the internal impedance)—for every moving-coil pickup, that is, a load that will yield the flattest, i.e., the most neutral frequency response. As I understand it, what proper loading really does is suppress the high-frequency resonances that all moving-coils have, resonances that are typically above 20kHz. When this resonance isn’t suppressed, it can sometimes confer a greater sense of “air,” “transparency,” and “dynamics,” but I always find this sounds artificial and eventually

fatiguing. Fairness requires that I report that my position here is by no means shared by many audiophiles and reviewers, including some at our magazine.

As should be obvious by now, the listening evaluations consistently revealed a bit of extra brilliance or sheen on upper strings, a bit of brightness on voices, notably sopranos, more “crystal” on high percussion. Experience suggests that this sort of frequency-response rise inheres in pickups, in particular moving coils that are not terminated with a low enough impedance. I did my first listening of the Brinkmann setup with the McIntosh MC22 preamp, which I was reviewing. Inasmuch as the company’s literature states that the “cartridge works perfectly on loads of 600 ohms,” I switched the C22’s loading to 500 ohms, the closest match it offered, and since it sounded fine on initial listen, there it remained until I completed the Mac evaluations. The C22 returned, I plugged in Pass Labs XP-10 driven by the trusty Musical Surroundings Nova II, which allowed me loading options of 475 and 660. Since 660 is closer to 600 than either 475 or the Mac’s 500, I began with that and was met with an unexpected surprise. It took no more than a couple of minutes of the Bernstein *Carmen* to realize the sound was entirely too bright and voices a bit edgy. So I selected the 475-ohm option and was rewarded with the flatter, more neutral presentation I had been enjoying through the C22, though extended listening still suggested a subtly rising response. Sometime well into the evaluations I read a review of the Pi that suggested there was more edge to the reproduction of voices than the reviewer was accustomed to hearing. This is a reviewer I usually find quite reliable, and he too evaluated the pickup into the recommended 600 ohms. Hmm . . .

Since Brinkmann’s literature recommended 600 as ideal, I didn’t give it a second thought, nor evidently did that reviewer. But since my experience suggested lower was definitely better, I took a look at the Pi’s specification sheet and discovered that the “output impedance” is listed as 20 ohms. I am assuming that this figure refers to what other manufacturers call the “internal impedance.” If that is so, then common wisdom suggests that an optimal load should be around ten times the value of the internal

impedance, in other words something in the vicinity of 200 ohms. The closest the Nova II allows to that value is either 150 ohms or 243 ohms. So I used the latter and the difference was quite striking. That apparently vestigial brightness was not completely eliminated but it was very much reduced, especially on voices. I next tried 150 ohms. This reduced the brightness a bit but at the price of a reduction in the Pi's transparency and transient response (i.e., its "speed," not the right word, but that's audiophile talk for you), which are quite excellent. Mind you, I liked the sound here and on any of several vocal recordings well enough I left it there. But overall I preferred the 243 setting. Would 200 have been ideal? Maybe, but my experience rarely suggests you need quite that degree of precision in loading (though I have to add that with my favorite pickup, still the Ortofon Windfeld, with its 4-ohm internal impedance, I could detect the difference between 59 ohms and 40 ohms, the latter better—that is, flatter sounding). So once again, I can only repeat what I've said so often in the past: When it comes to moving coils, optimal loading is required to get the best out of them, and it is sheerest folly to run these things straight into a 47k phonostage, which means effectively no loading at all. By the way, the Pi's tracking was consistently outstanding.

Operationally this setup was a joy to use, its fit and finish of a caliber that spells "G-E-R-M-A-N" in caps. I didn't do the setup, but I observed Andrea Brinkmann (Mrs. Brinkmann) do it and there's nothing beyond the ability of anyone willing to work carefully. Once speed was set, it operated flawlessly throughout the entire review period. The only ergonomic idiosyncrasy is that Brinkmann doesn't provide a fingerlift for the headshell, believing it colors the sound. I used it that way for as long as I could stand, and then, with Mrs. Brinkmann's blessing (my apologies, Andrea, if this gets you into trouble), I went ahead and installed a spare I had on from another 'arm. If there is degradation, I am blissfully unaware of it. Let me also say that I enjoyed for a change having a turntable with a compact footprint and of a size and mass that didn't leave me with a herniated disc when I had to lift it. In sum, here's a vinyl player of all-around excellence that should provide years of performance both pleasurable and trouble-free.

Specs & Pricing

Type: Belt-drive

Motor: 4 phase, 12 pole

Dimensions: Not supplied (plinth-less design)

Weight: 46 lbs.

Price: \$12,000

10.5 Tonearm

Type: Pivoted gimbal

Length: 10.5 inches

Effective mass: Ca. 12 grams

Price: \$5450

Pi Phono Pickup

Type: Moving-coil

Output: 0.15mV (velocity 1cm/sec)

Impedance: 20 ohms

Recommended tracking force: 1.8 grams

Weight: 14 grams

Price: \$2490

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