A Reprint from December 1997, Vol. 20 No. 12

You always remember your first one. For me it was an Oracle Delphi turntable back in 1982.

I'd gone to Christopher Hansen's in LA to buy a brand-new one, but as luck would have it, a barely used one had just been traded in by film director Roger Corman's son, and I was able to get the Delphi/Magnepan unipivot tonearm combo for a few hundred dollars less than the cost of a new Table. My first exposure to a wobbly-armed unipivot gave me the creeps, but the deal was too good to pass up.

My LP playback system at that point was a chipboard-plinthed Rotel fitted with a massive Denon direct-drive motor and an S-shaped, high-mass Lustre GST-1 arm with adjustable VTA (good) and a bayonet-type removable headhell (bad) that would slip and change azimuth if you looked at it funny. The headshell was damped with Star typewriter cleaner, the platter was packed with Mortite, and I forget which sticky mat I was using toward the end maybe the AudioQuest Sorbothane, which now damps vibrations from my saltwater fish tank's air pump.

The cartridge was the star of the show : a sexy Dynavector Ruby I'd picked out from then-importer Mark Shifter's personal stash. That happened only because the Ruby was in such short supply back in the late Õ70s that I'd switched coasts while waiting for it to show up ! When the dealer called to tell me the importer had finally gotten a fresh shipment, I asked him, in those pre-FedEx days, Why should I wait for the importer to ship it back to Beantown and for you to ship it to me, when he's right here in Westlake Village and I can go pick it up myself ? I want that Ruby NOW !!!!!!Ó

Schifter (late of Audio Alchemy, now of Genesis) generously let me search through the boxes for the flattest frequency-response trace. That cartridge was a honey. I'll never forget the first time I lowered it into the grooves : it was

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A N A L O G C O R N E R

Michael Fremer

MoFi's pressing of *Fleetwood Mac*. WOW! Now *that's* what cymbals sound like ! I kvelled.
I couldn't wait for the tech at Chris Hansen to install that Ruby in the Magnepan arm so I could take it home and play Monday Morning. After nervously laying out more money about $1200Ñfor an audio component than I'd ever spent before, I went to pick up the Table and noticed something strange : the Ruby's cantilever was hanging down from the cartridge body like a severed arm.
We didn't do this, the tech said.
Well, I sure as hell didn't ! I replied.
A pleasant afternoon ensued. I should have made them replace that Ruby, but I was a wuss and we compromised : I'd buy an AudioQuest 404i at Hansen's cost, and tack another copula hundred onto the already breathtaking bill. The 404i was a nice cartridge some ways smoother and more refined than the Ruby but it didn't do inner detail or dynamics nearly as well, it wasn't as transparent, and it sure didn't look as sexy. In fairness to the tech (who may very well be reading this), Ruby cantilevers were known to let go if you sneezed in the next room so it could have been a coincidence but how he set the overhang with that dangling cantilever I'll never know.

Y The Canadian-built Delphi was a revelation.

It was as if the noise floor had been dropped from an airplane. Images floated focused in space, and.... Well, I'll spare you a review of a 15-year-old turntable.
Later, I did an ignorant thing : I put an Eminent Technology I arm on the Delphi. Not a good idea to put a large shifting mass on a highly compliant sprung Table, but what did I know ? Still, the results were spectacular and the tweaking was endless. Back then, I had both the time and the constipation.
A Musical Fidelity (not the British company) power-supply upgrade and a trip to setup-guru Brooks Berdan gave me better sound yet, but eventually the shifting-weight thing and my desire to use the even heavier Eminent Technology ET2 tonearm had me selling the Delphi to a friend in favour of a more stable VPI TNT I'd reviewed for *The Absolute Sound*. That Delphi, fitted with a Sumiko MMT arm, still makes sweet music at a friend's house.

Birth of a legend

If you're not old enough to remember the Oracle's debut, or if audiophilia had yet to infect you at the time, the introduction of the Oracle created a sensation. Of course, there was the dramatic and revolutionary look of the thing.

Oracle Delphi MkV turntable

Win Labs had created a plinthless Oracle earlier, but the Oracle caught the public fancy as few other turntables had. It was revolutionary, and it worked. Among its many innovations : an integral screw-on record clamp.

Marcel Riendeau had been an audio dealer/distributor, a philosophy teacher at Sherbrooke University 100 miles east of Montreal, and a musician when he began developing the Table a time when Linn was the only serious game in town. His brother Jacques was a Caterpillar tractor mechanic.

When the prototype was finished, the brothers shipped it off to International Audio Reviews J. Peter Moncrieff, who listened, measured, and, backed by a series of graphs, declared the new $800 Oracle 634 times better than the Linn. The Oracle became an overnight sensation and the Riendeaus were swamped with 600 orders almost one for every reason the table was better than the Linn.

The learning curve was difficult, Jacques Riendeau told me over dinner the other day, given that my brother was a philosopher and I was a heavy-equipment mechanic, but the brothers managed to build over 500 of the original Oracle. What the other 100 who wanted them bought, I guess well never know.

The legend returns

Over 10,000 Oracles were built and sold throughout the world, and at its peak, the company had distribution in 30 countries. However, the late Õ80s were not kind to analog, and even less so to Oracle, which had not diversified in preparation for the digital age (though there was a loudspeaker project). The end, when it came in 1994, was slow and messy ; I'll spare you the ugly details. But the dream remained in the heart of Jacques Riendeau, who'd been with the company from 1979 to 1990. In 1996Ñalong with Robin Blanchard who'd been with Oracle from 1981 to 1989, and a silent investor Riendeau formed a new company, Oracle Audio Technologies Inc. The Oracle turntable was reborn.

Before SOTA bit the dust last year, I was sent a new top-of-the-line Millennium for review. Consisting of Cosmos

parts (subchassis, bearing assembly, vacuum platter, motor) configured to current expectations (four-corner springless suspension, external motor drive), the Millennium constituted a lastditch attempt to resurrect SOTA by creating a new flagship model out of existing parts which is exactly what it was. It sounded pretty good, actually, but before I could finish the write-up, the company folded.

I wanted to make sure the new Oracle was the real deal and not some second-rate rehash, and I wanted to hear the old and new Oracle story directly from the head flywheel. I'd seen the new table at a few hi-fi shows and had been impressed by what I'd seen and heard, but you know what kind of zoos those events are. I was glad to have the handson opportunity at home.

table was grounded in the future of analog, not the past. The fit' n' finish of the Mk.V. The machining far superior to that of the Oracle I owned, and up there with the best the world has to offer (at least that I've seen).

The Mk.V consists of an acrylic base (a granite base is optional)a slim, brushed-aluminium drive module containing the motor and electronic drive components, three spring-suspension towers, and a subchassis upon which are mounted the bearing/platter assembly and the arm. The subchassis fits over the three towers, and its weight decompresses the three springs. As any Linny knows, setting up a spring suspension can be a royal pain. If you don't get the springs balanced so the subchassis moves as one, you get a rocking motion that blurs and confuses the sound. Oracle has always supplied color-coded springs of different stiffnesses to deal with the different loads seen by the three towers, due to the asymmetrical mounting of the arm.

The Mk.V 3-lb subchassis counterweight, placed opposite the armboard area, increases the subchassis's lateral stability and makes tuning the subsonic suspension much more easy and accurate.

The towers themselves feature seven mechanical filters to isolate the record/stylus interface from external vibrations, including concave feet, Delrin pillars, rubber bushings, bell-shaped springs, a nylon calibration sleeve, and dampers of Sorbothane and felt.

The drive system consists of a new German Berger Lahr 8V AC motor driven by a dual-current electronics module that supplies higher torque at start-up

and drops down for smoother performance once the correct speed has been achieved. The Mk.V electronics have been neatly integrated into a module over the acrylic base below the subchassis. Long aluminium fingers extend from the module to the front of the table, allowing for instant ON at the desired speed.

The Mk.V comes with a standard outboard power supply and an optional Turbo line conditioner. The 8-lb aluminium platter with integral hard acrylic mat is driven by a flat molded belt riding on an inner rim. (The rubber wave trap rim found on older Oracles is no more.) The gold-plated motor pulley is crowned (convex) for maximum contact area and minimum adhesion.

The integral screw-on clamp has been upgraded with the inclusion of a Delrin bushing and an O-ring, for lower noise transmission.

Finally, a brand-new bearing does away with the standard dual-bushing interface. Instead, the Mk.V uses six

The fit'n'finish of the Mk.V —the machining—is far superior to that of the Oracle I owned, and up there with the best the world has to offer.

Over the years, the original Oracle has been modified and improved many times, but the basic design remains unchanged so much so that the subchassis of the original Oracle will fit perfectly on the spring towers of the latest version. Whereas the original Oracle featured an AC motor, the Delphi that I owned used a square, black, Hall effect DC drive system. Oracle built 5648 Mk. of both types. On the Delphi Mk.II, Oracle substituted a round Pabst motor similar to that used by ReVox as a capstan drive on its famous A-77 open-reel tape deck. Some 1322 Mk.II were built. Between 1986 and the demise of the original Oracle company in 1994, another 1580 Mk.III and Mk.IV were built. Oracle also built almost 3500 of the bigger, more expensive Premiere and the smaller Alexandria and Paris models.

Oracle Delphi Mk.V

Since the Oracle's basic design hasn't changed, neither have the dimensions ; the Mk.V comes cradled in the same styrofoam insert as my original Delphi. Watching Riendeau unbox the familiar packaging unleashed a rush of dizzying audiophilic nostalgia. (Okay, its

pathetic.) The glorious sound of my first top-shelf table charged my memory banks as did a series of lifelike recollections of activities conducted in close proximity to that Oracle, which are best described in an infamous Ian Drury song and an Eric Bogosian play of the same name.

The packaging may have been an exercise in nostalgia, but as Riendeau set up the new Oracle and explained the many improvements made to the design, it became obvious to me that the new precisely surfaced nylon setscrews ; Oracle AudioTechnologies Inc. claims these offer the lowest noise and highest level of rotational accuracy ever achieved. They also claims the bearing system is maintenance- and adjustment-free, and will perform flawlessly for a lifetime, which is more than any of us can claim.

Riendeau supplied me with a set of specs comparing the Mk.VK performance with the Mk.IV. There were marked improvements all around : speed stability went from +0.15% to +0.047%, wow and flutter were almost halved, and rumble (unweighted) dropped from -67.5dB to -84dB.

Setup

For obvious reasons, I asked Riendeau to drill an armboard for the new Graham 2.0, which had spent the previous five months or so on the TNT. It was also an opportunity to test the new company's machining accuracy. The Graham 2.0 doesn't feature the 1.5tÕs sliding hase, so if the mounting base hole isn't drilled dead-on perfect, the Grahams overhang gauge is rendered useless, and any premounted cartridges have to be realigned using an external gauge. Fortunately, the round aluminium armboard Riendeau unpacked was dead-on accurate, so all three Graham armwands I had on hand could he used as is.

It took Riendeau no time at all to set Up the table, but I suspect that was partly due to his having adjusted the springs before he showed up. Once the Graham 2.0 was mounted, a few minor tweaks got the three suspension towers bouncing as one (suggestive, no?), and at a very low frequency which is what you want. If you buy an Oracle and you're starting from scratch, IÕ sure it will take you more time.

The Delphi Mk.V sat on a Symposium Acoustics isolation board a really terrific upgrade to any Target stand wooden shelf. Had we had more time, I would have cleared the Vibraplane ; but even on the 1/15th-the-price Symposium

board, the Oracle performed brilliantly using the Grado Reference cartridge/ Graham 2.0 combo.

The sound of the Mk.V

We had a few hours to listen, and since Jacques refused to nail down his musical preferences, I hit him with all kinds of stuff. We compared Classic's reissue of ReinerÕs *Also sprach Zarathustra* (LSC-1806) with the original shaded dog. (Classic shouldn't have started with this one the original is magic, the reissue merely good.) We listened to some Miles Davis, to the original and Classic reissue of Sonny Rollin's *The Bridge* (here Classic nails it to perfection), some show music, and some rock. I played an original British pressing of the Small Face's *Ogden's Nut Gone Flake* Riendeau hated it, but it told me a great deal about the tables low-bass performance. I also played him *Belafonte at Carnegie Hall*, another Classic reissue. (Why all the Classics ? I dunno, it just worked out that way.) We compared the original pressing with both the regular reissue and a special 45rpm edition handed out to a few lucky reviewers. Riendeau couldn't get enough of that 45rpm pressing, and I don't blame him. While the regular issue was wonderful, the faster version was scary it brought the event to life before our ears in a way the 33 1/3 version only hinted at. We also played the Classic gold CD on a very fine player. HA HA HA HA HA!

The Oracle's design places the centre of gravity below the spring's hanging point ; coupled with the increased sub- chassis mass (counterweight) and the damping built into the towers that help restrict lateral motion, this design minimizes if not eliminates that problem. The Delphi Mk.V suspension seems to combine outstanding isolation with high stability. I say seems because I haven't yet spent enough time with the table to thoroughly check out all operating parameters, but I can tell you one thing : the Oracle more than passed the stylus-in-the-groove, platter-not-spinning *thump* test I described in my November Õ97 review of the Clearaudio table. There was almost dead silence think I could have thwacked the Oracle's plinth with a hammer and I wouldn't have heard it. I still don't recommend mounting a linear-tracking arm on the Delphi as I did back when, but if you do, I think you'll find the new table somewhat more stable.

If the new Delphi Mk.V gave any

ground to the TNT, it might have been in terms of extension and control in the very deep bass. I say Might because I've been listening to the VPI sitting on the ridiculously fabulous $5000 Vibraplane support. Unless and until I put the Delphi on the Vibraplane, the comparison is totally unfair.

What is fair is the Delphi price for what is probably the most visually elegant turntable in the world and built, from what I saw and felt, to a new, higher standard of excellence. The Turbo power supply is optional. Dustcover and hinges are optional-and I don't recommend them. Drilled armboards are extra too. There's probably room for sonic improvement in the armboard, a two-piece aluminium sandwich bolted to a ring cut out of the subchassis. The design cannot be the last word in energy dissipation and control. Perhaps a slathering of elastomer dressing between the slices would help.

Help for the needy 11,985

Okay, it was cruel for me to leave this for last, but I wanted to make sure you read everything : Yes, if you have an older Oracle and I cannot believe anyone threw theirs away some parts are still available. More important, your table can be upgraded to current specs. Unfortunately, when the original Oracle company was shut down, many parts were heaved, but since much of the design hasn't changed, some critical parts are once again available. If your spring seats have cracked, for example, new ones are available. But motors for the Mk.I, II, and III aren't.

The new Oracle offered outstanding image focus and stability, and a very quiet ride—a very low noise floor combined with finely scaled dynamic gradations.

It would he foolish indeed for me to compare the Mk.V to my Delphi, which I haven't heard in probably seven years. So I won't. But the new Delphi continued the Oracle tradition of open, airy, relaxed sound; of rich, seductive midrange; and an honest, Giving bloom in the midbass that much I do remember about my old table. The new Oracle offered outstanding image focus and stability, and a very quiet ridden very low noise floor combined with finely scaled dynamic gradations. The Tables high frequency performance was smooth yet detailed, indicative of outstanding speed

stability and effective energy transfer from the motor to the platter.
Spring suspensions, designed to isolate the playback system from outside vibrations, have gotten a bad rap of late because of their inherent setup difficulties and their potential instability. Few records are pressed with truly concentric grooves the arm usually ends up moving back and forth laterally, which can set a spring subchassis into a disastrous rocking motion. If the motor is mounted to the unsuspended plinth, the rocking subchassis causes shifts in belt tension and thus in speed accuracy. This speed variation usually manifests itself sonically as brightness, hardness, and grain.
Better news: a series of upgrades can be had at very reasonable cost. You get the new brushed-aluminium drive module, including the motor and electronics, new base, power supply, drive belt, oil, and necessary tools. If you have a really old OracleÑpre-Mk.II the sub chassis must be machined to make room for the motor housing.
Mk.III and IV Delphis after serial number 8135, and Mk.V editions prior to 9990, can be retrofitted with the new Delrin suspension pillars. You can add the new six-point bearing to your Mk.IV. The 3-lb subchassis counterweight and the hard acrylic mats are also available as upgrades but are already part of the Mk. IV.
Depending on the number of options selected, which would determine the total cost, the upgrade could be very valuable. If you would consider going with all the options I think at that rate you're better off selling your original Delphi and buying a new one, but beyond that model, if you own a more recent Oracle (of if you can get a used one cheap), here's your opportunity to upgrade to the Mk.V. From what I saw and heard, its probably a worthwhile investment.

Here's your opportunity to upgrade to the Mk.V. From what I saw and heard, it's probably a worthwhile investment.

For more information, call Oracle Audio Technologies Inc. Tell'em Mike sent you. Tel. : (819) 864-0480.