

Oracle Delphi Mk VI Record Player (TAS 206)

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Form and Function

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Given that Oracle Audio Technology has been in business for thirty years it may seem odd that, before this review, I've never had one of its turntables in my stereo system. Haven't had a Linn in my system, either. Yep. I missed out on the two 'tables that more or less divided the audio world between them from the nineteen-seventies into the nineteen-nineties. Of course, I've heard Oracles and Linns many many times, with many different arms and cartridges, at friends' homes, at shows, and in stereo stores (back when stereo stores actually sold turntables). But I've never owned either one. Happily, this little slip-up on my part doesn't matter much. When a company has been around forever and a day, like Oracle has, it invariably means that it started with sound fundamentals—and those fundamentals don't change from iteration to iteration. The Delphi Mk VI may have been spiffed up a bit, but its design is basically the same as it was when the first Oracle was conceived back in 1979. So, in a way, in reviewing the Mark VI version of the Delphi I'm also finally getting the chance to play with and review that very first Oracle.



That first 'table was the brainchild of Canadian Marcel Riendeau—then a philosophy teacher at the University of Sherbrooke in Quebec with a deep interest in music and, given the Delphi's famous good looks, other beautiful things. The way the story goes Riendeau originally wanted to import high-end turntables, but, like Hans-Peter Gabriel of Analog Audio Systems (later acquired by Da Vinci Audio Labs), he couldn't find one that met his standards. So, like Gabriel, Riendeau decided to come up with a 'table of his own. "Perhaps because of my university background," Riendeau told me, when I asked him about the birth of the Delphi, "I did my own

'philosophical study' of a number of the analog pretenders-to-the-throne of the time—from Cotter, Linn, Micro-Sieki, Thorens, Win, etc. My goal was to analyze the key elements that impacted sound reproduction for better or worse: the record, the groove, the supporting elements (platter/sub-chassis), the suspension system, etc. Then I asked myself how each of these elements should ideally interact and, more importantly, how each element should be designed to fulfill its necessary technical contribution without becoming part of and adding to the recorded music being reproduced. As I saw it, the key was not for the stylus to play the record; it was for the stylus to play the groove!"

For the stylus to "play the groove," Riendeau had to find a way to keep the stylus "in the groove." Anything that might disturb its composure as it travelled down that long and winding road to end-of-side silence—any resonance or vibration or feedback from outside the playback system (or inside it)—was engineered (beautifully) out of the Delphi. While a few items have been improved on the new 'table and two important features have been added to the Mk VI version (I'll get to these shortly), Riendeau's core philosophy of "groove isolation" and the core mechanisms he used to implement this philosophy remain the same. These include the spring-loading of the subchassis and platter via an elegant (albeit not entirely unproblematic—for which see "Set-up Notes") tripodal suspension system.

The way this system works is much easier to describe than to fine-tune. Three aluminum "suspension towers" are attached to the clear acrylic bottom plate of the Delphi; during assembly, the end user fills each one of these towers with prefabricated damping assemblies that include at least seven different damping materials attached to sizeable bell-shaped springs of different tensions. (The bell shape of the springs prevents "frequency build-up" from coil to coil and ensures the proper resonance frequency of 3.5Hz no matter what weight tonearm is used.) The three "legs" of the hand-brushed-aluminum subchassis—which look a little like the crankshaft ends of piston rods—attach atop and "float" above the piston-like spring assemblies inside the towers' bushings. The platter, in turn, sits upon the "floating" subchassis with its bearing spindle extending through a hole in the subchassis' center and into a thrust-plate bushing attached beneath the subchassis.

The Oracle's platter may not ride on air like a Walker's does, but it is certainly isolated—as are the tonearm, the stylus, and the record itself—from external and internal physical vibration by the precisely controlled "springiness" of the suspension on which every moving part rests. When the springs are properly adjusted, the platter is also perfectly leveled by that suspension and by rotation of the adjustable Delrin feet on the bottom of the acrylic base.

While the Delphi's suspension system has remained more-or-less the same since Marcel Riendeau first designed it (oh, the subchassis is a little larger in the Mk VI version, with better weight distribution to offset heavier contemporary tonearms), the 'table's bearing has undergone a number of changes over the years, evolving from a conventional bushing to the "dual-tripod" system currently in use. "If you magnify the spindle/bushing interface," says Jacques Riendeau, Marcel's brother and the current head of Oracle Audio Technologies, "you realize that the rotating spindle in the bushing is working somewhat like a rocking chair on a floor: In addition to the rotation there is also a wandering effect (back-and-forth and side-to-side movement of the shaft within the bushing). We thought about how to eliminate this wandering effect, and the dual tripod was our solution."

The "dual-tripod" comprises six polymer screws distributed inside the bearing-shaft bushing to maintain even contact with the spindle and keep it from wobbling. "We started to use this system on the Mk IV in 1996," says Jacques Riendeau, "but with contact points at 100° x 130° x 130°. With the new Mk VI we use an even distribution of contact points at 120° x 120° x 120°. This allows us to achieve a more accurate calibration, and at the same time we find there is even more stability at the contact points against the spindle."



Another thing that has changed is the bearing thrust plate. Ceramic in the earliest models, it was switched to tungsten carbide in the Delphi Mk V, and in the Mk VI is now made from Torlon high-strength plastic. According to Jacques Riendeau, “Torlon polyamide-imide (PAI) has the highest strength and stiffness of any thermoplastic. It also has outstanding resistance to wear.” Bathed in a precise measure of lubricant, which the user injects into the bushing’s well before inserting the bearing shaft, the bearing rotates near frictionlessly against its Torlon thrust plate and, thanks to the “dual-tripod” system, without any rocking.

Perhaps the biggest change on the Mk VI—in fact, not a change but an entirely new addition—is what the Riendeaux call the MVSS (Micro Vibration Stabilizer System). Reminiscent of the silicon-based stabilization system that John Bicht added to his spring-suspended Versa Dynamics turntable, MVSS uses three small containers of low-viscosity silicon fluid that sit on the acrylic base beneath plungers threaded into the bottoms of the subchassis’ three legs. The free ends of the plungers are lowered a precise number of turns into these little silicon reservoirs and then secured in place via a locknut. In this way any vibrations that the “floating” subchassis and platter see aren’t just damped and dissipated by the spring-loaded towers but also by the silicon fluid. MVSS may seem a little redundant given the elaborate spring-loaded tower system, but I get the impression that it is Oracle’s way of adding the damping of a more massive, constrained-layer support structure without actually adding more mass. Given the Oracle Delphi Mk VI’s unusually high resolution of low-level detail, it certainly appears to work.

Also new on the Mk VI are a Urethane drive belt (made by the same outfit that supplies A.J. Conti at Basis) and a hard-acrylic platter-mat that Oracle claims makes for a superior impedance match with vinyl discs. Though relatively lightweight, the Delphi’s 8.8-pound aluminum platter is constructed for maximum rigidity, minimum resonance, and a superior “fly-wheel” effect, with most of its mass distributed around its outer edge. The Delphi Mk VI also uses the same screw-down “record clamp” system that Oracle pioneered in the original Delphi Mk I. The table’s AC synchronous motor is designed to provide maximum start-up torque and minimum operating energy (like that of the AAS Gabriel/Da Vinci turntable)—and the table does, indeed, start up with alacrity and reaches speed almost instantly. The power-supply electronics for the motor are housed in a slim outboard box that is connected to the turntable via a supplied umbilical cord. Rotational speed for 33.3rpm and 45rpm can be adjusted via setscrews in the power supply box, although the table was delivered with both speeds dead-nuts on.

My version of the Oracle Delphi Mk VI I came with two significant and pricey options: a \$5950 SME V tonearm and a \$5500 Benz LP S-MR moving-coil cartridge. (Though both of these items are rebranded by Oracle, they are identical to SME's and Benz's own versions.) With the arm and cartridge, I was supplied with a complete \$19,950 record player and my review will necessarily be of the entire package. Happily I am also currently using the wonderful Benz LP S-MR cartridge on my \$57,000 Walker Proscenium Black Diamond Mk II record player, which made cross-comparisons of the same LPs on the two record players a slightly fairer proposition.

It may not be very scientific but it has been my experience that record players (and, to some extent, loudspeakers) tend to sound a bit the way they look. Smaller, more lightly-constructed ones tend to be a little "lighter," more nimble, and transparent sounding, while larger, more massive ones tend to be denser, richer, and more authoritative, although often with an attendant price paid in transparency and speed. Though he certainly wasn't agreeing with this observation, Jacques Riendeau said almost the same thing when he wrote (in an e-mail to me): "There is something about the quickness, the sharpness, and the openness of the new Mk VI that cannot be found in other designs!"

Quickness, sharpness, and openness are pretty apt descriptors of the sound of this record player. Indeed, if Jacques were to have added "realism" to his list of pluses, I'm not sure I could improve on it.

Take the song "A Case of You" from Diana Krall's *Live in Paris* [ORG] LP. Though Krall doesn't have quite the same range or the same rich resonant timbre of Sarah Vaughn—about whose voice I wrote in our last issue in my review of the Audio Research Reference 5 preamp—she still has quite a voice and a very complex timbre. As with Vaughn, you can hear the way Krall tosses notes from chest to throat to palette to nose very clearly via the Walker 'table, the way she strikes just the right not-quite-settled (because not quite coming from the same settled place emotionally) tone of clear-eyed helplessness for her wised-up-but-still-lovestruck delivery of this half-ironic, half-brokenhearted Joni Mitchell love song. You can also hear Krall constantly pounding on the *una corda* (soft) pedal at the start of the piece to add the matchingly appropriate subdued colors and intimate volume to her sophisticated presentation.

Through the Oracle, this presentation changes a bit. Like vintage ARC gear (though sweeter and considerably less bright), the Oracle seems to concentrate more of its energy in the mid-to-upper midrange and lower treble, comparatively leaning out the upper bass and lower midrange, which is where the Walker works a good deal of its timbral magic. To my ear this is not a bad thing because it accentuates everything that lives in the top half of the frequency spectrum, which is to say most of the information about transients, overtones, and decays. As a result, though the Delphi Mk VI Krall's voice loses a bit (not all, by any means) of its occasional chestiness on certain notes, it gains tremendous presence (it literally comes forward in the mix), and is so clearly separated from the ambience of the studio that Krall almost sounds the way one of those cardboard figures that pops up when you open certain greeting cards looks. It is an astonishingly three-dimensional (and incredibly realistic) effect. Add to this a wonderfully clear recovery of echo and ambience (among the best I've heard on any record player). While the sound of the *una corda* pedaling is not as weighty or prominent as it is via the Walker, some of the effects of that pedaling and of Krall's softer touch are more obvious. By this I mean that rhythms and dynamics sound more crisply defined and "pacier." In addition, the Delphi's treble is simply marvelous—rich, sweet, and highly dimensional through the brilliance range with a little congenial softness on the very tiptop. On the final refrain of "Fly Me to the Moon" from the same *Live in Paris* album, the metal of the cymbal, as Krall repeats "in other words," is more fully and realistically "there" than I've heard it sound before on any record player—not a fizzy, evanescent spray of color, as it usually is, but a solid, three-dimensional, multi-hued disc of bronze being struck by wood.

On most recordings, the Delphi simply sounds quicker and a tad lighter weight than the Walker (though it is not running faster—I checked). It's as if the Oracle were playing just a little ahead of the notes, adding its own very light touch of rubato, which creates foot-tapping excitement and in-the-room presence at a small (but audible) cost in the full development of certain tone colors and of certain kinds of performance details that live in the lower midrange and upper bass, precisely where the Walker gives you the whole enchilada.

As it does with many mini-monitors, the slight desaturation of upper bass and lower midrange timbres (and it is slight—this 'table does not lack for power or color in the power range and, unlike mini-monitors, has tremendous midbass and very deep bass) has a salubrious effect on the perceived clarity of instrumentation and of many performance details—and also on the recovery of non-performance details, such as the persistent traffic noise outside Walthamstow Hall at the start of the second movement of Schoenberg's *Five Pieces* [Mercury], which I've simply never heard reproduced so clearly and nakedly by any record player (mainly because the roar of the cars and buses is usually buried under the colors and resonances of bassoon and doublebasses). Musical effects such as the dramatic contrast between that sweet jocular cabaret mandolin in the third movement of Webern's own *Five Pieces* for Orchestra and the forbidding rumble of the muted bass drum that rolls out like grim misfortune from behind and beneath it are exceptionally vivid and effective. (Just in passing, it's remarkable how much music of the teens and twenties—both of these pieces were composed within about five years of each other, between 1909-1913—seemingly acknowledge that volcano above which Western civilization was then dancing and, come the thirties, into which it would plunge headfirst. On the other hand, the contrast between fleeting joy and despair is as old as music itself, though in the dissonances of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern it almost seems and sounds as if it were invented new—as if both joy and despair were coming from one and the same place and at one and the same time, as if what was being discovered or rediscovered wasn't mere Romantic joy and angst but the sinister depth and bedevilment of the unconscious mind.)

On a sprightly pop recording like *Rough Mix* [Atco], where most of the instruments play and both of the vocalists (Ronnie Lane and Pete Townshend) sing in the heart of the heart of the midrange, the sound of the Delphi Mk VI could scarcely be bettered. Its pace, clarity, resolution, quick dynamics, and three-dimensionality bring a liveliness and lifelikeness to these oldies but goodies that I haven't experienced since the album was new to me. I even got a little of that old frisson when Townshend goes "Ahhhh!" after the long string-orchestral interlude toward the finish of "Street in the City"—that's the kind of midrange pop and presence the Delphi is capable of. (I gotta admit that through the Walker that exclamation didn't thrill me in the same way.) I should also mention that on "Street in the City," or the Schoenberg *Five Pieces* for that matter, the 'table's soundstaging is unusually wide and deep, which, in combination with its three-dimensional pop-up imaging, makes for an extraordinary diorama-like effect. On certain recordings the instruments and voices are so "there" it almost seems as if you could get up from your listening chair and walk among them.

I could happily live with the Oracle Delphi Mk VI's presentation. In fact, I think I did live with it—or at least a considerably less refined version of it—years ago, with the Panasonic SP10 MkII, which had some of the same pace and clarity and also, like the Oracle, slightly thinned down timbre (though it did not have nearly as much bloom and air and light as the Delphi Mk VI). Yeah, the Walker Proscenium Black Diamond Mk II will give you more—of just about everything (except, perhaps, for pace and presence). It is, overall, the more neutral and faithful presentation (so, with slightly different emphases, is that of the AAS Gabriel/Da Vinci record player). But for the money (and it is so much less money), this package gives you everything a lot of "absolute sound" and "as-you-like-it" listeners are looking for in a high-end phonograph: lifelike presence, lifelike transient speed, tremendous foreground/background separation, superb imaging, wall-to-wall soundstaging, toe-tapping pace, outstanding resolution of inner detail, and fool-you-realistic reproduction of everything that plays in the low bass, midbass, mid-mids, upper mids, and treble. As any vintage ARC owner can tell you, this combination of sonic virtues goes a long way toward creating a lifelike presentation. To go all the way will cost you at least forty

thousand dollars more. If you're made out of money, go right ahead—you'll get what you pay for. If you're reaching for the stars in analog playback but don't have Walker or Da Vinci dough, then I can't think of a better place to pitch camp than here with the Oracle Delphi Mk VI.

Set-Up Notes

I might as well begin by saying that setting up the Oracle Delphi Mk VI is a royal pain in the ass. Oh, the thing comes packaged beautifully—every part is clearly and carefully labeled. But the instruction manual...well, it's not the last word in clarity. It is written in English—sort of. Quebecois English. Reading it may make you feel a little like you're talking to one of those French fur trappers in a film Western set in 1840, but you'll be able to follow the sense of it. Organization, however, is, uh, lacking. For instance, the instruction manual begins with a two-page explanation of how to install the MVSS system. Of course, installing the MVSS system is the last thing you do with this turntable, but there it is on page one. (This might be excusable since the MVSS is an entirely new feature and the two page supplement is clearly a last minute addendum; however, there are other seemingly out-of-order spots scattered throughout the manual, in which instructions or procedures you think should logically come next, don't. There is method in this madness, but it is a little maddening.)

More frustrating by far are some of the physical/mechanical legacies of a thirty-year-old design. Take attaching the drive belt, for instance. Unlike every other belt-driven turntable I've owned, the drive belt of the Delphi Mk VI doesn't go from the capstan of the motor around the outer perimeter of the platter. No. It goes around a small hub on the inside bottom of the platter. This means that you have to hook it around the hub before you fit the platter and the bearing spindle (which is attached to the bottom of the platter) into the hole in the subchassis that leads to the oil-filled thrust-plate bushing attached beneath it. While you're lowering the platter with one hand, you must hook a finger or two of the other hand through the drive belt, pulling it taut so that it can clear the motor and won't slip off the hub, and then release the belt just before the bearing shaft drops down into the bushing, so that the belt fits precisely around the capstan. If this sounds tricky, you don't know the half of it. The trouble—or one of the troubles—is that if the belt doesn't land exactly where it should on the capstan, it slips off the inner hub. You then have to repeat the whole damn procedure—lift the platter back off the subchassis with the bearing shaft now dripping oil, and hope that that oily shaft doesn't contact or drip oil on the belt. (Good luck with that, BTW.) I think I tried thiThen there are those farchacdat spring assemblies in their towers. Though each spring has a different inherent tension (appropriate to the function it serves on the 'table), you do have to adjust the height of all three of them to get the subchassis and the platter to float in ideal balance. This adjustment involves lowering the springs and, if you go a little too far, raising them, until the gap between the spring-loaded tower bushing and the base of the tower is just wide enough to let you squeeze a supplied measuring tool into it. (This "tool" is a zany item that aside from gap-measuring seems to have two unspecified vestigial functions, like a pair of appendixes.)

It's easy enough to lower the springs. You just turn the top cap of the tower counterclockwise, take a measurement with that "tool," turn a little more, and then, when everything is just so, you're done. Right? Uh, no. You see the subchassis and platter tend to "settle" a little bit after you've taken your measurements. So the gap is likely to be a little too narrow. (It may also be that you turn the spring a little too far, closing the gap a little too much.)

Sounds like it should be simple to fix, doesn't it? Just twist the tower cap in the opposite direction. Well...guess what? You can't turn the tower cap in the opposite direction. The only way to raise a spring that has been lowered

too much is—now, hold your breath—to disassemble the tower, remove the spring assembly, and turn the spring on its spindle by gripping the bottom coil with needle-nose pliers. Oh, and I forgot to mention that to disassemble the spring tower, you have to remove the platter and the subplatter and that friggin' drive belt you just spent two hours trying to get right!

In my considered opinion, assembling an Oracle Delphi Mk VI would be a far more effective torture than waterboarding. It took me the better part of a day to put mine together. The sound was well worth the effort—I'll admit. But, honestly, if you have the option, I strongly suggest that you have an experienced Oracle dealer (or owner) assemble the 'table for you, especially if (like me) you've have no previous experience with the vagaries of Oracles.

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Belt-driven, spring-suspended, viscous-damped turntable with outboard power supply

Speeds: 33.3 and 45rpm

Dimensions: 14.5" x 19" x 6"

Weight: 35 lbs.

Price: \$8500 (turntable and "Turbo" power supply). Supplied options: Oracle/SME V tonearm, \$5950; Oracle/Benz-Micro LP S-MR moving-coil cartridge, \$5500

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JV's Reference System

Loudspeakers: Magico M5, MartinLogan CLX, Magnepan 1.7

Linestage preamps: Audio Research Reference 5, Soultion 720, BALabo BC-1 Mk-II

Phonostage preamps: Audio Research Reference 2, Audio Tekne TEA-2000, Lamm Industries LP-2 Deluxe

Power amplifiers: Audio Research Reference 610T, Soultion 700, Lamm ML-2, BALabo BP-1 Mk-II

Analog source: Walker Audio Proscenium Black Diamond record player, AAS Gabriel/Da Vinci turntable with DaVinci Grandezza tonearm

Phono cartridges: Benz LP S-MR, DaVinci Grandezza, Air Tight PC-1 Supreme, Clearaudio Goldfinger v2

Digital source: dCS Scarlatti with U-Clock, Soudation 740, ARC Reference CD8

Cable and interconnect: Tara Labs "Zero" Gold interconnect, Tara Labs "Omega" Gold speaker cable, Tara Labs "The One" Cobalt power cords, MIT Oracle MA-X interconnect, MIT Oracle MA speaker cable, Synergistic Research Absolute Reference speakers cables and interconnects, Audio Tekne Litz wire cable and interconnect

Accessories: Shakti Hallographs (6), A/V Room Services Metu acoustic panels and corner traps, ASC Tube Traps, Symposium Isis equipment stand, Symposium Ultra equipment platforms, Symposium Rollerblocks, Symposium Fat Padz, Walker Prologue Reference equipment stand, Walker Prologue amp stands, Shunyata Research Hydra V-Ray power distributor and Anaconda Helix Alpha/VX power cables, Tara Labs PM 2 AC Power Screens, Shunyata Research Dark Field Cable Elevators, Walker Valid Points and Resonance Control discs, Winds Arm Load meter, Clearaudio Double Matrix record cleaner, HiFi-Tuning silver/gold fuses

s almost half a dozen times (and cleaned the belt almost half a dozen times) before I finally got lucky.