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SA Equipment

Oracle Audio Delphi MK VI Turntable With SME V Tonearm

A first-class turntable and tonearm with incredibly advanced power supplies.

Review By Tom Lyle

My first "real" turntable after years of listening to crummy mass-market contraptions was an AR ES-1. Mounted on its arm-board was a Grace tonearm, but I eventually upgraded to a Magnepan model, which as it turned out was not really an upgrade but merely a move sideways. At the time I was listening to the AR table in my humble high-end system I was also spending lots of my audiophile hours with the now legendary Herb Papier, the maker of the Tri-Planar tonearm. He became, for lack of any other term, my analog and high-end mentor. Eventually he sold me his original version of the Oracle Delphi, which was one of his first "modern" high-end tables that he owned, of which he spent many hours and a good sum of money modifying. Some of these modifications he did himself, but other modifications were performed by third parties, such as the Brooks Berdan, the LA retailer who affixed a weight under the turntables chassis to offset the weight that the tonearm applied to the Delphi's suspension. There were of course many other modifications made to this turntable, such as the conical Tip-Toes that replaced the Delphi's original footers, as well as changes made to the suspension.

Oddly enough, or perhaps in hindsight it wasn't so odd, I really couldn't hear much difference between the heavily modified Delphi and my ES-1. Yes, my system wasn't the highest of the high-end, but neither was it chopped liver – by the time the Oracle was inserted into the system I was using Snell floorstanding speakers, an early Krell power amp, and a PS Audio preamplifier. Perhaps the reason I couldn't really hear much difference between the Oracle and the AR was that these two tables were more alike than different. Yes, the Oracle used more modern materials than the AR, but both relied on a 3-point spring suspension design to isolate the 'table from both internal and external vibrations. Remember, this was also an original Oracle Delphi, with a relatively light-weight platter and other specifications that when compared to modern designs seem antiquated. When I upgraded to a Basis Gold (which was eventually upgraded to a Basis V) it was so much better than either of these older turntables, there was no comparison. And no looking back.

The only characteristics that the Oracle Delphi VI and my original Delphi (modified or not) have in common are that they are both named the Oracle Delphi. OK, they both rely on a trusted 3-point spring suspension design and they are both very good-looking turntables with their skeletal brush-aluminum sub-chassis and acrylic plinth. Obviously Oracle didn't leap from the original Delphi to the model under review in a single bound. Or even in a few years. The original Delphi was first marketed over thirty years ago, and to say that there have been refinements made to this Oracle Delphi is a gross understatement. Yes, the platter of the current Delphi VI is still not as heavy as some other maker's models, but has increased to almost 9 pounds. There is also some difference in the appearances between the original Delphi and the Delphi VI, even if they still can be recognized as being members of the same family. After all these years the Oracle Delphi VI is still one of the most attractive turntables on the market. Plus, spoiler alert: the sonic differences between the similarly priced Basis Debut V and the Oracle Delphi MK VI are not profound. Yet there are differences, and I will explain these as best I can.

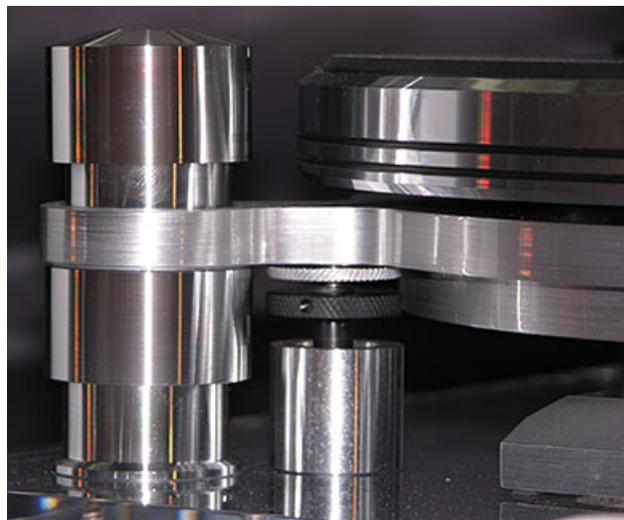


The Starting Point

First of all, why was I asked to review this 'table, as some of the more well informed audiophiles should notice that this isn't the first review that has ever appeared of Oracle's flagship Delphi VI? Oracle Audio's Jacques Riendeau (pictured) and I exchanged quite a few emails where he not only touted the VI's improvements over the Delphi V, but that my review will be the first to use the newest iteration of the Turbo power supply, the Turbo MK II, that will be available as an option to either those that order a new Delphi VI, or any other of the models that can use this Turbo power supply. Owners of the original Turbo can upgrade to the MK II for \$500. I had both the original Turbo and the Turbo MK II so I could compare and contrast.

Other options that are available with the purchase of an Oracle Delphi are a tonearm and phono cartridge. Oracle makes available at a discount when purchased as a package either an Oracle-branded SME 345 or SME V tonearm. Besides having an emblazoned with the Oracle logo next to SME's, these tonearms differ from the stock SME 'arms in that they use Mono Crystal Silver internal wiring in place of the stock wiring. Also available are packages with Oracle Thalia high and Corinth low output moving coil phono cartridge. This ebony-bodied cartridge has an output of 2.5mV and will mate with most phono preamplifiers, including the internal phono preamps of most home theater receivers and integrated amplifiers.

There are certain facts regarding the design of the Delphi VI that are likely to impress even the most jaded of turntable enthusiasts. The 3-point suspension of the Delphi is, or at least was common in more than a few turntables (think of the AR), but the Delphi VI combines a dozen different components in its three tower assemblies, and uses seven different mechanical filters to control vibration that might occur from the turntable's mechanisms or outside interference. The bearing assembly in older Delphi models used a two-bushing system but the new model uses six "precision surfaced" Peek screws (PEEK is Polyetheretherketone, a thermoplastic usually used in very demanding applications) to ensure the rotational accuracy of the turntable's platter. There have also been improvements made to the motor and the drive belt, where the AC synchronous motor circuitry features dual current drive which increases torque and maximizes efficiency, thus decreasing motor vibration. The 9 pound platter is designed to distribute most of its mass to its outer edge which of course increases its momentum.



Most audiophiles consider the record clamp as standard equipment for serious vinyl playback, but may have forgotten that the original Oracle Delphi might have been the first, if not the first turntable system to include a record clamp, or as it's called by Oracle, a record coupling system, to help secure the record to the platter. The record clamp is especially useful when playing records that might be slightly warped, but there can't be many downsides to holding a record securely in place during play. Naturally, this coupling device is included with the Delphi VI. The Delphi VI also includes a platter that has an acrylic mat that is constructed from a "specially formulated" polymer that has been shown to counteract best with our precious vinyl records.

The changes from the Delphi MK V to the newest Delphi MK VI include the improvements I spoke of in the bearing assembly, but also the new Delrin feet. For those not familiar with Delrin, it is a trademarked name for the polymer Polyoxymethylene frequently used in automotive and consumer electronics construction. It is used in the Delphi VI not only in the feet, but also in its suspension modules. Probably the greatest improvement occurred when they upgraded the MK V to the MK VI is Oracle's Micro Vibration Stabilizer System (MVSS). There are basically three things that contribute to the improvements when comparing the Delphi V to the Delphi MK VI, but I was surprised that the least significant of these three is the Delrin feet, although I wouldn't suggest for one minute that Oracle do without them. If one was to break things into percentage contribution, only about 10% would be attributed to these feet, about 25% to the main bearing system, and the balance would go to the MVSS. The MVSS makes it possible to achieve the Delphi MK VI's high level of stabilization via the suspension system, and has a direct impact on how the turntable performs in the environment of one's listening room since it literally allows one to precisely tailor the performance of the Delphi MK VI's suspension system in relation to the turntable's mechanical environment.

Just For Kicks

Just for kicks I loosened the three nuts blocking the plunger that dip into the Silicon fluid of one of the suspension towers. Just by lifting these plungers, it completely changed the sound of the turntable. Not for the better, by the way, but I wasn't expecting such a great change. I learned a very quick lesson about vibration control. Not so quick was getting the plungers exactly as I had them before and getting the nuts tightened without leaving any trace of this impulsive act! But I'm glad I did it, because sometimes convincing audiophiles of an upgrade isn't the easiest thing in the world. It wasn't on a whim when I decided to upgrade my Basis Gold to the V model. It was a long expensive undertaking, much less so than upgrading from an Oracle Delphi MK to an Oracle Delphi MK VI if one chooses to do so. I'm very, very glad that I did it, but in retrospect I would probably have been more eager to upgrade from a Delphi MK V to a VI.

But that's it for the technical considerations of the Delphi VI. Those who have read my reviews in *Enjoy the Music.com* know very well that I have a philosophy regarding most equipment, and I'm sure that it is shared by at least a few other audiophiles: although construction quality is important (we all want our equipment to be reasonably durable) sound quality is paramount. Therefore, as far as I'm concerned, a component could be made out of pieces of ball-point pens and held together with duct tape. As long as it sounds great and is built to last, I'm OK with that. As audiophiles, it's fortunate that modern high-end components are at least good-looking enough to be part of the rest of our systems and our homes. Of course we also respect the engineers, designers, and all that must be behind a components sonic success, and realize that it takes time and money not only to build a piece of audio gear but purchase and assemble a great system.



Capacities

The assembly an Oracle Delphi VI should not be beyond the capacities of the average audiophile that has had some experience setting up turntables, that is, if willing to take the time to do so. Assembling this turntable will also most likely include many teachable moments so one can observe how the Delphi VI performs its audio mastery. It took only a few hours before I was aligning my phono cartridge on the SME V that was provided with my sample.

Even though the Oracle Delphi VI has a suspension system it would be foolish not to place this turntable on an extremely stable surface. I consider myself lucky not only to have a dedicated listening room, but a specialized audiophile-approved equipment rack, so I situated the Delphi MK VI on the top shelf of an Arcici Suspense equipment rack for this review. It was easiest to do most of the set-up on a nearby flat surface that was closer to eye-level when I was seated, and then lift the Oracle turntable onto the top shelf of the rack. After that was done, all that was left to do was the final leveling of the Delphi's VI footers. The 'table has a built-in bubble level located at about 4 o'clock just below the surface of the platter. I started my listening sessions with the "standard" Turbo power supply, and then later switched over to the newer Turbo MK II. As one would expect, the sound of the Delphi MK VI was better with the new Turbo supply, but the 'table's inherent characteristics did not change, it's just its characteristics became more noticeable. Therefore, my description of the Delphi MK VI's sound should be taken as a whole, because even though the Turbo MK II did change its sound for the better it wasn't a profound change, so any comments I have regarding its sound without the new power supply are indeed true without -- they are just better with the new Turbo MK II!

I used the SME V 'arm that was supplied with the Delphi MK VI because I did not request that Oracle send me an armboard drilled with holes to accept my Tri-Planar 6 tonearm. Using the SME rather than the Tri-Planar bothered me not one iota because besides the SME being a great tonearm, a fact that most audiophile should be familiar with is that the sound of an analog playback system is most dependent on the turntable itself -- followed by the tonearm, and lastly the phono cartridge. Of course, *everything* matters, but upgrading ones tonearm or cartridge is just that, an upgrade. One should not expect a tonearm or phono cartridge (or a power supply, for that matter) to change the intrinsic sound of a turntable, only improve (or degrade) it. Of course, it is common audiophile wisdom that tonearms and phono cartridges are extremely important links in the analog front-end chain, so difference between a merely good tonearm or cartridge and a great tonearm or cartridge can and will make the difference between merely good analog front-ends great ones. But to put things in perspective: if one were to somehow mount a current production SME tonearm with a Lyra phono cartridge on a \$69 department store turntable from 1976, one should not expect the resulting sound to be any better than the sound one gets from a \$69 department store turntable. Conversely, it would be poor judgment not to mount a good phono cartridge on a more than decent tonearm on a high-performance turntable.

I used my own Lyra Kleos MC phono cartridge, and at the very least, using it should diminish the amount of variables that I would have to deal with to write my review of the Delphi MK VI. The SME V tonearm used a phono cable with a DIN plug on one end, RCAs on the other, and Oracle supplied a Van den Hul phono cable for this review. Other cables in my system besides the Van den Hul phono cable were interconnect and power cables mostly from MIT, and some by Virtual Dynamics, DH Labs, and Audio Art. The Van den Hul phono cable was connected to the RCA inputs of the phono preamplifier that's been in my system for a while, the very versatile and transparent Pass Laboratories XP-15. I used a few different preamplifiers and linestages, ranging from not using one at all -- instead relying on the variable output of the Benchmark Media DAC1USB digital-to-analog converter -- and I also used a Balanced Audio Technologies (BAT) VK-3i preamplifier and a Red Wine Isabella linestage, and both tubed units. These were connected to either a Pass Labs X350.5 solid-state power amplifier or PrimaLuna monoblock tube amps. The Pass Labs amp was used when I had the Sound Labs DynaStat hybrid electrostatic speakers in the system, the PrimaLunas when I listened to the Venture Audio Encore dynamic floorstanders, both speaker systems usually augmented by a Velodyne HGS-15b sub. The Delphi MK VI turntable's power supply was connected directly to a Virtual Dynamics wall receptacle that was one of two dedicated power lines that supplied the AC to the listening room. The room is treated with Echobuster acoustic panels, and the lighting provided by a mixture of incandescent and fluorescent lights at night, but mostly sunlight during the day.



Oracle makes available two types of clear acrylic dust covers for the Delphi MK VI, one that attaches via hinges and a full dust cover that one removes during play. I highly recommend the latter. The nice people at Oracle stated via email that using the dust cover that is attached to the Delphi MK VI and positioning it perpendicular to the turntable during operation will not adversely affect the sound of the turntable. Go ahead and call me a skeptic, but I'm certain that I'm not the only audiophile that believes that dust covers that are attached to a turntable during play are not a good idea since it will act as a sonic vibration sail. Occasionally blowing off the turntable with compressed air and dusting its flat surfaces isn't such a daunting task, but again, if one (or one's significant other) really wants a dust cover, go with the full dust cover that doesn't attach to the body and is removed during play.

The Pleasure Principle

The Oracle Delphi VI is a pleasure to use. One lightly pushes down on one of the two 2" shafts that extrude from the sub-chassis to select either 33 or 45. The speed numbers on the shaft light up and the record gets spinning within two rotations at most. My initial impressions of the sound of the Oracle Delphi MK VI were very positive, and things only got better as I listened to more records. I assumed that because my reference Basis turntable was physically more massive, it would produce a much more massive sound than the Delphi. Surprisingly, the bass response of the two tables weren't as different from one another as I expected. What was also very surprising was the extreme silence that lay beneath the music, the sound emanating from this quite would explosively enter the listening room when called for, or stealthily reveal itself when called for. Comparisons to my reference until the very end of the review were unnecessary since the music coming from this analog set-up spoke for itself, on account of when playing a record, it sounded as if this is what a reference turntable sounded like. Besides the quiet background the Delphi MK VI had a tight, muscular pitch specific bass, and what could only be called a luxurious midbass. The right side of the orchestra as well as all low-pitched percussion such as bass drum would be depth-charge deep, and could be sub-sonic if the fundamentals were present on the recording. Rock albums sounded as if I've never heard them in this light, kick drum and bass guitar would enter the room as a feeling as well as a sound. The upper frequencies had a crystal, sparkling clarity that floated between the speakers, and combined with the ultra-transparent midrange the images that populated the huge soundstage assumed the visual definition of the word. When spinning a clean vinyl copy of an album the format became imperceptible – it didn't sound like a record – it sounded like music.

But more about the new version of Delphi's power supply. The standard Turbo was made by Oracle after "extensive development and performance comparisons". They go on to claim that the Turbo compared favorably to comparisons with "special batteries" and a "monstrous" power source. I'll just say that it didn't take long for me to become an advocate for improving the AC power turntables. My first epiphany of sorts came when I simply replaced the factory supplied power cable that connects to the IEC outlet on my Basis Debut V and heard an improvement in its sound quality. This improvement manifested itself mostly in a quiet background, but other improvements were subtle but significant, such as a greater sense of verisimilitude to the sound of the instruments that emerged from the grooves of the record, as well as a greater solidity of the overall sound. These improvements took on greater weight when I started using a PS Audio Power Plant AC Regenerator to power the turntable.

The PS Audio takes the AC from the wall outlet and with its internal power amplifier converts the AC signal to DC, then re-converts it back to AC in the form of a pure sine wave with the user's choice of frequency. I use 60 Hz to power a 33.3 rpm record, and without changing any of the setting on the turntable (such as moving its belt to a different section of its pulley) I could play a 45 rpm record simply by selecting a frequency of 81 Hz. The increase in the sound quality was similar to replacing the power cable, but as if it were this improved sound on steroids – the black background became blacker, and instruments that I already though sounded "real" became even more authentic. But the greatest improvement was that it took all the positive characteristics of the turntable, and made them undisputedly better.

Of course the same can be said of the original Turbo power supply that I was sent along with the Delphi VI. And I was expecting the same sort of thing that happened when I switched to the PS Audio unit to happen when I switched to the MK II version of the Turbo. I was wrong. The improvements were almost indescribable using common audiophile terms. It was as if I now could "see" further into a recording that was pressed onto the record. I suppose I could have said that it sounded as if the transparency of the turntable was improved, but it was more than that. The Turbo MK II took what was a great turntable and transformed it into a machine that could take any record in my collection, and transform it into an experience that was totally new. I could have also easily have used the cliché "it was as if I was hearing the record for the first time", but again, it was more than that. Still, it was fun listening to records I must have heard hundreds of times with the Delphi VI/Turbo II set-up and reveling in the sonic results.

Great Music

There is some disagreement between their fans whether Pink Floyd's *The Wall* is one of their best works, reviling *Dark Side Of The Moon* for the top spot in their catalog. But there is no dispute that the Japanese pressing of *The Wall* is the best vinyl version of this album. I don't play this record that often, perhaps it's because I like to savor the times I spend with it, or perhaps in the back of my mind I've always been wary that I might damage it (OK, plus I'm more of a fan of early Pink Floyd, for that reason I consider this album in a different musical category). Removing the heavy gatefold sleeve it from its re-sealable clear plastic outer sleeve, carefully taking the "hanger obi" off and placing it aside, and removing one of the two records from its thin rice paper inner sleeve and carrying it over to the turntable's platter – it is the epitome of the vinyl ritual. But then there is the sound: I will not vouch for this record being the best Pink Floyd album, but I will vouch for it not only being the best version of *The Wall*, but one of the best sounding rock records in my collection that wasn't marketed exclusively for audiophiles.

As soon as the needle of the Lyra Kleos slowly lowered to the first track on the record "In The Flesh", I sensed that I was in for quite a treat. In that each song on this record has been scrutinized more times than I'd like to admit, sometimes it's nice just to bask in the sound of the music, which was exactly the point during this listening session. As the song starts quietly with the theme that will be repeated at the end of the double album, things abruptly turns loud, and that's quite an understatement. It practically knocked me out of my listening seat when the power-chords of the organ and distorted guitar enter. A sonic hologram of a drum set entered my listening room with the rest of the band about halfway through the song, after which a snarling Roger Waters as the character Pink appears centered between the speakers. Sound effects such as the dive-bomber and the cooing baby during the song's last seconds don't sound as real as the lead vocals, but certainly real enough. In my mind's ear I can picture a reel-to-reel recorder playing these sounds, being dubbed onto the recording. The song lasts a little over three minutes, but after it's over I sensed the interminable studio hours it must have taken to assemble it, at the same time practically gushing over what I've just heard. And that was just the first song.

I didn't need to listen to only audiophile-approved recordings through the Delphi VI and Turbo II; every record I spun was a more than satisfying experience to re-live these moments. But as the good ones sounded good, of course the great ones sounded better. The Classic Records version of Ravel's *Piano Concerto In G Major* (b/w d'Indy *Symphony On A French Mountain Air*), the re-issue on Classic Records of the RCA shaded dog. It once again thrilled me with not only its great sound, but for the fact that the Ravel piece is a great work of art. And what a great record for the audiophile it is! Ravel wastes not a minute, as the needle tracks the open passage of a whip-crack and snare drum and then a large portion of the orchestra immediately backs the front-and-center piano. It will not only test the resolution, transient attack, and frequency response of one's system, but the attentiveness of the listener, as it next goes into very Ravel-ian territory with its strummed harps and the blues and jazz-motif via the trumpet theme with the piano following and underpinning the orchestra. There is no shortage of Ravel's dream-like orchestration (especially during the second movement which follows without break), and what sounds like a very challenging piano part that continues throughout the piece. The Delphi MK VI/Turbo MK II practically disappears as a source during this hubbub, again letting the music speak for itself as the music enters the listening room. Of course the pitch-black surface noise-less background of the record itself helps; the only sound beneath the music is the tape hiss – which I have no trouble ignoring perhaps because I'm so accustomed to listening to records from this era. The third and last movement, marked *Presto* was quite controversial in its time because of its quickly changing moods and what the critics at the time termed dissonance from the brass and wind sections, but these days it just sound like a great composition by a composer that was ahead of his time. Through the Delphi MK VI/Turbo MK II it sounded to me as I've been privileged to hear Charles Munch conduct his Boston Symphony in 1959 in my own listening room in as close to a "real" situation as I'm ever going to hear it within my lifetime. It is the epitome of a reproduction of real musicians playing in a real space as reproduced with mechanical means.

And so we return to comparisons to my reference, the Basis Debut V, where many have described its sound as weighty -- and it is weighty – this turntable comes in at 90 pounds versus the Delphi MK VI's 35 pounds. The Basis' increased weight is likely to be at least partially responsible for this translating to its sound, which is indeed a monster when it comes to bass response. Although there have some that call the Basis' sound a bit sluggish, I suppose maligning the fact that it is constructed totally out of machined acrylic. And I agree, with the wrong ancillary gear it can sound a bit sluggish. With my associated equipment it does not sound at all sluggish. But while the Oracle Delphi MK VI equipment with the Turbo MK II power supply does not have the same amount of sonic density in the lower frequencies, it does have just about the same bass quality, and when it is directly compared to the Basis it seems a bit quicker on its feet, that is, there is a transparency in its lower register that is bettered by no other turntable in my recent experience.

Artistry

The Oracle Delphi MK VI fitted with an SME V tonearm and equipped with its optional Turbo MK II is a fantastic piece of analog artistry, in both sound and looks. At over \$17,000 for the turntable, arm and power supply, this package should be considered expensive by all but the very few. But it is not an unreasonable price for this package. What you get is a first-class turntable, a first-class tonearm, and most likely one of the most advanced turntable power supplies available today. The Delphi MK VI has modern museum aesthetics, is stupid-simple easy to use once it is set up, and made every single record I played on it sound like the most important record in my collection because every record I played on it sounded like music, plain and simple. If one has decided to spend this amount on an analog set-up, and they decided on the Oracle Delphi MK VI/SME V/Turbo MK II package, I would be the last audiophile equipment reviewer on Earth to try to talk him or her out of it.



Specifications

Type: Turntable with 33.3 and 45 rpm speed
Drive Type: Belt
Motor: Low voltage AC synchronous
Power Supply Options: Basic 24 VDC power adaptor
Turbo MK II reference version of 24 VDC power adaptor
Speeds: 33 and 45 rpm, both fully adjustable
Dimensions: 14.5" x 19" x 6" (DxWxH)
Weight: 35 lbs.
Price: Delphi MK VI with MK II Turbo and acrylic dust cover \$10,350
Oracle SME 5 tone arm \$7250 and Turbo upgrade to MK II \$500

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