

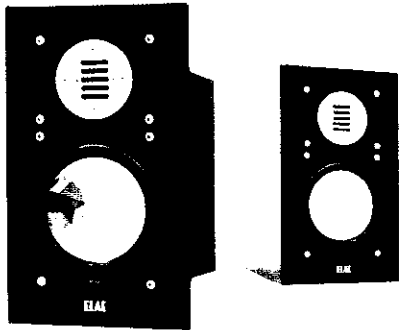
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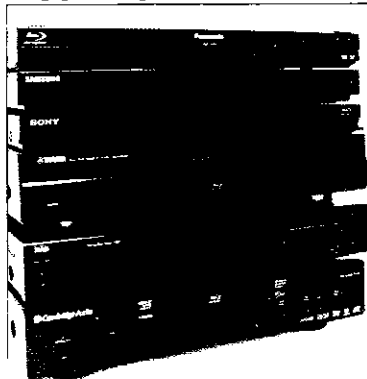
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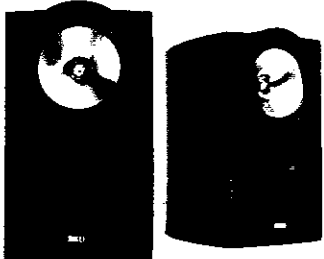
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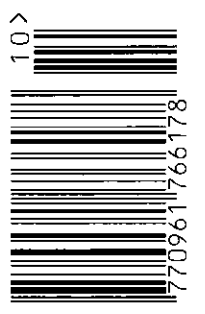
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Concept a reality

Richard Black finds a way into Clearaudio ownership that won't break the bank – the new £1,050 plug 'n' play Concept

Clearaudio's impressive range of turntables is, to the best of our knowledge, just about the broadest on the planet, stretching downwards from the delightfully over-the-top 'Statement'.

The company doesn't compete with the Regas and Pro-Jects of this world in the budget arena, but the new Concept model puts Clearaudio within reach of more analogue-lovers than ever, bringing the price of entry down significantly.

Predictably, with a name like that, there's plenty of piffle in the literature about how this model is a whole new design, sorry, concept – but fair's fair, it is in fact genuinely novel in some ways.

The basic outline has a particle-board chassis, plastic platter, DC motor and pivoted arm. Differences from the norm are most obvious in the arm, which has a magnetic bearing, an ingenious arrangement that functions pretty much as a unipivot but with better stability and handling qualities than those notoriously fussy devices usually provide. It's also effectively friction-free.

It's actually very simple, relying on a pair of very strong magnets: one is fixed to the top of the arm tube, the other to the top of the bearing yoke and they hold the arm up. It is prevented from jamming itself against the top magnet by a tie wire fixed below, which also transmits the anti-skating force.

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Clearaudio Concept

ORIGIN: Germany

WEIGHT:
7.5kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
420x140x350mm

FEATURES:

- 30mm plastic platter
- DC motor
- 230mm arm with magnetic bearing
- Captive arm lead

DISTRIBUTOR:
Audio Reference

TELEPHONE:
01252 702705

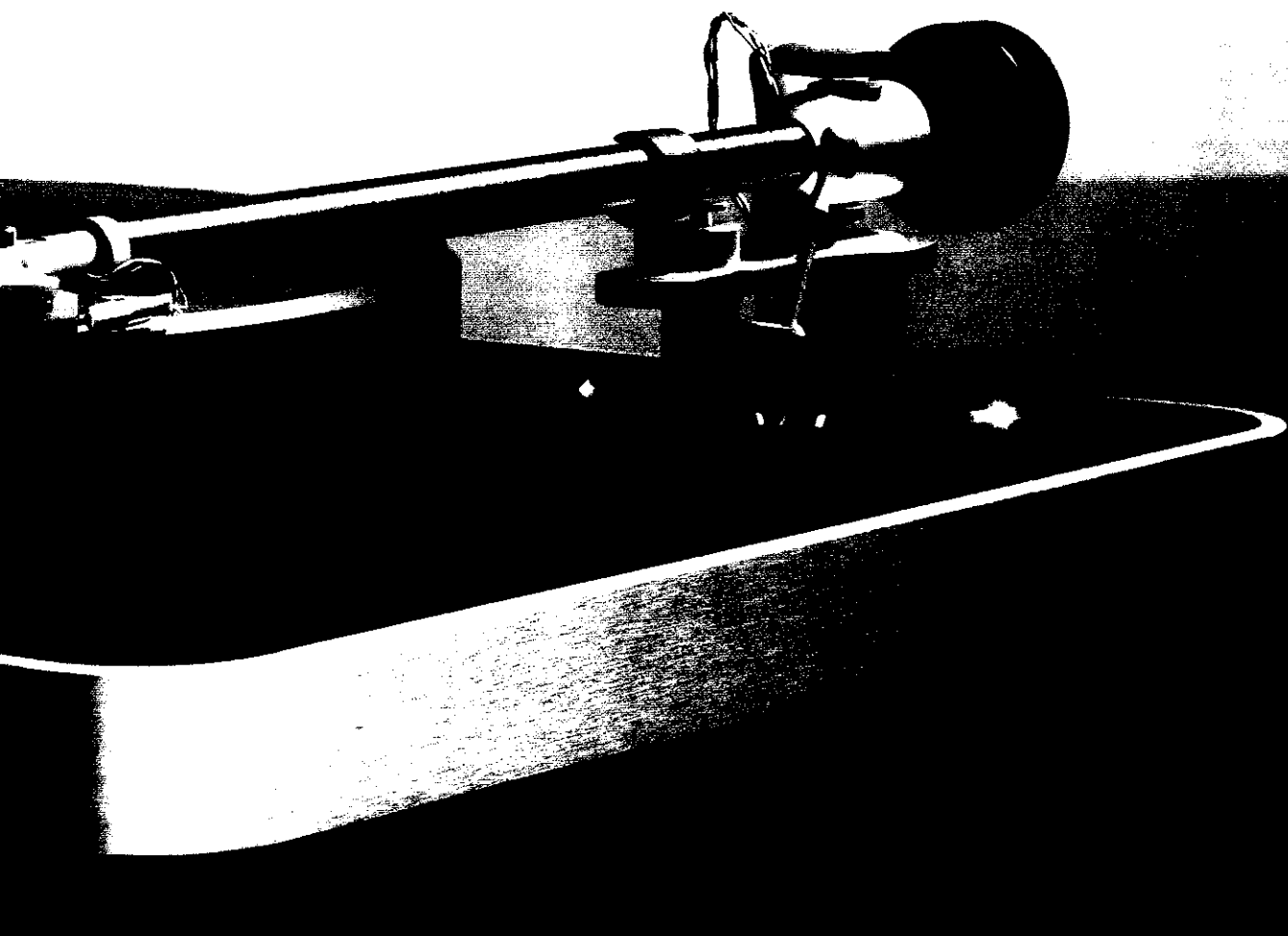
WEBSITE:
clearaudio.de

The chassis is also distinctive, though less obviously so. Particle-board (MDF etc.) components on LP players are notorious for adding their own resonance unless carefully treated, but Clearaudio has addressed that with damping measures including the aluminium trim, which apparently plays a significant part – whatever the details, it's certainly very much better damped than most of its kind, as is evident from the simplest test of tapping it in a few places.

Level-headed

Another feature that is unusual, possibly even unprecedented in a high-quality turntable, is that the Concept is ready to play discs straight out of the box. Well, all right, you have to put the platter in place and plug in the power supply, but the cartridge is fitted and aligned and even the tracking force is preset. The arm and cartridge are Clearaudio's own, of course, the latter a moving magnet design, but if you prefer not to use them you can replace either.

You can also adjust all the usual parameters – offset and overhang, VTA, tracking force, anti-skating – but the clever part is that you don't need to. A spirit level is provided so that the user can adjust the three spiked feet to set the deck level.



Drive is from a small DC motor, the sort of thing one used to find in cassette decks (remember them?), which operates via a flat belt. The motor is resiliently mounted: Clearaudio claims it's 'completely decoupled' which is clearly an overstatement, but the small amount of noise it produces is adequately suppressed by the decoupling.

In addition to the usual 33 and 45rpm speeds, 78 is available for those who collect shellac as well as vinyl – you'll ideally need to change the cartridge as no LP stylus ever

sounds great playing the relatively cavernous grooves of shellac discs, but it's a useful option to have.

The power supply is a tiny plug-top switch-mode affair and while ultra-purists may wince at that thought, it's effectively free of hum fields and both it and its associated wiring are a good long distance from the sensitive signal wiring in and around the arm. There's also no electrical path (not even an earth link) between it and the audio.

Only one feature seems to us to be missing – a lid. It may seem a small

detail, but a lid both reduces acoustic feedback from the loudspeakers to the deck, and keeps dust off, and no LP collector will need reminding what a pernicious enemy dust can be. That apart, this is a very nicely turned-out deck, attractively finished and presented. We've never had cause to query the general standard of fit and finish from Clearaudio; just about the worst that could be said is that the surfaces show dust and fingerprints, but then so do wine glasses, fine furniture and so many other things. Anyway, this deck has

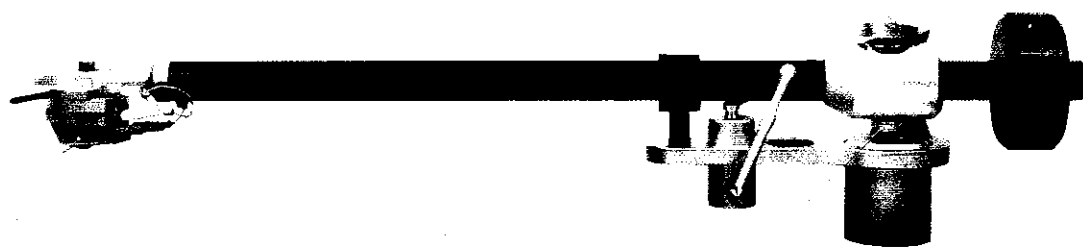


THE ARM'S magnetic bearing is intriguing and the promise of zero friction certainly appeals. There are, however, two problems with it.

The first one it shares with all unipivots and plenty of more conventional arms: the pivot point is too high. If the axis about which an arm pivots up and down is above or below the level of the disc, any warping in the disc will cause the cartridge to travel a little forwards and backwards as well as up and down, introducing speed variations or 'wow'.

The second problem is that the arm's suspension point can vibrate laterally, both side-to-side and fore-and-aft, again introducing wow and also subsonic noise. Clearaudio reckons it's a trade-off worth making.

CLOSE-UP



Headshell allows both offset and overhang adjustment

Vertical tracking angle (VTA) is adjustable

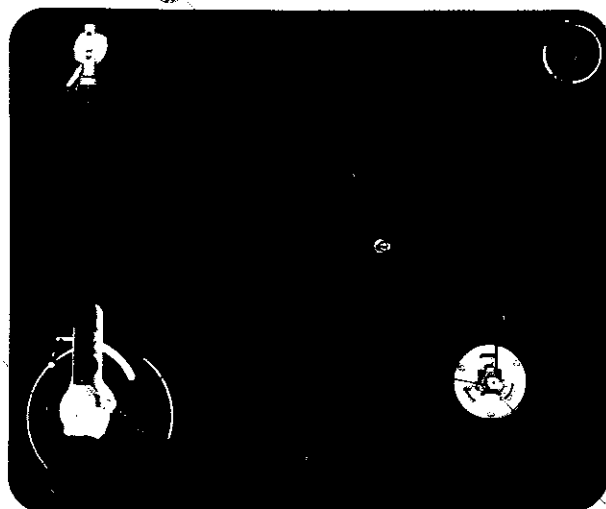
Magnetic bearing lifts arm upwards

Magnet's force is resisted by anti-skate tie-wire

Screw-adjustable counterweight

Concept moving-magnet cartridge

HIDDEN TECH



- Eccentric armboard allows extra overhang adjustment**
- Plastic subplatter on conventional bearing**
- Convenient rotary on/off/speed control**
- Good-quality flat belt gives consistent drive**
- Small low-noise DC motor only requires one pulley for three speeds**
- Polymer top surface on MDF chassis controls resonance**

more matt and less shiny surfaces than many and is quite forgiving in that regard. We can't comment on the accuracy of settings as supplied, but attention to detail certainly reflects the manufacturer's usual high standards. We were particularly impressed with the bearing, which has an admirable combination of low friction and low play.

No blur in oasis

Lacking anything in the way of a proper suspension, this deck is never going to sound its best on a structure closely coupled to the floor; so we used our usual isolation table for most of the listening. Thus configured, the Concept produces some very good sounds, clearly much better

than the budget turntables which it (very superficially) resembles and thus vindicating Clearaudio's damping measures and arm.

What's most noticeable about it is the way it largely avoids the midrange blurring that affects so many unsuspended decks. Avoiding that is one of the biggest challenges facing designers and manufacturers, and we'd say Clearaudio's team has done very well in that regard.

Scale, openness and detail

The results are most obvious in large-scale music – symphony orchestra, big rock and so on – where there's a lovely sense of openness and scale, combined with very good detail and also excellent

imaging. By the same token, simple recordings such as solo guitar are very clear and full of the little details that make the character of an instrument or player unique.

Where this player does yield a little ground to dearer models is in the bass, which is decent but not astounding. There's some quite good extension, but control and solidity aren't really up there with the best. All the same, because the upper bass is tight and dynamic, one isn't much aware of anything being amiss in recordings where most of the low-frequency action is in the bass.

High treble is probably just as much a function of the cartridge as of the deck itself, a suspicion strengthened by a brief spell with another cartridge in place, but it's somewhere between basically likeable and very good, with a slight question mark over its sweetness when it gets very busy: the sound can thicken up a little. But as with the midrange, getting this really spot-on is invariably a costly business and for the asking price this deck does a very good job.

SYSTEM BUILDING

WE SPOKE to Dave Denyer, Clearaudio's PR man in the UK, about system-building options based around the Concept. He pointed out that the 'plug'n'play' idea of the Concept rather presupposes an existing system. However, he was quick to point out that Clearaudio markets various phono stages, which would certainly be on the menu – most likely the Smart Phono (£400) or Nano Phono (£235).

The lowish-priced integrated amplifier market is flush with fine models these days, while among loudspeakers the ideal would be something neutral and extended but not too bassy, as that can exacerbate the rumble inherent in many older recordings. Dave recommends the Cardea models from Kudos and also highly rates the Leema Xone.

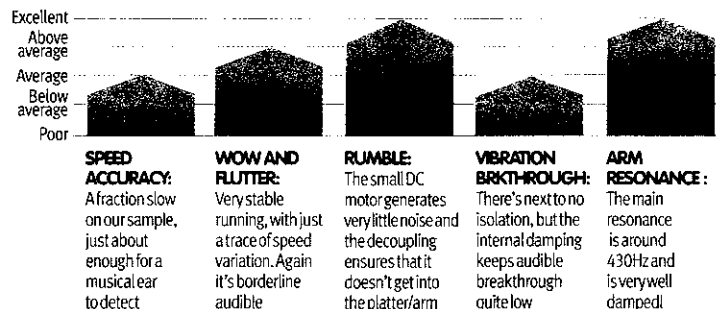
Devotion to the cause

As always, what's more important than the specifics is the overall musical impression and this is really where the Concept scores. It isn't perfect, but the minor technical blemishes are very much in the background and out of one's general awareness. If the disc is rock, the Concept rocks. If jazz, it swings. If romantic, it smooches.

Watching the analogue renaissance over the last few years has been a heartening experience. Clearaudio's combination of audio and aesthetic design has produced a winning combination here which we feel sure will both win converts and keep them devoted to the analogue cause. ●

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



HifiChoice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY:** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Ease of setup/use; lively, involving music-making with plenty of detail
- VALUE FOR MONEY:** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No lid; bass not quite the firmest; treble occasionally a little thick
- FEATURES:** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** One of the simplest ways of getting into analogue, with excellent results for the price

OVERALL

