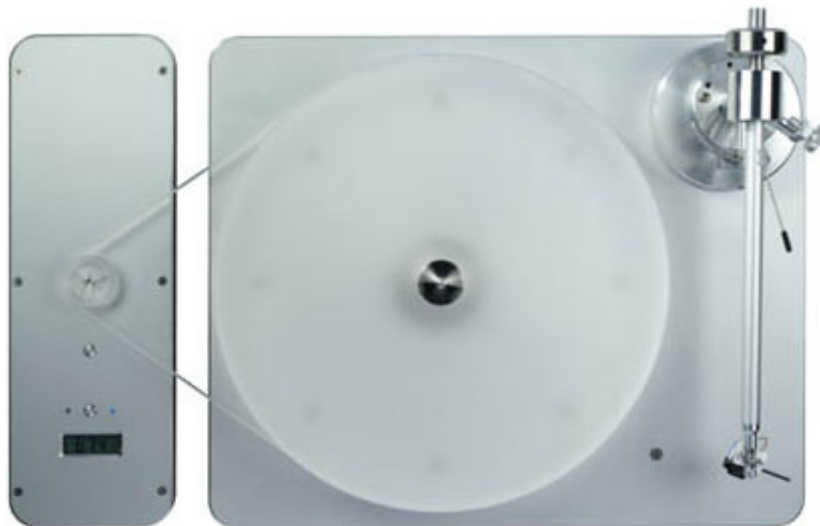


"Simplicity, sophistication, precision, and eloquence":

says Jack Roberts on the

# Clearaudio Ambient Turntable with Satisfy Tonearm

May, 2007



**Clearaudio Ambient turntable system  
Specifications:**

**Construction details:** Resonance optimized shape, belt drive  
Aluminum sandwiched bulletproof plywood

**Speed change:** 33 1/3 und 45 rpm -- 78 rpm

**Motor drive:** separately housed synchronous motor, speed  
rotation fine-adjustable

**Mains bearing:** polished and hardened steel, polished bearing  
house, sintered bronze, inverted

**Platter material:** GS-PMMA / acrylic, Surface CNC-precision  
drilled

**Platter height:** 1,6 inch / 40 mm

**Speed accuracy (measured):**  $\pm 0,1$  %

**Signal to noise ratio:** 84 dB

**Manufacturer's warranty:** 5 Years

**Dimensions:** 21.5 inches by 5.9 inches by 13 inches

**Weight:** 26.5 lbs.

**MSRP:** \$3500 without arm and \$4600 with Satisfy Tonearm

**U. S. Distributor:**

Musical Surroundings  
5662 Shattuck Avenue  
Oakland, CA 94609

Tel. 510-547-5006

URL: <http://www.musicalsurrroundings.com>

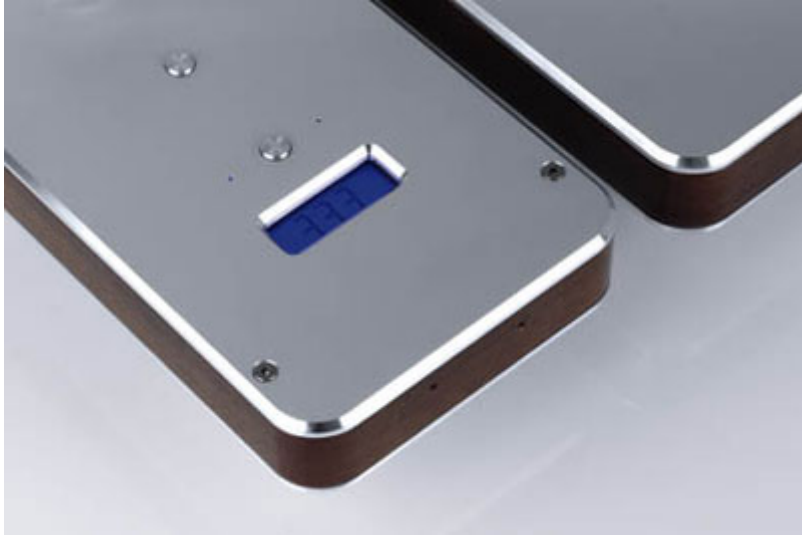
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**LET'S GET TWO THINGS OUT OF THE WAY BEFORE WE BEGIN THE REVIEW:**

First, Clearaudio is a turntable maker who already comes with a reputation for making some of the most industrially beautiful, and sonically detailed, transparent, and accurate turntables on the market. In fact, when I talked about what was wrong with turntable these days, I have been known to complain about massive acrylic tables that seemed to me to drain the life out of music. If that's what you think about Clearaudio, then I know you haven't heard their Ambient Turntable or their new reference table.

The Ambient sounds different from earlier Clearaudio tables that I have heard in one significant way. Where the systems I heard with Clearaudio tables could lean a little to the analytical side of things, the Ambient is musical in spades. Yet all that musicality comes without one iota of loss in overall detail, inner detail, or the transparency we have come to expect from a Clearaudio table.

Second, the Ambient is just as beautiful as it is to listen to. It's beautiful in an understated way, in an architectural way, and in a modernly simplistic way. Even though understated, without exception, everyone, whether male or female, old or young, that has come into the listening room has said it was the best-looking peace of audio equipment they have ever seen. It may not be important to you how it looks, but if you get this table, its looks will not be neglected. Now with those two things out of the way, let's get started.



## DESCRIPTION

The Ambient consists of a main plinth with a separate smaller but matching plinth that houses the synchronous motor and the “Smart” speed controller. The main plinth is made with many layers of “Panzerholz”, a solid bulletproof wood that is used in Germany for limousines and some special armored trucks. This very special wood is flanked top and bottom by brushed aluminum sheets. This set-up seems to work wonderfully sonically, and it looks very sleek and modern. The 40mm silicon acrylic platter rests on the beautiful and precise Clearaudio inverted bearing.

I had my table outfitted with the Clearaudio “Satisfy Carbon Fiber Direct Wire” tonearm. It mounts easily in the rear right hand corner of the main plinth. Personally, I think this arm, like the table, is a marvel of eloquence of design and simplicity of use. The mere method in which the cartridge attaches to the arm demonstrates this beautifully. By just loosening one nut you can adjust almost everything.

The arm mass and resonant characteristics vary between the aluminum, carbon fiber and the wood tubes. The bearings are tuned accordingly to match each tube. Specifically, the wood arms are well suited for the lighter body moving-coils, such as those made by Clearaudio. For heavier moving-coils such as the Benz Ebony L that I used for much of the review, the Satisfy Carbon Fiber arm is the better choice. The Benz cartridge was chosen because it would work best with the moving-coil section of my Shindo Monbrison preamp.



Back to the description of the table. It is nothing unusual nowadays for turntables to have a separate, freestanding motor, but the Ambient's motor is enclosed in a matching plinth of the same depth as the main plinth, but only a little over three inches wide. This plinth houses the motor, power switch, speed selector, and provides electronic speed stabilization via AC filtering and regulation. It has a nice digital readout for speed, and there are two small holes where you can use a Clearaudio-provided small screwdriver to adjust the motor's speed.

It is all very straightforward and easy to use. In front of the motor is a blue digital readout that informs the user of the speed. All you have to do is push one of two buttons; one will turn on the power and the other will allow you to choose the speed. This outboard motor/speed control unit is a pleasure to use, and again, it looks very nice the way it seems to be just an extension of the main plinth, separated only by about a one-inch gap of air.

The only things that connect the motor-plinth and the main plinth are three almost clear, slim, round silicon-based belts. These belts are designed to be quieter than the ordinary wide and flat rubber belts. The motor has a small acrylic disc with three grooves in it that the three belts fit onto. The platter has no grooves, the belts simply find their own place to ride on the main platter, riding very near the bottom. This three-belt system works well and gives the system more torque for startup of the main platter, though they can be a pain to put on. The three belts also look great, giving some architectural interest to the look of the unit.

One last feature that is really convenient and functional is that the feet of both plinths are adjustable, lockable, and very effective in controlling vibration. They work well for leveling the table and isolating it from vibrations.



## USING THE AMBIENT TABLE

Four words come to mind when using the Clearaudio Ambient table: simplicity, sophistication, precision, and eloquence. It is always a joy when something in life that possesses sophistication, precision, and eloquence is also simple to use. The last thing I am looking for in my music reproduction equipment is a Rube Goldberg type of device that makes using it the center of my attention instead of the music I want to listen to.

It is here that I find the Ambient wonderfully satisfying. Its good looks are not as over-imposing as many others, and do not represent a distraction from the musical experience.

If you've read my "Beatnik's Journey" columns, you know I spent a lot of time hauling my Vacuum State Electronics Inc. Level 5+ modded Sony SCD 777ES SACD player around to compare to turntables. I listened to belt drives, direct drives, and highly modified idler wheel drives. Only one of these came close to consistently bettering the VSEI Level 5+ Sony like the Ambient did. Every time I think I have an SACD that will outperform the Vinyl, it turns out not so with the Ambient.

The Ambient is the best table I have heard in my system at playing piano music. It plays piano recordings with authority and with no variance in pitch at all. It holds pitch as well as my SACD player and in every other way sounds even more like a piano. Amazingly, the Ambient allows music of the piano to come out of a blacker and quieter background than even the VSEI Level 5+ Sony SACD player.

Its ability to hold pitch is really quite incredible. It's even as good as the best direct-drive tables. I should mention that this is only true when you use all three belts. I don't know why, but one reviewer preferred the table with just one belt. I, too, could hear a difference between one, two, and three belts, but I felt the music was always more under control and more lifelike with three belts. Whatever extra excitement might come from using just one belt seemed to me to come at the loss of the table's perfect speed stability with three belts.

With the Clearaudio Ambient table in my system, I was able to hear all the inner detail with all the transparency one expects in a real high-end system. Plucked strings, fingering work, as well as bowed strings all came through in a musically satisfying manner. The Ambient playback system never over-emphasized sibilants, yet always let you hear the breath of the singer and the air of the hall.

I was surprised how little groove noise I heard with the Ambient table. When I went from place to place with my VSEI Level 5+ Sony 777, I always thought I could hear the stylus in the groove. This is an area where the Ambient is just world-class; I just can't hear much of any groove noise with the Clearaudio setup. This

quietness, combined with a record that has been cleaned on a good cleaning machine, can produce startling dynamics. I guess dynamics brings me to the most important thing I wanted to talk about with the Ambient turntable.



## **MUSIC COMING TO LIFE IN MY LISTENING ROOM AND THROUGHOUT THE HOUSE**

Forgive me for going down memory lane so often as a reviewer, but so many of my memories are tied to music, and so much music is tied to equipment for me as an audiophile. When I was in college, there was a tech that repaired equipment for a couple of the high-end stores, and made recordings at the university. One day, he invited me over to hear his system. Now at this time I had a pretty fine system; Quad 57s, Quad electronics, and Dual 1229 with some version of the Shure M15.

I was not prepared for his house. He must have had 10,000 records. He had homemade horns with 30-inch Hartley subs, McIntosh tube electronics, and two big old turntables with long arms. One was a Rek-o-Kut with the longest arm I'd ever seen. The cartridge was an old RCA mono moving-iron. The other was Garrard 301 mounted in its own floor standing table with an Ortofon arm and a SPU cartridge.

Now both systems were great. He loved to come hear mine and I loved to go hear his, especially with all those records. Heck, he had records that played from the inside out, and a group whose members used their voices in place of all the standard instruments in a jazz quartet. He always wished he had the midrange purity that my system had, and I longed for the life that his system had.

I moved on from college and the first time I would experience even a taste of that life from recorded music was when I heard my first Linn turntable demonstration. It had never occurred to us at that time that the turntables themselves sounded different. Yet, at the Linn demo there was no doubt about it. The Linn turntable sounded more alive than other tables.

Now let's skip forward all these years and there it is. **The most wonderful thing about the Clearaudio Ambient record playing system is that it allows recorded music to sound alive, wonderfully alive!**



This is a quality that is very difficult to put into words. For example, people talking sound more like people talking because the rhythm of their phrasing comes through so easily; horns cut through with more startle because they come out of such a quiet background with such dynamic power and drive, but never in a way that sounds bright or irritating, just more like a horn. It's not just about things sounding more like themselves though. It's more than looking into a mirror. It's about how music flows, how the rhythm pulses life into sound. Heck, like I said to start with, it just sounds more alive.

While this may be hard to describe, it's not hard to hear. Neither of my sons (in their 20s) knows anything about vinyl. I was shocked that they didn't even know how to pick up the tonearm. They both immediately noticed how much more alive the sound was; now one of the boys has set out to try to figure out why and the other just asked me why fool with digital. Of course, the answer is because I can't get some music on vinyl; but it is a fair question.

This sounding more alive is not just inherent to all turntables. I have owned and heard many turntables that somehow drained the life out of records. I have heard others that seemed to mellow out everything that was played on them. I do think vinyl done correctly though does let this life flow inherently into and out of the music.

## ONE SMALL QUIRK

The only negative I could find was more of a quirk; but I feel I should mention it. Even with three belts, the table does not have a lot of torque. In fact, my table would not start at 45rpm without giving it a little spin. I found it easier to start it at 33rpm and then hit the 45rpm button, this works perfectly every time. When I

contacted Musical Surroundings about this, they said this was normal. This in no way diminished anything from the excellent performance of this great table, but I thought you should know.

## CONCLUSION

The Clearaudio Ambient turntable allowed me to enjoy incredible sound compared to other tables at any price, and while it's not a bargain-priced table, it is a bargain for the sound you get for the money. I know it's not cheap enough to be a giant-killer, but it sure costs a lot less than some of the giants and it comes real close in sound and gives up nothing in life and fun. It also is the perfect table for someone who is coming over from the digital world. It is easy to set up, easy to use, and let's you get into the fun of hunting and finding great records.

### U.S. Importer's Comment:

Thanks to Jack Roberts for contacting our office after seeing pictures of the the Clearaudio Ambient turntable. He gave us the opportunity to accomplish our primary goal: to get another music lover and audiophile to revisit analog and experience its joys.

The Ambient represents the further development of Clearaudio product, combining the company's signature speed, dynamics, and transparency with increased musicality and naturalness. We believe this reflects efforts throughout the high-end industry to move beyond older limitations and colorations and provide a more balanced musical presentation. This is also true of the new generation of Clearaudio moving coil cartridges. In Jack's case, we recommended the new Benz Ebony L, another product we import, as the ideal match for his step up transformer. Benz, like Clearaudio, has also brought their products closer to the ideal balance, retaining their highly regarded musicality while adding greater resolution and definition. To get the most out of your analog front end, it is critical that it balances perfectly with your phono amplification.

The Panzerholz multi-layer wood is such an excellent material, combining strength, rigidity and resonant characteristics, that Musical Surroundings features it exclusively on all of the Clearaudio turntables starting with the Ambient and going all the way up to the \$100,000 Statement turntable.

We invite Jack to now experience the further performance of his turntable by auditioning the new Clearaudio Ceramic Magnetic Bearing or CMB. This new platter bearing system uses 2 opposing magnets to "levitate" the platter bearing for lower friction and noise. A ceramic shaft replaces the sintered bronze shaft and the ball bearing is totally eliminated. The CMB bearing is easily retro-fitted to Jack's Ambient as well as any Clearaudio turntable with a 30mm of taller platter/bearing assembly. The sonic advantage of this bearing is so remarkable that we now offer the CMB exclusively on Clearaudio tables starting with the \$2,500 Performance/Satisfy Carbon package. The Ambient with Ceramic Magnet Bearing (CMB) retails for \$4,500 and is package-priced with the Satisfy Satinee wood tonearm for \$5,500 (\$5,300 as Jack tested



with the Satisfy Carbon tonearm).

We look forward to more music lovers and Dagogo readers discovering the joys of music via vinyl playback.

Garth Leerer  
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