

Clearaudio Concept MC

Integrated Turntable

By Rich Teer



If you're in the market for an entry-level turntable, there's an almost bewildering amount of choice. Models from the likes of Rega, Dual, Pro-Ject, and Music Hall are just some of the examples that immediately come to mind. Moving up the price ladder a little, another alternative is available: Germany's Clearaudio.

Perhaps more famous for the more upmarket models in their broad range—including the eye-wateringly expensive, 350 kg top-of-the-line über turntable, the Statement—Clearaudio have been making high-end turntables and tonearms for more than three decades.

In an effort to bring their wares within the financial reach of less well-healed vinyl-loving audiophiles, Clearaudio released the Concept a couple of years ago. The Concept is available with a factory-fitted Concept MM or MC cartridge (at a price that's less than the two components would be if purchased separately), or sans cartridge. My review sample came with the Concept MC cartridge.

Technical Details

The Concept is a suspensionless, belt-driven integrated turntable. The plinth is made from MDF, with a polymer top surface and a rather fetching brushed

aluminum trim to control resonances. It is powered by an external wall wart power supply, and uses a DC motor rather than a more typical AC synchronous one. Talking about the motor, three speeds are supported: the usual 33 and 45 RPM, as well as 78 RPM (although the cartridge must be changed before playing your 78s).

The 30 mm thick platter is made from black-coloured polyoxymethylene (POM), a thermoplastic that exhibits high stiffness, low friction, and dimensional stability. Designed to be used without a mat, the platter has an indentation for the record label.

A large knob selects the desired speed, and three adjustable feet on the underside of the plinth allow for easy levelling.

Perhaps the most interesting technical aspect of the Concept is the included Verify tonearm, which has a carbon fibre arm tube and a magnetic unipivot bearing that Clearaudio asserts is friction free. The bearing is implemented by a pair of strong magnets, one on the top bearing yoke, and the other on the arm tube. The magnets' attraction pulls the arm up, while a tie wire from below prevents the arm from jamming itself against the top yoke. The tie wire also transmits the anti-skating (bias) force.

VTF is set by positioning the threaded counterweight, the VTA is adjustable

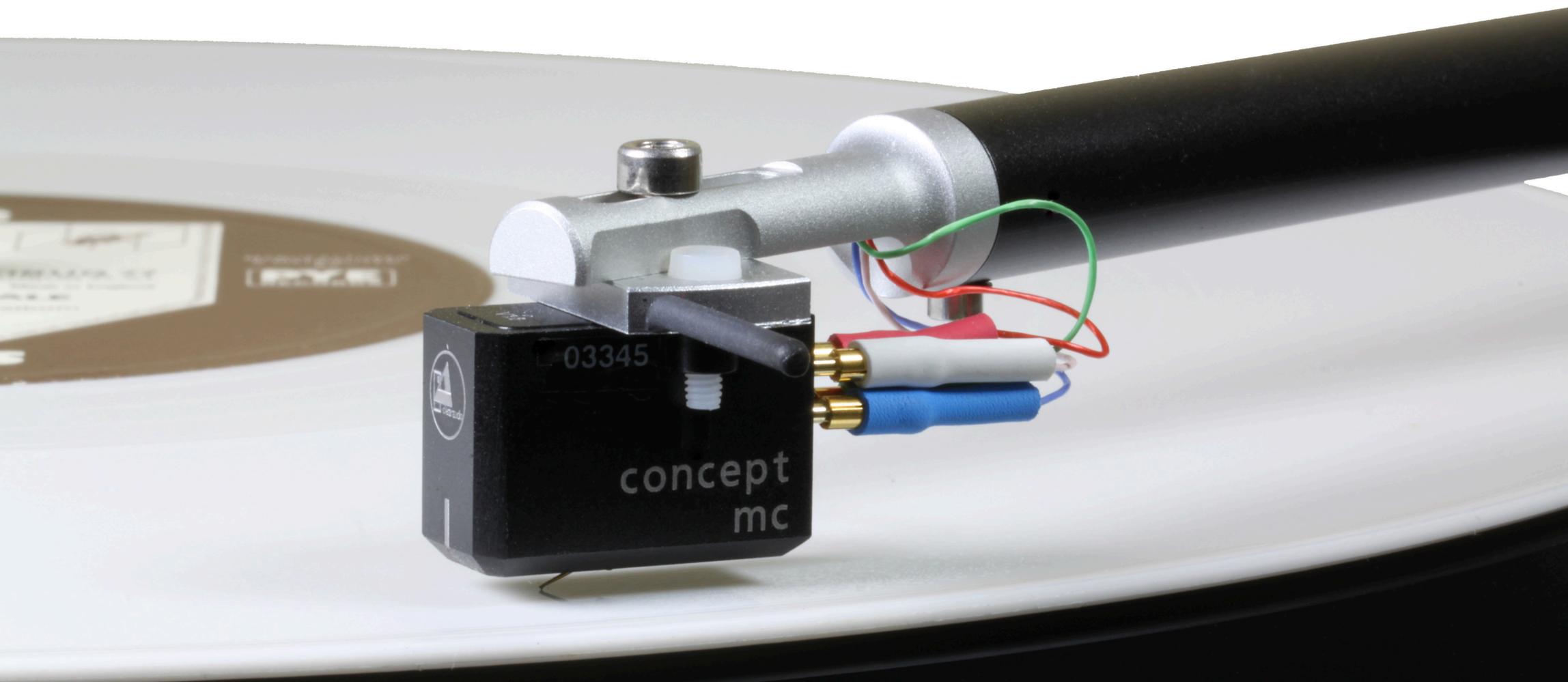
(although not while playing a record), and a screw near the headshell permits adjusting the cartridge's azimuth. All of these parameters are set at the factory, a boon for audiophiles new to turntable set up. While I'm talking about the tonearm: one operational aspect I really liked about using the Verify was the damped cueing lever. Just line the stylus up with the track you want to play, pull the cueing arm towards you, and wait for the damped mechanism to slowly lower the cartridge into place.

The Concept's fit and finish are fine, but it comes without a dustcover (regular readers will know this is one of my pet peeves!). Although one may purchase a separate acrylic dustcover for the Concept, I do think that all turntable manufacturers should include at least

a soft dustcover or a detachable hard one.

Setup and Listening

The Concept is designed to be plug and go more or less straight from the box, so setting it up is easy. After placing the Concept on my stand, installing the drive belt, and putting on the platter, I levelled the plinth using the adjustable feet. Kudos to Clearaudio for including a bubble level for this purpose! I checked the cartridge's alignment and VTF, discovering that the latter was a touch on the heavy side. I measured a VTF of about 3 g, whereas the maximum recommended for the Concept MC cartridge is 2.2 g. I set the VTF to a shade under 2.2 g, and adjusted the bias appropriately using the nut under the tonearm's base. The



manual cautions against doing this, so unless you're absolutely sure about what you're doing, it's best to ask your dealer (or a suitably knowledgeable friend!) to do this for you.

To give everything a chance to burn in, I played the Concept for 20 to 30 hours before doing any serious listening.

Initial Impressions

The first record I put on was Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* [Virgin Records V2001]. It's a record I've listened to countless times and with which I am intimately familiar. My initial thought after the first few bars of the piano introduction was that the speed was very slightly too fast. The pitch of the various instruments seemed to be about right, but I got the feeling that the tempo had been increased by one or two BPM, giving the impression that Oldfield was hurrying his way through the piece. (I later checked the platter's speed with a stroboscope and confirmed my initial suspicions: it was indeed spinning just a little bit fast.) I don't want to make a big deal out of this, as the speed increase was very minor and probably only detectable by someone with a musical ear, but it's my job to point these things out.

My initial impressions were very positive: the tinkling piano, bells, and other percussion sparkled nicely, and the bass was tuneful. Adding to the positive impression was the Concept's detail retrieval. There were details

aplenty, and I think that I heard some subtle textures near the beginning I hadn't heard before.

One of the things I look for when evaluating equipment with *Tubular Bells* is how well the individual people in the Nasal Choir are defined. With gear that has superlative imaging, one can make out the distinct positions of choir's members. On lesser equipment, the choir is presented as a congealed blob. On this test, the Concept fared reasonably well: the choir was about the correct size, but I had to strain to hear the individual positions, and could only place a few of them.

Goosebumps Galore!

Encouraged by my experience of listening to *Tubular Bells*, I moved onto one of my favourite classical pieces: Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kije* [Classic Records/RCA Victor LSC-2150]. This record opens with an off-stage trumpet, which is followed by a snare drum and piccolo. The illusion of the off-stage trumpet wasn't quite as real as I've heard on other systems, but the Concept fared quite well.

The bass drum thwacks in the third movement, *The Wedding of Kije*, don't have quite the weight and heft they should, but are still very satisfying. The tintinnabulation and interplay between tambourines and other percussion in *Troika* were very nicely reproduced, perhaps lacking just a touch of sparkle at the top end.

Moving on, the next piece I played was *Albinoni*, the opening track from Gary Karr's *Adagio d'Alinoni* [Impex Records IMP3001-45]. Karr's Amati double bass and the Vega Hall's organ were well reproduced, with nice warmth and weight. It didn't quite plumb the subterranean depths the way my Forsell does, but that's not unexpected given the price differential! This suggests to me that one of the Concept's weaknesses (albeit a minor one) isn't the bass per se, but bass coupled with large dynamic swings. But what the Concept does do very well on this piece is convey the emotion. The sadness really comes across; as my listening notes say, this is a very communicative ensemble!

For a change of scene (and eager to see how the Concept would sound when playing female voices), I listened to *Wuthering Heights*, a track from Kate Bush's debut album, *The Kick Inside* [EMI EMC 3223]. I hadn't heard this song for many a moon, so I was pleasantly surprised by how good it sounded: the tinkling piano, bells, and piano shimmer just right, and when the guitar started playing during the finale, I literally got goosebumps!

Verdict

The Clearaudio Concept MC combines a well-designed turntable and tonearm with a good quality MC cartridge, in a moderately affordable plug 'n' go package. Fit and finish are up to the high standards one comes to expect