

In Balance

If the idea of a minimalist high-end vinyl system appeals, then Channa Vithana might just have the answer...

For hardcore vinyl aficionados, only a truly LP-specific system will do - one without all the clutter of digital disc spinners, tuners and iPods, which can all sit somewhere else. This month, I've assembled a highly focused single-source system that's designed to eke the most from your record grooves, and to do this I found myself taking some unusual steps...

The set-up you see before you is very rare for possessing a fully balanced signal path from turntable to phono stage to active loudspeakers! I designed it backwards, with the PMC AMLI loudspeakers being my first choice. PMC tells me that while the £4,641 stand mount AMLIs are used for monitoring purposes in recording studios, they are equally adept with domestic hi-fi, and as I found out later, their naturally insightful nature is complemented by a satisfying musicality - unlike many high-end active 'filling-removal' monitors. Internally, each AMLI uses 100W mid/bass and 80W treble linear power amplifiers made by Canadian amplifier specialist Bryston. As a result, the heatsinks at the rear are quite plentiful, but unlike many active loudspeakers they're beautifully designed and without any sharp edges. The tweeter is a 32mm soft dome, while the mid/bass is described as a 165mm carbon-fibre and Nomex flat piston.

Being a 'pro audio' product, the AMLIs are connected via XLR balanced sockets only, so the hunt was on for a high-quality volume-control-equipped phono stage with

XLR connectors - and it arrived in the shape of the newly released £1,170 Clearaudio Balance+. This is a versatile device as it has balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA phono inputs and outputs, and has switchable MM, MC and subsonic filter. Its machined front-panel has a very solid and smoothly-operated volume-control, headphone output and variable/fixed and mute switches. It has a separate power supply in a matching, exquisitely finished, thick non-resonant aluminium case. I was also supplied with the £410 Clearaudio Accu+ upgrade which can be used with new "+" Clearaudio phono stages providing isolated rechargeable DC battery source for power.

The turntable source also had to be XLR connected - luckily most cartridges are suited to balanced connection as they have separate positive and negative left and right outputs (including ground connection). So I opted for the new Origin Live £2,300 MK2 Resolution turntable and £970 MK3 Encounter arm combination. The new MK2 Resolution features a precision bored, honed and polished bearing that rotates in a film of special oil without any surface contact except the load bearing tip - which acts as a single energy transmission point. Gone is the sub platter and previous plinth which has been replaced by a heavyweight, simpler, chassis with steel components for stability against inertia vibrations. As a result, when spinning on its own, the new Resolution MK2 is one of the quietest turntables I have yet heard.

The MK3 Encounter arm now uses a dual pivot bearing assembly

instead of the previous gimbal type. Origin Live says the dual pivot method has the benefits of unipivots (low-friction and high-decoupling for "excellent definition and transparency") but with the stability and convenience ("non-wobbliness") of gimbal arms. The Resolution MK2 now comes part-assembled and is much easier to set up than many suspended types. The Resolution MK2 and Encounter MK3 are superbly designed and built, and proved a pleasure to use.

Going right back to the source pick up I decided to try the Japanese Zyx R100H MC cartridge at £650. The Zyx uses 6N (99.9999%) purity copper wire in its coils with a Boron 0.3mm diameter cantilever. It weighs 4.2g, and I set it at 2g tracking force. For system synergy, Origin Live supplied me with their Reference interconnect at £199 for a 3m length (plus XLRs at £25). Being very secretive about its construction, all Origin Live will say is that it's a two-core construction with a braided sheath!



Resolution MK2 with Encounter MK3 arm



Zyx R100H moving coil.

To support this high-end active turntable system I utilised the new Sunoko-Vent rack system from Quadraspire, and exceptionally elegant £320 acrylic QX600L loudspeaker stands for the AML1s. The Sunoko-Vent system costs from £180 for each shelf and is finished in real-wood veneer Oak, Maple, Cherry, Rosenut, Dark Oak and Black. To connect each shelf Quadraspire uses a 'floating' system whereby a metal sleeve isolates the shelf from the aluminium upright for better sound quality. In use, the Quadraspire rack and stands provided a well-engineered support for a high-end system like this, and they look nice too...

Finally to power up the phono stage and loudspeakers I used three Vertex AQ Roraima Mains leads at

"a highly focused single-source system designed to eke out the most from your records..."

£317 each and one £545 Silver Plus Jaya passive mains-filter. The Roraimas use silver-plated copper with PTFE (Teflon) insulation and silver-plated plugs and sockets - this seems 'standard' enough but the cable is partly housed within a solid, acoustic absorbing case which makes them unusual. For more information on the Vertex AQ acoustic absorption and passive-filtering technology please visit their website at www.vertexaq.com.

SOUND QUALITY

Fully kitted-out with the Clearaudio Accu+ and Vertex AQ mains components, this system proved to have a particularly distinct character. Those who use vinyl for its warm, balming and inoffensive sound will



Clearaudio Balance+ phono stage/preamplifier

not like this one jot - it is all about speed, impact, power and dynamics. It's not in the least bit romantic, but that doesn't mean to say it's cold or dispassionate - quite the reverse, in fact...

Playing the Karajan Brahms Piano Concerto No. 2 (1959) showcased why this system has such convincingly good dynamic range. The music flowed effortlessly with a great sense of controlled power, yet was tonally smooth with the stringed instruments and horn. At low volume levels, the music was never less than engaging, while at high volumes it was unfailingly satisfying over long listening sessions. The phrasing of the piano playing was first-rate with superb timing, sounding tantalisingly close to a real instrument. When the large swell of orchestration gathered momentum, there were no signs of strain, and the system accommodated the dynamics with ease.

With the cover of Al Jarreau's 'Could You Believe' from 'Meet Me In London' by Antonio Forcione and Sabina Sciubba, the bass was deep, expressive and enjoyably tuneful. Sciubba's vocals were excellent while the individual phrasing of, and interplay between, guitar and

double bass allowed for very credible musical timing and thus made the vocals much easier to follow. With a vanishingly low noise floor and unusually well articulated dynamics, it felt more like listening to 30ips analogue studio master tapes than vinyl.

There were equally deep and tuneful bass lines in 'Whiplash Smile' by Billy Idol, as the low frequencies enveloped the listening room with brooding power and the music was readily peeled open to unveil the superb multilayered Keith Forsey production. Piano and keyboards were reproduced deftly, while the

female backing vocals were a clear and textured counterpoint to Idol's 'peroxide Elvis' singing style. Steve Stevens' guitar showcased his trademark flowing playing style, combining speed and tone - a rare combination for most modern guitarists. It all seemed too realistic, as if this system had walked me right to the studio door.



Origin Live fully balanced interconnects.

CONCLUSION

This active, balanced vinyl system was to most turntable-based set-ups what DVD-Audio is to CD - in short, it proved a far more expansive, dynamic and downright engrossing performer, with oodles of extra musical nuances too. This is down to a combination of factors - with balanced operation get the most information into the amplification, while the active loudspeakers effectively cut out a link in the chain and bring a host of other benefits too. The result was breathtaking power and passion, without the need to turn the volume up particularly high.

It was thumbs aloft then for the latest Origin Live Resolution MK2 turntable and Encounter MK3 tonearm, which are significantly better than their forebears, and superb in themselves. The Clearaudio Balance+ proved a fine little bit of kit, and was just the job driving the PMC AML1 loudspeakers. These satisfy on so many levels with their superb design, build and sound quality, able to reveal pure unadulterated music with no sense of strain whatsoever. It's a great combination, and I'd recommend committed vinylistas to audition it, in whole or in part, if they possibly can.

TUNING

Connecting the Clearaudio Accu+ PSU into the Balance+ phono stage makes an already very quiet phono stage even quieter - where there is even less noise in recordings so that instruments and vocals sound purer. Then replacing the three removable mains cables with Vertex AQ Roraima mains cables and Silver Plus Jaya mains filter realised the full potential of the system further - the already good musical timing was improved, lending expressive phrasing to vocals and instruments without any dislocations that would muddy and confuse the sound.

ORIGIN LIVE	
RESOLUTION MK2	£2,300
ORIGIN LIVE	
ENCOUNTER MK3	£970
ORIGIN LIVE REFERENCE	
INTERCONNECT	£199
Origin Live	
☎ +44(0)2380 578 877	
www.originlive.com	

ZYX R100H	£650
GT Audio	
☎ +44 (0)1895 833099	
www.gtaudio.com	

CLEARAUDIO	
BALANCE+	£1,170
CLEARAUDIO ACCU+	£410
Audio Reference	
☎ +44(0)1252 702 705	
www.audioreference.co.uk	

PMC AML1	£4,641
PMC Speakers	
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www.pmc-speakers.com	

QUADRASPIRE	
SUNOKO-VENT	£180
QUADRASPIRE QX600L	£320
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