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Slave To The Rhythm... The Grand Prix Audio Monaco Turntable

by Chris Binns

As elegant engineering solutions go, the concept of direct drive has always been a far more attractive proposition than the use of belts or pulleys to couple rotational energy from the motor to the platter. Go back thirty years and a good proportion of the turntable market was made up of such devices which claimed superior speed stability over other forms of coupling – on paper at any rate – while the technology continued to get cheaper and become available to the mass market where they were incorporated into music centres. For a short time it seemed as though the direct drive turntable would render other designs obsolete, this of course being a time when the widely held perception was that beyond rotating at the correct speed, turntables had little or no influence on sound quality. But the truth was that despite an impressive specification in the manual, many (if not all) direct drive turntables of the era didn't actually sound very good, a key factor in a radical change of attitude that occurred and the rise to ascendancy of the Linn LP12. The all-pervading arrogance of the new wave saw those that did not agree with the musical superiority of belt drive condemned as deaf idiots, and partly because of this, direct drive technology crawled back under a stone and became virtually extinct, although its attributes of quick start up and general ruggedness made it a natural choice for the broadcast

industry and DJ's; ironically, the Technics SL1200 and 1210 must qualify as the best selling turntable of all time.

But since that time, there have been a few rare examples of high-end turntables that have continued to refine the genre and overcome the servo related problems that gave them such a bad name (the Goldmund

Studio springs to mind) and the truth is that we now know just how much the mechanics of a turntable influence the sound quality. So there has been a bit of a renaissance with the direct drive approach, not to mention some reassessment of vintage designs such as the Technics SP10 and Micro Seiki models.

And now there is the Grand Prix Monaco, a tour de force of innovative mechanical, material and electronic engineering, and yes it's direct drive. For the full picture I urge you to look at RG's review in issue 57, this explains in considerable detail about the product and its design, and thus is an important part of understanding exactly what this turntable is about.

Compared to many high-end designs that seem to sprawl in terms of their bulk, the Monaco is appealingly compact and aesthetically rather beautiful, with form definitely following function. Don't be fooled by its diminutive size – it is extremely solid, in fact reassuringly so after years of using suspended sub-chassis designs – and you soon get used to the slightly fiddly business of incorporating the Sorbothane damping washers that sit under the record and screw down clamp. The accompanying arm and cartridge was the TriPlanar VIII with the Lyra Skala, a combination that I am quite familiar with having used it with the mighty Kuzma Stabi reference recently.

Let's get to the point, the Grand prix is quite unlike any turntable that I have heard before.

I have always been reasonably confident in discerning the strengths and weaknesses of CD and vinyl respectively, but the Monaco seems to blur the boundaries between the two mediums and form a category of its own. My first impression was of neutrality the like of which I have rarely encountered from a turntable, and at times I had to remind myself that I was actually listening to a record. The sheer cleanliness of the signal does little to hide any faults, and in fact tends ►



● EQUIPMENT REVIEW

► to highlight the ability of partnering equipment, how it is set up and the quality of the pressing to an almost frightening degree. Adjusting the VTA – a process that the TriPlanar allows while playing – becomes not so much a matter of preference but more of a right/wrong setting that is all too clearly obvious, and once right, the soundstage had a dimensionality and presence that was awe inspiring in its realism, particularly when using the little Meridian M20 active



loudspeakers which excel at throwing three dimensional images. Disregarding the quality of recording for the moment, the Monaco lays bare the mechanical quality of the vinyl that you are playing and how well it was cut; ironically the discs that came off worst were either certain 'audiophile' pressings that sounded thin and undynamic, or discs that had played to the strengths of turntables such as the Linn over the last thirty years or so but sounded quite artificial on the Monaco. But there were others that revealed astonishing detail and presence that I had not heard before, despite years of familiarity with the albums.

Levels of surface and background noise were eerily low, but it is when the music starts to play that you realise there is a stability and grounding to what you hear that transcends anything CD can offer, and betters most other turntables that I have heard. It is against

this that the music finds its own pace in the most natural and unforced way, and had me seriously questioning how often the excitement I experience with other vinyl replay is sometimes a bit of an illusion; after all is said and done, it should be the music that is stimulating rather than the system.

If the Monaco is picky about pressings, there is no such favouritism when it comes to music. The foundation and consistency provided

by such precise speed control allow solo piano a measure of depth and expression that has to be heard to be believed, while rock orientated material is has more of an insight into both the playing and how the recording was put together. Pitch stability is supposed to be one of the great strengths of CD, but increasingly I disagree; I think one of the biggest problems with the format is its ineptness when it comes to dealing with that information that feeds the listener's perception of musical pitch, so its ability to sustain it is immaterial. This is an area where a good turntable excels, and the Monaco has served to not only highlight this particular aspect but also carry it to a new level, where music sounds significantly more convincing as a result.

Having no suspension of its own to speak of, the Monaco is highly dependant of the support that it is used

with. The combination of the grand Prix F1 shelf with the Monaco modular isolation rack offered (as you would expect) a good interface with the turntable, but attention to detail with levelling and the like is essential to performance. Likewise, positioning in an area where the loudspeakers have minimal impact will have a dramatic affect on the sound, but the Monaco is so uncluttered in the information that it gets out of the groove that fine-tuning has an obvious effect that is both rewarding and fun.

Living with the Monaco for the last couple of months has proven to be both an interesting and enlightening experience, but also mildly disturbing, giving me cause to re-evaluate and move forward with my record collection. It is almost as if all the traditional negatives of vinyl replay have been removed, and whilst the Grand Prix turntable isn't perfect – or even close to perfect – putting your finger on its flaws is easier said than done. And if you think that's an unsatisfactory conclusion, look at it from my point of view; When it leaves I'll be reinstalling my LP12. It won't be easy going back... ►+

Price: £12000

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