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**ORACLE
PREMIERE SERIES II**

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The Premiere is the top of the line turntable from Oracle Audio Corporation. Its design, obviously evolutionary from the original Oracle/Delphi, benefits from the company's experience with that earlier model. Aesthetically, the Premiere reflects an even higher level of fit and finish than the Delphi. But appearance alone would not justify the considerable added cost of the Premiere over the Delphi. I say this, not because the Premiere is anything less than gorgeous, but rather because the Delphi is, itself a remarkably handsome piece of industrial art. Suffice it to say that the Premiere is even more beautiful than the Delphi — an absolutely stunning visual and technical triumph.

Mechanically, the Premiere incorporates a number of important refinements designed to improve upon selected performance areas of the Delphi. I refer you to Tom Miller's excellent review of the Delphi in Issue 34.

To improve low frequency stability and extension, the mass of the chassis has been increased, and the distance between spring-strut supports has been lengthened. The suspension's "wider stance" results in a structure with greater impact resistance, either from external or stylus/groove wall sources. The arm attachment platform is larger and more rigid than the Delphi's. This improvement results in a more effective mechanical coupling of the arm to the sprung mass of the turntable. A secondary benefit of the larger platform is that it will accommodate an even more diverse variety of arms than the Delphi. Both the Delphi and especially the Premiere, because of the exposed configuration of their arm-mount platforms, are convenient turntables for evaluating tonearms. Arm pillar height adjustments to optimize stylus rake angle (SRA) are particularly easy. The Sota is less convenient, in this regard, because of its recessed arm-mount platform.

In overall design philosophy, mechanical execution, and aesthetic direction, I agree with TOM's appraisal of the Sota vs. Oracle. In automotive terms, I would liken the Sota to a new Corvette: big, gutsy, straightforward, cost-effective. The Delphi is more like a turbocharged Porsche 944; lighter, more minutely responsive, with performance achieved through the clever use of refined elements. The Premiere, more massive and even more refined than the Delphi, reminds me of the Porsche 928S.

The Premiere, itself, has undergone significant refinement since its introduction. When I first received the unit early in 1984, it represented a sample of the first production series, or "Series I". In May 1984, my sample was upgraded to "Series II". Series II represents a significant improvement over what was already an excellent device. The Series II modification includes a capacitor storage/buffer output for power supply, and suspension improvements which damp spurious resonances in the 160-180 Hz, 280-340 Hz, 400-530 Hz, and 610-790 Hz regions. It is to the credit of Riendeau's superb industrial engineering that the modifications could be retrofitted correctly to the Series I in less than 15 minutes.

Methodology

I refer readers to the comparison of the Goldmund Studio/T3B to the Delphi (Series I)/EPA-100 in Issue 31 and to my arm survey in Issue 34, which includes the Goldmund T3B. The data collection and storage methods used in this evaluation are identical to the Issue 34 pickup arm test.

It will be seen in the accompanying graphs, which are directly comparable to those in Issue 34, that the performance of the Premiere Series II/Finale arm differs in a number of important ways from the units tested then. The same cartridge was used in all tests (a selected Kiseki Agate Boron), as were the same recordings and most of the reference system. The WAMM speaker system has (as of July 1984) undergone a significant revision to what I refer to as "Series III". The Series III revision incorporates new mid-range modules, main crossover networks, and equalizer circuitry. The differences seen in the graphs are thus the result of the *turntable/arm* variable.

Tonal Balance

The tonal balance of the Premiere/Finale is very linear from the mid/upper bass up through the midrange. The system sounds slightly warmer than the Goldmund/Syrinx or the Goldmund/T3B. Voices are more harmonically correct with the Premiere/Finale than with the Goldmund/T3B, because the Oracle does not exhibit the Goldmund's lean lower midrange. Most instrumental fundamentals are elegantly integrated with their harmonics when heard through the Premiere/Finale. The most significant tonal balance deviation with the Oracle is a low bass roll-off, which would probably go undetected in most systems, especially without direct comparison to a Goldmund (Studio of Reference), Entec Granite, Sota, or the master tape. What I noticed, however, is the smoothness of response throughout most of the bass region — a smoothness that is quite natural and relaxing. I do not, for example, find the Sota's bass to be quite as natural as the Premiere's. I would characterize the Sota's mid-bass as slightly heavy, with a subtle attenuation of low frequency harmonics (lacking in "air"). The upper bass of the Premiere is superbly integrated with the lower midrange and midrange, so that voices are superbly rendered tonally, as are most instrumental fundamentals. Instruments retain a lifelike with the Premiere. In this regard, the Premiere is more convincing than the Goldmund Studio/T3B, which, because of its subtle lower midrange and upper bass tonal balance depression, tends to subjectively shrink the size of some instruments. The high frequency tonal balance is exquisitely smooth, extended, and natural, making the Goldmund/T3B sound ever so slightly bright and the Sota noticeably closed down and dark. The overall character of the Premiere is smooth, light (but not thin), and together. Overall, I find the Oracle's tonal balance to be one of its greatest strengths, and not really surpassed by any other turntable/arm in my experience.

Resolution of Detail

The resolution of detail of the Oracle Première/Finale Series II is generally surpassed by the Goldmund Studio or Reference especially with the T3B arm, save for the mid-to-upper-treble where the Première is just wonderfully natural and non-fatiguing. The relative loss of resolution noted in the lower midrange and down is, I believe, primarily caused by a lack of mass and a rigidity in the Finale arm. HP's comment in Issue 34 regarding the Première's extraordinary focus was substantiated in my tests. The loss of resolution is not perceived as a diminution of instrumental textural detail, but rather as a slightly reduced sense of wall reflections and "black space" between instruments. Not a gross absence (as from a CD), not smeared and coarse (as from a Linn), just a consistently noticeable suppression of low level spatial clues.

The Première is superior to the Sota Sapphire in this respect, but not the equal of the Goldmund. Incidentally, the focus/resolving power of the Sota, particularly in the outer one inch of radius of the record, can be significantly improved by substituting an oracle for the stock Sota mat.

The Première's soundstaging performance is very good, however, providing a very deep soundfield with good width and, as I said earlier, convincing image size. Imaging is very focused and stable, but with some recession and narrowing of placement. The above-mentioned low level ambience loss is, I believe, partially responsible for the slight narrowing of sound field width.

Discussion

When I first received our Première/Finale for evaluation it was in Series I configuration. In that configuration it was better than the Delphi (Series I with Mod-Squad power supply) in low frequency extension, dynamics and linearity. Overall, the Première Series I was also slightly cleaner than the Delphi Series I. The Première's performance fell significantly short of the Goldmund, however, in virtually every respect except image focus and high frequency cleanness.

Then, two things happened: the Première was upgraded to Series II and we obtained a slightly newer Goldmund, which was not as good as our previous one. The only difference between the two Goldmunds appeared to be their power supplies. The better unit had its power supply in a grey plastic box (approximately 5 x 9 x 4 inches), while the newer power supply is a small black plug-in transformer/converter unit like a calculator power supply. The Series II Première incorporates a new power supply output buffer capacitance bank and improved suspension dampers made of sorbothane. The Series II upgrades are highly effective and quite modest in cost. The major areas of improvement are in a reduction of spurious textures and nonlinearities particularly in the midrange with a resultant improvement in resolution of detail. **Soundstage depth was dramatically improved.** The total effect is quite similar qualitatively and quantitatively to the upgrade from Spectral DMC-10 Beta to Gamma. So the Oracle's performance was greatly improved at the same time that the Goldmund's was slightly compromised. What happened to the Goldmund's sound? The major losses occurred in the upper midrange and trebles which became overly textured (grainy), bright, and less dimensional. The low frequencies lost impact and some control. Please see my comments regarding the Mac-Mod power supply in Issue 31 (pg 41), for comments on power supply control of dynamic drag. The arm report in Issue 34 reflects the *earlier* Goldmund Studio. Goldmund will offer a low source impedance, nicad battery power supply as an option for the studio turntable. I recommend it. We have also had excellent results using a heavy duty 24 volt regulated power supply, with capacitor bank output stage. So if you've been having trouble getting a recent Goldmund Studio to sound as good as you think it should, take a look at that power supply.

The Arm

What about the Finale arm? How does it compare with the Syrinx PU-3 or Sumiko MDC-800? The issue really revolves around a device's performance *potential* and a user's likelihood of *achieving* that potential performance. On the one hand (arm), both the Syrinx and the Sumiko are more rigid and neutral mechanical structures than the Finale and, as such, they should (and generally do) provide better dynamics and resolution in the low frequencies and mid-range. On the other hand, however, the Finale's geometry is better, providing less tracking error and subsequently cleaner high frequency response. Perhaps even more important, through, is the finale's excellent cable attachment box which allows the use of very high performance arm to preamp interconnect. The Syrinx comes with a fixed cable of only fair quality, which unquestionably compromises the sound to some extent. The Finale also has a very convenient SRA adjustment mechanism, which allows that parameter to be exquisitely fine-tuned. In stark contrast, the Syrinx and Sumiko, as well as most other arms, are jokes in this important regard. Many users will, therefore, achieve a higher level of performance from the Finale than from either a Syrinx or Sumiko, even though their performance *potential* may be greater.

One area where I am *not* happy with the Finale concerns its arm lift, rest, and cueing mechanism, which are just plain flimsy. Indeed, removing the arm's finger lift and clamp-down rest cleared up an insidious smeary texture. This should not be the case in a \$900 arm.

In conclusion, I much prefer the Oracle Premiere/Finale Series II to the Linn Sondek/Linn Ittok, and *generally* prefer the Premiere Series II ensemble over the Sota Sapphire/Sumiko MDC-800, or Oracle Delphi Series II/Technics EPA-100.

The Premiere is convenient and unambiguous in its set-up, has looks that really match its price, and overall an excellent level of performance. It is a honey of a unit.

What we need now is a comparison between the Premiere, the Sota vacuum, and Goldmund Studiette/T-5. Only then, when compared with its price-point peers, will we have a measure of the real *value* of the Premiere. As of now, I recommend it as the logical and attractive bridge between the high-value sonic competence of the Linn/Sota/Delphi group and the sonic magnificence (and financial extravagance) of an *optimized* Goldmund.

— DAW

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