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**ORACLE  
ALEXANDRIA  
TURNTABLE  
PRELUDE  
ARM  
TALISMAN  
CARTRIDGE**

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## **User Report**

**by Dave Berriman**

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Why do turntables have to be such an emotive and political subject? Ever since the importance of the turntable's contribution to sound quality became appreciated and fully exploited by Linn products, turntables have been the centre of a heated controversy. The claims and counter claims have increased with each new upmarket analogue turntable, and now with the advent of Compact Disc, the furnace has been stoked up to white heat. The resulting atmosphere is one in which a potential turntable buyer will inevitably have difficulty in making a sound decision, because of the conflicting views as to which is "the business" and which is "rubbish" (advice is often given and taken in such black and white terminology).

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Oracle's new Alexandria is the latest contender for "best" turntable — "*Much better than the Linn*" I'm told by Riccardo Franassovich of Absolute Sounds the U.K. importer. It's certainly well-made and finished and came for review fitted with a new arm called the Prelude, also from Oracle, and a new cartridge from the American company Sumiko, who designed and source it from Japan. The turntable and arm are factory assembled and are sold as a package with the suspension preset for the arm, so avoiding the very real possibility of suspension problems when partnering different arms to any deck. This is good for the customer, since he is less likely to have his "front end" go off tune, and good for the dealer, since it means less setting-up time (and hence more profit!). The arm leads are a continuous run of copper Litz wire from cartridge pins to the rear.

The Alexandria's set-up screws are easily accessible from the top of the deck, simply by removing the three heavy cylindrical turned castings which push fit into the brushed aluminium top plate. These conceal conical springs on which the 4 lb cast-zinc-alloy webbed sub-chassis hangs unseen within the plinth. On top of the springs are the height-adjusting screws, the only setting up the deck requires (apart from speed adjustment). The Linn LP12 in contrast needs considerable care in setting up, from underneath with the unit mounted on a special jig, and can easily go out of adjustment with the user blissfully unaware — apart from an intangible sense that the system seemed to sound better when he or she bought it. My experience indicates that excellent as the Linn LP12 is, when well set up there are probably many in use which are quite simply not working at their best, sometimes due to dealer incompetence, sometimes due to the user "just having a go" himself and sometimes due to the deck's suspension canting over — a particular problem with the black springs. Anyway, the Alexandria and Prelude should exhibit none of these problems, though this would need to be proven over a longer period.

The Prelude's arm leads are a continuous run of copper litz wire from cartridge pins to the rear-mounted phono sockets, thus avoiding the usual multiplicity of soldered joints. More important, perhaps, the leads are very compliant, because they have no stiff plastic insulation. So, the suspension bounces vertically with great freedom and minimum transmission of unwanted vibration. This avoids the usual problem of stiff arm leads which can upset the operation of the suspension if they are not carefully adjusted. Interestingly there isn't a great tendency to rotational vibration of the Alexandria's sub-chassis (which is a good thing in my view) and this is no doubt helped by foam damping inside the springs. It must be said that foam damping needs to be designed very carefully if it is not to mechanically short-circuit the suspension. Oracle seem to have got it right.

So, from a variety of viewpoints, the suspension would appear to be non-problematical. It certainly never gave me cause for concern in use and always stayed in adjustment — which is more than can be said for my Linn LP12!

Like the dearer Oracle Delphi — known in the UK as simply the Oracle — the Alexandria features a heavy sticky "Groove Isolator" mat with a small conical collet to raise the record's centre and a turned alloy disc clamp which screws down on the centre spindle and holds the record onto the mat by pressing around the outer label area. The platter is a two-piece affair, pressure diecast in zinc alloy and turned to finish weighing 5 1/2 lb.

It's ribbed underneath for strength and has a rubber "tyre" around its circumference known as the "peripheral wave trap" to damp bell-like resonances which can occur in any platter.

Drive to the platter is *via* an injection-moulded flat belt from a Papst hall-effect brushless dc motor which takes its power *via* a small external transformer (dc conversion taking place within the Alexandria). Speed selection and on/off functions are operated by a neat led-illuminated three-section touch pad to the front right of the top plate, while speed adjustment is easy to carry out by means of a small thumb wheel under the front-right section of the plinth.

The motor has a flywheel weighing an astonishing 0.454 kg (1 lb.). This directly connected to the motor and drive pulley and spins at the high speed of around 400 rpm at 33 1/3 rpm and around 600 rpm at 45 rpm platter speed and so stores a considerable amount of rotational energy. This is most definitely a good thing, for it irons out any short-term speeds variations from the motor for a relatively vibration-free drive to the belt — something no platter can do as well because it is rotating slower and hence stores less rotational energy. The motor flywheel may also help combat short-term speed variations due to drag between stylus and groove — a very real effect — but the platter mass will have a more direct bearing on this.

The whole assembly is mounted in a varnished ash frame with a moulded polyethylene-fibre base, firmly screwed on because there are no adjustments underneath the plinth (a good thing for safety too). On top fits a neat moulded acrylic cover on spring-counterbalanced hinges.

## The Prelude

The Prelude arm is a very sleek and pretty-looking device finished in black. It has a large circular base which bolts on spacers to the sub-chassis. The Prelude's headshell looks flimsy, but is made of solid aluminium and is in fact much more rigid than it looks. This is a permanent push fit for minimum movement onto the special thin-walled aluminium and magnesium alloy arm tube and the tube is fixed by a screw at the bearing housing to allow for azimuth adjustment by the user or dealer.

At the bearing end, the horizontal bearings are below the arm tube for minimum warp-wow, and angled at 22 degrees to eliminate azimuth variations on warps: both horizontal and vertical pivots are precision ball races, The counterweight is also below the arm tube and slightly decoupled on its spigot. I mention this because I always flex the headshell *gently* to see if there is any play in the bearings and also to see if the headshell twists. With the Prelude, there was some movement, but it wasn't the headshell flexing, nor was it play in the bearings. There was some movement at the pivot.

I discussed this with Jacques Riendeau, brother of designer Marcel, and he puts the flexure down to the positioning and offset angle of the bearings. The vertical bearings are also quite close — about 12.5 mm (1/2 inch) apart — and these factors together, he says, would put considerable leverage on the bearings. There is a lot of basis to what he says, though I'd expect this to produce free-play or a "clonk" rather than flexure. I rather suspect something in the bearing housing is being flexed by this high torque — to be fair a much higher torque than would be produced by vibrations from the cartridge. Just how important this is to the sound contribution of the arm cannot be judged by looking but by listening. Remember that



the arm board of the LP12 flexes intentionally and the Linn felt mat allows some movement of the record — both areas which are held comparatively rigid in the Alexandria.

Next we come to the VTA tower. This is the cylindrical structure to the left of the arm's bearing housing. It has a locking finger nut on the side and a graduated knob on the top. To adjust the height of the arm pillar, and hence the vertical tracking angle at the cartridge, simply loosen the finger nut, turn the knob and then re-tighten. Each graduation represents one thousandth of an inch. It's a unique feature in the U.K. and you'd be surprised at how much difference it can make — with the Talisman anyway.

Finally, the magic touch — an automatic end-of-side lift-off device built into the lift/lower mechanism. To lower the arm you just depress the finger lift against a spring, and at the end of the record a trip device releases a catch and, hey-presto up rises the arm. Just the thing to save on stylus wear and weary limbs.

### **Talisman cartridge**

Well, I've overwritten on the Alexandria and Prelude, which doesn't leave much space for the Talisman moving-coil cartridge. It comes in three versions, the S with a sapphire cantilever and laser-mounted line-contact stylus, the B with boron tube and also with laser-mounted line-contact stylus and a straightforward A model, with — you've guessed it — an aluminium nude-mounted elliptical stylus. In rapid tour de force of its features, it has a rigid allow body and mounting bracket, samarium cobalt magnets, a 260 V output, 15 cu compliance and a recommended force of between 1.5 to 2.5 grammes. I tracked it at two grammes for this review.

### **Alexandria/Prelude/Talisman in use**

The Alexandria, Prelude and Talisman were supplied to me as a package for evaluation and since front ends work very much as an entity for disc replay, this was mainly how they were assessed — in combination. Considering the price bracket in which this "front end" will be competing in the U.K. it seemed logical and fair to compare it directly to a Linn, Ittok arm and Asak cartridge with both mounted on a Sound Organization table for consistency and good rigid, low-mass support.

To get the best out of the LP12, this was completely reset and adjusted and additionally a lot of time was spent making adjustments to the Prelude to optimize VTA for the Talisman. The Talisman was also tried in the Linn LVX on an LP12 but the Asak was not put in the Prelude because it was felt that since the Asak and Ittok were designed to work together and the Ittok is a higher mass arm of more rigid construction, this would hardly be fair. Many records, both classical and rock were played over a period mainly using the new Meridian Component amplifier and into a variety of loudspeakers. What follows is a summary of my feelings about the Alexandria/Prelude and Talisman.

My impression of the Alexandria/Prelude/Talisman used in combination is that it is very good at revealing bass detail and overall rhythm. Also the sound is dramatic in that a piece which is fast and energetic comes over as just that, while at the other extreme the result can be delicate musically when instruments are played with sensitivity. This front end seems to dig down deep into the signal and reveal small things like musicians moving about and small

amounts of pre-echo perhaps better than any other turntable I've heard — even the Linn!

In my experience it's in the area of rhythm analysis that contestants for best turntable often fall down. In the main they just don't deliver that foot-tapping response which tells you the rhythm is easy to follow. Another failing is often a softened non-dynamic effect. The Alexandria exhibits neither weakness, and in fact my listening tests indicated that if anything the Alexandria/Prelude/Talisman allowed one to follow rapid bass lines more readily and sounded generally punchier. As a result turning back to the Linn sounded a bit less exciting and the drive behind the music not quite so explicit, though still there in good measure. So, rhythm, drama dynamics and detail are definitely good points about the front end on test.

On the other hand, there was negative comment. From the outset I noticed that along with the dynamic sound, there was a degree of sharpness to the Alexandria/Prelude/Talisman and, though voices lost the hard edge they can gain with the Linn/Ittok/Asak, the extreme top end seemed to have a touch of lift. This made sound a trifle shallow, applause thin and voices a touch wispy. It also gave the impression that leading edges were "sped up" and on some records resulted in a relentless, attacking character to every transient. This effect was reduced by lowering the arm pivot and also by careful azimuth setting, but there none-the-less. It was also reduced noticeably by removing the record clamp and replacing the groove isolator mat with a Linn felt mat, though its smaller thickness resulted in a larger VTA. So the mat has a greater effect than changes in VTA, it would appear! The felt mat smoothed out the top and, interestingly, reduced the bass detail a little pushing the mid band forward and resulting in a tonal balance more like the Linn. It's a sound I preferred, despite the slight loss of detail, though I can see that there are users who would prefer the groove isolator mat in their particular system.

Musically there is little to choose between the turntables. Taking track two side one from our Joni Mitchell Supercut for example, (an early test pressing which we have now had re-cut at a slightly lower level) the Alexandria/Prelude/Talisman with groove isolator mat put the emphasis on the backing tracks and voice, while the Linn/Ittok/Asak placed the emphasis on the menacing synth and pounding drum rhythm. The synth sounded "meatier" and more aggressive on the Linn but lighter and more ethereal on the Alexandria. The brass at times became over prominent on the Linn, but more in control on the Alexandria. More importantly, the Alexandria/Prelude/Talisman tracks this band with ease, making good sense of the music. The LP12 did as well, but only after very careful setting up, (arm lead dressing, spring adjustments and the like). This speaks well for the Alexandria/Prelude/Talisman as a front-end system.

Another test, mounting the Talisman in a Linn LVX on the LP12 revealed that some of the sharpness in the front end was due to the Talisman — but not all. In the Linn/LVX the Talisman took on some of the Linn/Ittok/Asak attributes, with, for example, that synth line becoming more menacing again and yet with a nice voice quality lacking unnatural harshness, and without the brightness featured in the Alexandria/Prelude, even though the arm pivot on the LVX was not as low as the setting on the Prelude (bear in mind that a higher pivot brightens the sound while a lower pivot makes it richer and warmer).



The Talisman according to these tests is obviously a very good cartridge, clear, open and detailed, if a trifle bright at the extreme top end. It tracks remarkably well and can be guaranteed to reveal a lot of detail while not sounding coarse or harsh.

### Summary

Summarising on the Alexandria/Prelude I would categorise it as an excellent turntable/arm combination worthy of being compared to the best. It provides a rhythmic, dynamic sound with good detail and a clear, sharply-etched sound stage — noticeable better in these respects than most other contenders for “best” turntable.

Is it better than the Linn, or more fairly, is the Alexandria/Prelude/Talisman better than the Linn/Ittok/Asak? I think it depends on what you are after — if you want the extra detail and drive the Alexandria/Prelude/Talisman offers, then you would prefer it.

Using a system which is good rhythmically, with loudspeakers which have sufficient bass and perhaps needing the extra drama and a touch of sharpness to liven it up then the Alexandria/Prelude/Talisman could be just what you need. My own feeling in the end was that I very much admired those things the Alexandria did well — better than the Linn in some areas in fact — while still preferring the more relaxed Linn result which shifted the emphasis away from the top end into the mid-band area — even though there are aspects about the Linn front end which could be better.

Changing the groove isolator mat tempered that view and I must admit to finding the results more enjoyable with the felt mat even though it makes the sound less “impressive”. Using the felt mat I was able to produce some very enjoyable music from the Alexandria/Prelude/Talisman and there will be systems in which the Alexandria/Prelude/Talisman may be the best choice, with either the recommended felt mat (used without a clamp) or using the groove isolator for more dynamics. It depends on your system and what you want. Of course you should listen with the deck in your selected system before making a decision.

One thing is for certain, though, the Alexandria is one of the best turntables around. No front end is universally ideal and neither the Linn, nor the Alexandria are exceptions. They are both excellent, but very, very different.