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## & Record Review

# MAGIC MUSIC

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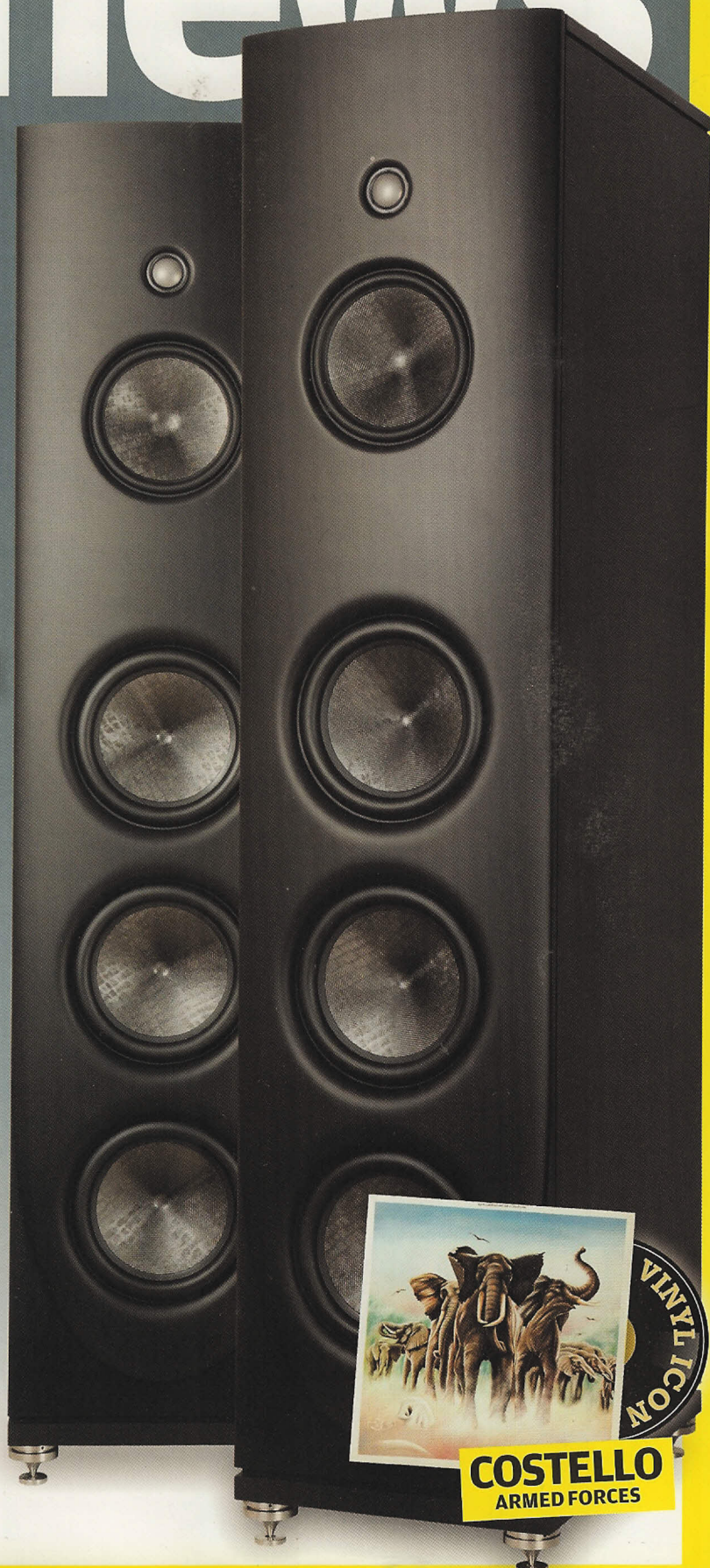
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**Oracle Paris MkV**  
Classic LP deck returns in style



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# Oracle Paris MkV (£4750)

After the exotic Delphi MkVI comes Oracle's updated Paris, a no-fuss complete player, more conventional maybe, but still a beauty with its sculpted plinth shape  
 Review: **Steve Harris** Lab: **Paul Miller**

One of the great analogue brands, Oracle got started in 1979 and survived the American 'turntable wars', which were apparently more vicious than anything we had here. Perhaps being in Canada helped. But above all, Oracle had a really distinctive product.

It was the work of Marcel Riendeau, a philosophy lecturer and musician who'd found himself dissatisfied with existing turntables and decided to make his own. His Oracle Delphi became the turntable of choice for those who wanted a high-end system that looked good.

Not everyone could afford a Delphi, which in the early days cost UK buyers twice as much as a Linn or Pink Triangle [see p114]. The Alexandria, introduced in 1983, looked more conventional but was still quite expensive. But then Oracle came up with a fundamentally simpler design, still with a suspended or decoupled subchassis, but doing away with coil springs. This turntable was named not after Paris, France or even Texas, but after the prince in Greek mythology who caused the Trojan War by abducting Helen. By then it had become the Paris MkIV.

## BUSINESS MATTERS

Things got tougher for high-end turntable makers in the early 1990s, and the business went down in 1994. But Marcel's brother Jacques Riendeau had worked with him at Oracle since the beginning, and in 1995, with some new business partners, he re-started the company. That partnership ended less than happily, with Jacques leaving in 2003. After this, in 2005, Oracle was acquired by Stephane Nadeau, owner of the machine shop that made many parts for the turntable. He kept in touch with Jacques and in March 2009 Jacques bought back into the company with a 49% holding.

With Jacques returning as chief designer, product development started

again, and the first result was the new Delphi MkVI. Work done on the Delphi fed into the new Paris MkV turntable.

One of the main innovations for the Delphi MkVI [HFN Aug '10] was a damping system for the suspension. Silicone-fluid dashpots are fixed to the baseboard inboard of the three suspension towers. Adjustable Delrin plungers attached to the subchassis dip into the fluid, damping the movement of the suspension.

Revisions to the Paris suspension also aimed at better lateral stability. Here the 'semi-floating' subchassis is supported not on metal springs but on two fibreglass rods which terminate in Sorbothane rings. The new design provides better control by using additional Sorbothane rings, and can be adjusted from below for levelling.

The new Paris main bearing is simpler than that of the Delphi MkVI, but uses a similar high-tech material. Its 8mm diameter stainless steel shaft runs in two plain bushings of a high-temperature

engineered thermoplastic called PEEK, which is also used for the thrust pad.

## PLATTER MATTERS

Machined from acrylic, the platter has a central depression which, unlike many others, is actually large enough to clear record labels which stand proud. It fits snugly onto the shaft, on top of the 150mm diameter aluminium subplatter around which the drive belt runs.

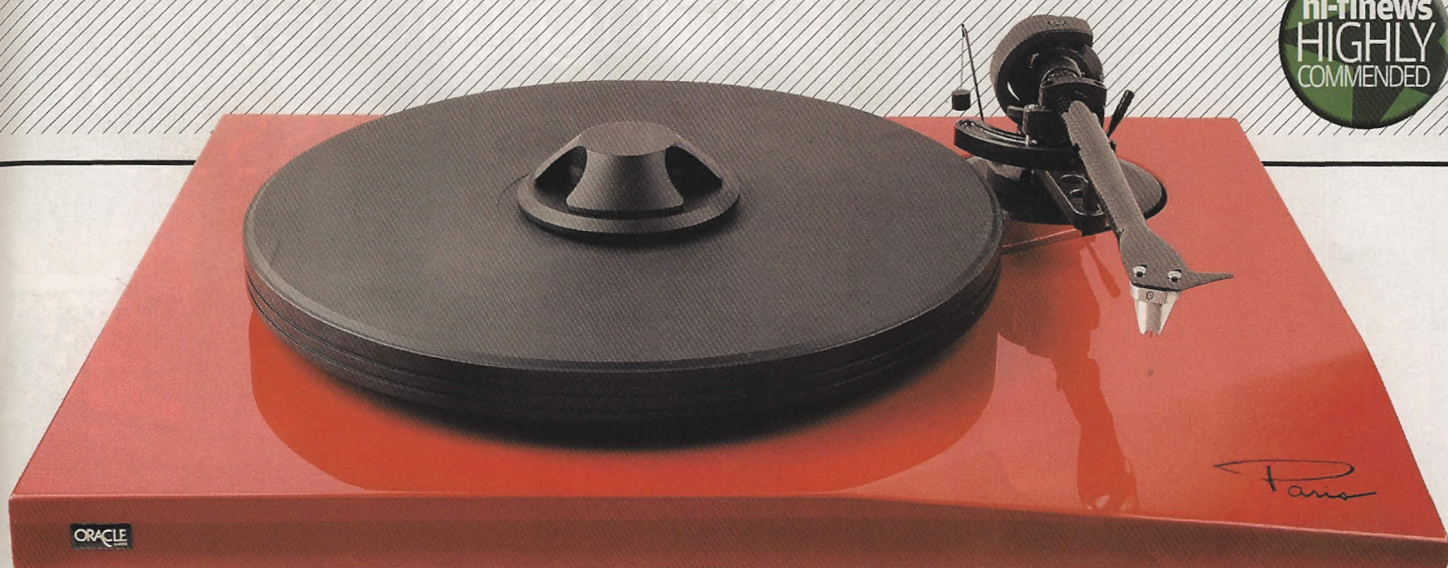
With built-in control electronics and AC motor identical to the Delphi MkVI, speed switching is by a neat pair of push buttons which simply toggle on and off, showing blue-lit indicators for 33.3 or 45, and there are fine speed adjusters at the back. The Paris comes with a compact plug-top 24V power supply, but users can upgrade to the Turbo power supply created for the MkVI.

Supplied with the Paris is a neat screw-down record clamp, a two-part device in Delrin. Since the clamping element does not turn with the screw



**RIGHT:** Oracle's neatly-fitted silicone-fluid damping trough can be seen following the curve of the arm base. A touch on one of the two buttons will start or stop play at 33.3 or 45rpm

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action, it won't mark or damage the record labels. It's a far less brutal device than the original Oracle clamp, which was designed to force the outer part of the record downwards against the platter.

Despite the Oracle Audio name screened on it, the Paris arm is recognisable as a Pro-Ject 9cc (not the 9cc Evolution, which has a beefier bearing yoke). The collaboration was a natural one as Heinz Lichtenegger of Pro-Ject has also been the Oracle distributor in Austria for many years, and Jacques Riendeau says he was really drawn to this arm by the high-tech look of the carbon fibre.

But it's a 9cc with a difference – you might say with shades of SME. Work done on the Delphi VI suspension, and the desire to control unwanted vibration within the subchassis system, led to the concept of applying damping to the arm, not to the suspension. As with the well-known SME damper, an adjustable paddle attached near the back end of the arm tube dips into a curved trough of silicone fluid. Oracle's 'paddle' is a small hex grub screw, and its point only needs to dip very slightly into the shallow trough.

According to Riendeau, 'It takes a very simple arm, and turns it into a stunning arm.' It also gives the user a chance to tweak without damaging anything. You can start from the 'zero' position, where the screw 'paddle' doesn't quite touch the fluid

in the trough, then experiment by lowering it half a turn at a time.

Completing the package is the high-output Oracle Paris moving-coil cartridge. The magnesium-alloy body is made by Oracle, but the source of the cartridge itself is not disclosed. Its rated output of 1.6mV is sufficient for moving-magnet phono stage inputs.

### TANGIBLE IMAGES

Listening started with the complete Paris turntable/arm/cartridge package as supplied. When I kicked off with Albert King's *Live Wire Blues Power* [Stax 1002], the Oracle gave a great presentation of this classic live blues recording from the Fillmore West.

King and his sadly uncredited band members were tangibly placed on stage, and you could marvel at the way bass, drums, rhythm guitar and organ almost whisper behind King, as he works the big auditorium with his mellow, foggy voice, then break out at full power behind him as he launches his impassioned guitar. On the uptempo 'Please Leave Me' they produced a fantastic groove, the drums sounding palpably live.

On one of the seminal direct-cuts, *I Got The Music In Me* [Sheffield Lab LAB-2]

**ABOVE:** Constructed of board in three layers, the plinth comes in red, white, silver or black. A hinged cover is available and custom finishes can also be ordered at extra cost

with Thelma Houston and Pressure Cooker, the Oracle gave a convincing and punchy sound. In the title track it was as if the combination was giving more presence than many players do to the singer's sound, so that now you could really admire the way she held her own in the thick of the busy arrangement. For me, the Oracle revived this album as a 'sonic spectacular'.

Moving on from the 1970s to the late 1980s with *Tracy Chapman* [Elektra 960774-2] and 'Fast Car', the Oracle combination gave a generally bright and open sound, revealing the subtle studio enhancement of the singer's voice and the lively echo sound that seems to energise the drums. The bass was free-sounding and powerful, underpinning the music

well. All this contributed to making the dynamic contrasts effective, particularly the eloquent way this track ends just as quietly as begins.

Turning inevitably to Eric Clapton, I put on *Backless* [RSO Deluxe RSD5001] from 1978. When the solid slow rock of 'Walk Out In The Rain' was followed by the uptempo 'Watch Out For Lucy' it really seemed that the great rhythm team of Radle and Oldaker had changed up a gear and produced a really tremendous beat, with the bass sound coherent and even and the drums full of life.

Midrange detail in the mix was good, with Dick Sims' far-back piano more easily distinguishable than usual from the rhythm guitars. Clapton's vocal, half-buried as always, at least managed to surface with some real character and urgency, while his guitar had all the fire and authority you could wish for. ↻

## THE ORACLE SPEAKS

'If we talk about the looks,' says Jacques Riendeau, 'we kept exactly the same design my brother chose back in 1985. That's pretty well where it stops, though.' In the current Paris, the suspension and bearing have been fundamentally improved, as has the drive. 'We're using 100% of the drive system of the Delphi Mk VI – same board, same motor, same pulley,' adds Jacques. 'Now, my plan had been to re-introduce the Paris and Alexandria. Originally, the Paris was the entry level, Alexandria was the mid, and the Delphi was the top model. But the way we did this screwed up my plan!' Today the Paris sits only below the Delphi in price and performance, and it's understood that a new Alexandria will become the entry-level. Meanwhile, a range of visually-matching Paris electronics is promised, a phono stage being first to appear.

'Gorgeous string tones sang in the resonant acoustic'

## TURNTABLE



**ABOVE:** Signal output is via phono sockets, seen left, DIN connector is for the 24V power supply. Speed trim screws are just visible to the right under the plinth

With Christine Collister's *Love* [Rega ENS 002] the opening 'Time In A Bottle' seemed to take on a slightly too-close perspective, the singer's voice a little forward as if the balance was tilted up a little, though the background vocals were strikingly tangible. I think it's fair to say that the Oracle combination highlighted the oddities of this track, and I found myself enjoying the following 'Mad, Mad Me' more. Here the Oracle seemed to get everything in balance.

With Barbirolli and Elgar, the great *English String Music* recording of 1967 [EMI ASD 521], it was obvious from the first chord of the *Introduction And Allegro* that the Oracle could produce a very satisfying orchestral sound. The music emanated from a convincing acoustic space that had back corners as well as depth in the middle. You could really feel and hear the contribution of the double-basses, and the work's central fugue was very well served by the clear positioning of the opposing strings.

### ANOTHER CARTRIDGE

Naturally I tried other cartridges with the Paris turntable and arm, and got the expected good results with the Benz Micro Glider SL.

With the Sheffield Lab *I Got The Music In Me*, the Benz didn't give the vocal presence exhibited by the Paris cartridge, but still coped well with the often overcrowded soundstage: the brass bright and clean, the background vocals clear and joyful.

On Tracy Chapman's 'Fast Car', there was still a great sense of stereo spread, the accompanying instruments set tangibly around the vocal, which was placed firmly and quite deep into the soundstage, while Chapman's melismatic vocal manner was portrayed with warmth.

The overall effect was smooth and effortless, if perhaps *too* smoothed.

On Clapton's *Watch Out For Lucy*, it seemed that the Benz had everything well under control. It was compulsively easy to follow Carl Radle's brilliant, lithe bass line, and the way it's complemented by the driving offbeat laid down by Jamie Oldaker. Once again, the treble quality was smooth and almost self-effacing, and in this instance I realised that a tweak of the damper was called for.

Barbirolli's *English String Music* showed once again the Oracle's ability to give a fine sense of music heard in a real space. In the Elgar *Introduction And Allegro* the strings of the main group were heard in all their grandeur, with a good feeling of the acoustic, particularly in the depth perspectives.

To be critical, I felt that with the Benz cartridge a little more bass weight would have been welcome, to give an even better sense of scale to the recording venue. But Elgar's lighter *Serenade* was simply delightful: gorgeous string tones singing in the resonant acoustic. ⬇

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

When supplied with arm and cartridge set up at the factory, the Paris combination is a great plug-and-play solution, yet one that also cleverly allows you to tweak to taste by means of the arm damper. Superbly finished, the Paris looks as desirable as Oracle intended, and sounds very good indeed, with excellent stereo imaging and a presentation that's unflagging and musically involving.

Sound Quality: 83%

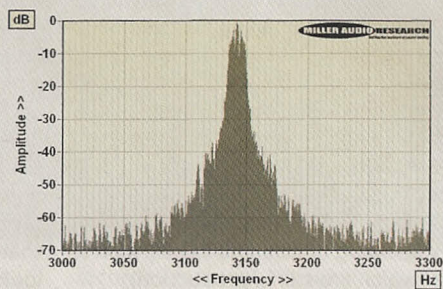


## LAB REPORT

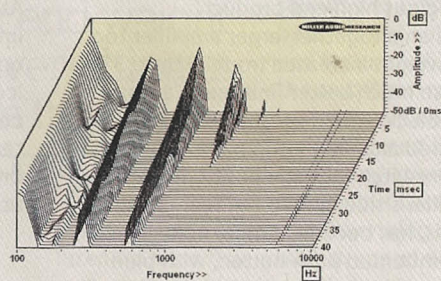
### ORACLE PARIS MkV (£4750)

Free of the  $\pm 60\text{Hz}$  wow that we detected in Oracle's larger Delphi MkVI [HFN Aug '10], the revamped Paris MkV offers a similar peak-weighted W&F of some 0.09% – comprising slightly higher wow, but less flutter. And this despite using the same speed control electronics as the costlier Delphi, and the same low voltage synchronous AC motor. The acrylic platter offers a good termination for LPs, as evidenced by the slight improvement in through-groove rumble from  $-66.6\text{dB}$  to  $-67.0\text{dB}$  with the clamp in place. The bearing is a quality part and yields a superior  $-68.5\text{dB}$  DIN B-weighted rumble, some 1.5dB ahead of the Delphi MkVI but still a few dB short of the state-of-the-art delivered by top decks from SME, Pro-Ject and Clearaudio. Start-up time is a slick 4 seconds.

Oracle's addition to Pro-Ject's carbon-tubed tonearm – a clamp around the top of the tube connected to a paddle dipped into a silicone oil bath – brings tremendous benefits. This cannot hold the cartridge itself in such splendid isolation as the headshell-mounted paddle employed all these years by Townshend, but it does rather successfully dampen-out many of those high-Q resonances that accompany the 9cc/Evolution tube and its attachments [HFN Jun '10]. Now vastly 'cleaned-up', the main tube resonance is revealed at  $\sim 270\text{Hz}$  followed by the same  $\sim 560\text{Hz}$  and  $\sim 1.02\text{kHz}$  harmonics on the waterfall plot [see Graph 2, below]. All higher frequency and mid-bass frequency modes are all but eliminated – a fantastic result. Readers are invited to view a full QC Suite report for the Oracle Paris MkV turntable and tonearm by navigating to [www.hifinews.com](http://www.hifinews.com) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



**ABOVE:** Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted  $\pm 150\text{Hz}$ , 5Hz per minor division). Note the mild, discrete wow at  $\pm 5\text{Hz}$



**ABOVE:** Cumulative tonearm resonant decay spectrum, illustrating various bearing, pillar and tube vibration modes spanning 100Hz-10kHz over 40msec

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|                                      |                   |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm    | 33.26rpm (-0.22%) |
| Time to audible stabilisation        | 4sec              |
| Peak Wow/Flutter                     | 0.06% / 0.03%     |
| Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)    | $-67.0\text{dB}$  |
| Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)  | $-68.5\text{dB}$  |
| Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec) | $-53.4\text{dB}$  |
| Power Consumption                    | 5W                |
| Dimensions (WHD)                     | 490x200x370mm     |