

ANALOG CORNER

BY MICHAEL FREMER

An iron plinth for Technics SP10s new and old

Last May I got a text message from my vinyl-loving electrician: “Hey Michael, I’m listening to WFMU and a young 12 year old analog genius is guest DJ-ing, Malachi Lui. He mentioned you, and talks about mastering and pressings—he’s incredible. I imagine he’s been in touch with you. Hope all is well, Craig.”

Malachi hadn’t been in touch, but his comments were all over AnalogPlanet’s YouTube channel,¹ and you’d never know they were from a 12-year-old. I responded to one, and shortly thereafter I heard from his mother, who said he *really* wanted to meet me, and that they’d drive over when it was convenient for me.

We set up a day and time just before Independence Day. I readied my video camera, in case the encounter proved worthy of YouTube. If you haven’t watched the video, please do.² I guarantee it will make your day, no matter how good your day is already going.

After that encounter, a generous reader sent me a Rega P3 to give to Malachi, which I surprised him with during a return visit.³ And Robert Marino of Athena Productions, a pioneer of vinyl reissues I’d not heard from in decades, was moved to send the kid a box of great records.

In the second video, Malachi references Howlin’ Wolf and Captain Beefheart, along with Jack White, whose label, Third Man Records, recently reissued Beefheart’s *Trout Mask Replica* (1969) on vinyl. Shortly after the second visit, Malachi and his family moved to Portland, Oregon. The man who’d sent the Rega table mentioned that Jack White was going to play Portland; I checked with Malachi’s mother, and found out that they planned to attend.

So a surprise backstage visit with Jack White was arranged. It wasn’t difficult—White had seen the video, and he, too, had been bowled over by Malachi’s references to Howlin’ Wolf and Beefheart. The turntable benefactor—a Grammy-nominated music supervisor based in L.A.—texted that White was “psyched” to meet Malachi, adding that his kids were “already a bit jealous because Jack talks about him so much.” Probably a bit of hyperbole, but not much more than a bit, I’m sure.

The caption for the photo of the backstage encounter on White’s Ins-

tagram account (officialjackwhitelive) reads, “Jack is telling Malachi that he is the future of audiophile sacred music appreciation.” That’s not quite accurate. Malachi is the *present* of audiophile sacred music appreciation.

Because now Malachi is writing for AnalogPlanet, reviewing records and equipment and being paid the going rate. His review of Jack White’s *Boarding House Reach* is perceptive,⁴ his writing clean and well punctuated. But when he asked if he could review John Coltrane’s *Both Directions at Once: The Lost Album*, I balked. “Come on, Malachi—you’re 12 years old.”

Read the review.⁵ I suggested that he add a section outlining the albums Coltrane was releasing even as he left this one in the vault, and Malachi turned it in the next day. But the words are all his, with scarcely an edit. It reads as if written by an erudite 45-year-old—or, as one well-known record producer pushing 70 texted, “Damn, that’s what I would have written!” He then added: “If I could have been guaranteed a kid like that, I’d have had kids!”

Malachi’s parents, who are fully involved in and supportive of all of this, have provided me with a far more balanced picture of this precocious youngster, whom my wife describes as “an old soul.” When I told them that, on the phone and in the videos, he’s a sweet, bubbly kid, but in e-mail communications he sometimes sounds like a busy, middle-aged business executive, his mom said, “That’s him!”

How good is this kid? In September, I wrote and published a story that included links to 24-bit/96kHz

needle drops of the same music, played using the same turntable, cartridge, and phono preamplifier, but switching among Swedish Analog Technologies’ original tonearm (over \$30,000) and their more recent, lower-cost LM-09 (\$25,400) and CF1-09 (\$48,000) models.⁶ I invited readers to listen to the files and state their preferences and why, and to try to guess which file was recorded with which arm. I also posted a file recorded using the same music, cartridge, and phono preamp, but with a “mystery” turntable and tonearm.

The next day, Malachi responded. He’d correctly matched every file with the tonearm I’d used to record it, and his descriptions of each arm’s sound eerily matched my own. (My review of the SAT CF1-09⁷ had not yet been published, and he hadn’t read my review of the LM-09⁸ because his complimentary subscription to *Stereophile* hadn’t begun). I told him by return e-mail that he was “the real deal!” He responded that he’d made the correct identifications in study hall, using his iPad speaker!

Malachi’s family and their friends have told me how fortunate he is to have me as a mentor, but really—to have this remarkable yet selfless young man appear at this juncture of my life and career makes me think that I’m the lucky one. Joy has replaced the sadness experienced over the losses, in rapid succession, of Dave Wilson of Wilson Audio Specialties, Wally Malewicz of WAM Engineering, and loudspeaker maven Siegfried Linkwitz.

Back to those needle drops and

1 See www.youtube.com/user/21stCenturyVinyl.

2 See <https://youtu.be/HVzBWLGF9gc>.

3 See <https://youtu.be/dUscoreK0To>.

4 See www.analogplanet.com/content/jack-whites-latests-album-excellent-case-you-missed-it.

5 See www.analogplanet.com/content/docs-“lost“-coltrane-album-live-hype.

6 See www.analogplanet.com/content/listen-sats-original-pickup-arm-and-compare-it-new-lm-09-and-cf1-09.

7 See “Analog Corner” in the November 2018 issue.

8 See “Analog Corner” in the October 2018 issue.

those unidentified tonearms: Most responders, including Malachi, noted that the “mystery” file didn’t sound as good as the rest, particularly in terms of background “blackness” and its overall soft sound. I produced that file

with a Technics SL-1000R turntable—the one I reviewed in the November 2018 *Stereophile* and that’s pictured on that issue’s cover. I wrote in that review that the star of the SL-1000R—an assemblage of the company’s new

perfectionist-quality SP-10R motor unit with plinth and tonearm—was probably the SP-10R itself, though at the time that was just conjecture, as there was no way to judge each individually.

OMA SP10 PLINTH SYSTEM

Specialty audio manufacturer Oswalds Mill Audio, aka OMA, makes tubed electronics, horn loudspeakers, and, for well over a decade now, high-mass turntable plinths.⁹ Most of these plinths are made of slate, but recently OMA has produced an iron plinth specifically designed for Technics’ SP-10R and earlier SP10MK2 and SP10MK3 direct-drive turntables.

The SP10 Plinth System is a single sand casting of hypoeutectic or “gray” iron.¹⁰ This is not your grandmother’s cast-iron skillet melted down and poured into a plinth mold, but a more recent development. Gray iron combines high mass with exceptional rigidity and vibration-damping properties. On the SP10 plinth’s underside is a web of cast chambers, each filled with a vibration-damping polymer. The casting is CNC-machined to

precisely fit the SP10’s chassis as well as an opening for removable armboards, which OMA CNC-machines from torrefied (*ie*, thermally modified) Pennsylvania ash wood. (Torrefaction involves heating the wood in the absence of oxygen, which removes from it residual water and volatiles, to produce a material with no biological activity—*ie*, it will never rot or soften.)

OMA claims that torrefying ash wood produces a material that is both extremely dimensionally stable—it won’t warp or swell or shrink with changes in temperature and/or humidity—and has “superior acoustical properties.” The armboards can accept tonearms with pivot-to-spindle distances of 9” to 12” or longer, and can be precisely swapped out in minutes.

Holes in the plinth’s feet are tapped for M6 hardware. OMA supplies “basic leveling feet,” but of course your every

footer fantasy can easily be fulfilled. The plinth, available in clear lacquer or black powder, weighs 110 lb *not* including the turntable, and it’s big: 26 1/8” wide by 4 1/8” high by 20 3/8” deep. The price has yet to be determined but will be under \$10,000, which means that the combined price with SP-10R turntable will be under \$20,000.

OMA’s Jonathan Weiss hoisted the plinth, fitted with an armboard for a Schröder CB tonearm, atop my Harmonic Resolution Systems M3 isolation base. I set up the CB (the initials stand for captive bearing) arm, with which I’m well familiar—it’s the same Thrax-built arm supplied with the Döhmman Helix 1 turntable—and installed an Ortofon MC Century

⁹ See www.stereophile.com/artdudleylistening/listening_93/index.html.

¹⁰ See www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0924013612000337.



cartridge. This particular Schröder CB was 9" long, with an armtube of carbon fiber instead of the more typical ebony, grenadilla, or cocobolo wood.

The Schröder CB arm costs \$6500. Add the costs of the SP-10R and OMA plinth and you're listening to a package costing about \$26,000. Add \$465 for OMA's graphite mat, machined from high-grade, polycrystalline graphite,

OMA's SP10 Plinth System is a single sand casting of hypoeutectic or "gray" iron.

not the more usual amorphous carbon (graphite dust in resin).

Lower the stylus into the groove

and perform a "tap test" with this combo and you'll know the meaning of *dead*. The OMA plinth was one super energy sink. Tapping the HRS base or the plinth itself only *occasionally* produced the faintest impulse through my speakers.

The Sound of Deep, Dark, and Luxurious

Having spun in the preceding weeks many dozens of LPs on the SP-10R-equipped SL-1000R, I had certain sonic expectations, few of which were met. The one that was met was that the SP-10R's solid grip on pitch and speed stability was limited only by each record's concentricity or eccentricity.

Beyond that, all else was different and far superior to the sound of the SL-1000R, especially the certainty and clarity of instrumental attacks and image three-dimensionality and stability, behind which were velvet-"black" backgrounds that I can describe only as serene—they rivaled, if not equaled, those of the Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn, which the SL-1000R had been incapable of producing. The overall sound was very similar to what I remember from my first, memorable listening session with the Caliburn 13

years ago, which immediately set it apart from every other turntable I'd ever owned or listened to.

Cradled in the highly damped energy sink that is OMA's SP10 plinth, the SP-10R produced speed-stability-based sonic serenity *and* intense excitement as music poured forth from the "blackest" backdrops.

How good was it? I don't mean to pick on the Ikeda 9Gss cartridge but with it installed in the SAT CF1-09 arm mounted on the Continuum Caliburn 'table, and the Ortofon MC Century in the Schröder CB arm on the Technics SP-10R with OMA plinth, the latter combo's sound was *clearly* superior—something both I and Jonathan Weiss heard, as became clear as soon as we switched between them

and exclaimed about the improvement simultaneously.

Later, swapping cartridges between the two 'tables demonstrated that what we'd really been hearing was the MC Century's superior transparency, image specificity, precision of transient attacks, dynamic expression, and most other aspects of sound. The sounds of the 'tables themselves, with their respective tonearms, though not identical, were more similar than different. This let both cartridges fully reveal their strengths—and, in the case of the Ikeda 9Gss, its deficiencies relative to its competitors at the \$10,000+ price point.

Next, I reinstalled the MC Century in the Schröder CB and the Lyra Atlas SL in the SAT, compared them, then swapped them back *again*. Yes, a lot

of work! While the Lyra Atlas SL and Ortofon MC Century sound different, and the Schröder (\$6500) isn't the sonic equal of the SAT CF1-09 (\$48,000), the playing field was now more level.

I concluded that, were my reference front end to disappear, I could happily live with the Schröder CB on the Technics SP-10R on the OMA SP10 plinth. Though its sound was somewhat harder and more austere, it was also rhythmically taut and, overall, "together" from top to bottom. Its bass wasn't as texturally supple or as muscular, attacks were slightly sharp, and sustains and decays were stingy. I thought back to Weiss's remark that he preferred Schröder's wooden-tubed CB arms . . .

SWEDISH ANALOG TECHNOLOGIES' CF1-12 TONEARM ARRIVES

With SAT's 12"-long CF1-12 arm installed in place of the Schröder CB, there was one fewer variable in the comparison, though SAT designer Marc Gomez says his 9" and 12" arms don't sound identical, and that he, like some other tonearm designers, prefers his 9" arm for its superior in-the-groove dynamic behavior. Like other designers, Gomez makes the longer arm to meet the needs of his customers—such as those who own Air Force turntables, on which the installation of a second tonearm requires one 12" long.

I hesitate to call adding the 12" SAT arm to this mix "the icing on the cake"—at \$53,000, that's some pricey frosting, and *frosty* hardly describes the change in sound.

Compared to the Schröder CB's super-tight, well-organized, but somewhat mechanical sound, the CF1-12 produced a more explosive, a warmer, and definitely a fuller sound that

resulted with smoother, more natural attacks, more generous sustain, longer decay, and the bottom-end wallop and control I'd noted in my review of the CF1-09 last November.

I immediately heard better resolution of fine detail, especially at the rear of the soundstage, with *Cousins: Polkas, Waltzes & Other Entertainments for Cornet & Trombone*, with cornetist Gerard Schwarz, trombonist Ronald Barron, and pianist Kenneth Cooper (LP, Nonesuch H-71341)—and also from the *Ataulfo Argenta Edition* (6 LPs, Alto Analogue AA006). (It's interesting how records can sit unplayed on a shelf for a decade or more—and then I can't stop playing them!) In Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*, with Argenta conducting the National Orchestra of Spain, the CF1-12 put soloist Narciso Yepes's finely focused guitar well in front of the orchestra, with believable string attacks and guitar-body sustain, but with none of the milky overlay produced by lesser tonearms, including the one Technics supplies with

the SL-1000R. The CB got attacks just about right, but a bit sharp, and skimped on the sustains and decays. Overall, the SAT CF1-12 produced a sound that was similar to that of the 9" CF1-09, but somewhat fuller in the lower midbass.

The power supply of my Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn turntable is starting to fail, and its oil pump has a very slow leak. Should that \$150,000 system (the price includes Continuum's Cobra tonearm, no longer in use) give up the ghost after 13 years of dependable, trouble-free use and abuse from me, I could *definitely* live happily with the *aa*-\$20,000 combo of Technics SP-10R and OMA SP10 plinth with OMA graphite mat (though I'd sorely miss the Caliburn's vacuum hold-down)—and, of course, that replacement system would have to include a SAT CF1 arm. I don't think I've written that about any other turntable that's been here since the summer of 2005.

DOSHI AUDIO V3.0 PHONO STAGE

Nick Doshi's handsome and compact V3.0 phono stage (\$16,995) is one of a series of tubed products from Doshi Audio that include line and tape preamps as well as power amps. It's always sounded smooth and refined in difficult audio-show conditions.

The V3.0 update of the hybrid Phono Stage includes convenient microprocessor remote-control functionality. Its moving-coil circuit includes a J-FET transistor differential input that

provides 26dB of gain, followed by a pair of monaural step-*down* transformers that lower the gain by 6dB.

Nick Doshi says that using the transformers to step down rather than up produces three major benefits: it provides pre-preamp galvanic isolation from the rest of the circuit; it converts the cartridge's inherently balanced input (no reference to ground) to single-ended, which allows the use of his "Zero-Feedback" tube circuit; and it steps down the impedance 4:1, thus

increasing bandwidth.

The V3.0's tube complement is: two dual-triode ECC83/12AX7s for the first gain stage, two ECC81/12AT7s for EQ/buffering, and two 12DW7s for the final gain stage and line-out buffering. Doshi provides either NOS or OS tubes, and encourages buyers to swap out tubes as desired. I listened using the supplied tubes.

The V3.0 Phono Stage's gain is 50dB into either MM input, and 72dB into the single MC input. Hum and noise



are specified as “at least 80dB below 0dBV.”

A total of 512 cartridge loadings, from 10 ohms to 10k ohms, are selectable via the front panel or the hefty remote control’s unlabeled pushbuttons. Both front panel and remote include a switch for reversing absolute phase.

Other features include a large, massive, outboard power supply connected via an umbilical to the main enclosure, which is made of 14-gauge stainless steel damped with a top plate of solid Corian. Inside are vibration-isolation grommets for the circuit board and Teflon tube sockets fitted with gold-plated copper contacts, transformers custom-made in the US by the Toroid Corporation, and custom IW Clarity-Cap coupling capacitors.

Super-quiet, ultra-transparent

I’m not sure why some phono preamps are free of hum as soon as I plug them in, while others just never stop humming. Doshi’s V3.0 Phono Stage was one of the quiet ones. I think the J-FET/tube combo makes complete sense.

Aural memories are supposed to be short, but the first time I heard the Doshi V3.0 at home, I was reminded of what had attracted me to the built-in phono stage of Hovland’s HP-100 preamplifier, which I reviewed in the November 2000 issue.¹¹ I’ve just reread that review for the first time in almost 20 years, and it perfectly describes the Doshi’s sound, especially on top: Like the Hovland HP-100, the Doshi V3.0 “served the ebb and flow of music . . . It breathed music with a rare effortless-ness, perfectly balancing tube warmth and solid-state clarity while moving dynamically up and down the scale in both large and small steps with exceptional continuity and cohesiveness.”

The Doshi’s star quality was its ability to unravel upper-octave information and reproduce it with finely dialed-in transient clarity and speed, all completely free of edginess, etch, or grain. It was these qualities that so reminded me of what the Hovland did so well.

The Doshi hasn’t got the midrange creaminess of the Ypsilon VPS-100, or the Audio Research REF Phono 3’s almost sinful overall richness, or the slam and low-frequency drive of the CH Precision P1/X1 (two of which are far more costly)—but plug in a rich-sounding cartridge with super-low output, like the Ortofon MC Century I mostly used with the Doshi, and \$16,995 will buy you a taut, fast, exciting, well-detailed ride on every kind of music. I’m out of room, but if your phono-preamp budget stretches that far, do consider the Doshi. It was clear to me that it was designed by an electrical engineer who loves music, and who listened as he smartly designed. ■

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analogical.

¹¹ See www.stereophile.com/tubepreamps/291/index.html.

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