

A vintage turntable and a modern tonearm - cartridge combination; does that work?

by Martin Faßnacht, in spring 2025

How wishes come true.

What began as a non-binding listening session of top turntables during visits to dealers, distributors and trade fairs took a sudden turn over the course of last year. During the comparisons, the expensive tonearms from PrimaryControl unexpectedly became the focus of my interest. In addition to the upcoming replacement of my previous cartridge.

Replacing my Lyra Etna with its successor, the Lyra Etna Lambda, didn't cause me any major headaches. I had already experienced this rocker among the Lyra cartridges several times in demonstrations. Its pithy, full-bodied, lively and yet high-resolution nature predestines the Etna Lambda not only for rock, but also for my large classical LP collection, especially for piano recordings and "everything with voice".

I was already more concerned about buying a new tonearm. For many years I had not reacted uneasily when new turntable-tonearm combinations were presented to me. My successful combination of Platine Verdier and Naim Aro played too well at home: on the one hand the stoic calmness of the Verdier, on the other the liveliness of the Aro (30 years ago an underestimated killer of "reference tonearms" such as Linn Ekos and SME V). Now, confronted with PrimaryControl's top two tonearms, the FCL and the Gravity, alternately mounted on a TechDAS Air Force V Premium and a PrimaryControl Kinea, for the first time I heard more and more accurate musically relevant information than with the home system. Oh!

However, both the TechDAS and PrimaryControl turntables are modern designs, whereas I have a vintage turntable at home that I didn't want to replace. Would the outstanding sound impression also be achieved with the daring combination of the Verdier and a PrimaryControl tonearm? The unquestionably best PrimaryControl tonearm, the FCL, is so extreme, so excessively expensive, that it was out of the question for me. The only slightly lower resolution and only a touch less explosive, but otherwise just as good, Gravity is still expensive as hell, but would somehow still be affordable for me. So I had every reason to be restless ...

From wish to reality

The crucial question remained: would the installation of the Gravity on my Verdier circuit board fit? To clarify this, Thomas Fast came to my music room twice, the second time even assisted by a precision mechanic friend. There were also several exchanges with Bernd Hemmen, the man behind the company name PrimaryControl, who himself had no experience of installing his tonearms on a Verdier. The technical clarification finally revealed that the previous brass base (presumably MS 58) could be reused with a new bore. However, the previous wooden block between the stone Verdier surface and the brass base had to be replaced by a flatter beechwood block due to the changed tonearm height. To prevent two metals, the aluminum foot of the Gravity and the brass base, from coming into direct contact, a precisely fitting, wafer-thin paper interlayer was provided between them. This meant that nothing stood in the way of ordering the Gravity plus Etna Lambda. The Gravity is normally built in lengths between 9.5 inches and 12 inches. For installation on my Verdier board, however, even the 9.5-inch version was a little too long, as there is no space on my Gütte support to the right of the drive to swivel the brass base. That's why Bernd Hemmen built a 234 mm long, slightly shortened version (equivalent to 9.2 inches) for me. No problem, as all Primary Control tonearms are custom-made.

After a waiting period of almost 3 months, Thomas Fast arrived at my home and took around 4 hours to carefully install and adjust the new base, new tonearm and new stylus. As a rather impatient person, I am always fascinated by the care with which Thomas Fast works.

Visual and tactile impressions

In purely visual terms, the new combination of beech wood block, freshly polished brass base, Mosambique ebony tonearm and black and gold pickup is almost too beautiful for the rather rustic exterior of the Platine Verdier.

Compared to the Naim Aro, which offers the user no resistance when moving, the Gravity does not offer the same buttery smoothness when moving from

its resting position to the desired position on an LP. Even rotary tonearms with very good ball bearings, such as an AMG12JT or a Rega RB-3000, can be moved more smoothly.

The Gravity-Lift, on the other hand, is a dream in terms of smoothness. Changing the lift height, adjusting the magnetic anti-skating, setting the

support weight and adjusting the VTA are just as uniquely precise and coherent in operation.

While with the Aro I never had the idea of adjusting the vertical tracking height of the tonearm depending on the thickness of a record, with the Gravity's rotary wheel this can be done sensitively depending on the LP, but also on personal listening taste. My starting position with normal-thick records was between 7 and 8 o'clock. As I'm not a child gamer, but a music listener, I only use this option in exceptional cases.

The DIN socket for the freely selectable tonearm cable provides just the right mix of secure contact and easy handling when plugged in. A Schnerzinger Essential Line was initially used as the tonearm cable for the Tom Evans Mastergroove SR phono preamplifier, which was then replaced by a Lyra Phonopipe after further tests with other cables, at least for the time being. Gravity and Etna Lambda invite you to make sound comparisons. My search is not over at this point. But that's another story ...

Listening impressions

If I mention neutrality first and foremost here, it sounds unspectacular. But for me, the natural reproduction of human voices and acoustic instruments is the most important characteristic of every component in my system. The previous tonearm-cartridge duo had already spoiled me, but the sound that comes out of my Quad ESL-2912 and Velodyne DD-12 Plus speaker-subwoofer combination with the two newly installed components is quite simply the best reproduction of human voices that I have ever heard.

Konstantin Wecker: "Meine Frau wollte heute ausgehen" (Polydor-DoLP "Live")

Wecker begins quite harmlessly and casually, but then he lends his voice a quiet fury, revealing his suppressed anger. It bursts out of him aggressively and loudly, you experience his emotional build-up, the angry emphasis of individual words, the escalation to open hostility, until at the end you can recognize quiet satisfaction and a maliciously satisfied smile because of his wife's silent capitulation.

On the same side of the LP, there is an intensification of the emotional rage speech: "Habemus papam", fitting for the three-popes summer of 1978, a vicious reckoning with the Catholic Church, delivered with the voice of a true demagogue. I have never experienced Konstantin Wecker

in a better, more natural way when it comes to tracing the characteristics of his voice.

Carla Bruni: Carla Bruni (Teorema-LP)

This also applies to the completely different voice of the Italo-French singer Carla Bruni: you can hear her limited vocal range, the soft, enticing bedroom voice, which is careful not to pronounce any hard consonants. She seems a little short of breath with the slight excess of breathiness. You can hear that this voice, which is fascinating despite its character traits, was given a lot of help in the studio. Live on stage, some of this charm is lost (compare via YouTube). On the other hand, the background music on the LP is very discreet with just a few instruments and does not distract from the essentials, namely this seductive voice.

Georg Kreisler: "Lied für Kärntner Männerchor" (Intercord-DoLP "Everblacks Zwei")

I have the impression that for the first time I can really hear all of the diverse vocal means Kreisler uses here for his black humor. These are just a few examples: Cheerfully exultant in "Hoch droben auf den schneebedeckten Almen", full-throated in "tönt aus jungen frischen Kehlen", compassionate in "Armes einäugiges Elschen", cutting in "sie will ihren Veit dort stabchen", jubilant in "im Dunkeln hielt sie Jochen für ein Schwein", relishing the atrocity in "will doch ihr Kind dort verkaufen", heartbreakingly vibrating in "traf sie in das Herz", cheerful as in a children's song "Käferchen, Bienchen und Gelschen" and at the end juicy satirical in "einen Psalm".

Great singer, very well recorded, perfectly rendered.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Don Giovanni, Carlo Maria Giulini conducts the Philharmonia Orchestra (EMI-LP)

The precise differentiation of the low male voices of Don Giovanni (Eberhard Wächter), Leporello (Giuseppe Taddei) and the Commendatore (Gottlob Frick) draws me as a listener directly into the first scene of Act 1, as if I were in the opera house. It's like a virtual reality with purely acoustic means. Simply fabulous.

Ludwig van Beethoven: Diabelli Variations

Friedrich Gulda (MPS-LP) and Alfredo Perl (Audite-LP)

Piano lovers who like to compare recordings by different pianists will be delighted here: With Gravity and Etna Lambda, they can follow at close quarters how Gulda's motoric, rhythmically compelling recording from

1970 in Hans Georg Brunner-Schwer's studio sounds with this special, immediate but disembodied recording technique and how much more serene Alfredo Perl's interpretation of Beethoven's variations of the simple Diabelli Waltz with its many different nuances is and how much more natural the Audite recording from the Sendesaal Bremen, made in 2021, sounds.

Mop Mop: "Jua Kiss" and "Let I go" (Agogo LP "Isle of Magic")

I like to use LPs with a lot of percussion to assess coarse and fine dynamics. Call me a neurotic or a fetishist, but you only have to listen to the resolution of the high sound components in the many percussion instruments to hear the superiority of analog sampling over the Qobuz stream and even more so the CD playback of the two tracks. In addition, the second track features beautifully dark, perfectly full beats on the low percussion instruments and the preaching voice of Anthony Joseph.

What about spatiality, localization and spatial information? In other words: how well are singers, instruments or sound events in general arranged in all three dimensions, width, depth and height, and what do you hear about the room in which the recording was made (always assuming that such information is available on the record)?

Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 1 in D major (Decca LP/Reson/Speakers Corner repressing, London Symphony Orchestra, Georg Solti)

Wonderful orchestral colors, widely spread out like a rainbow, the low sounds standing richly in space, tender tones and wildly effervescent violence in excessive dynamics - Georg Solti has the London Symphony Orchestra celebrate all of this. Unlike in many of his other recordings, Solti does not have to seek out and exaggerate effects here - the effects are already recorded in the notes by Gustav Mahler. For example, the sudden opening of the last movement. When you hear the beginning of the first movement, you know where the pioneers of electronic pop music such as Klaus Schulze and Tangerine Dream drew inspiration for their early works. The way in which the simple but alienated "Brother Jacob" motif in the third movement moves from the timpani to the double bass, then to the bassoon and cellos, as in a canon, is also great art, and is then gradually taken up by other instruments as a funeral march and then spun out in an almost folk-musical manner. In this exemplary transparent Decca recording, all musical parameters are audible: worthy of reference. In addition, my Reson/Speakers Corner repressing is exemplary. And the reproduction leaves nothing to be desired.

“O virgo splendens and “Stella splendens“ from the EMI LP “Llibre Vermell de Montserrat” (Jordi Savall conducts his ensemble Hesperion XX and several choirs and instrumental ensembles)

Acoustically, we are in the middle of a church. A small, bright church bell rings briefly in the upper left corner. Somewhere clearly in the background a cock crows. Then, far back in the choir room, a small choir of monks intones the Gregorian chant “O virgo splendens”. The individual voices do not blur into one another, but can be clearly distinguished. The volume is not uniform, but fluctuates.

After the last word of the choir has faded away, the sounds of a glockenspiel and ancient string instruments can suddenly be heard much further forward in the church, before a large choir of children's, women's and men's voices, lined up directly behind the instruments, begins the simple, hypnotic canon “Stella splendens” very loudly. The choral sound can spread far and wide in the large stone church interior.

With the best listening equipment, you can immerse yourself completely in this strange, archaic sound world of the 14th century.

According to the acoustic impressions and the photos in the booklet, the recording did not take place in the magnificent church of the Montserrat monastery. I have not found any more detailed information. Warning: The new version available on YouTube with a few singers (also conducted by Jordi Savall) is also beautiful, but does not reach the intensity of the old LP recording.

*Eagles: “Victim of Love” (Asylum LP “Hotel California”)
(this is not about the title track, which is so often misused for listening tests ...)*

Instruments and voice are nicely separated from each other across the virtual stereo width. You can hear that the bell on the far right is struck a little higher vertically. There is no imaging in the depth of the room.

Dr. Feelgood: “I don’t wanna know” (United Artists-LP “Be seeing you”) Lee Brilleaux's voice as well as the drums, electric guitar and bass: everything clusters in the stereo center between the speakers, massive, compact and uncompromising. Fine details? Spatial depth? What is that supposed to be ...?

But that doesn't change the fact that this LP is a great blues-rock, pub-rock, punk-rock or whatever-rock record that I like to put on again and again.

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Brief conclusion on the subject of spatiality & co:

Gravity and Lambda show how an LP was recorded and don't invent any 2D or 3D effects.

When I bought the Naim Aro many years ago, I was aware that a Linn Ekos could simply be even more merciless in the bass, a little harder and deeper and more precise in the frequency range. Installed on the Verdier board, this minimal weakness of the Aro no longer played a role, I never had the feeling that something might be missing. Now with the Gravity I know better how menacingly deep, gripping, juicy and full or dry as dust bass can sound:

With:

Sevdaliza: "Oh my God" (Music on Vinyl-LP "Shabrang")

I hear these extremely deep, powerful and loud synthetic basses, which stand in stark contrast to Sevdaliza's equally artificial baby voice.

It doesn't go quite as deep into the frequency cellar with

Propellerheads: "Take California" (Wall of Sound-LP

"Decksanddrumsandrockandroll").

Instead, the hard-hitting rhythmic steam hammer of this LP rolls over me. It even sounds violent over my electrostatic-subwoofer combination.

Jazzkantine: Jazzkantine (RCA-DoLP)

The wonderfully wild mixture of German rap, DJ gimmicks, hard beats, jazz horns and in some places a female choir sounds completely clear and smooth. And if you want it to sound a little fatter, you can turn the VTA dial.

Whether large PA or horn speakers would not be the better choice for this music is a matter for others to discuss.

What I find almost more fascinating is the combination's ability to bring details to my attention that I hadn't noticed before with my older LPs, although of course they were always there:

Beatles: "Hey Jude" (Apple LP "Hey Jude")

Incredible String Band: "A very cellular Song" (Elektra LP "The Hangman's beautiful Daughter")

In the Beatles hit, for example, the careful treatment of the cymbals by Ringo Starr.

Or the exotic, drug-inspired folk weirdness of the Incredible String Band: barrel organ, violin, weird, sometimes polyphonic vocals, hand clapping

because harpsichord, flute and hand drum, then again full folk instruments including jew's harp, the whole thing rearranged again and again for 13 minutes. Under the supervision of star producer Joe Boyd, the LP was recorded with outstanding transparency for the time (1968).

The recording characteristics of my records are therefore wonderfully presented, regardless of whether they are from the 1960s or the new millennium. This is exactly how I imagine listening to LPs in my music room at home.

An improvement is only indirectly related to the sound: The Gravity is not as easy to upset as the Aro: At the beginning of the A-side of the Geffen LP "Shooting Rubberbands at the Stars" by Edie Brickell & New Bohemians, on the beautifully jittery track "What I am", the old tonearm was only too happy to follow the treble beat present there, with the consequence that the stylus involuntarily jumped a few millimeters inwards. Even with my AFI flat record iron, I was unable to repair this pressing error on the LP. The new Gravity/Etna Lambda combination makes the pitch fluctuation clearly audible at this point, but does not jump. This could justifiably be called improved tracking reliability.

Review and outlook

My steep learning curve: Despite initial skepticism, combining a vintage turntable of the quality of a Verdier platter with a modern world-class tonearm was the right decision. Yes, Verdier owners who use their beloved turntable with a Denon DL-103 on a tonearm that is at least as old (typically a heavy 12-inch beater) know the emotional content of their LPs. But they are not exploiting the potential of their still world-class turntable: Together with the Gravity and the Lyra Lambda, you can elicit significantly more musically relevant information from records than with Cold War-era designs.

Just to put the total price of the PrimaryControl Gravity plus Lyra Etna Lambda in perspective: For that amount of money, I could have fulfilled another dream - owning one of the high-tech racing bikes that the world's best racers use to compete in the Tour de France. After buying an S-Works Tarmac SL8 from Specialized, the budget would even have been enough for a training camp in Tenerife ...

After buying the PrimaryControl Gravity and the Lyra Etna Lambda, I just have to make do with sitting in my music room on a cheaper racing bike after a ride in my home country and immersing myself in the musical world of my records with complete satisfaction. I have never heard them better. A supposed quote from the pianist Krystian Zimerman describes it best: "Sound is not everything, it's just a catalyst for music".