

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



Consonance Wax Engine & Charisma Eco

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OK. So turntables are still the ‘new kid on the block’ after all this time, and still the debates rage regarding whether they should be suspended, rigidly mounted, plinth or no plinth, belt, idler or direct drive... But let’s face it, as with speaker types, or your preferred music to listen to, it’s whether a particular approach suits how you want to access your vinyl collection that matters most. Forget fashion, whether it comes in red, blue or any other colour, has a lid (or not), or is mains or battery powered, and concentrate on whether it floats your musical boat.

The Wax Engine is a minimalist turntable, built around a substantial L/T-shaped chassis. Although comprised of essentially square- or rectangular-section metal tube with sections bolted together, this chassis is substantial being both heavy and well-damped. It connects with your favourite turntable support via three adjustable ‘rounded-point’ rubber feet which allow easy levelling. Cunningly, the motor sits at the end of one shorter section, the main bearing (the same as that used on the Well-Tempered turntable with ‘zero clearance’) in another section, and the arm is mounted furthest from both at the far end of a third section. While very simple in execution, the benefits of not having all three attached to ‘the same sheet’ (as in some designs) are borne out in listening tests.

The platter is a very well-finished acrylic translucent affair, and when revolving in use displayed, as one would hope, no discernible ‘wobble’ at all. The high quality Mabuchi DC motor sports an on-off switch and a stepped pulley for 33 or 45rpm playback, and includes servo-speed control. Speed adjustment (should it ever be needed) is via a small but accessible trim-pot at the rear of the motor housing, and DC power is supplied by a ‘wall-wart’ adapter.

The arm – a Consonance Allegro – is traditionally-styled with what appear to be needle-and-captive-ball races for vertical and lateral movement, the arm tube appears to be well-damped, being filled with cotton fibre damping material. A traditional lift/lower device worked simply and smoothly, and the large counterweight would appear to cater for a wide variety of cartridge types, but seems particularly well-suited to the Charisma Audio Eco MC cartridge as fitted.

The Eco has a ceramic cantilever fitted with a super elliptical contact nude diamond stylus. Signal connection to the outside world is via gold RCA phono sockets on a substantial connection block fitted to the rear of the arm/chassis. The turntable came supplied with a cork platter mat, and a good quality strobe disc for speed checking.

Wow. That was some preamble. A few pictures would probably have done, but it's not always possible to cover everything in a picture, hence the need for wordsmiths like me. How it sounds isn't possible to convey visually, so here goes.



Sound quality

Initial listening was done with some piano music, first by Horowitz (Horowitz in Moscow, DG 491-499-1), and then with Sergio Fiorentino playing Liszt (Dover 97258-5). The playing styles are vastly different, the acoustics also vastly different but speed stability (often the bane of a turntable if it's not consistent) was exceptionally good. There was no hint at all of any wow or flutter, and the focus (particularly in the large acoustics of the Horowitz recording) was exemplary. The long decay on some notes was steady, assured and 'full' without being thick or overblown. Even the earlier Fiorentino had good bass weight, and despite being a much older recording and pressing, the Eco cartridge tracked it with ease. You could easily hear that the recording was from a different era, but the whole combination – particularly the Eco – acquitted itself with ease and presented the performances with equal musicality, detail and engagement despite the very different eras.

Larger scale works can upset some record players, so I headed for one of the most difficult ensembles to see how it fared. Delius' Mass of Life calls for a large orchestra, a double choir and four soloists. No mean feat for the engineers to squeeze into the miniscule grooves on a vinyl record. The EMI set (SLS958) under Charles Groves hit the platter. Having sung this as a student in my university days, it's a work I know from the inside out. The writing is quite complex, textures very varied from pathos to grandiose declamations, and from very bare to full orchestra. The part writing is quite amazing, and the work, though by no means an 'easy' listen, is quite uplifting. With everything going on in the mix, I was interested to hear whether or not the Wax Engine/Allegro/Eco combination could make sense of the scale, the different lines in the music, the enormity of the whole and the intimacy of some of the solo parts.

To be fair, while the combination is very competent there were a couple of passages where the Eco lost a little focus, but with this very 'full', high level recording I suspect many other similarly-priced decks would have let go long before. It stayed on song for a lot longer than I'd anticipated, and despite one very rare moment never really lost its way in the mix. It was more akin to rubbing your eyes to get a slightly better view than getting lost in the dark.

The Eco conveyed level changes and sudden dynamics with great assuredness. It gave a superbly realistic account of the sound staging, and a very believable depth to the recording,



siting the soloists forward of the main orchestra, and choirs either side but slightly further back. That never became muddled. It was more in the retrieval of the micro-details way back in the mix where the loss of focus appeared. But then, with two choirs, a full orchestra, and four soloists there's rather a lot going on. It would take a deck at a significantly higher price point to make more sense of the piece, and many others at the same price might not fare quite as well as this combo.

A quieter diversion had me heading for Carole Kidd. Yes, a bit of female vocal, and a departure from the oft-used female vocalists employed for equipment evaluation. Here's a woman whose music and performances are well thought out, who has a lovely warm voice, a huge dynamic range and has always been superbly recorded.

Mostly centre-stage, and forward from her ensemble, as soon as Carol starts singing the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Although quite close-miked her performances are remarkably lifelike, and if you get the system volume right, sit back and close your eyes you really could be there. Her self-titled album from 1984 (ALOI AKH003) covers a variety of different styles, but perhaps special mention should be made of Trouble is a Man, where, if you walk out of the room with the track playing, it's almost as if you're being called back to be 'educated'. The imploring Never Let Me Go is heart-rending, and the deep taut tidy bass in Then I'll Be Tired Of You is something to behold. The Eco tracked all this with almost disdainful ease. The arm coped with the warp (sadly this LP got left with an edge in the sun years ago), and again, focus within the presentation was really assured, giving no hint at all that this was a vinyl disc. No wow, no speed/pitch variations, but just quietly rock-steady.

Night Train

A change of mood took me to Oscar Peterson's more upbeat Night Train, a fantastic album, and one which gives rather more than just a nod to his ability to conjure many styles through his unmistakable takes on jazz. Originally released in 1953, this has been reissued numerous times, and on virtually every music storage medium there is. I have both an original from 1963 (mono – Verve V8538) and the Speakers Corner reissue (009 8538) from around 1998/9.

As you might expect, while the original mono is somehow more immediate and raw the stereo version is a little more laid back in sound terms. There's slightly more surface / background noise on the '63 pressing, but that's only to be expected, given the number of plays it's had, and the age of the vinyl. However, the Eco provides a rock-steady centrally-placed aural image and a seamless top-to-bottom presentation. Despite being mono, there's still the feeling (ooh, very subjective, this, and yes, unashamedly so) of spatial separation between the instruments. Not so much in the aural image, but more within the music. They gel together, they're united in their approach to the music, and have obviously played this stuff a lot, so know it well, but you can feel the spaces inside the music. With the Speakers Corner reissue, none of that is lost. There's still the unifying factor which binds the mono version, but now the spaces

are more brightly lit, the instruments spatially separated, the soundstage extended beyond and between the speakers as if the narrow slit window has been opened out to a full cinema screen. The Eco's ability to convey these very subtle nuances between pressings of the same performances is testament to how well this combination engages the listener with the musical experience.

ELP's version of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, a rock version of Mussourgsky's classical masterpiece has been in the catalogues and marvelled at for years. An initially very unlikely



candidate for rocking, this magical album gives full vent to the force of a rock band in full flight. There are complex passages, silences followed by humungous crescendo, deep bass, sparkling treble sections and even one that sounds like an electronic helicopter in full flight. I'm fortunate enough to own an original pressing (Island Records - HELP1) from 1971 of this live performance recorded in Newcastle City Hall in March '71. I only wish I'd been there! It's been played a lot, but is also very well looked after, and with a quiet background (if a space filled with a baying crowd can ever be quiet) and particularly good mastering, this is one of the prized records in my collection.

The Wax Engine/ Eco did not disappoint. The magic and complete surprise of the event really gripped me by the throat and dragged me along with it. I was worryingly beguiled at how well this record player coped with the whole shooting match. Deep bass was presented with weight and authority. Sudden crescendo and the arm/cartridge combination was decidedly unflustered. Wide range treble and bass material was handled with consummate ease and yet still managed to retain a poise and authority over what it was doing. On an emotional level it was easy to hear through the music and lock into the energy, the buzz and the sheer excitement of the performance.

Florence Foster Jenkins

Was there anything, I wondered, that would upset this combination? Last-ditch attempt – Florence Foster Jenkins. Some of you may have seen the film with Meryl Streep. I first heard about FFJ when I was working at EMI, way back in the 1980s. Some there had a slightly different take to the one portrayed in the film. They took the view that actually FFJ wanted to make a serious contribution to 'music for the masses', and it has to be said that the sleeve notes' comment that "tickets to her concerts were more highly sought after than tickets to the World Series" is probably true. However, as to her vocal prowess (or not), whether she knew she was no good and wanted to 'cock a snook' at high (music) society, or whether she believed she was good, and did it to show that anyone could do it if they wanted was open to debate. Whatever the reason, she has gone down in the history books and definitely made her mark. Nonetheless her recording of Mozart's Queen of the Night from *Die Zauberflote* (*The Glory of the Human Voice – A Faust Travesty*, RCA INTS5200) is something to behold (and a challenge for the integrity of any audio system). While the recordings date from pre-WWII they are

remarkably good, and the musical content is disarmingly bizarre. However, given the previous pressing (the ELP) I used to test the WAX / Eco's abilities, this one seems a fair challenge.

Sound quality is as you'd expect from recordings of that era, and perhaps a little telephone-line-like. Having said that, there is good weight to the bottom end which the Eco was adept at retrieving. The midrange came across well, where most of the information is, and gave a wholly faithful rendition. The upper reaches; FFJ's voice is poor at best, shrill (especially as the notes climb skywards) at worst, and because of the appalling vibrato and screechiness, very difficult to track cleanly.

All I can do is commend you to the Eco as one of the few cartridges I have had which has negotiated this disc without upset or mistracking. As much as it can be, FFJ's voice was focussed, clearly presented, and definitely 'there' with bells on. I'm not sure whose poodles she had used as singing teachers, but they did a fantastic job, her 'yelping' being faithfully reproduced by my audio system. If you don't believe me, please, I implore you, check out a recording of FFJ for yourself.

But, I hear you ask, "Why use a recording like this to evaluate a turntable package?" Since my early days adoring and later reviewing hi-fi and audio systems, I have had Peter Walker's famous saying echoing in my ears: "The closest approach to the original sound". It may have been Quad's tag line, but it's surely the reason that hi-fi is such an absorbing pursuit. As I've said in previous reviews, I am both a classical music performer, graduate and critic. That is my world. My knowledge of rock, pop and other non-acoustic genres is limited. So for me, if the engineers have done their job and captured a musical event faithfully, to the highest fidelity they can, the replay chain should be designed to replay said recording also as faithfully as possible.

FFJ's voice was captured in this way, so is just as fair a test as a modern recording of some other music. As you may have gathered, these are only a few of the numerous discs which I played on the Wax Engine/ Eco combination (not forgetting the arm, of course) over the course of some four weeks of in-depth listening.

Conclusion

For the money, this package is a bargain. While it offers a modest discount on the individual elements if bought separately, the overall end product is one whose performance far outweighs the sum of the separate parts. There's a synergy which not only retrieves an awful lot of information from the groove in terms of sound quality, but it also does that indefinable thing of engaging with the listener and really 'making music'.

Think about it. A more than half-decent MC cartridge, a superbly capable finely engineered pick-up arm, and a turntable which has the pedigree of an exceptionally fine centre bearing coupled with a high quality motor on a robust non-resonant chassis.



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It really is punching above its weight in terms of 'bang for buck', and quite honestly, there are a few other arm/deck/cartridge combinations out there which might need to look nervously at their own price points because this pairing is a serious contender in the sub-£2,000 stakes.

Performance-wise, it really should be priced a fair bit higher. From my experience it deserves a hearty recommendation, and I encourage you all to seek one out and really give it a fair test; I'm sure you won't be disappointed.



Specifications

Type: thread-drive turntable and arm
Speeds: 33 1/3 RPM, 45 RPM.
Supplied tonearm: 9inch Allegro
Drive mechanism: DC motor with thread drive
Speed control: manual
Platter type: 12-inch acrylic
Platter weight: not specified
Main bearing: stainless steel in Teflon
Plinth material: skeletal aluminium
Dimensions (HxWxD): 145 x 385 x 345mm
Weight: 5.65kg
Warranty: 3 years

Type: moving coil cartridge
Body: aluminium
Cantilever: ceramic
Stylus: super elliptical nude diamond
Tracking Pressure: 1.9g
Input load impedance: 100 Ohms – 1kOhms
Output impedance: not specified
Nominal output voltage: 0.38mV
Channel Balance : > 0.5dB
Separation : > 25dB
Mass: 11gm
Warranty: 1 year



The ear is all about great music and great sound. It is written by hard bitten audio enthusiasts who strive to find the most engaging, entertaining and great value components and music of the highest calibre. This really is what living is all about.