



Temptation

The very latest Well Tempered turntable takes a different approach to both tonearm and plinth. **Jason Kennedy** takes it for a spin...

A long, long time ago in a place far, far away, Bill Firebaugh built the first Well Tempered Lab turntable. By the standards of the guy – admittedly very conservative and still showing undue influence from the likes of Thorens' TD150 [see p88] – it was a pretty radical piece of audio engineering.

There was refreshingly little 'me too thinking', especially in its tonearm design, which was novel to say the very least. The bearing consisted of a paddle suspended in a pot full of silicone fluid and the platter bearing was no more conventional. It was a pretty expensive and exotic piece of kit. I only ever heard one in the flesh, but enough were sold for the company to keep going and indeed earn a modest but very devoted customer base. These days the company is going from strength to strength, and indeed it appears to be

flourishing, as this new Versalex model would seem to prove. The latest turntable is its new range topper, having taken the crown from the distinctly different Amadeus GTA. The latter is the same size as the Versalex and shares many of its elements, but has a different and seemingly more expensive means of suspending the arm bearing in its silicone bath. But the biggest difference is the plinth, where the GTA has acrylic and aluminium plates bonded together in an effort to kill of vibration, the Versalex is built on a slab of Finnish ply, a 30mm thick slab that looks considerably better than the painted black finish of the GTA.

The Versalex has an oversize Delrin platter that comes with a mat, but its use is optional. John Burns the UK distributor recommends it be left off in the first instance. The platter's long spindle sits in an unusual Teflon bearing that has a

corner against which the spindle is pulled by the drive belt, without the belt it can be moved around with ease as the entry hole is triangular in shape. The belt itself is a piece of fishing line, or 0.1mm polyester filament to be specific, this is almost invisible except for a knot with loose ends, which looks odd but it's so small that it doesn't cause any problems. The motor itself is a small DC type driven by a torque servo designed by Firebaugh and is isolated from the plinth by a compliant ring of unspecified material.

The LTD tonearm on the Versalex is the first Well Tempered Labs design that is actually available on its own for fitting to third party turntables, all the previous examples had multiple fixings for the gantry, armrest, etc. The LTD is all one piece with the gantry that supports the 'bearing' on monofilament thread, lift lower device and output sockets sitting on the same base. Anti-skate bias is achieved by a twist in the monofilament that supports a black golf ball in silicone fluid, and setting this up is a little trickier than usual, but a lot easier if you take the distributor rather than the manufacturer's advice and fill the silicone fluid first. Still, you get there in the end...

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Well Tempered
Versalex
ORIGIN: USA/China
TYPE: turntable
and arm
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
480x160x410mm
WEIGHT: 15.6kg
FEATURES:
• 33-3, 45rpm
manual change
• zero tolerance
nylon main bearing
• 325mm Delrin
platter
• sand and silicone
damped 10.5inch
tonearm
• RCA socket outputs
• finish: walnut
veneered birch ply
DISTRIBUTOR:
Pear Audio
TELEPHONE:
01665 830862
WEBSITE:
welltemperedlab.
net



How much fluid you use is a matter of taste, the more used the greater the damping and Pear Audio suggests you don't use too much to begin with as it can be added more easily than it can be removed. That said, there is a feature on the LTD that means this aspect can be changed. It consists of an adjustable plug underneath the bath that can be raised or dropped, having the same effect on the silicone fluid.

The arm tube itself is 10 inches long and damped with sand as per that on the Amadeus. As with other WT designs there are no arm cables, but merely a pair of

RCA phono sockets with an earth lead attached, this adds cost (and an electrical junction) but lets you choose the best cable for your system and cartridge.

If you know how to set up a Well Tempered, then you'll not find this especially fiddly – in the same way that changing the spark plugs on a Jaguar V12 engine isn't too much of a chore if you've done it before. If you haven't however, welcome to a world where you'll be swearing more than a shell-suited sociopath. Setting up that arm might just have you wondering why the hell you didn't buy that SME 309...

But there's more! The most controversial thing about this turntable is not the silicone bearing, the golf ball or the main bearing, it's the fact that the tracking angle is fixed on the arm. There are holes rather than slots in the headshell so you can't adjust angle and there is no alignment gauge supplied nor encouraged. Bill Firebaugh's opinion is that tracking angle errors result in second harmonic distortion which is "not injurious of musical quality but rather, makes for a richer and more enjoyable musical experience". This is another one of those things that makes hi-fi such a fun hobby, or so teeth-gnashingly annoying – depending on your point of view. Suffice to say this is a controversial view, one which is not held by the vast majority of the hi-fi world. Even those unfamiliar with the mathematics may well have heard evidence to the contrary...

Sound Quality

Having pointed out that this turntable's designer's views on arm set-up are far from uncontested, along comes the Versalex to show me with my own ears that it can work. Indeed it certainly didn't sound bad with a Dynavector DV-20X2L moving coil on the end – in fact it sounded pretty damn marvellous in an unusually relaxed, yet timely and informative fashion. The nature of the arm bearing is more than likely the reason for the effortlessness encountered, it nullifies the sort of micro vibrations that are difficult to eliminate in a metal ball race or gimbal, so that movement in the stylus is not muddled by movements elsewhere on the tonearm.

The Versalex has a knack for getting music out of the groove in an effortless, yet gripping fashion...

This does not mean that the Versalex is a laid back or mellow turntable, but merely that only the energy in the groove is relayed to the output, and that my friends makes for some high octane musical entertainment. Especially when you let Billy Gibbons, Dusty Hill and Frank Beard strut their stuff in the style they had back in the day. I'm talking about the album *Tres Hombres* and the track *La Grange*, seemingly simple, gritty blues played in the down and dirty style that only ZZ Top could do. The timing is locked down tight so that Gibbons' righteous guitar playing can cut loose and lay down the jam, so to speak.

It's the sort of sound that encourages you to wind up the level and rifle through the record collection looking for your favourite tracks, I lost a lot of time indulging in the open clear playing and voice of Patricia Barber and the jazzy groove of the Grateful Dead's *Blues for Allah*. Things naturally get better with upgrades in the phono stage department, I swapped out the rather good Dynavector P75 MkIII for a Trilog 907 and got more involved in the emotional side of the music. This turntable does three-dimensionality and soul as well as it does timing and Rickie Lee Jones's voice sent tingles down my spine as she sang *There Goes My Baby*. That doesn't sound so hard, RLJ is difficult not to enjoy, but her voice can often get a little edgy when she reaches for higher notes. But that doesn't happen with the Versalex, which makes me wonder if it's not a distortion introduced by other turntables.

This record player brings a fluency to everything you listen to, almost as if other models introduce something which undermines this quality. It certainly makes for very natural yet revealing listening,

IN SIGHT



It's fair to say that setting up the tonearm is something of a chore, especially if you haven't done it before...



With no way to vary the cartridge overhang, tracking geometry is one thing you don't need to worry about



The oversized Delrin platter is nicely finished and gives a nice inert support for your prized vinyl discs...



Threading the fine 'fishing line' drive belt is another fiddly moment on the long Versalex set-up road!

Q&A

Frank Denson
Well Tempered Labs



JK: Why have you chosen ply for the Versalex plinth?

FD: We chose the Baltic plywood because we had a very strong hunch that it would sound good, and also because our distributors required a natural wood finish and the call for light oak/dark oak/cherry/walnut, and so on would have driven us nuts, hence the use of Finnish (Baltic) ply, it covers all bases!

Am I right in thinking that the LTD arm was created so that it could be used on third party turntables? If so is it available separately and have you heard about any examples of its application?

The LTD was a very close collaboration with our Beijing manufacturers Opera Audio. Yes the rationale was for it to be able to fitted on third party turntables, but also to include cueing, variable damping and a more elegant design solution. Although we have sold a few separately, I have not heard of any results, good, bad or indifferent.

Does this arm have any advantages or disadvantages compared to the one on the Amadeus?

In functional respects both arms are very similar, the advantages are largely cosmetic. The only disadvantage I can think of on the arm compared to an Amadeus one is that the damping is slightly harder to adjust, but of course once it has been set, the user is unlikely to need to adjust it anyway.

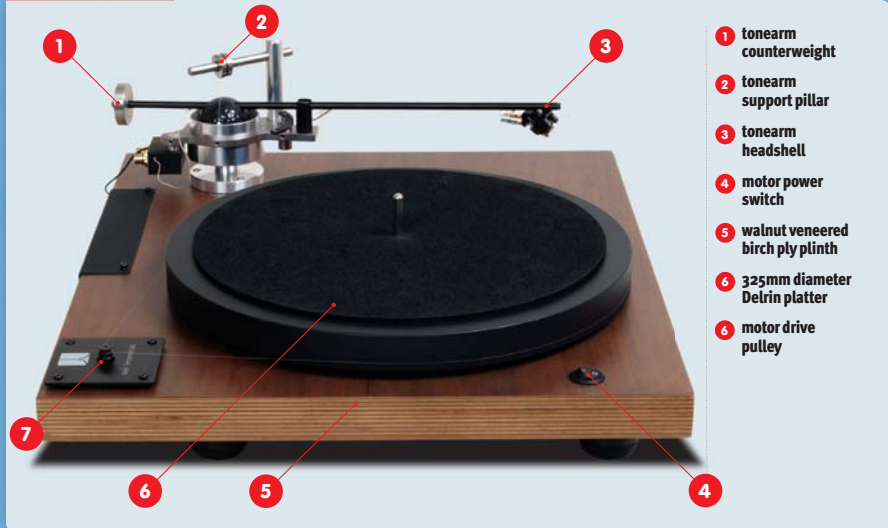
Why is the centre spindle so long?

We always found it a bit of a pain centering the platter into the main bearing with a short center spindle. The longer spindle gives a better grip and allows one to more easily see under the latter when installing. We think it also makes it slightly easier to place the record.

Is the LTD tonearm suited to low or high compliance cartridges?

The effective mass for the 10 inch arm is 10 grams. We believe that because of the damping the compliance of the cartridge is of little consequence.

IN SIGHT



- 1 tonearm counterweight
- 2 tonearm support pillar
- 3 tonearm headshell
- 4 motor power switch
- 5 walnut veneered birch ply plinth
- 6 325mm diameter Delrin platter
- 7 motor drive pulley



THE VERSALEX, like other Well Tempered designs is notably more effortless sounding than a lot of the competition, but this doesn't mean that it is short on dynamics or power when the music requires it. It has a stability about it that is usually only found with high mass designs, and a calmness that one associates with models from SME and Townshend Audio. It doesn't have the authority in the bass of a Rock 7 but is possibly more fluent and equals that fine design for detail retrieval.

The Delrin platter has less character than acrylic types, which gives it the edge over models like those from Clearaudio and Pro-Ject, but in both cases those companies can give you a rather more sexy looking turntable for this sort of money. The other competitor at around this price is Michell's very fine Orbe SE (£2,649), which looks great and has the advantage of spring suspension, but whether it's as revealing is open to debate.

you really appreciate the tone and dexterity of the musicians, but this doesn't get in the way of the music itself. The sinuous bass alongside Leo Kottke's dexterous guitar playing on the track *Ice Cream* (from *Great Big Boy*) is an absolute delight, the bass is often obscured by the acoustic guitar, but with the Versalex both instruments are easy to follow. It also delivers the full depth of reverb creating a soundstage that's deep and wide, the resolution of low level detail is remarkably effective for the price being asked.

The latter is a reflection of the fact that Well Tempered Labs are manufactured by Opera Audio in China, the company that's behind Consonance electronics. If this turntable were made in the US it would probably double in price. And that would be a pity because the radical technology it incorporates is probably slightly daunting for some buyers. I've heard that silicone fluid is a tough sell, but having lived with a Townshend Rock for many years I can assure you that it's not messy. The sheer viscosity means that nothing happens quickly and in the case of the LTD arm the only time you'd need to get near it would be if it had to be transported. It's a very minor inconvenience for the benefits accrued especially if you want to hear more of the music and less of the hardware.

That just about sums up this turntable – it's one of the least 'self referential' around. There's little sense of the stylus tracing the groove, or the arm putting in some real hard work. Rather, the music just flows.

This latest Well Tempered Labs turntable is the best sounding I have personally encountered, and surely the best looking too. Spinning an original zip front copy of *Sticky Fingers* that's really too worn revealed pretty much all the glory of Keith Richards' sparse, biting riff alongside the richness of the funky swampy sound of the keyboards and sax at the end. Delivering it in such a fashion that you can't merely sit and listen, as Mick draws on the next track, you gotta move.

Conclusion

This new Well Tempered Labs Versalex has a knack for getting music out of the groove in an effortless, yet gripping fashion whether it be a well-played favourite or a pristine heavyweight pressing. In fact, it gives you the job of vinyl without the pfaaf and that is quite an achievement. It's expensive alright, but there really are very few other things like it. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Consummately natural, smooth, detailed, open, musical sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Initial set-up is fiddly, and a dust cover option would be nice...

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A musically enthralling performance makes this a great, charismatic package

FEATURES



OVERALL

