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EQUIPMENT REPORT



Acoustic Signature Ascona Turntable

New Contender

Jonathan Valin

Like me (up until six months ago), most of you have probably never heard of the German turntable manufacturing firm Acoustic Signature, its brilliant chief engineer and CEO Gunther Frohnhöfer, or its beautiful, massive (176 pound), \$34k flagship turntable, the Ascona. In Europe and Great Britain, I'm told, it's quite a different story. AS 'tables have been highly praised for their superb engineering (this is a German hi-fi product, after all), their unbelievably precise and solid build-quality (ditto), and, of course, their sound.

Before I talk about that sound, a few design highlights, starting with the Ascona's platter (called by AS the SilencerPlatter3). Frohnhöfer, who is an electrical engineer, set a very high goal for his top-of-the-line 'table: eliminating the impact of structure-borne vibration, airborne vibration, and bearing noise by removing resonance at all frequencies, and increasing the rotating mass of the platter to aid stability.

To achieve these goals, Frohnhöfer starts with a 50mm (two-inch-thick) solid-aluminum platter with a diameter of nearly 350mm (13.78 inches). This massive platter is CNC-milled in-house (AS, which does a good deal of industrial manufacturing for other concerns, owns many expensive CNC machines) from a very soft alloy "to optimize its periodic resonance; [in addition]

a resonance-reducing material is applied to the bottom face." Cylindrical solid-brass "Silencer" inserts are then fitted into the aluminum to eliminate resonance via constrained-layer damping. (The Ascona uses thirty small Silencers on the outer diameter of the platter, and 24 larger Silencers within the body of the platter.) The holes for the Silencers are drilled and line-bored into the aluminum with a clearance of less than 0.01mm in a pattern that is absolutely true about the center of the turntable (to maintain ideal balance). The fit is so perfect that the Silencers effectively become an integral part of the platter, "absorbing all vibrational energy [so that] the platter remains resonance-free."

To achieve his goal of eliminating bearing noise, Frohnhöfer invented a platter bearing "with the ideal performance characteristics of exact fit, extremely low noise, very low friction, and long-term stability." Manufactured from special hardened and polished steel, with an extremely hard tungsten-carbide ball at its base, "the bearing housing uses perfectly matched and 'aged' sintered-bronze inserts which are self-lubricating; and therefore maintenance-free." The thrust plate is made of a specially developed high-tech material called TIDORFOLON (a combination of ferrite, vanadium, Teflon, and titanium).

EQUIPMENT REPORT - Acoustic Signature Ascona Turntable

The platter-drive mechanism, which sits in a separate CNC-milled aluminum housing at the rear of the CNC-machined solid-aluminum plinth, comprises three motors triangulated about the spindle of a subplatter, upon which a massive aluminum flywheel (with its own set of brass Silencer inserts) sits. The three motors drive the subplatter (and the flywheel atop it) via three separate belts. (The flywheel then drives the platter via its own belt.) The motors are powered by an electronic controller (called the AlphaDIG) that uses digital output stages and quartz-lock-loop technology to generate a perfect sine wave at 24V AC. The motors are thus “totally impervious to the negative effects of AC voltage fluctuations,” i.e., they should maintain perfect speed stability regardless of house current. (I’ll have a demurrer about this device later on.)

The Ascona’s CNC-milled aluminum tonearm-mounting plates are “the most rigid versions [Acoustic Signature] has ever designed.” Adjustable to suit tonearms of lengths from 9 to 12 inches, two can be fitted on the Ascona, allowing for the use of two different arms and/or cartridges.

Outside of its highly damped mass, the Ascona has no suspension. Three adjustable feet allow precise leveling of the table, which comes with a machined record weight (a clamp is also available) and a newly developed platter mat (whose perforations allow you to see the brass Silencer inserts imbedded in the platter).

Once set up (with the sterling Kuzma 4Point ’arm), the Ascona is quite a sight to behold. It wowed my friend (and analog guru) Andre Jennings, who has seen just about every other table and ’arm out there, with its sheer beauty, solidity, and breathtaking build-quality. (The thing is built like a brick *scheissbaus*.) Nothing about the Ascona smacks of garage tinkering or home brew; on the contrary, it looks like a scientific instrument designed by a talented industrial artist.

As I said in my review of the excellent Oracle Delphi table, turntables tend to sound the way they look. The lighter ones, such as the Delphi, tend to sound lighter in tonal balance (i.e., slightly canted toward the upper midrange and treble), quicker and more nimble on attacks, and more toe-tappingly pacy. The more massive ones, such as the TW Acoustic Raven AC-3, tend to sound darker (i.e., slightly canted toward the lower midrange and bass), more authoritative, and richer in timbre and duration. The Ascona rather goes against type.

Not that it sounds “light”—or dark, for that matter. It sounds, well, neutral, by which I mean extremely low in coloration of any kind. As a result, it seems to blend the virtues of lighter-weight and more massive tables almost equally, giving it extraordinary transparency to sources and, depending on the quality of the LP, a high degree of realism.

Over the past few months I’ve learned many of the “ins” and “outs” of the Ascona, at least when it is equipped with the eleven-and-a-half-inch Kuzma 4Point tonearm and the Ortofon MC A90 mc cartridge (which is an excellent match to that ’arm, BTW). Late in the review period I got to do more of an apples-to-apples comparison of the Ascona to my reference Walker Black Diamond Mk III when Garth Leerer of Musical Surroundings kindly sent me a second Goldfinger Statement. Although I can’t say that the Ascona/Kuzma/Statement displaces the Walker/Statement at the top of my pantheon of great tables (for many of the selfsame reasons that the Kuzma Stabi XL turntable and air-bearing Airline

tonearm didn’t displace the Walker Black Diamond Mk I—for which, see below), I am prepared to say that it unquestionably belongs in the same small, exalted circle as the Walker and my other reference table, the marvelous AAS Gabriel/Da Vinci Mk II now with Master’s Reference Virtu ’arm.

Here’s why. While it is true that you hear “new” things you haven’t heard before with any worthy new component, simply because of differences in timbral balance, pitch resolution, dynamic accent, and the handling of durations, the Ascona has revealed an entirely new “class” of very-low-level “things” that have previously gone unheard. Let’s call it, for the time being, locational cues, although it actually has to do with the way miking in combination with instrumental radiation patterns and performance styles affects the imaging (the perceived size, shape, and locus) of an instrument.

For example, as you’re probably a little tired of hearing by now, I’ve listened to the Hungaroton recording of composer/performer

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Unsuspended, belt-driven turntable with digital speed controller

Dimensions: 573 x 185 x 480mm

Weight: ca. 176 lbs.

Price: \$34,000 (Kuzma 4Point tonearm, \$5800)

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JV’S REFERENCE SYSTEM

Loudspeakers: Magico Q5, Raidho C1.1, MartinLogan CLX, Magnepan 1.7, Magnepan 3.7, Magnepan 20.7

Linestage preamps:

Constellation Virgo, Audio Research Reference 5SE

Phonostage preamps: Audio Research Corporation Reference Phono 2 SE

Power amplifiers: Constellation Centaur, Audio Research Reference 250, Lamm ML2.2

Analog source: Walker Audio Proscenium Black Diamond Mk III record player, DaVinci AAS Gabriel Mk II turntable

with DaVinci Master’s Reference Virtu tonearm, Acoustic Signature Ascona with Kuzma 4P tonearm

Phono cartridges: Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement, Ortofon MC A90, Benz LP S-MR, **Digital source:** Mac Mini/Wavelength Audio Crimson USB DAC, Berkeley Alpha DAC 2

Cable and interconnect: Synergistic Research Galileo **Power Cords:** Synergistic Research Tesla, Shunyata King Cobra

Power Conditioner: Synergistics Research Tesla III

Accessories: Synergistic ART system, Shakti Hallographs (6), A/V Room Services Metu panels and traps, ASC Tube Traps, Critical Mass MAXXUM equipment and amp stands, Symposium Isis and Ultra equipment platforms, Symposium Rollerblocks and Fat Padz, Walker Prologue Reference equipment and amp stands, Walker Valid Points and Resonance Control discs, Clearaudio Double Matrix SE record cleaner, HiFi-Tuning silver/gold fuses



Attila Bozay's sonically amazing (musically zany) *Improvisations for Zither* many times—and have read the LP liner notes many times, as well. On the back of the jacket, there is a photo of Bozay seated at a table, his Hungarian “harp zither” sitting on the tabletop in front of him. Until I heard the record through the Ascona, I hadn't realized what an important clue that photograph was giving me about the way the instrument is played and how that affected the way it was recorded. Like a pedal-steel or Hawaiian guitar, the zither isn't typically cradled in the hands and arms when strummed; rather, it sits on a stand or, horizontally, in the performer's lap, as the zitherist plucks the strings with plectrum or fingers. In *Improvisations*, those strings have been tuned to a twelve-tone row of Bozay's invention and they are not just strummed, but played glissando, pizzicato, above the bridge (or, rather, near the tuning pegs, since the zither has no bridge)...you name it. Indeed, at various points, Bozay doesn't just play the strings; he raps his knuckles against and scrapes his fingernails, in a queasy chalkboard squeak, along the instrument's resonant wooden body. It all goes towards making a sonic tour-de-force.

Other 'arms and 'tables have told me, with great precision, how (and with what speed and pressure) Bozay was sliding his fingers and nails and plectra along the strings (and also rapping and scratching the instrument's body) to produce the panoply of tone colors and transient effects that is *Improvisations*. And the

Ascona tells me these things, too, with equal clarity. But what other 'tables/'arms/cartridges haven't told me was that Bozay was seated when he played *Improvisations* and that the instrument was lying horizontally on his lap or sitting on a stand or tabletop as he performed, with the microphones very close by the strings and sounding box. With other 'tables it sounds as if the zither is being cradled in Bozay's arms like an autoharp. In other words, the instrument makes a strictly vertical image, as if the zither were standing on its end). With the Ascona/Kuzma/Ortofon, the zither makes more of a horizontal image (although there are strong vertical components, too, as the zither's timbre “blossoms” into the space above and around it), as if it is being played, as it was, by a man seated behind it as it sat in his lap (or on a table) with different microphones perpendicular and parallel to the instrument.

While this might not be a musically important bit of information, it is still an astounding one. To hear—for the first time—that the microphones picked up enough of this very-low-level “locational” information to realistically alter the way the instrument images in acoustic space is kind of amazing. And the Bozay is scarcely the only recording that the Ascona does this nifty little “locational” trick with. (Note that it is not just “locating” the instrument; it's locating the mikes.)

What this suggests to me is that the 'table may be so low in noise (so resonance-free) and so stable in rotation that it is

Kuzma 4Point Tonearm

Like the Kuzma Airline straight-line-tracking air-bearing 'arm, to which it bears a strong sonic resemblance, the Kuzma 4Point pivoted tonearm is a veritable paragon of high-resolution. An ingenious design that is immaculately well made and simple to install and adjust (VTA, VTF, azimuth, overhang, anti-skate), the 4Point uses a unique four-point bearing (thus, the name). Two spike bearings sit in cups at the base of the tonearm housing (sort of like dual unipivots) to constrain vertical movement, while two additional spike bearings (one of which rides in a cup machined into the side of a support rod upon which the tonearm housing is balanced, the other in a cup at the very tip of the rod), constrain horizontal movement. Both vertical and horizontal bearing movements can be variably damped; both sets of bearings have very low friction and susceptibility to resonance. The tonearm itself, an eleven-inch tubular design with removable headshell, has an effective mass of 14 grams.

As I said in the review, part of the Ascona's exceptional recovery of detail, including those locational cues I'd not heard before, has to be attributable to this superb tonearm; however, without trying the 'arm in another 'table (or the Ascona with another 'arm) it is impossible to say precisely how large a part. This much I can state with confidence: The Ascona/Kuzma 4P is very transparent to sources. When I switched cartridges—from the Ortofon MC A90 to the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement—in order to make an apples-to-apples comparison with the Walker Black Diamond Mk III, the overall sound changed dramatically, with added density of tone color from top to bottom and considerably

more weight and power in the bottom-most octaves, although the presentation was still a mite less fully fleshed out and three-dimensional than that of the Walker.

To be honest I had somewhat similar result when I compared the Walker Proscenium to the Kuzma Stabi XL turntable with Air Line tonearm many, many moons ago. The Kuzma combo was then the champ of transient attack and low-level resolution, the Walker its superior in tone color, texture, body, decay, and bloom. The difference was rather like the difference between solid-state and tubes. However, like tubes and transistors both the Walker and the Kuzma (judging by the 4Point) have improved over the years to the degree that the Walker Black Diamond III tonearm no longer plays a marked second fiddle to the Kuzma in low-level resolution and transient speed, and the Kuzma no longer plays a marked second fiddle to the Walker in timbre, texture, and bloom. Both of them are more on a par in all respects than they were in the past, although, as noted, with its slight richer balance the Walker sounds fuller, more powerful, and, as noted, more realistically fleshed out, while the Kuzma with its slightly leaner balance may sound a bit more detailed, although that extra detail is probably being “exposed” by what I think is the 4P's slight emphasis on the upper mids and treble (where a good deal of transient-related information lives).

The bottom line here is that the Kuzma 4Point is an exceptional performer—almost unbelievably good for the dough—and easily earns my recommendation, particularly if you are a “fidelity-to-sources” kind of listener. **JV**

EQUIPMENT REPORT

allowing the tonearm/cartridge to pick up unbelievably low-level information that is simply buried beneath the noise floors of other 'tables.

You get a taste of this exceptional low-level resolution and pinpoint imaging on just about every (well-recorded) LP, whether it's DG's (well, East Germany's Nova/Eterna, actually) superb recording of Brecht/Weill's droll, mordant *Seven Deadly Sins* (wait till you hear the great Gisela May's startlingly realistic contralto or the amusing barbershop quartet that makes up her family), every pluck, strum, squeak, slide, and overtone of fantastic finger-picker John Fahey's polyphony on the (newly reissued!) Vanguard album *John Fahey*, or the exceptionally nimble string and wind playing throughout the "Game of Pairs" on Solti and the London Symphony Orchestra's rendition of Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra [Decca].

And you don't just get low-level detail; you also get superb large-scale dynamics. To hear the sheer string-busting force with which Fahey occasionally strums chords on his steel-string guitar is to hear something very, very close to the lifelike power that virtuoso guitar players are capable of bringing to their instruments.

Now, I don't know precisely how much of a role the Kuzma 4Point is playing in these remarkable feats of resolution and transient response, although it is clearly playing a large one. (Andre measured, via Dr. Feickert's wonderful Adjust+ software, fully 4dB better channel separation than we've gotten from the MC A90 in other 'arms—and 4dB better than Ortofon's own specs! However, the measurement shoe was on the other foot when I substituted the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement for the Ortofon. In the Walker Black Diamond tonearm—which is clearly an ideal match for the Goldfinger—Andre got the lowest harmonic distortion and best separation numbers he's ever measured in any turntable/'arm, and he's taken these measurements in just about every turntable/toner combo extant.)

I guess I should also note that the Ascona/Kuzma/Ortofon combo does not make the warmest and cuddliest sound I've heard. Indeed, it is the kind of neutral that verges slightly on the analytical. But then the Ortofon MC A90

has been a bit on the ruthlessly revealing side with every 'table/'arm I've tried it in. The Ascona/Kuzma appear to be allowing this incredibly detailed cartridge to achieve its fullest resolution (and the fullest resolution of its slightly clinical "character"). By contrast, the Goldfinger Statement sounds substantially warmer and fuller in the Ascona/Kuzma, as it also does in the Walker, with resolution that is nearly equal to that of the Ortofon. Which cartridge you prefer will depend on what sonic attributes you prioritize. Transparency-to-sources/high-resolution listeners will swoon over the Ortofon, absolute sound/as-you-like-it ones over the Clearaudio.

The only functional reservations I have about the Ascona have to do with its AlphaDIG digital motor-controller, which (at least with Constellation electronics) can generate a very-low-level, very-high-pitched switching noise that rides along with the music. Except for the silences between cuts and at the start and end of records, you can't hear this extremely faint pulsing in playback, and even during silences it is only audible when you come very close to the speakers. (For some reason you can't hear the pulsing at all with Audio Research electronics in the system.) In any event, this is something that Frohnhöfer needs to look into (and I believe that something *is* being done about it as I write). Also, setting rotational speed with the AlphaDIG is a bit more of a chore than it is with, oh, the AMG V12 motor controller. Once you get the hang of it it is easy enough to do, but you do have to get the hang of it (and you do have to take the cover off the motor controller to access the adjustment screws).

All in all, the Ascona/Kuzma is among the highest-resolution source components I've yet heard, consistently digging out more details (including those marvelous locational cues) than most other 'tables and 'arms. That extraordinary resolution combined with the Ascona's admirably neutral balance make for one of the most transparent-to-sources analog front ends on the market. The fact that it is beautifully engineered, impeccably well made, and priced some \$50,000 less than the superb 'tables it so impressively competes with only makes it that much more of a good deal (and that much more recommendable). **tas**



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