

A New Concept? – The Clearaudio Concept Turntable

Neville Roberts

A turntable that works straight out of the box with no setting up? Whatever next! A record deck it may be, but surely not Hi-Fi. Neville Roberts investigates...

I was driving home from work on a dark, windy, autumn night when I received a phone call from our esteemed Editor. He had news of a turntable that was incredibly simple to use and required no setting up - so he thought of me! I was intrigued. This sounded like an old record player from the stereogram era, not a piece of real Hi-Fi. However, when he told me that it was from the Clearaudio stables, I realised that this merited further investigation.

Clearaudio are based in Erlangen, Germany, and have gained a reputation for high quality and innovative designs. They entered the market in 1978 with moving-coil cartridges based on their unique symmetrical generator. Their products now range from high-end phono cartridges, tonearms and stylish turntables through to phono preamplifiers and Class A power amplifiers. The new Concept turntable certainly falls into the 'innovative' category – a true piece of Hi-Fi equipment that works, so they claim, 'straight out of the box'.



The Concept is equipped with a new tonearm that incorporates a friction-free magnetic bearing and is fitted with a high quality Clearaudio Concept moving magnet cartridge. Apart from low friction, the magnetic bearing allows the arm to be shipped with the counterbalance weight and cartridge installed without risk of damage to the arm bearing. All the necessary adjustments are already completed at the Clearaudio factory - even the tracking weight and anti-skating force are pre-adjusted.

The turntable itself is spun by a belt driven decoupled DC motor fitted with low noise bush bearings (made of bronze and Teflon) and powered by a separate German power supply. Interestingly, all three speeds are possible, 33 1/3,

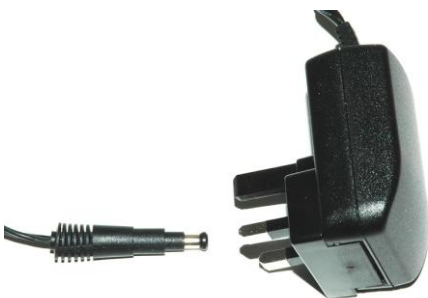
45 and 78 RPM, although I would be somewhat wary about letting the supplied Clearaudio Concept cartridge anywhere near a 78! The speed change is effected electrically via the selector switch situated on the left. This is a nice feature as many units in this price range require the user to move the belt to a different pulley on the motor spindle to select the required speed.

Out of the box

The turntable is well packaged and, not being too heavy, it was easy to remove from the box. The sub-platter is already fitted and secured by a strip of blue adhesive tape. This would not cause any problems for transit as the sub-platter itself is extremely light. In fact, the sub-platter is just a plastic moulding with a thin lip at the base to facilitate fitting the belt and having a metal centre spindle. To be honest, it does, to my mind, look a bit cheap, but of course this will be hidden from view when the main platter is fitted. The arm design has

the tonearm wire exiting from the top of the arm, rather than the conventional route through the base pivot. This means that the

tonearm wires loop from the top of the arm and enter the base through a hole adjacent to the pivot, but this is very neatly done. The only control knob is the on/off and speed setting control on the left opposite the arm. The motor power supply is of the 'wall-wart' variety and will run from 100-240VAC 50-60Hz to provide the 12VDC required by the motor. Also included are a spirit level for levelling the turntable and a little bottle of synthetic bearing oil for lubricating the turntable centre bearing.





Setting it up was certainly very easy. Firstly, the turntable base is placed on a suitable surface of at least 17" x 14", according to the instruction manual. The base is of a non-suspended design and fitted with spiked feet, so a good, solid surface is essential. The spikes are quite small and unsophisticated – essentially a large diameter bolt with a spike at the end and a lock-nut. It is extremely important that the base is level and this adjustment has to be carried out in situ (see later). Next, the strip of blue adhesive tape is removed from the sub-platter, allowing it to rotate freely. The manual very helpfully contains 'before and after' pictures: the first showing the tape in place over the sub-platter and the second showing what the tape looks like when removed – just so you know!



After fitting the drive belt over the motor pulley and sub-platter, the main 30mm-thick platter is then fitted. This is sensibly packed separately in order to avoid damage to the main bearing in transit. Following the removal of two more strips of blue tape and two pieces of packing foam rubber from the arm and cartridge, all that is left to do is to level the turntable by rotation of the feet spikes, using the supplied spirit level gauge for reference. Once the turntable is level, the feet adjusters are locked in place with their respective locknuts. Should you wish to do so, the manual does include instructions on how to adjust the tracking force, tonearm height (to set the VTA) and anti-skating device. I did adjust the tracking force myself using my digital gauge to ensure it was spot-on at the recommended 2.4g for the Concept cartridge. This is easily accomplished by rotating the counterbalance weight.



I did have a small problem plugging in the power supply – the socket at the rear of the plinth is a bit flimsy and the one on my review sample disintegrated when I tried to push in the plug. I had to unscrew the socket to rescue the parts from inside the unit and make a connection! However, once I had sorted that, I was ready to connect the turntable to my amplifier and start listening!

Concept testing

To get things started, I placed a copy of 'J S Bach Partita No 1' by Trevor Pinnock (from an Archiv 2-LP set 415 493-1) onto the turntable. The solo harpsichord displayed a lot of detail and clarity, but I was left feeling that I was an innocent bystander, rather than involved with the performance. In other words, even when I closed my eyes, I knew I was listening to a recording rather than a live performance, if you know what I mean!

I then turned to a recording of a full orchestra - 'Haydn Symphony No. 35' by L'Estro Armonico & Derek Solomons (from a CBS boxed set CBS D3 37861). This performance gave a full sound with instrumentation that was rich, if a little two-dimensional. The sound stage did seem to be restricted to the area between the loudspeakers. Having said that, there was again a lot of detail in the upper registers and the exciting content of the music was well conveyed to the listener.

Ramping up the tempo with Jean Michel Jarre's 'Equinoxe' (Polydor Deluxe POLD5007) demonstrated a good dynamic range with a crisp top end and meaty bass. This deck didn't seem to hold anything back from the recording with a fast and detailed performance.

Checking the turntable speeds using my strobe disc showed that they were spot-on and there was no sign of drift when the cartridge was playing a record.

A good punchy, yet tight bass response demonstrates that the arm and cartridge are well matched. Using my 'Vinyl Essentials' test record, I was able to confirm that the arm resonance was at 10Hz, which is comfortably within the acceptable range of 6-14Hz. However, the Concept cartridge tracking was a little disappointing and it could really only manage tracking a groove modulation amplitude of 40 microns without any audible miss-tracking.

In summary, the turntable performed satisfactorily across a wide range of musical genres. I have to say that if I had £1,000 or so to spend, I can think of several turntable units I would choose above the Concept, but they will all require careful setting up to hear them at their best. This turntable is certainly going to be the unit of choice for many who might otherwise be deterred by the thought of all the fiddly adjustments required by the opposition and, as such, the Clearaudio Concept will bring the joys of vinyl to a whole new audience.