

THE ENTRY LEVEL by STEPHEN MEJIAS

THIS ISSUE: SM gets back to vinyl.

Into the Groove

What I failed to make absolutely clear in my April column is that I really, truly, thoroughly enjoyed all three USB DAC-headphone amps that I auditioned: the Audioengine D3 (\$189), the AudioQuest DragonFly v1.2 (\$149), and the Cambridge Audio DacMagic XS (\$199). Each offered a slightly different perspective on the music, but none could be accused of closing lanes on the George Washington Bridge, dumping several feet of snow on top of our car, or doing anything especially *wrong*. They committed no crimes, told no lies. If I had to choose a favorite, I'd choose the DragonFly—not only for its sound, which remains excellent, but also for its look, feel, low price, and because it's made in the US.

Sound isn't everything. I think that audiophiles, in general, care *too much* about sound. Such fanatical pursuit of one slippery goal can drive us to do strange things: trim the edges from our CDs, "demagnetize" our LPs, carefully snake our unusually thick and unwieldy speaker cables through carbon-impregnated risers—all totally fine ways to pass the time, I suppose, so long as we're able to maintain healthy, happy lives and relationships. But it's also okay to care about the way a product looks and feels. It's okay to care about packaging, usability, convenience. It's important to keep in touch with the world beyond the dedicated listening room, to remember that there are other considerations to be trimmed, measured, and weighed. That you care about good sound at all—that you're learning how to listen to music, that you're honestly concerned with quality—is more than enough to distinguish yourself from the average consumer.

And isn't that something we *all* want? To feel special? To love and to feel loved?

The new(er) VPI Traveler turntable

Over the last few months, I've had a great time listening primarily to digital files through headphones and powered loudspeakers, but I still prefer listening to LPs played on a good turntable. My preference has only a little to do with sound. For me, listening to vinyl isn't only fun, it's *important*. More than any other music format I've enjoyed, vinyl soothes my mind, strengthens my spirit, makes me feel connected to other people, places, and times.

I reviewed the original VPI Traveler turntable in November 2012, and while I quickly fell in love with its smooth, coherent, dynamic sound, I was less impressed with its overall appearance. Rather than appropriate



The VPI Traveler has been revised in a number of significant ways since we reviewed it in November 2012.

the purposeful, considered look and feel of other VPI turntables, the Traveler looked almost cobbled together, as though it had been hurriedly fashioned from spare parts. As far as I could tell, however, the 'table's modest looks had no negative effect on its outstanding sound.

Still, not long after I'd reviewed the Traveler, VPI began implementing subtle changes in its appearance: revised logo, altered feet, different platter mat... Whenever I saw it at a show or dealer event, the Traveler looked somehow new. I began to wonder what was going on, but the dealers and sales reps with whom I casually chatted offered no concrete explanation. Running changes continued over the next several months, and culminated at the 2013 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, where VPI's young new president, Mathew Weisfeld, told me the revisions were meant to address the 'table's cosmetics, as well as improve its durability and ease of use. With those improvements came an increase in price—from \$1299 to \$1499, without phono cartridge.

I bet you know what's coming next—that great, familiar refrain: It was time to do a Follow-Up.

Current-production models of the VPI Traveler are easily more attractive than the original model I reviewed. VPI's logo—formerly a tacky plastic badge affixed to the front of the chassis—is now discreetly and expertly laser-printed on its top panel. The original model's four feet—shiny aluminum cones with rubber-compound surface contacts—gave the Traveler a solidly stable foundation, but looked as if they'd been swiped from some other, more modern-looking turntable. The new black rubber feet look specifically designed for the Traveler. According to Mat Weisfeld, they not only create an even firmer foundation, they provide greater reliability. The original Traveler, it was found, did not travel easily enough: If the user attempted to move it without first lifting it, the rubber-compound surface contacts were easily dislodged from the shiny feet.

The original Traveler came with an unusual platter mat—a rubbery thing with a web-like surface very reminiscent of

See Stephen's popular blog at stereophile.com

mesh shelf lining—affixed to the platter with a gummy, sticky substance not at all ideal for supporting valued LPs, as users discovered who attempted to remove the mat. The Traveler now comes with an attractive and more traditional rubber mat that can be easily removed or replaced as the user sees fit.

Making the Traveler friendlier to overseas customers became a priority when its international sales surpassed VPI's expectations. The company The company equipped the Traveler with a power supply that supports both 110 and 240V. "It was tough having to keep changing the production line from US Travelers to overseas models," Weisfeld said. "This gave us the ability to make the Traveler universal." In addition, VPI moved the motor assembly an hour forward—from the platter's nine o'clock position to its ten o'clock position—and made the power switch more accessible, moving it from the table's left side panel to its top surface. I had appreciated the inconspicuous placement of the original power switch, but I have no problem whatsoever with

its new location; and while I recall that the original model started and stopped on a dime—like a sports car, in fact—my new sample always starts with a bouncy rumble, and comes to a slower, more gradual stop. However, having reviewed the original model in a completely different system within a completely different room, it's impossible for me to say whether the new motor runs more quietly. The old sample ran quietly; so does the new one.

Finally, VPI replaced the tonearm's sapphire gimbal bearings with harder, low-friction, ABEC-5 ball bearings. The original bearings were too easily knocked out of place during shipping, explained Weisfeld, and could be damaged if the user tried to adjust the vertical tracking force (VTF) by rotating the tonearm's counterweight instead of correctly using the knurled knob at the tonearm's back end. "The new bearings are impossible to break," he said. "All of the changes were inspired by customer and reviewer feedback and [reflect] our efforts to . . . supply a high-quality, American-made product."

Despite bumps along the way, the

Traveler has brought VPI great success. It has won a number of awards from the press, including *Stereophile's* Analog Component of 2013 (tied with Spiral Groove's SG1.1 turntable; \$31,000), and has introduced the New Jersey company to a wider, more varied audience that, Mat Weisfeld says, includes non-audiophiles, college students, and even women. I don't doubt him.

Ortofon 2M Red moving-magnet phono cartridge

In 2008, I helped my Uncle Omar build his first hi-fi system, and since then I've grown familiar with its sound. Omar uses a Cambridge Audio Azur 350A integrated amplifier to drive a pair of B&W DM602 loudspeakers. Speaker cables and interconnects are Kimber Kable's 8TC and Hero. His phono preamplifier is the Bellari VP129. His turntable, which he has come to view as his system's weakest link, is a Rega P1 (discontinued; \$350 with RB100 tonearm when last available), whose stock Ortofon OM 5E moving-magnet phono cartridge he's upgraded to Ortofon's 2M Red

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(\$99), the least expensive of the company's excellent 2M moving-magnet models.

The 2M Red has an attractive body of black and translucent red, and its chunky shape, weight of 72gm, and threaded mounting holes make it relatively easy to install. It uses an elliptical diamond stylus, outputs 5.5mV, tracks at 1.8gm, and has a recommended load resistance of 47k ohms—all of which make it compatible with a wide variety of turntables. Dress it up or dress it down:

Just as you're equally happy sipping a glass of Del Borgo Lequilibrista at Birreria or pounding cans of Bud at Barcade, the 2M Red is as comfortable in a VPI Traveler as it is in a Rega P1.

A few weeks ago, Uncle Omar and I set up the new Traveler in his system while Ms. Little and Auntie Katie were in the kitchen baking oatmeal-raisin muffins. It was an idyllic Sunday afternoon. If you've ever set up a turntable, you'll have



Ortofon's 2M Red moving-magnet cartridge costs just \$99.

no problem whatsoever with the Traveler; and if the Traveler is the first 'table you've ever set up, you'll be entirely prepared for the task: Simply follow VPI's instructions, take your time, and be careful.

You'll need a phono cable. We used Kimber Kable's perfectly quiet TAK-Cu (\$385/1.5m), but there are also some excellent affordable options out

there, such as AudioQuest's Wildcat (\$89/1.5m) or Project's Connect-It (\$99/1.23m). VPI provides everything else you'll need, including a small, user-friendly digital VTF gauge. (Earlier Traveler models came with the fussier Shure SFG-2 beam-balance gauge.) We used the supplied gauge to set the 2M Red's VTF at 1.8gm, and verified the results with my Audio Additives gauge (\$79).¹ Less than an hour later, just as the ladies were pulling the muffins from the oven, Omar and I first dropped needle into groove. Very soon after, jaws dropped to floor.

With the Ortofon-equipped Traveler in Omar's system, we heard obvious and significant improvements in the sound. Omar was most impressed by the VPI's tighter, weightier bass, while

¹ For more details about setting up a VPI Traveler, read my original review at www.stereophile.com/content/vpi-industries-traveler-turntable, or Michael Fremer's review at www.analogplanet.com/content/vpi-traveler-plants-american-flag-mid-entry-level-turntable-territory

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I most enjoyed its vastly wider dynamic range. Silences were quieter, and musical climaxes were produced with greater ease, clarity, and control. Cymbals sounded cleaner and clearer, with faster attacks and longer decays, and without the slightest hint of unnecessary grain or edge. After we'd devoured a couple of muffins and a side of Beach House's excellent *Teen Dream* (LP, Sub Pop SP845), Omar sat back and sighed. "That was completely and thoroughly enjoyable. I felt like I was right in the middle of the music." The Traveler's smooth, coherent, relaxed sound was much as I remembered, and while the Ortofon 2M Red was indeed right at home in the system, I suspected that, partnered with a more ambitious cartridge, the Traveler could provide even greater drama and scale. The muffins, too, were excellent, and paired perfectly with Samuel Smith's Oatmeal Stout.

The most affordable turntables from Rega, Pro-Ject, and other high-quality brands are typically equipped with an Ortofon OM 3E (\$46) or OM 5E (\$59) cartridge—very fine performers, capable of producing good sound without damaging your LPs, but easily outclassed by more expensive models, such as those found in Ortofon's 2M line. If you've been enjoying your music through an OM cartridge but feel it's time to upgrade, the 2M Red is an excellent choice. I wouldn't think twice about it. You'll hear quieter backgrounds, a cleaner midrange, and more detail, treble, and bass. And if you're looking for a high-value cartridge to match a high-value table like the VPI Traveler, the 2M Red is an excellent place to start. It's exactly where I would start, delighted at the thought of eventually climbing all the way up the 2M ladder.

Lehmannaudio Black Cube Statement phono preamplifier

Back at home, I tried the Traveler-Ortofon combo in my system, first running the Traveler's signal into the phono stage of Arcam's A19 integrated amplifier, and later using Lehmannaudio's Black Cube Statement MM/MC phono preamplifier (\$449). I'd long been curious about the German manufacturer's popular Black Cube line. Way back in October 1998, when I was, like, two years old (actually, 20), Michael



The Lehmannaudio Black Cube Statement is a versatile and powerful performer.

Fremer reviewed the original Black Cube, which then sold for \$695. Extremely impressed by its fast, detailed, dynamic sound, Mikey urged readers to "Get your hands on a Lehmann Audio Black Cube. I don't know of anything at or near the price, or maybe even twice the price, that sounds this good."

In spite of its assertive model name, the Statement is actually the most modest preamp in Lehmannaudio's Black Cube line, which now includes the standard Black Cube (\$629), the Black Cube SE (\$929), and the Black Cube SE II (\$1149). All but the last—which, oddly, is neither black nor a cube—are physically identical and have gone nearly unchanged (cosmetically) since the original Black Cube was introduced in 1995. They measure about 4" W by 1.75" H by 4.25" D and weigh just a few ounces. As you ascend the line, the quality of internal parts improves and the overall circuit design grows in sophistication. At one end of the Statement are a ground plug and a pair of gold-plated RCA inputs; the opposite end provides an input for the external AC power supply (included) and a pair of gold-plated RCA outputs. The audio circuitry is housed in a simple, nonmagnetic aluminum case whose top panel is not etched, engraved, or otherwise adorned, but instead carries a sticker with the company logo and model name. But it's a nice sticker, and for \$449 I don't mind

it at all—in fact, I think it's kind of cool, in a no-nonsense sort of way. But I do wish the sticker had been more carefully centered on my sample's top panel. I'm picky like that. Everything under the lid, which is held in place by four small hex screws, is tidy and clean.

The Statement is surprisingly versatile: Four options of gain (31, 41, 51, and 61dB) and three of input impedance (1k, 47k, and 100 ohms) can be selected with two sets of four DIP switches each on the bottom plate. In addition, custom load impedances (for cartridges that require special loading) can be achieved by inserting resistors into two open slots on the Statement's circuit board. If that sounds intimidating, don't worry about it. "Install these resistors only if you know what you are doing," the Statement's manual advises. "Otherwise, please consult your

dealer." If your cartridge requires a custom load, you're probably already familiar with this sort of thing, and the Statement's manual offers plenty of support for the task. Otherwise, call that dealer. From the factory, the Statement is set to accommodate MM cartridges, such as the Ortofon 2M Red. I didn't have to touch a single DIP. The rest of my system comprised KEF's LS50 loudspeakers, AudioQuest's Rocket 33 speaker cables and Big Sur interconnects, and Kimber Kable's TAK-Cu phono cable.

"Love Is to Die," currently my favorite track on Warpaint's new, self-titled album (LP, Rough Trade RTRADLP680), opens with drummer Stella Mozgawa tapping out a tight rhythm of rapid rim shots and closed hi-hat—a theme that returns throughout the song—while Emily Kokal's synth patterns gradually grow louder and move toward the listener. Through the Arcam A19's built-in phono stage I heard a very solid and well-focused center image, the rim shots and cymbal work presented with natural tone, great speed, and clarity. The Statement preserved that strong center image but threw a far wider, deeper, taller soundstage, and provided more clarity and presence overall. I enjoyed more snap and bite in those rim shots, more sparkle in the electric guitars, more punch in the bass guitar and kick drum, greater separation

between the lead and backing vocals.

Compared to my long-term reference phono preamp, an NAD PP-3 (discontinued; \$199 when last available), the Black Cube Statement brought the music forward and produced greater dynamic contrasts, adding excitement and drama to my listening. The NAD sounds laid-back and reserved, but nonetheless produces a smooth, seductive sound, with an especially fine sense of rhythm and pace. Listening to the Lehmannaudio was like opening a window and sticking my head out to feel the cool, fresh air. Listening to the NAD is like enjoying that same view from a distance, in bed, under a cozy blanket. "Enjoy the day!" says the Lehmannaudio. "Why get up?" asks the NAD. It's hard to argue with either.

But, ultimately, the Statement's generous soundstage, awesome clarity, beautiful detail, and fast attack transients proved impossible to deny. A spacious, dynamic recording like James Blake's *Overgrown* (LP, Republic B0018305-01) seems made to be heard through the Lehmannaudio. Listening to it was an absolute thrill and joy: The sound was gripping, dramatic, and emotionally compelling, with frighteningly deep silences, well-controlled bass, clean highs, and superb presence. I felt I was right in the middle of the music, and I loved it. The Lehmannaudio Black Cube Statement is an awesome little phono preamplifier—versatile, powerful, and true to the music. At \$449, it strikes me as a bargain. Get your hands on one.

Bozak Madisson CLK-PH2 moving-magnet phono preamplifier

But if you're just getting interested in analog playback and are anxious to start spinning LPs, the Lehmannaudio Black Cube Statement might seem prohibitively expensive. After all, some outstanding turntables—Pro-Ject's

Elemental (\$199), Essential (\$299), and Debut (\$399) come to mind—are significantly more affordable.

What's a guy or gal to do? I visited The Everything Store—the devil's own website, Amazon.com—where I searched for phono preamplifiers and sorted the results by price, from low to high. The least costly phono preamp available from Amazon that day was the Taiwanese-made Bozak Madisson CLK-PH2 (\$19.95, plus \$7.49 shipping). I bought it. Of course, afterward, distraught with guilt, I marched straight to our local bookstore, Word, and paid full price for five new hardcovers: *Why I Read*, by Wendy Lesser; *Smarter Than You Think*, by Clive Thompson; *Writing on the Wall*, by Tom Standage; *Absolute Value*, by Itamar Simonson and Emanuel Rosen; and *The Sound Book*, by Trevor Cox. Each cost more than the Bozak Madisson. I guess we have Jeff Bezos to thank for this.

The Bozak Madisson is completely fine. It works only with moving-magnet cartridges, provides no loading options, and has no power indicator light—but, like the far more expensive Lehmannaudio Black Cube Statement, it's small, has a ground pin, puts pairs of ins and outs on opposite ends, and has a nice sticker on its top panel.

Compared to the Lehmannaudio or the NAD, the Bozak Madisson sounded smaller, darker, and more distant, with softer lows, edgier highs, and less accomplished senses of touch and momentum. But it was surprisingly quiet and, most important, preserved the music's essence. I enjoyed everything I played through it—pop, rock, classical, jazz, rap, noise. For those in a serious pinch or on a really tight budget, the Bozak Madisson CLK-PH2 will do the trick. Totally recommended. But don't forget to support small businesses . . .

Mooco Mat record mat

. . . and the cattle industry? Distributed by Music Hall, the Mooco Mat (\$75) is a turntable platter mat with a bottom layer of cork and a top layer "made of real cowhide from real dead cows (vegans and PETA need not buy)." The FAQs page at Mooomats.com explains that the dissimilar materials work to reduce vibrations, and the cowhide lifts and decouples the record from the platter. In addition, because cowhide has "natural antistatic properties"—an evolutionary development due to cattle's risk of being struck by lightning while grazing on the prairie?—the Mooco Mat is claimed to reduce unwanted static on the surface of an LP. Hmm. I don't mooco about all that, but I do know that the Mooco Mat looks really cool, in a mid-century-modern kinda way. It's very hip. Each Mooco Mat has a unique hide pattern. The cowhides are imported from South America, where they undergo a tanning process that "eliminates the possibility of shedding and produces no odor."

I tried a very pretty, brown-and-white (Ms. Little calls it "cognac and cream") Mooco Mat on the VPI Traveler, and though it was slightly thicker than the Traveler's stock mat, it didn't necessitate an adjustment of the Traveler tonearm's vertical tracking angle (VTA). The music sounded great—clear, bold, and beautiful. The little breath that singer Shara Worden takes before the first words of "You Will Return," from David Lang's heartrending *Death Speaks* (LP, Cantaloupe Music CA21092LP), was more obvious and lovelier than it had been before, and violinist Owen Pallett and guitarist Bryce Dessner seemed to pluck and strum their instruments' strings with more force and feeling.

However, I did find that the Mooco Mat left little brown (I mean, cognac) hairs on my LPs. These were easily

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