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Acoustic Signature Invictus Turntable and TA-9000 Tonearm, Part One

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There has been a lot of talk in our magazine recently about things sounding alike. Aside from trivial differences in voicing or nuance it seems we are living in a world in which everything is sonically equal, and that, of course, means that paying a good deal more for something that sounds almost exactly like something else that costs a good deal less is a literal waste of money—or a flamboyant exercise in conspicuous consumption. One of our writers even went so far as to say that rather than buy a very expensive component—which he extolled—he would devote such money to charitable causes, as if people with the means to buy such things couldn't (and don't) do both. Well, bully for him.

Putting aside the fact that the entire purpose of *The Absolute Sound*, from Day One, has been to observe and comment on the differences in voicing and nuance among competing products—and that virtually throwing up one's hands in the face of such differences, large and small, is tantamount to abandoning critical thought—I'm not one who thinks that all contemporary hi-fi products sound alike or that the differences among them are trivial or that spending a lot (assuming you have a lot to spend) on something superior is a form of immorality.

What I do agree with—in so far as this fact plays a role in the everything-sounds-alike school of thinking—is that things have gotten better in hi-fi, and that they've gotten better across the board, regardless of price point. What has changed in my view—and it has changed in every type of component from front end to back—is the audibility of distortions. Simply put, noises of all sorts (be they electrical or mechanical) have been reduced, and as a direct result resolution of all sorts and transparency to sources have been increased.

Nowhere is this lowering of noise and increase in resolution more apparent than in front-end components, particularly analog front-end components. People sometimes wonder why, outside of old age and a perverse streak of Luddism, guys like me are still wedded to LPs—or why LPs are currently selling at a faster clip than they were in their heyday. For music lovers, it's not because LPs have better liner notes or cooler cover art or hipper anti-establishment appeal. It's because they sound better—which is to say, more beautiful, more exciting, more like the real thing. This was true at the dawn of the Digital Era, and in spite of the many advances that digital sources have made (and they have) it is even truer today.

Perhaps you'd have to be a geezer (like someone we know) to fully appreciate how much more of everything (color, dynamics, detail, dimensionality, presence, sheer musical life) current LP-playback gear is able to retrieve from those fifty-or-sixty-year-old grooves—and consequently how much closer LP playback now comes to the sound absolute—than the very best of yesteryear or, in some cases, yesterday. The lowering of noise (particularly the susceptibility to resonance and vibration) in 'tables and 'arms and the consequent better tracing and tracking of contemporary cartridges, which have themselves greatly improved, have revolutionized (and I don't think that's too strong a word) LP playback. It is mind-boggling to discover how much you were previously missing on LPs you thought you knew by heart—on LPs you've been playing for virtually an entire lifetime—and how far hearing more of what you haven't heard goes toward creating a more credible illusion of the real thing. It kind of makes you wonder where it's all going to end—how much more music and performance is still hidden in those little canyons of vinyl.

All this brings me to the subject at hand, the Acoustic Signature Invictus turntable and TA-9000 tonearm. Simply put, this ultra-expensive bit of Teutonic engineering is the best record player (by far) that I have heard in my home. And the difference between it and other rivals isn't trivial or a matter of nuance.

Not too long ago TAS' Paul Seydor reported that the TechDAS Air Force One turntable with Graham Phantom Elite tonearm produced a sound from LPs that was “not likely to be surpassed in our lifetime.” Well...beep, beep! Here comes a potential surpasser—and, checking my pulse, I think it's still my lifetime. This incredibly massive (375 pounds of CNC-milled aluminum and brass, not including its 400-pound stand), six-motor, belt-driven, almost Mayan-looking *objet du son* from Günter Frohnhoefer of Germany is not only the biggest, heaviest, and most imperturbable record player I have ever come across--you simply cannot make it feedback vibration, even by pounding on it with both hands while it is playing--it is also the most versatile (it accepts four tonearms) and the simplest to use (at least, once you've hoisted it onto a suitable support system). *Unbelievably* quiet in playback, in combination with the TA-9000 tonearm it tracks with the precision of a Westrex cutterhead, reproducing instruments and vocals with unparalleled three-dimensionality, solidity, color, detail, power, pace—all those good

things—and turning the soundstage into a veritable diorama of a symphony orchestra, a string quartet, a jazz quintet, or a rock trio.



Acoustic Signature’s TA-9000 tonearm is built up millimeter by millimeter via a selective-laser-melting process (each ’arm takes 50 hours of processing on a €25 million SLM machine) to produce a resonance-free structure impossible to create by any other means. (Internally, the ’arm has tree-branch-like “limbs” that connect its inner tube to an outer tube, channeling resonances like a grounding wire channels RF). With highest-precision/tolerance ceramic bearings, it is as sonically invisible (and utterly imperturbable) as Acoustic Signature’s fabulous Invictus.

I will have a good deal more to say about this standard-setting turntable and tonearm in future installments of this blog, and when I review the entire system in the magazine. But for the nonce, if you’re *really* into vinyl, looking for the best LP-source component, and have the requisite do-re-mi (roughly \$123k for the package!), here it’s.

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