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Review: ZYX Atmos X-SB (low output) Cartridge

When Mehran told us ZYX was introducing a new cartridge I wondered where it could possibly fit in an already full lineup. "Not to worry," he said, "it's a new design. I think it will sound very different."

Those familiar with my enthusiasm for the UNiVerse and its lower priced siblings can imagine my reaction. Why would I want to hear a very different sound? Well, they'd revoke my audiophile card if I refused to listen to something new. When he offered to let us audition his demo copy of the new beast - well - who among us would refuse?

The Atmos' specifications are pretty much identical to other low output ZYX's, but when I opened the box it was obvious that Mehran was right: this is indeed a new design. The Atmos has a body quite unlike the enclosed acrylic shell of other ZYX's. Oh it's still acrylic, but there's barely anything to it. There's a top, to hold the permanently installed mounting nuts, and a face and back. That's about all. The bottom is vestigial at most. The sides are virtually nonexistent, so don't go poking at them. It does have a removable stylus guard so some thought was given to safety, but it's no cartridge for a klutz.

Knowing how much sonic freedom the semi-nude UNiVerse has, I was quite excited by the sight of an almost fully disrobed cartridge. (I know what you're thinking, so stop.) Before mounting it up I anticipated big dynamics and impact. Was that expectation satisfied? I'll let Paul describe what we heard.

* * *

My first impression on hearing the Atmos was that this would be a great rock cartridge. Even though I was listening to a solo harpsichord at the time, the power, weight, authority, punch and bass were clearly evident strengths. Switching to 'Dark Side of the Moon' confirmed my initial impression. The Atmos really delivers when it comes to rock. There is no need to turn up the volume to feel the heart beats.

The Atmos is a different kind of ZYX. It is not just an improved Airy 3 and it is not quite a UNiVerse. Its level of performance puts it significantly closer to the UNiVerse than an Airy 3. However, the sound does not lie between these two cartridges; it has its own sound. This is due in part to a new body shape that is even more open than the semi-nude UNiVerse.

As a classical music listener this cartridge has been an eye opener for me. I now have a better appreciation of why the goal of ever greater detail retrieval does not necessarily work for all genres of music, or for all listeners. The strengths of the UNiVerse are its speed, detail retrieval, lack of sonic overhang and phenomenally extended highs; all of which work well for classical music. Friends who bring over rock albums all delight in hearing new detail on their LPs, but they are not always bowled over with the UNiVerse. I now get it. The UNiVerse can be too revealing. It is not a problem of detail overload. The problem is the resolution of the separate tracks that make up most rock recordings. Each track is revealed as a separate entity. Illuminating how an album was put together doesn't always provide the full visceral experience.

Enter the Atmos. Unlike the UNiVerse's exceptional ability to drop every note when it is finished, the Atmos, like virtually all other cartridges, has a sonic overhang. The energy built up in the cantilever and coils keeps a note going a little longer after it has actually finished on the LP. This overhang is very short with the Atmos and is shorter than that of the Airy 3, but it is just enough to blur the edges of separate sound tracks and present a unified sound. With weight, power, authority, punch and drive coupled with a cohesive sound the Atmos delivers a highly satisfying rock experience. For rock many listeners will prefer the Atmos to the UNiVerse.

The Atmos outplays the Airy 3 for all genres. The Atmos has more speed, weight, power, authority, punch and drive. The Atmos is also more forgiving about VTF and VTA. As with all cartridges, time spent finding the best VTF and VTA will be rewarded with the best sound. This is true with the Atmos, but there is less of a drop off in performance when slightly away from optimal.

So, how is the Atmos when it comes to classical music? It is very good and falls just short of the UNiVerse. The initial trial with the solo harpsichord was very revealing. The Atmos doesn't quite have the speed of the UNiVerse and lacks the phenomenally extended highs. The Atmos didn't convey the shimmering air around the strings as they were plucked. Without the extended highs the Atmos presented a slightly bass heavy, darker sound. The creaks and groans of the instrument as the pedals were pressed were more present with the Atmos. There was also that very slight sonic overhang at the end of each note. This small trailing tail prevents the full resolution of the gaps between the notes. There is more of a continuum of sound; a background ambience that holds the notes together. For highly energetic performances such as organ works this results in a less resolved and slightly muddy vibrato when compared to the UNiVerse.

On most classical recordings we missed the extraordinary extended highs of the UNiVerse when listening to the Atmos. To even the playing field I brought out re-released pressings of recordings made in the early fifties, The Kubelik Legacy on Mercury (MG 3-4500 & MG 3-4501). Not only are these great musical performances with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, but the recorded sound is exceptional. Virtually the only thing missing are the extended highs. The weight, power, punch and drive of the Atmos breathed real vitality and presence into these performances. The Atmos picked up the bass line, drove the rhythm with great ease and provided an extremely satisfying listening experience.

So, for rock the power-punch of the Atmos delivers a highly enjoyable visceral experience. There is no need for most rockers to spend extra money for the UNiVerse to get features which, in the end, may detract from their rock experience. For classical music the UNiVerse is still the best ZYX cartridge, and one of the two best cartridges we have heard.

That was going to be the end of this review until both proof/goof readers asked the same question. What about jazz? Well, jazz listeners have an interesting choice between the UNiVerse and the Atmos. For those who revel in the detail of wire brush strokes, vocal timbres and cymbal hits with natural, extended decays the UNiVerse is the clear cut winner. For others who prefer a more relaxed, jazz-in-a-smoke-filled-club atmosphere, with the emphasis on the rhythm and drive from the double bass the Atmos will deliver the sound you enjoy.

* * *

Doug's postscript...

I heard pretty much exactly what Paul described. To put it simply, this baby KICKS, big

time.

It would be great fun to A/B an Atmos with a Dynavector XV-1S or Transfiguration Orpheus. My guess is that the impact of the Atmos would impress the fans of those two excellent cartridges, while the tonal accuracy of all three would otherwise make them more alike than different.

My friend and fellow Audiogoner Mothra recently pointed out that at least some rock listeners prefer transparency to the source, phase coherency and a very low sound floor even at the cost of some impact and apparent cohesiveness. As a professional recording engineer he values the ability to hear everything on a record. For his priorities, which I share even when stompin' to one of my 3 rock LP's, the UNiVerse is still the more satisfying cartridge. But I suspect this is a minority view among rockers. If they flock to the new ZYX instead they'll be very satisfied.

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by [Dougdeacon](#) on 05-24-07

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[05-25-07 Thanks to you both for the usual thoughtful review. ...](#) Mothra

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