



amazon audio

Model Two turntable

as reviewed by Larry Cox



LARRY COX'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS
ATC SCM 35.

ELECTRONICS
E.A.R. 509 amplifiers and E.A.R.
864 preamplifier.

SOURCE
Audio Note CD3.1x CD player.

CABLES
Ensemble Dynaflex and Calrad
balanced interconnects. Speaker
cables are either Ixos 6003 or
Belden 1219A.

ACCESSORIES
API Power Pack. BDR cones.

The analog revival is an odd thing. Vinyl can present so many more problems than digital, it seems odd that people want it, let alone prefer it. Not only are CDs widely available, they are easier to use, unless you are one of those people who buffs or paints your CDs, or puts aftermarket pucks on top of them. With vinyl, you'll be thinking about, if not actually changing, the VTA, wondering "Should I fluxbust?" or "Is the table level?" and so on. Analog involves lots of angst, and for what? The answer is that when analog is good, it's really good. Digital promised perfect sound forever, and most would agree that it was neither perfect nor forever. Analog, when delivered by a turntable like the Amazon Model Two, easily clobbers digital. Then again, the Model Two retails for \$3895, so you should expect a lot.

It's been about three years since I've regularly had a turntable in my system, but before that, I had owned a Dual 504 for twelve years, then a SOTA Sapphire Mk I for six years, and finally an Oracle Delphi Mk II (with Brooks Berdan mods) for about five. I enjoyed the step up the ladder from decent (the Dual) to better (the Sapphire), and the sidestep to a different-sounding table. (The Oracle had better imaging and a "faster" sound than the SOTA, though it had less bass and was not as tonally rich.) I had decent-to-good cartridges that entire time, from a 1987-era Audio Technica that cost about \$200 to an AudioQuest 404i, and finally a Koetsu Rosewood.

My initial itch to return to vinyl came because I have about 600 LPs that I haven't replaced with CDs. Listening to Ensemble's hi-dac and Dirondo transport, I thought I had found a digital player that would allow me to leave analog behind, but there is still a lot of music that I can't hear without a turntable. As good as the Ensemble gear was, it couldn't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Plus, I'd have to give up the album covers and all of my nostalgia about stuff I bought in high school and college. I'd rather keep what I've paid for, and allow myself to treasure hunt

occasionally at record swap meets.

Amazon has been doing business in Germany for approximately seventeen years, and has earned a good reputation in Europe. From the beginning, the key to Amazon's designs has been the vibration damping built into the plinth in the form of low-resonance polymers (LRPs). Three LRPs, which are shaped like squished Hostess® Twinkies, are placed between two slabs of material made by ICI (a large European manufacturer) that looks like acrylic but isn't. The LRPs are radially arranged, like spokes in a bicycle wheel.

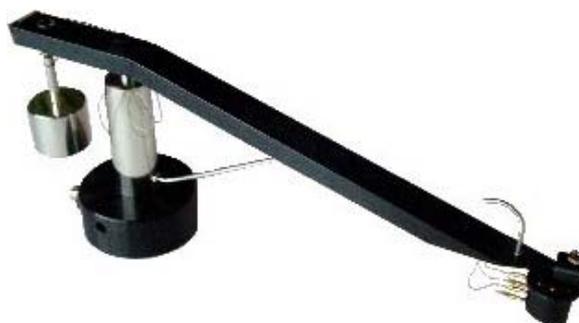
The Amazon is very simple, almost Clark-Kent-like in appearance. It doesn't shout, as some of the chrome and acrylic tables do. The fact that it is simple-looking makes it welcome in my house. My wife is the ultimate de-clutterer. Every six months, another bag of stuff disappears forever, and her appreciation of simplicity carries over into my choices of audio gear.

The platter of the Model Two is eleven pounds of acrylic, almost twice the weight of that on the Model Three, but the same as the one on the Model One. More vibration control, more weight, and a heavier, thicker platter is the way Amazon goes "up line." The entry-level Model Three (\$2395) weighs 19 pounds, the Model Two is 35 pounds, and the Model One (\$8995) is 55. All Amazon tables have two layers of ICI material, but none have three, so apparently two is the magic number.

Beneath the Model Two's plinth are three simple feet, which are height adjustable and feature spikes. The feet made leveling the table easy and precise, but the spikes are very sharp, so you'll want to be careful how you place the table on your rack. Racks with fine finishes will require cups or other devices to keep the spikes from digging into the wood.

Integral to the design of the Model Two is an inverted bearing. Amazon has been using inverted bearings since 1986, well before the rest of the industry. An inverted bearing means that the bearing is below the level of the platter, so if the platter were to wobble from being pulled on by the belt, the wobble would be at its lowest at the level of the record. This should mean that the azimuth of the cantilever will move the least amount possible relative to the record. The ball on which the Amazon platter spins is made of a highly polished ceramic, and spins atop a Teflon thrust plate. Amazon asserts that the ceramic material in the ball is stronger than metal, and can be more highly polished, which means that it should have more symmetrical rotation. Heat and friction are dissipated by oil that is wicked up to lubricate the ball.

All Amazon tables feature DC motors. An AC motor can have 60Hz hum. Although this is a \$4000 turntable, the motor is mounted on the plinth. I thought this was a huge design error, particularly at the Model Two's price point. I presumed that this would add noise, but the Model Two was really quiet. I also thought that mounting the motor on the plinth would yield a muddy sound, but it didn't. The Model Two provides a very precise and calm sound. So much for my presumptions.



Coupled to the Model Two turntable was the RS Labs A-1 tonearm (which will be the subject of a separate review). The A-1 is a unipivot arm with a flat wand instead of the usual round one. Setup of the A-1 was beyond easy. It has no anti-skating mechanism, and judging from my experience, doesn't appear to need it. In addition to the flat wand, the A-1 has two other rather large anomalies. The first is that the arm just sits on top of the turntable—it isn't bolted or otherwise affixed, except through the rather heavy weight of the arm base. It is very easy to simply plop the

arm down and start playing.

Several of the cables I had on hand were either too heavy (Jena Labs) or too stiff (Ensemble Dynaflux) for the unattached tonearm, but happily, Silver Audio's 4.0 Bullets were just right. Although the Silver Audio cable is nice for its price, it lacks the precision of the three-times-as-expensive Dynaflux cable and the rounded detail of the seven-times-as-expensive Jena Labs. Nevertheless, the Silver Audio cable is an overachiever, and was a worthy partner for the turntable and arm.

The final anomaly of the RS Labs arm is that the headshell pivots at the point of the cantilever, and rotates in an arc of approximately six degrees. Pick the arm up and the cartridge seems to wiggle around. As you lower the cartridge, the headshell seems to drop into the grooves at the wrong angle, but the cartridge and cantilever immediately right themselves so that they are properly aligned, and they stay that way. Although the pivoting headshell is strange, it isn't dangerous, though it did throw me for the first couple of weeks I used the arm.

The Amazon Model Two and RS Labs A-1 combination was among the more low-tech-looking setups I've had around for a while. It leaned more toward the hobbyist roots of audio than to the evolved version that tries to look high tech as well as sound good. Looks were deceiving, however. Although the RS Labs arm looks quite goofy, it is an excellent arm, and the Amazon did a great job of concealing its technology, I quickly stopped thinking about how it got its job done and simply took my seat to hear how well it worked.

I'm almost ready to tell you how the Model Two sounded, but first a comment about my room. I had lots of problems getting the VPI Aries Black Knight (read the [review](#)) not to skip while anyone walked in my living/listening room. Ultimately I had to rely on both a Mana AV rack and a Townshend Seismic Sink to keep the VPI from skipping, as well as to get good sound out of it. I also had trouble getting good sound out of the JR Transrotor Leonardo without the isolation provided by the Mana and the Seismic Sink. In both cases, I consider these products necessities rather than accessories, which adds to the price of the turntable.

While the Black Knight is a good buy at \$2800, I would be saddled with an additional \$1400 for the Mana rack and the Seismic Sink to optimize its performance, and the \$3500 Transrotor would require a similar expenditure. While other users may not encounter footfall problems, in my situation, these less expensive tables would end up costing about the same as the Amazon, given the required ancillaries. I've since moved my equipment rack to a corner of the listening room, and the good news is that footfalls are no longer a problem, at least with the Amazon. It was a pleasure to be able to use the Amazon on my Lovan rack with the Seismic Sink and have no problems.

I loved the combination of RS Labs tonearm and Amazon Model Two turntable. This was the best analog sound I've had in my house. The sound was sweet, fast, delicate, rich on occasion, and big. I found the Model Two more detailed, cleaner, clearer, and more relaxing than the Aries Black Knight, and more relaxed and spatially delineated than the Transrotor. The Amazon, despite its appearance of pedestrian simplicity, is an accomplished table. I gathered all manner of recordings to both test and enjoy the Model Two. Among the records I pulled out were:

Edvard Grieg, *Piano Concerto No. 1 in A Minor*

Richard Strauss, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*

The Sound of Music soundtrack

Manuel de Falla, *Concerto de Aranjuez* featuring Julian Bream

Echo and the Bunnymen, *Songs to Learn and Love*

X, *Fourth of July* (actually the entire catalog)

The Clash, *London Calling*

Van Halen (first album)

David Bowie, *Diamond Dogs*

Several LPs by Leo Kottke

Although the Amazon didn't seem to favor one genre more than another, well-recorded, more subtle music like the *Concerto de Aranjuez* and other classical pieces seemed to benefit from its refinement the most. Nevertheless, it wasn't all tea party music that made the Model Two a treat. Deep bass was taut, loose, fast, slow—whatever kind of bass the LPs provided. The standup bass on Joe Williams' *Every Day I Have the Blues* was fast, rich, and full, as well as a little sloppy, as an acoustic bass should be. My New Order records had the appropriate tight, rhythmic, electronic bass. The bottom end on my MFSL Edward Elgar *Fantasia* was full and rhythmic. Perhaps my SOTA had deeper bass, but I doubt that it was as taut, fast, and rich as the Amazon's.

Imaging was excellent, with pinpoint imaging and a precise yet relaxed sound. It was all that AND full-bodied, while retaining a wonderful rendition of tonality. If I had a quibble, and I am not sure I do, it would be that there should have been just a little more sparkle on some records. On great systems, music seems to have a bit of sparkle at times, and I didn't hear that from the Amazon. However, I never heard the Amazon make dull, over-polished sound. I'm inclined to think that my Koetsu doesn't sparkle anymore.

What I particularly liked about the Amazon was that, like my ATC speakers, warts could still be heard as warts. The Amazon/RS Labs combination showed recording failures, but it did not twist the recording aberrations deeply into the music. It was as though the sonic shortcomings rested on top of the music rather than being part of it. It was like being at a concert with someone shuffling their feet. In a quiet passage, you could hear the shuffling, but it wasn't distracting because it sounded like shuffling feet, not a shift in the tonal balance of the music.

The Model Two's retrieval of low level detail is one of its special benefits. The table allowed small details to reach my ear while leaving sufficient space in the woof and warp of the music for much louder sounds. This was most obvious listening to Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. On my original copy of this LP, I could hear the low-level kick drum without it being anywhere nearly as loud as other sounds I was hearing at the same time. I don't get this effect with CD, nor have I heard it with any of the other tables I've heard recently. Systems that are hard and bright tend to throw information at you. Softer, mellower systems bury details, and you find yourself turning up the volume to hear more. The Amazon/RS Labs combination had a liveliness that never threw detail at me. Rather, its liveness chauffeured musical information in a most civilized way, without emasculating the sound, and this made it easier to listen into the music.

I thought I'd be able to move into an entirely digital world, but it isn't going to happen. The Amazon Model Two and RS Labs A-1 tonearm, with the Townshend Seismic Sink, was clearly superior to the excellent Ensemble hi-dac/dirondo digital combo. This in no way diminishes my appreciation of the Ensemble gear, but this analog rig is better still.

The Amazon Model Two turntable demonstrated a deep bottom end. Treble was not only extended but amazingly detailed, with the very finest filigree to cymbals, triangles, and other high-frequency information. The midrange was rich, continuous, and full-bodied, in a way I often hope for but don't often get. I found myself digging through all kinds of music—a good sign. Some systems invite you to listen to only one variety of music, but this turntable/tonearm pairing allowed me to open my ears to everything in my audio closet.

The Model Two provided a sustained tone as well as a precision to the artifacts of attack and decay that other tables can't. The \$1000 difference between the Amazon combination and the Aries combination would not keep me from recommending the Amazon. It was equally easy to use, and likely to be as durable as the Aries, yet it was clearly more satisfying, making it the more recommendable table. Amazon turntables have been a little hard to find in the U.S., so it may take some work to find one, but it will be well worth the effort. **Larry Cox**

Model Two

Retail: \$3895 w/RS A-1 arm \$4695

RS A-1 tonearm

Retail: \$1150

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