## Review: ZYX UNIverse-X-SB Cartridge

Many Audiogoners have already heard about this cartridge, from discussions here and elsewhere. If this review had appeared when it ought to have, three or four months ago, it would have been more newsworthy. My apologies to Mehran of SORAsound for taking so long about it. My only excuse is that our UNIverse has been playing virtually non-stop since November. It is a cartridge that is easier and more enjoyable to listen to than talk about. When it's been off our arm for any reason, our only desire has been to put it back on as soon as possible.

This article assumes familiarity with our prior [url=http://forum.audiogon.com/cgi-bin/frr.pl?ranlg&1104115011&read&3&4&] review of the ZYX Airy 2 and Airy 3[/url]. Previously described sound characteristics of the coil windings and the micro-groove stylus have not been repeated. Nor will we say much about set up and fine-tuning, since these are very similar for all ZYX cartridges.

ZYX was challenged by SORAsound (ZYX's US Importer) to design and produce a world class, no expense spared, phono cartridge. They succeeded. The UNIverse is not an evolutional tweak to the Airy 2 or Airy 3. From the solid gold cryogenically treated pins and semi-nude shell to the sapphire terminal board, this is a cartridge on an entirely different playing field. The Airy 2 produced great music, the Airy 3 added speed, detail and articulation. The UNIverse leaves both siblings in its wake with a great top to bottom frequency response and phenomenal speed. Music, detail and articulation with finesse and refinement are just the start. There is true weight and authority behind every note. This cartridge puts you in the same sound space as the performance. There is no barrier between you and the music. You are not on the outside listening in on the performance. Close your eyes and the instruments and voices are in the room with you. The UNIverse has not lost its ZYX heritage. It is neutral and produces a wonderfully deep and natural sound stage. Nothing is thrown forward to make you part of the sound space; it is just that the front edge of the sound stage is no longer there.

As with all ZYX cartridges, the music comes first. The added speed allows more resolution of detail and really separates the instruments with their individual timbres. This inner detail adds to the musical experience. It is all part of the magic of putting you in the same sound space. The UNIverse is also fast enough to reproduce tape hiss as a gentle, silky, background hiss. No grittiness or graininess, just a silky smooth soft whisper. OK, no one gets into hi-fi analog to reproduce beautiful tape hiss, but it is a universal experience. For a musical revelation, those damn original instrument recordings now sound like real music. Oboes sound like genuine musical instruments; no more quacking ducks! High soprano choir notes are now fully resolved without a hint of shrillness. Just pure and natural sound. No missteps to remind you that you are listening to a recording.

Got Bass? You bet. Our speakers are only flat to around 42 Hz, but the UNIverse provides room-shaking power with authority and remarkable detail. This cartridge now allows the differentiation of the plucked string and the wood body resonances of double basses even in a full orchestra. There is appropriate weight and authority behind every note from the top to the bottom of the musical scale. It is not just the added weight to the rhythm; the melodic line played in the bass is now fleshed out.

On listening to a Bach Cantata with multiple choirs, orchestras and soloists it is quite remarkable that everyone is accounted for and their individual contributions are easily resolved. An old London blue back (CS-6153) of Rachmaninov's Variations on a Theme of Paganini revealed more of its hidden treasures when played with the UNIverse. There are staccato quarter and eighth notes all over the place. The UNIverse never missed a note, never missed a beat and revealed more of the subtle texturing of the notes than we have ever heard before, all with real presence in the room. Even with frequent doubling of instruments all melodic lines for each instrument are easy to follow, as are the wonderful subtle interplays between the various sections of the orchestra. Absolutely no blurring of one note to another, nor melding of two separate instruments into a single note. It is not just the notes, but the resolution of the quiet spaces between the notes. There is true anticipation as a musician creates tension with the slightest pause; completely drawing you into the music. To be perfectly honest, every single LP played with this cartridge has resulted in a significant revelation. The list just goes on and on. It is quite baffling that dragging a stylus through a groove can actually produce all this detail, power and presence. This cartridge really makes you stop and listen to the music. It is totally spellbinding.

Had cartridges like this been around 25 years ago, I doubt that compact discs would have so easily penetrated the marketplace. Be forewarned. A friend used to enjoy both LPs and CDs. Since the purchase of the UNIverse his Meitner has been collecting dust. We recently demoed a fully tube-modded Denon DVD-3910 against our stock DVD-3910 and our Arcam FMJ CD23. The ZYX handily dispatched all three without breaking a sweat, though I admit the Denons have an edge when it comes to picture quality!

It is difficult to write without reading like a babbling idiot, a sycophant or a shill. No, the UNIverse is not perfect. No cartridge is. How about the cost? This ZYX has surely joined the ranks of other obscenely priced cartridges, yet it provides outstanding performance for the money. How does the UNIverse compare with other cartridges? To give you some idea: an Airy 2 outperforms a Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum. The Airy 3 is a clear step ahead of that. The UNIverse isn't even in the same ball park. I have heard one other cartridge that can just beat the UNIverse for speed, but that cartridge is no longer made and cost $10,000 in its day. We don't have any other $10,000 cartridges for comparisons, but at one three-day listening session the owner of a Clearaudio Insider refused to mount that cartridge after listening to the UNIverse. He felt it would be a clear step backwards and did not want to waste our limited listening time.

The UNIverse is well behaved on a tonearm and is equally at home on a Schroeder Reference or Tri-Planar Mk VII. It makes great music on either arm while also revealing their unique sonic signatures. Since buying the UNIverse we have upgraded our speaker spikes, power amp and turntable. In each case the UNIverse instantly and clearly revealed the sonic differences. Each upgrade simply allowed the cartridge to show more of what it can do. The better the system, the more it gives.

Most of the above was written by Paul. I have little to add to his general comments about this cartridge, but perhaps some musical examples will be of interest. The UNIverse either made these revelations for the first time in our system or clarified what had been unclear before.

I'll start with an imperfect record: Sibelius, 'Finlandia', recorded by Charles Mackerras and the London Proms Symphony for RCA (LSC-2336). The 180g Classic Records reissue suffers in some degree from a problem common to many of their re-releases, overly prominent highs. With previous cartridges Classic's meddling with RCA's equalization often made this record shrill and unpleasant. With the UNIverse, particularly when paired

with a low-resonance table like our new Teres 320, the shrillness is much abated. The pushed highs are still very evident of course, but they are less shrill. The UNIverse's refusal to collapse closely related waveforms into an inharmonious mass was never more welcome. Instead there is simply a near-holographic depiction of where the remastering engineers fiddled the response curve. The UNIverse makes this record easier to listen to while clearly displaying the engineers' little tricks.

For an altogether pleasurable example I pulled out one of our best records, Bartok's 'Sonate Pour Deux Pianos & Percussion' (French Erato STU-70642). Katia and Marielle Lebeque, brilliantly accompanied on percussion by Sylvio Gualda and Jean-Pierre Drouet, offer a rhythmic, driving, riveting performance of this 1937 avant-garde masterwork. This record rivals direct-to-disk releases for transparency and the dynamic range is shocking. Levels go from the barest whisper to ear- and room-shattering percussion impacts. If you don't know this record I guarantee you'll jump out of your chair the first time you hear it. Fine as the record and performance are, the music itself had always seemed to me more intellectual than emotional. No longer. The UNIverse coordinated Bartok's intricate and extended rhythmic and melodic lines, and so brought them to real life. The UNIverse's ability to play anything thrown at it, while maintaining proportion and relation, really allowed my system to make danceable, musical sense of this challenging score. Can your cartridge boogie to Bartok?

Lest anyone think we listen only to classical, I'll mention the new drive and feeling the UNIverse brought to Clark Terry's 'Portraits' (Chesky Records JR-2). These live-to-DAT sessions from 1988 prove not only that real music can be recorded digitally, but also that old trumpeters can swing and bop with the best of them. The UNIverse's extraordinary bass response reveals that Victor Gaskin's acoustic bass often drives the melody as well as the rhythm on 'Jive at Five'. The UNIverse also resolves Terry's trumpet and mute brilliantly on 'Sugar Blues'. We all know the sounds of a muted trumpet. How many cartridges play the harmonic overtones of both trumpet and mute, separately yet simultaneously? This extraordinary clarity helps dissolve the barrier between listener and musician. You can almost believe you are there.

The UNIverse's refusal to bloom or overplay a note also enhanced Louis Armstrong's heartfelt, rich and breathy vocals on the 45 rpm Classic Records reissue of 'St. James Infirmary' (Audio Fidelity ST-91058). Other cartridges, even the well-controlled Airy 2, can make the tightly miked Armstrong sound larger than life. Not the UNIverse. Armstrong's as close and sweaty as ever, but now he's life-sized. This makes his heart-wrenching dirge all the more real.

One friend and fellow UNIverse owner complained to me, tongue in cheek, that it made everything sound like a harpsichord. Well, Satchmo ain't no harpsichord but I know what he meant. This cartridge's ability to play without compression, its clear portrayal of each fundamental and overtone without confusion, do indeed remind one of the richly varied yet transparent timbres and harmonics of that instrument. If the record actually contains a harpsichord you clearly hear key, action, plectrum, string and box, not to mention back wall echoes and the birds chirping in the rafters. Yet all these details are perfectly integrated to yield a convincing sonic impression of one thing, a harpsichord. In that sense this component is poetically well named. It sings every available tone and overtone yet all in one voice, as a UNI-verse should.

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05-26-05

**Responses** (1-14 of 14)

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05-27-05 . doug / paul, . nicely done. thanks for the time and effor ... Cello

05-28-05 always a pleasure going through your posts doug. kudos to ... Dogpile

05-28-05 Wow, based on that review it seems the zyx's are worth an au ... Nrchy

05-28-05 Doug,this review seems so thorough that i'm going to print i ... sirspeedy70680@

05-28-05 Thanks, gents. i was afraid this might read as yesterday's n ... **Dougdeacon**

05-29-05 While doug's review is pretty much definitive, i'd like to a ... Simes

06-01-05 Doug/paul, i am extremely impressed with the level of yo ... sirspeedy70680@

06-02-05 if you're ever passing through ct please let us know so we c ... **Dougdeacon**

10-23-05 Hi just a comment on the zyz universe outclassing cdplayers. ... bmsko@

01-21-06 Hi bmsko, you are right of course. that wasn't a very signif ... **Dougdeacon**

02-04-06 Hi doug, got the zyx universe and you are right. it sounds v ... Thomasheisig

02-05-06 Thomas, thank you for adding your review to ours. we've bee ... **Dougdeacon**

09-02-06 Doug, i just got my universe setup. your review was so posi ... Dgad

03-10-07 Hi! thanks for writing the informative review. has anyone he ... Ebalog

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