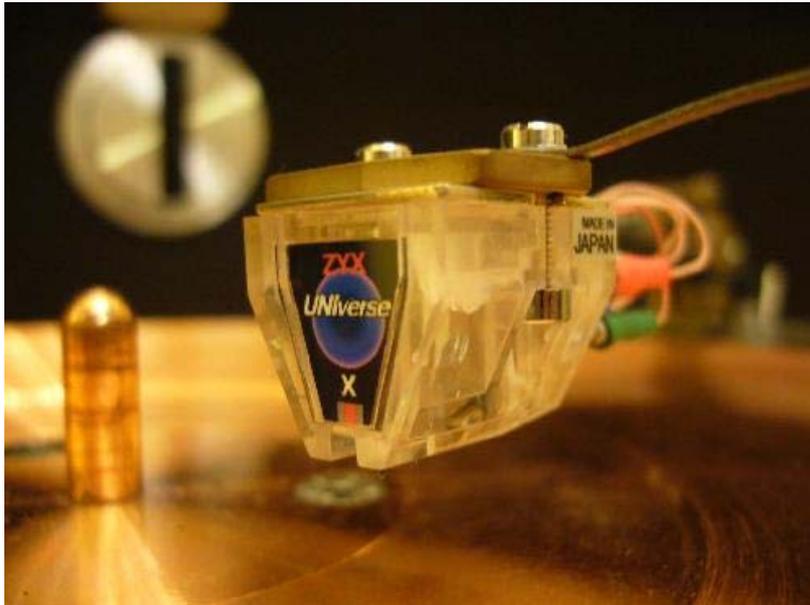




Little me inside the Universe



My vinyl experience is short. I mean real short. Perhaps 8 months at most. The Raven AC turntable by TW Acoustics from Germany and the Grandezza Reference arm from Switzerland alongside the Zanden 1200 phono stage (the heart of Yamada san) forms the core part of the vinyl system. They are fed directly into the Horning Sati Ultimate Integrated amplifier driving the Horning flagship, Eufrodite.

My very first cartridge is Eminent by My Sonic Lab, which was recommended by Yamada san. I was very happy with the LP setup from day one. Honestly speaking, I enjoyed the outcome more than the process of setting them up. For that, I have been strongly reliant on my father and another veteran in this area whom I respect very much. My father is a big fan of opera. He constantly plays the recording of "Frederick von Stade sings the Aria of Mozart and Rossini" by Philips to test the performance of the LP setup. I was shocked by the dynamics in the high frequency compartment as the energy of the soprano's voice rises to the peak with incremental steps. So, this is LP, I said to myself.

Without any intention of changing anything on the LP part, I enjoyed the replay of vinyl evening after evening until one loyal customer of us in Shanghai purchased the Zanden 1200 phono stage. Of course, he is looking for a high quality cartridge to match with it. J.Lam, owner and founder of AE, told me to let go of my eminent cartridge to him because he intends to carry a new cartridge under the AE umbrella. This was surely easier said than done because it takes time to find something truly unique.

During the period of bewilderment, I used the Dynavector XV1S cartridge, which received rave reviews around the world, to fill my innocence with great pleasure. I am not going to say which cartridge is better simply because I am not qualified to make any conclusion in the absence of any skills. Thus, what I am describing here is purely my subjective listening impression. Compared to the Eminent, the Dynavector seems to have stronger bass weight and mid-bass punch than the eminent. There is more subjective air around each musical objects. Everything seems to sound better. I was again very happy, albeit for a short 3 months only. My arm accidentally broke the pin of the XV1S one day. I had to send them back to re-tip, which takes another 2 months.

Nights are off. No more fun on LP. It is troublesome. It is fragile. It is time consuming. At that

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time, the Grandezza Reference cartridge by Da Vinci was still under development. Well, I said to myself, going back to CD saves me more time. All the exquisite joy associated with vinyl is shattered by something called "inconvenience" in my books. J.Lam, however, argues my attitude means impatience.

Well said, he presented me another cartridge with a fancy name called the UNIVERSE by Nakatsuka san of ZYX. I called up our LP veteran to do the set up immediately. After 30 minutes, the show was on. When the Universe landed on the groves of Maria Joan Pires playing the piano sonata K545 by Mozart, the youthful tone of hers caught my heart. Byran Terfel, world renowned bass baritone once commented that it is better to master the art of Mozart at young age. He is right. The spontaneous heart of the youth should interpret the spirit of Mozart more accurately despite technical immaturity. Her fingers were springing up and down on the keyboard with speed. The control is there but without the strong commanding presence of the pianist. By contrast, I always feel Horowitz has a very commanding role in his interpretation of Mozart. The physical presence of the Steinway integrates well with the acoustics as harmonic decays could be separated nicely from the ambience of the recording venue.

As far as I understand (I could be wrong), the performance was not done in a concert hall but a studio, not the dead sounding type, however. It is mercy enough to allow harmonic decay to travel farther before fading to silence. The delineation of bass keys from mid-bass keys is very well done without being clinical. In certain passages when the left hand hit hard on the keyboard, I could feel the motion energy on the left hand side gradually traveled out of the Horning towards me from the farther end of the z axis. The bass is not delivered in one package of strong energy. Instead, they are tuneful and always structured well with the acoustics characteristic of the recording venue. I could be too carried away by the micro-dynamism of the Universe; nevertheless I am touched by the serenity tone of the piano as well as the youthful rhythm of the piano sonata.

Then, I played the Frederick Von Stade again. This time, the feeling is not just silkier treble and better low. She is simply standing in between the speakers. What it shocked me the most is the strong element of human flesh embedded in her voice. The ultra transparent mid-range burst out with real energy motion. One could easily feel the energy of the soprano originates from her lung. It is not a static stereo image fixated within a soundstage but an almost human-like figure singing arias in front of you. The handling of a soprano voice with dramatic energy variation from the midrange onward all the way up to the ultra treble alongside a small scale orchestra at the back is not easy. The unforgettable experiences are confirmed by many honorable visitors who had spared their precious time to visit us.

I can go on and on penning down my impressions of different recordings but I have to wrap up here. The Universe is indeed quite an experience. The transparency portrayed by this cartridge is quite shocking. By transparency, I do not mean details heightened in a hyper realistic manner. What I mean is the ability to reveal the harmonious communication amongst musicians in the recording through accurate timbre, pitch and tempo. The Universe is not meant to throw you a soundstage as huge as the name implies. Rather, I believe, the name refers to the Mind Universe of the performers. The power of the Universe thus goes beyond the iota physical size of the cartridge.

Audio Exotics

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