

Eastern

Adam Smith tastes Consonance's new T988 tonearm...



adjustable effective length from 10.5in to 12in). I have sent much nagging in the direction of Consonance's UK distributor, Alium Audio, for a review sample of the ST500. However, it was not to be as I recently learnt that Consonance had pulled a curve-ball on me. Yes, that's right, they discontinued the entire range!

All is not lost however, as I sit here with Consonance's new tonearm quietly warming up beside me, and rather smart it is too. The newbie actually comes in two flavours; the T988 which is a nine inch unipivot design, and the T1288 which is the twelve inch variant. The designs are actually identical in other respects and spare arm wand/bearing assemblies can be purchased to simply lift on to and off the installed base. Each wand comes with leads terminated in a small multi-way plug that connects to a short lead with matching socket that is screwed to the armbase. The other end of this lead has a pair of phono sockets, so that the interconnect of your choice may be easily used to connect to your amplifier or phono stage.

The new arms have a interesting bearing structure, consisting of a 'well' with a central protrusion in the base around which sit six ball bearings, and the rounded 'point' on the underside of the arm fits into the centre of these, free to move on their upper surfaces. Maybe this doesn't make it a conventional unipivot in the strictest sense of the word but the arm feels more stable than some of the more 'point on a spike' types. Interestingly, this must be a very new development as the manual shows a thin point and makes no mention of the bearings!

The armtube itself is made of carbon fibre and a single weight allows for balancing in both the fore-aft and port-starboard planes. The headshell is little more than a basic

support platform, very much in the mould of the Simon Yorke S9 arm that still stands as the best unipivot we have yet measured at *Hi-Fi World*. Construction quality is excellent, although I was a little disappointed to find that the cueing lever seems to be more akin to the first ST100 arm that I met than the second, in that it dumps the stylus into the groove with a rather abrupt thud. Such things are rather a shock, especially when used to an Alphason cue lift so overdamped that there is time to brew a cuppa in between tapping the lever forward and diamond finally hitting vinyl!

SOUND QUALITY

It is often true that one affordable unipivot arm can often give similar results to another, and to really step forward in sonic terms, a greater outlay has to be made. Consequently I wondered if the ST988 would offer the usual blend of strengths and weaknesses that are most often part of the package with such designs. As the opening bars of Steely Dan's 'Do it Again' rang out through my loudspeakers, however, I realised that the ST988 seemed destined to impress. This particular track, taken from a double 'Best of Steely Dan' album is a rather laid-back recording that lacks top end sparkle and, unless a vinyl spinner can really cut through this to the material underneath, can often sound rather drab. With the Consonance in charge though, everything leapt out into the room and not the slightest bit of action was missed. Even more encouragingly, the bass line underpinning the track was impressively detailed and spry

The Opera Consonance Audio Company of Beijing is the oldest of China's respected audio manufacturers, having been founded in 1994 by Mr. Shi Hui Liu,

and I would say that they are definitely the kings of left-field. Whilst I have heard quite a few of their products and been impressed by them all, it is the sheer breadth and variety of their range that never fails to amaze me. If any readers can name a single current manufacturer where high end CD players rub shoulders with affordable turntables; where single ended valve amplifiers like the Cyber 10 sit alongside solid state 200W behemoths like the Forbidden City Calaf, and where horn loudspeakers find themselves stablemates to an iPod dock, then please let me know, because I can't think of any!

It is the record playing department with which we concern ourselves here though, as after testing a couple of Consonance's highly worthy LP spinners, I could not help but notice that the tonearm that was fitted to both, the ST100, was a rather special item. This formed the base of the ST range, below the ST300 (another nine inch, multi pivot design), the ST500 (a 10.5in unipivot) and the ST600 (another unipivot with

Promise

despite, again, not being the most vivid around in recording terms.

I was pleased to hear that the ST988 offered the traditional unipivot strengths of space and atmosphere around instruments and singers, as this is one aspect of such a design that I always find most enjoyable. With a good design of this type, performances stretch well into the distance and simultaneously project into the listening area, making a good recording a truly room-filling experience. Spinning such a recording, in the form of Eleanor McEvoy's 'Yola' had me thinking that perhaps I actually had a room full of musicians rather than a room half full of hi-fi! The lady's vocals were marvelously



intimate and forthright, the Consonance capturing each phrasing inflection as she uttered it and giving a vivid sense of being there. I also noted with delight that the drums that underpin the track 'Isn't it a Little Late?' were snappy, taut and full in their physical form. All too often even the best unipivots can be found a little wanting at the low end, but it appears that the T988 is not one of them.

With this in mind, I decided to see how far I could push things down at the bottom end. Maxi Priest's eponymous album went under the stylus next and the track 'Suzi - You Are' punched out of my loudspeakers in a forthright manner. In absolute terms the Consonance lacked the real punch, drive and virtually instantaneous start and stop of my reference Alphason HR-100S, but it really wasn't far off and I certainly never felt that it was struggling; something that can occasionally afflict another favourite unipivot of mine, the

Roksan Nima. The ST988 has an air of confidence about it at all times, and not once did I hear it give the sense that it was out of its depth, despite flinging a range of synthesiser bass lines, double basses and even some lithe fretless bass material at it. The ST988 took it all comfortably in its stride.

Part of this air of confidence surely has to be the fact that the ST988 seems completely uncritical of the material that is fed to it. Yes, this should naturally be true of any good hi-fi component but the fact is that a certain item's sonic signature may often suit one style of music over another. The ST988 seems to pull off the trick of coming complete with a whole range of musical 'hats', and it just put the appropriate one on according to what I was playing on it. Grand orchestral soliloquies made it seem to stand firm in order

highlight for me had to be the track 'An Cuibhle Mor/The Big Wheel'. Towards the end this has some radio commentaries played over the main vocals and really making the words contained in them distinguishable is usually the preserve of more expensive and exotic LP spinners. The ST988, however, gave me a big surprise by the way in which it pulled these items out of the background, yet never drowning out the main action; it layered everything perfectly.

CONCLUSION

On hearing that the old Consonance ST100 was to be discontinued I was rather disappointed, as I had even gone as far as to consider splashing the Smith credit card out on one. It was one of the few new arms that really impressed me at its price point and, as a result of this, I was quite prepared to give the newcomer a

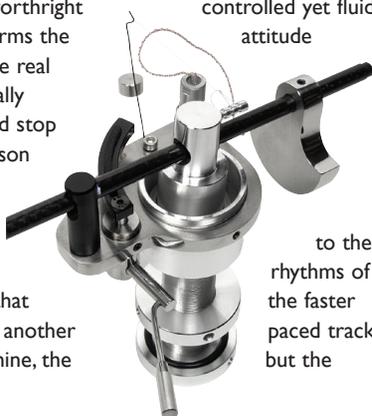
"this new unipivot has an air of confidence about it at all times..."

to elicit a fine sense of purpose and control, whereas some more soft jazz flavours seemed to have the arm sliding back, kicking its shoes off and lighting up a cigar. At all times instrument definition was excellent, rhythms captured expertly and sound staging deep and well ordered, if ever so slightly diffuse at the very extremes of left and right.

A final fling in the form of Runrig's 'The Big Wheel' album was a delightful reintroduction to an LP that I have not played for far too long. Once again, the Consonance took a controlled yet fluid attitude

to the rhythms of the faster paced tracks, but the

tough time if it didn't come up to scratch. It turns out I need not have worried however, as the T988 builds on its predecessor's strengths and tops them off with a cheeky dollop of extras that, for me, make it a must-audition at the price. Heartily recommended!



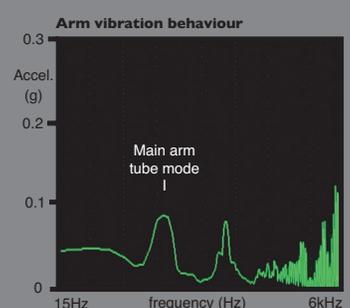
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The slender arm tube of the T988 proved to be fairly inert, measurement with an accelerometer showed. There was some unusual low frequency energy below the main arm tube mode at 225Hz, suggesting the arm was slightly bending in sympathy with applied accelerations, up to 200Hz, but the accelerative level was very low, although as frequency lowers displacement and velocity get larger. The main arm tube mode is at a low frequency for such a light structure so compliance is higher than that of stiff metal tubes, but the low level of the peak shows that damping is good too; the tube does not 'ring' like a tuning fork as undamped metal tubes do. A small, narrow peak at 800Hz visible in our analysis will be of little consequence and above that the usual forest of small peaks that is common to most arms hardly exists, likely due to

lack of a headshell. Clamping direct to the arm tube might not look elegant but measurement consistently shows it is very effective.

The Consonance measures very well and will likely image sharply and sound clean across the midband and treble in particular. NK

ARM VIBRATION



HI-FI WORLD

VERDICT 
Unipivot airiness combined with pleasing musical dexterity makes this an excellent affordable tonearm.

CONSONANCE ST988 £650
(9 or 12in arm wands £195)
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Alium Audio

FOR

- spatiality
- tonality
- bass weight
- build
- versatility

AGAINST

- poor cueing damping