Phono Preamps & Purified Water

In 1998, on learning that Aquafina, Pepsi’s entry in the bottled-water market, was nothing more than purified municipal water, I shook my head and continued drinking the far more exotic Fiji water.

More recently, I’ve struck up an e-mail friendship with Tom Fine, son of Robert and Wilma Cozart Fine, of Mercury Living Presence fame: Bob was the legendary chief engineer, Wilma the equally legendary producer. Though Tom shares their (and our) passion for good music and sound, and runs as a side-business a small studio devoted to analog-to-digital transfers, his day job is as managing editor of a beverage-industry trade publication.

Tom Fine gave me a great deal of useful information about the record business in general, and specifically the Mercury and Phillips labels, all of which can be found in PDF files in the DVD-ROM section of my recent DVD on LP setup and care, It’s a Vinyl World, After All (see p.5). I sent Fine a copy of that disc and, a short time later, prompted by the section on record cleaning, he e-mailed to tell me he’d enjoyed watching it and, more important, to suggest using Aquafina to rinse LPs after cleaning. He told me that the water used in Aquafina is purified by reverse osmosis (RO) and thus is very pure. (According to Pepsi, Aquafina has 10ppm of undisolved solids; spring water has up to 500ppm.)

I knew Aquafina was purified, and I knew that RO water was preferred for rinsing records (I have an RO system at home), but I’d never put the two together. See www.aquafina.com and click on “Water Facts” to read why Aquafina, especially considering the price and the supermarket convenience. I tried it and it worked great. It didn’t taste bad, either. The Disc Doctor fluid I accidentally swigged when I picked up the wrong bottle? Not so good.

Speaking of cleaning fluids, I screwed up on my new DVD. At one point I held up a bottle of Nitty Gritty FIRSTv and said that it, like LAST’s #1 pre-cleaner was no longer being manufactured because of environmental issues. FIRSTv is Nitty Gritty’s replacement pre-cleaner. What’s more, a company spokesperson told me, it’s identical to MicroCare’s Premier!, which I did demonstrate on my DVD, minus the aerosol propellant. In fact, Nitty Gritty buys the liquid from MicroCare. Sorry about that!

World’s most beautiful, most expensive record rack?

No doubt on both counts. Atocha Design’s custom-built, freestanding record-storage cabinet of American Walnut and European cored plywood can store about 800 LPs, or can be configured for both LPs and CDs. When you flip through your records, you see the covers, not the spines. I like that a lot more than I like the price: $12,500. But for a well-heeled apartment dweller with a modest record collection, it can’t be beat. See for yourself at www.atochadesign.com.

Custom-made turntable dustcover from New Zealand

I’m not into turntable dustcovers myself, but if you are, you can’t go wrong with the covers custom-made in New Zealand by Paul Burgess. They’re made of 1⁄4”-thick acrylic and feature “lovely tight curved edges,” and Burgess will build to your specs, including cutouts for cables and hand holes, for the all-inclusive price of $275, including shipping anywhere in the world. Burgess can be reached at paulssegrub01@gmail.com.

A fancy clamp for record-cleaning machines

I’ve long complained about the small, hard-plastic clamp VPI Industries supplies with its record-cleaning machines. This clamp is no luxury: without it, the vacuum sucks up the record and stops it from rotating. Aside from the clamp being easily misplaced, its size makes it easy to misthread and slip out of your grip, sending it careening across the record you’re trying to clean. Maybe I’m just a klutz, but I don’t think it’s just me.

In fact, I bitched about it on my DVD while using a VPI HW-17F to demonstrate cleaning an LP: “Why doesn’t VPI or someone make a better, bigger clamp? Maybe one that also covers the label, so liquid can’t ruin it?” No sooner had the DVD gone to the pressing plant than I got an e-mail from TTWeights Audio’s Larry Denham. Denham’s day job is running LJT Manufacturing, which supplies parts for the Boeing 737, the world’s most popular passenger jet. When not doing that, he machines absolutely gorgeous record weights, clamps, and, most recently, outer platter rings of brass. Last time I looked, he had 12 models machined for various applications, including a really neat one for large-hole 45rpm singles.

Denham has also designed a clamp specifically for VPI cleaning machines,
a sample of which he sent me. It’s lightweight and a pleasure to use. You won’t lose it—hand-polished to a mirror finish, it just about glows in the dark—it’s much easier to screw on and off than VPI’s own clamp, and, most important, it should never career across and scratch the record. The two-piece, lightweight design of hollowed-out billet aluminum has a protective bottom surface of polycarbonate, and a proprietary outer-edge seal that’s designed to stop leaks of cleaning fluid. Unfortunately, Denham told me, making the clamp’s contact surface wide enough to protect the entire label from spills would mean it would interfere with the action of the vacuum wand. But some protection is better than none.

Still, the clamps and weights are gorgeous and reasonably priced, and the clamp for VPI cleaners is well worth $59.90, especially if you clean a lot of records in one session. I’m using one on the SME 20/12 turntable reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

**Koetsu’s Coralstone Platinum Mono: more than just a pretty face**

The Koetsu Coralstone Platinum Mono phono cartridge has a platinum magnet system, coil wiring of silver-plated copper, a boron cantilever, and a proprietary stylus shape. Its output is a relatively low 0.3mV. It costs $15,550.

I wish I could tell you there was nothing special about the Coralstone Platinum Mono’s sound, but there is. Why can’t they sprinkle this kind of sonic fairy dust over $300 or $3000 cartridges, I haven’t a clue. But they can’t. I know this will sound like one of those “It’s the most expensive, so he’s got to write that it’s the best” writeups, but there’s no doubt about it. I have no choice.

On the turntable right now is a mono vinyl reissue of Jimi Hendrix’s *Axis: Bold as Love* (Experience Hendrix/Classic). I’ve played it plenty, and I had expectations of the Koetsu—all good. But the Coralstone Platinum Mono rendered this disc with a daring, solidly tactile kick drum that had degrees of body, definition, three-dimensionality, and weight that I was unaccustomed to hearing.

“There is tremendous punch to the sound,” says engineer Eddie Kramer about the mono mix, especially when played back on the full-track mono Studer tape deck used to master the LP. He’s not kidding, but I’d never heard any other cartridge deliver that punch, particularly on the bottom, the way the Coralstone Platinum Mono did.

And it did it without slowing the music’s rhythmic flow or bloating the image size. The cartridge took the bottom end to the limit, but stopped short of going over the cliff with it. So despite the kick drum’s overwhelming weight and presence, it never stepped on Noel Redding’s bass lines, which it also delivered with weight, presence, and what I can describe only as thick, rich vibrationality.

The mids, rich yet never syrupy, toed the same delicate line to produce the same large physical presence. Hendrix’s voice appeared with the quality of a giant, floating head that almost dared me to believe that he hadn’t been brought back to life to hang between the speakers.

I experienced that same séance-like quality with John Lennon’s voice on an original UK monophonic pressing of *The Beatles* (Apple). The sensation that he was alive and singing in my room was undeniable. The image’s size and three-dimensionality startled me, helped by trebles and sibilants that sounded neither bright and artificial nor muffled and hooded. The highs produced by this cartridge also had weight, body, punch, and three-dimensionality—cymbals chimed, rang, and shimmered appropriately, accompanied by an uncanny physicality and weight that usually comes at the expense of that chiming, ringing, and shimmering.

The Coralstone Platinum’s image specificity and three-dimensionality were sensational. A recent 45rpm edition of Julie London’s 1956 mono classic, *Julie Is Her Name* (BoxStar), has the sultry singer intimately backed by Barney Kessel’s guitar and Ray Leatherwood’s bass. If you don’t think mono recordings can produce image three-dimensionality and front-to-back layering, listen to this record—and don’t pass up any opportunity to hear it through the Koetsu Coralstone Platinum. You’ll hear an uncanny combination of warmth, presence, immediacy, and resolution of detail that’s melt-worthy. Jazz buffs with big collections of mono LPs: Translate this description to saxophone or piano, and you’ll understand that, even if you can’t afford it, you need this cartridge.

Trust me. Once you experience one of your favorite mono LPs through the excellent-tracking Coralstone Platinum, you’ll want to hear every one of them. I’ve spent weeks listening to nothing but the monos in my collection. The original mono pressing of *The Doors* (Elektra EK-74007) has always sounded immediate, but it’s never been rendered as solidly and vividly as it was through the Coralstone Platinum Mono. This cartridge favored no musical genre over any other; it was as adept and convincing with rock and classical as it was with jazz.

I find it difficult to listen to monophonic recordings of symphonic music, especially when stereo editions of the same recording are available—recordings from RCA’s mono LM-series are not for me. Not even this cartridge was able to change my mind about that, but solo performances, such as Glenn Gould’s original 1955 recording of J.S. Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* (Columbia ML 5060), attained through the Coralstone Platinum a sonic richness and physicality I hadn’t thought they possessed. The cartridge communicated microdetails of Gould’s touch on the keys that I also didn’t think were there to be retrieved.

There was nothing flashy about the sound of the Koetsu Coralstone Platinum. It didn’t wow me into submission with bright splashes of color or gobs of air, but in terms of bringing performances and performers back to life by revealing hitherto unheard subtleties of touch and texture, and
thus getting them to play just for me in my room, nothing else I’ve heard comes close.

Yesterday I played Miles Davis and John Coltrane Live in Stockholm 1960 (2 LPs, Dragon DRLP 90/91), from a mono radio broadcast of March 22, 1960 (my 13th birthday). The amount of useful information the Koetsu dug from this familiar recording was riveting. Coltrane went solo a month later, and here, on familiar tunes from Kind of Blue taken much faster than on that album, you can hear him tearing at the seams, trying to get out but always staying in the groove. The Coralstone’s ability to layer the instruments in three dimensions and clearly produce low-level details of Wynton Kelly’s piano, despite its being mixed well back, made a very familiar record new again.

I could go on, though there’s not much point when so few of us can afford a cartridge that costs as much as a car. But believe me—you’d buy one of these if you could. If you can, and you have a worthy collection of mono favorites, don’t deny yourself. After all, where are you going to put that money? In the stock market? These days, where are you going to put that money?

Munich, and now that Musical Sounds is importing Audia Flight gear, a review of the Phono seemed a good idea. I know nothing about Audia Flight or the designer, or what Italian audiophiles think of them, but the more time I spent with the versatile, exquisitely built Phono, the more I liked everything about it.

Audia Flight Phono preamplifier: an Italian beauty that offers a lot more than good looks

I first spotted Audia Flight’s exquisite-looking two-box phono preamplifier ($6100) at last year’s Hi-End show in Munich, and now that Musical Sounds is importing Audia Flight gear, a review of the Phono seemed a good idea. I know nothing about Audia Flight or the designer, or what Italian audiophiles think of them, but the more time I spent with the versatile, exquisitely built Phono, the more I liked everything about it.

The Phono’s good looks speak for themselves. Note the sculpted faceplate accent that integrates the main box with the power supply—a nice touch. And speaking of touch, the satiny finish of the thick front panel is as pleasing to the fingers as to the eyes.

The Phono’s insides are even more impressive. The power-supply box contains a dedicated 50VA toroidal transformer for the amplification stages. A second 15VA toroidal transformer supplies the relays and logic controls for the front-panel pushbutton selections stored in memory. Opto-isolators communicate the pushbutton choices without electrical connections.

The main unit is a modular, current-feedback preamplifier with passive RIAA equalization using 1%-tolerance polypropylene and polystyrene capacitors. The module options are: one moving-magnet, one moving-coil, one of each, or two of either; if you start with one module, you can later add a second. The MM module produces 40dB of gain. The MC module offers 60dB gain without the use of transformers. A second gain/output stage, this one based on a proprietary module, lets you add another 10dB if necessary, for a total of 74dB gain (MC). This second gain stage, powered by an onboard, low-noise, MOSFET-based power supply, also offers a balanced XLR output via a separate module.

Resistive and capacitive loading are accomplished via gold-plated jumpers (supplied) inserted into sockets located very close to the input stage. To access these, you remove a small plate on the chassis rear. There are four sets of sockets, one for each channel of each of the maximum of two modules. If you’re a fetishist, you can also insert custom resistor values in another set of sockets. The jumper system offers 16 logically chosen values between 60 ohms and 47k ohms, which was more than enough for me. Accessing the jumper sockets is inconvenient—unless you have easy access to your rack’s rear, you’ll have to turn the Phono
around to insert or remove jumpers.

**Using the Audia Flight Phono:**
The front-panel pushbuttons are On/Off, input module choice, +10dB, Mono, and an IEC based subsonic filter. You can have both inputs connected simultaneously and switch between them at the push of a button.

Once I had the loading figured out, using the Flight Phono produced nothing but sonic pleasure. But be sure to give the Phono hundreds of hours of playing (not merely powered-up) time before judging its sound. It sounded good out of the box, but not great. That came much later.

How great? The Phono laid it all out on the pitch-blackest backgrounds. It was dead quiet. Those black backgrounds were reminiscent of the Boulder 2008 (+$30,000) and, to a somewhat lesser degree, my current solid-state reference, Einstein Audio’s Turntable’s Choice. However, the Flight Phono produced music out of what subjectively sounded like an even blacker backdrop, and probably partly because of that, its soundstage presentation was among the most transparent, deep, and three-dimensional I’ve heard from any phono stage.

Nor did the Phono’s dynamic presentation leave anything to be desired. It beat the Manley Labs Steelhead by a considerable margin, and possibly the Einstein as well, though it was too close to call. If you have problems with transformer-coupled MC stages (I don’t), the Phono will take care of them. With up to 74dB of available gain, it can handle cartridges of even the lowest output.

The Flight’s overall presentation was free of grain and edge, and as pure and smooth as I’ve heard from any other great phono preamp. Its bottom end was taut, extended, extremely well defined, and rhythmically proficient. The top end was clean, ultrafast without being bright or edgy, and transients were detailed without sounding clinical. In short, I was reminded not only of the far more expensive Boulder 2008, but also of the pricer Naim Superline with Supercap power supply.

The Phono produced maximum musical excitement with all musical genres, and with both MM and MC cartridges. Its harmonic presentation and delivery of musical flow probably won’t satisfy die-hard tube fanatics in search of that “golden glow,” but if you’re okay with solid-state—and I am—the Audia Flight Phono is a set-it-and-forget-it product that you happily will forget is contributing to the musical presentation. It just gets out of the way and lets the notes roll.

With its good looks, convenient front-panel controls (including Mono and +10dB on demand), and high-tech and equally high build quality, the Audia Flight Phono is a superbly made product that produces superb sound—and, at $6100, is a superb value. I could live happily ever after with this pleasant surprise from Italy.

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**IN HEAVY ROTATION**

1) Gil Melle, *Patterns in Jazz*, Music Matters 45rpm, 180gm mono LPs (2)
2) ZZ Top, *Fandango*, Warner Bros. 180gm LP
3) Georgie Fame, *Cool Blues*, Go Jazz/Pure Pleasure 180gm LPs (2)
4) Billie Holiday, *Music for Torching*, Verve/Speakers Corner 180gm mono LP
5) Frank Sinatra, *Sings for Only the Lonely*, Capitol/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab 180gm mono LP
6) Diana Krall, *The Look of Love*, Verve/Original 180gm LPs (2)
7) The Ramones, *It’s Alive*, Sire/Audio Fidelity 180gm LPs (2)
8) Iggy Pop, *Raw Power*, Columbia/Sundazed LP
9) Dan Auerbach, *Keep It Hid*, Nonesuch LP
10) John Hart, *John Hart*, Direct Grace lacquer LPs (2)

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