

JUNE 2006



CLEARAUDIO GOLDFINGER

Reviewer: Mike Malinowski

Source: Walker Proscenium Gold turntable; Walker Reference phono preamp; Clearaudio Reference Wood cartridge; Magic Diamond cartridge; *Goldfinger* [on review]

Preamp: VTL 7.5 Reference

Amp: darTZeel NHB-108

Speakers: Wilson X-2 Alexandria

Cables: Transparent Opus, Silent Source, Omega Mikro Ebony speaker cables; Transparent XL w/MM interconnect to amp; Omega Mikro between phono pre and preamp

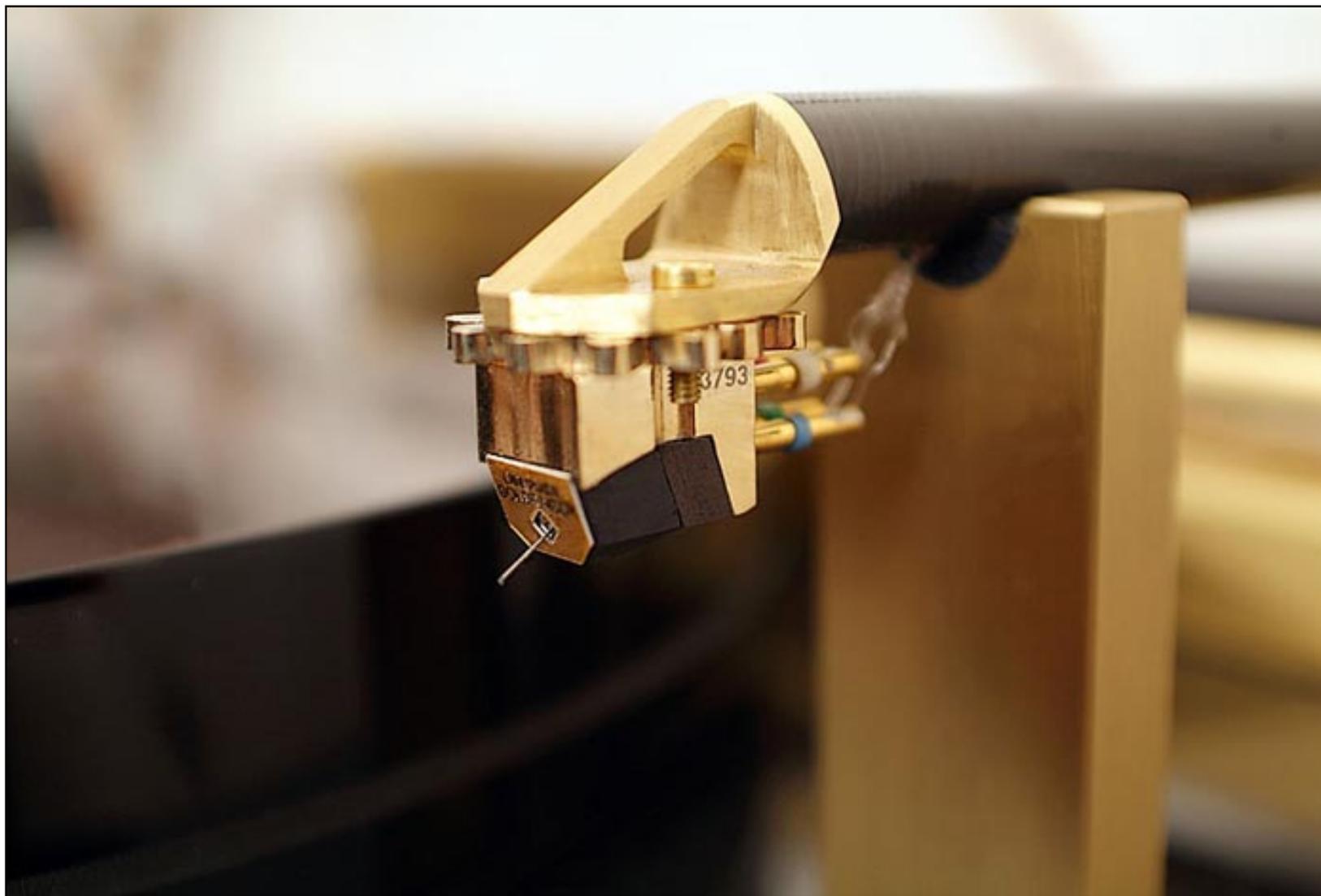
Stands: Michael Green racks, VPI phono stand, Zoethecus, Walker Prologue Amp Stand

Powerline conditioning: Furman Balanced Power, Walker Audio Velocitor S, PS Audio 300

Sundry accessories: Valid Points resonance control discs; ASC tube traps; Echo Buster absorbent and diffuser panels; Argent Room Lens; separate 90-amp sub panel feeding five dedicated cryo'd outlets; Loricraft Model 4 record cleaner

Room size: 22' x 17' x 8' (double sheetrock on 2"x 6" framing in basement)

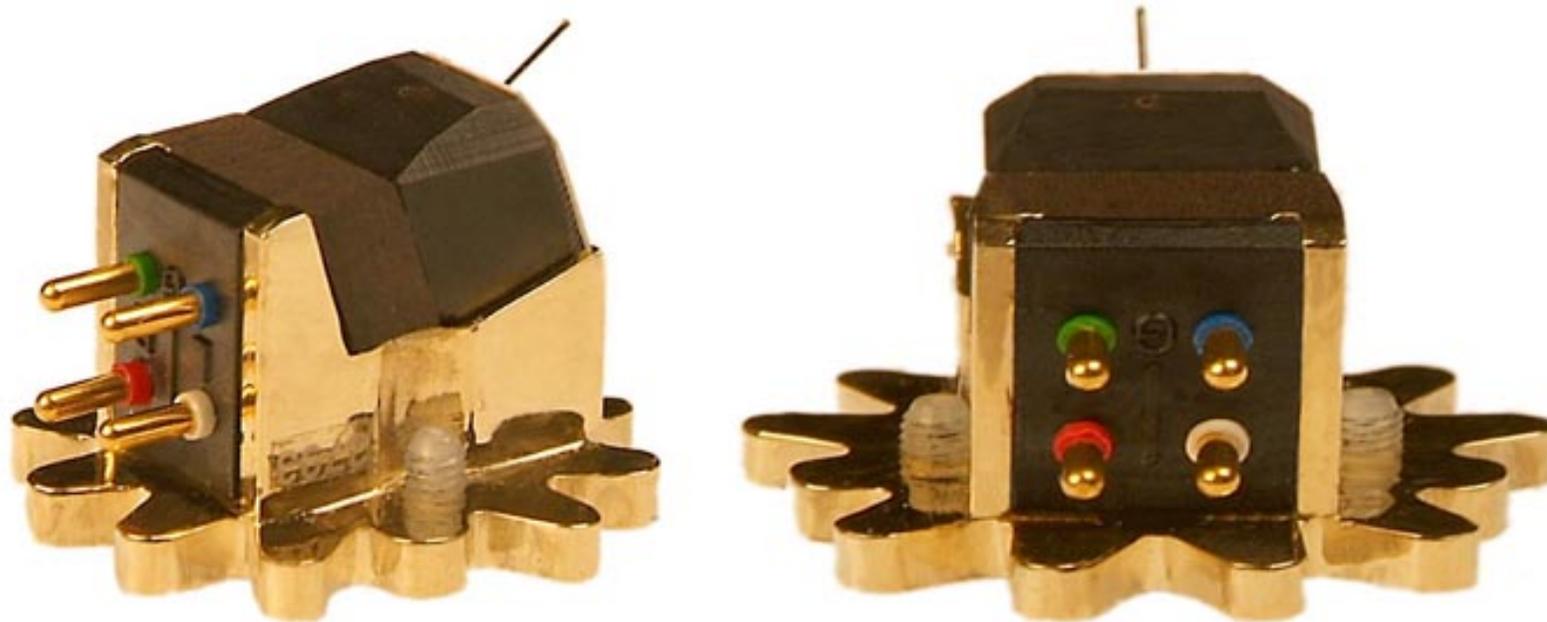
Review component retail: \$8,000 (various trade-in allowances apply and reduce the price to \$3,600 against a working Clearaudio Insider or \$4,400 for a non-working Insider. Other older Clearaudio cartridges are worth \$2,000 to \$3,200 in trade depending on vintage. Even a Benz cartridge nets \$1,600 toward a Goldfinger.)



Introduction

Rather than succumb to the musical forces of the new millennium (including digital, home theater and MP3s), a few of the vinyl visionaries have taken the industry transition not as the death knell of an industry but as a *challenge*. These companies could have easily rolled over, adjusted their business model and joined the digital revolution. Established players such as VPI, Walker, Benz, SME, Koetsu, new players like Continuum and dozens of others chose not only to maintain the vinyl status quo but to challenge it with exciting state of the art products. While facing what some pundits believe to be their imminent extinction, these visionary companies chose to meet the challenge head-on with boundary- pushing, state of the art products. One such visionary is Peter Suchy of Clearaudio, a company whose mission statement is: "Take the best, make it better - only then is it just good enough." For twenty-five years, Suchy has developed and manufactured an impressive and growing range of products: cartridges, turntables, phono preamps and vinyl accessories. His passion has been adopted by his sons, Robert and Patrick, each sharing the same ideal - "unlocking another dimension, an emotional odyssey and discovering an existence within the energy of music."

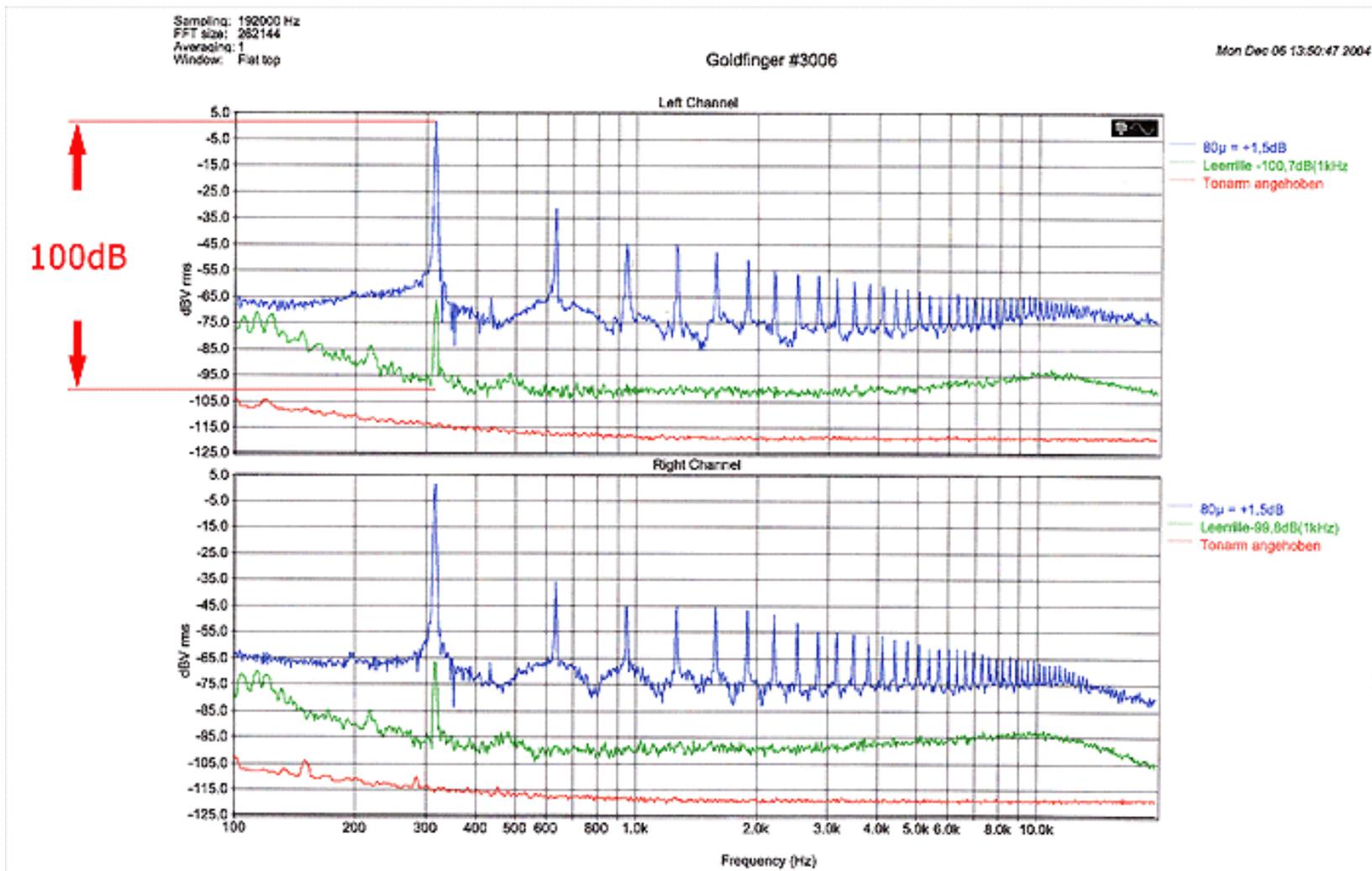
Today we focus on the cartridge flagship, the Goldfinger. The entire cartridge line -- Concerto, Stradivari, Titanium, Goldfinger -- proceeds not in incremental upgrades but totally new designs from the ground up - or more correctly, the diamond tip up. Clearaudio's previous Reference Series brought critical acclaim, albeit with a price tag that some found to be extreme. However, as an owner of the Insider Reference Wood, I would say that it elevated my system to new heights in soundstaging, transparency and transient response. It was and is, fast, detailed and exciting as opposed to lush, warm and romantic. It was arguably one of the best. Moving up the Clearaudio line, there is a definite house sound - alive, dynamic, clean, detailed and transparent. Each step up allows you to progressively peer deeper into the musical picture with ever increasing detail. Now, take the detailed strengths of the Insider Reference, extend them, combine them with the cohesive musicality and liquidity of a Magic Diamond (or even a Koetsu) and you have the musical foundation of the Goldfinger.



Technical

Some designers offer intimate details of the design process and manufacturing. However, the Clearaudio information provided by the importer, Garth Leerer of Musical Surrounding, was somewhat limited. This is not surprising. Over the years, Clearaudio seems to have kept technical details somewhat close to the vest. Still, what we have is interesting. As a totally new design, you will not mistake this cartridge for any other. The mounting flange is a petal or gear shape with multiple radii, which aid in resonance control. Its appearance is unique and distinctive as one might expect from a \$7,000 cartridge. Clearaudio prides itself on their "symmetrical [design] in all aspects of electrical, mechanical and magnetic engineering." The gold coils are symmetrically balanced both front to back and side to side and attached directly to the cantilever with no traditional suspension, leading to better separation and transparency. The long boron cantilever with 24kt gold coils and the newly developed ultra low mass (.00016 grams) HD-diamond tip is housed in a high mass (16gram) gold housing, the design of which is claimed to reduce resonance and increase dynamics. Plus, "a radical new design of the magnetic circuit, achieved by doubling the magnets up to eight pieces and by using the most powerful magnet materials currently available."

The study of the cut walls of vinyl grooves led to the HD tip which is, theoretically, a best fit match of the tip to the groove. Even without access to their data, it makes logical sense that the better stylus *fit* will retrieve more musical detail. Where this gets really interesting is the published dynamic range of up to 100dB, with frequency response of 10Hz to 100kHz.



From Clearaudio's test data, "the peak level (blue graph) in relation to the record noise (green graph) clearly shows a dynamic range of 100dB." For all of you confirmed digiphiles, remember that the theoretical dynamic range of a CD is 96B, reduced to a practical range of 90dB. The dynamic headroom of the Goldfinger should, in theory, blow away CDs without nasty digital artifacts. The noteworthy specs are to the right.

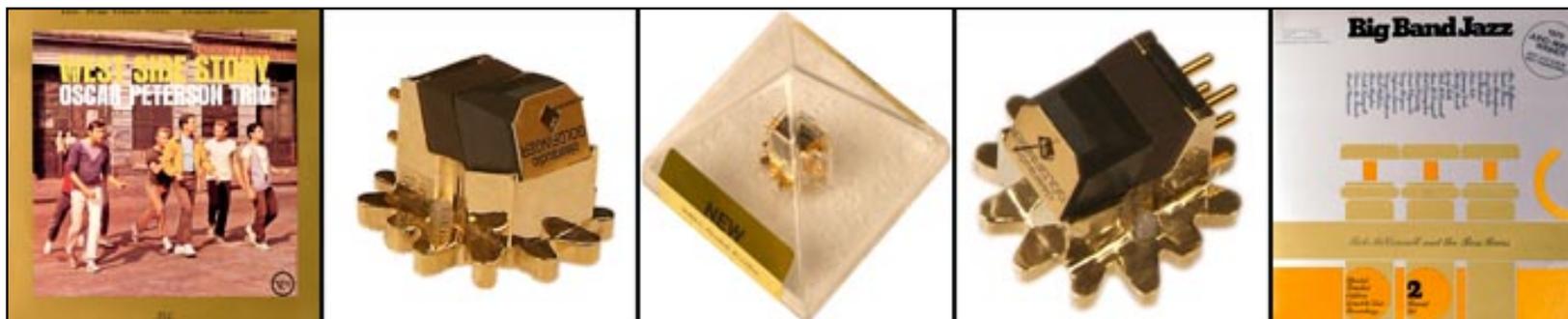
As impressive as this is, our wonderful hobby is not about numbers but listening. If it

doesn't sound good, who cares if the frequency response goes out to one megahertz? Fear not, the Goldfinger is a winner - big time.

| | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Total mass | 16 g |
| Frequency response | 20 Hz - 100 kHz |
| Stylus shape | micro HD |
| Cantilever | Boron |
| Coil assembly | Absolute symmetrical design |
| Coil material | Gold 24 Ct |
| Compliance | 15/15 μ /mN |
| Recommended tracking force | 2,8 g |
| Crosstalk | > 45 dB |
| Channel difference | 0 dB |
| Output voltage | 0,8 mV (at 5 cm/sec) |
| Coil impedance | 50 Ohm |
| Body material | Massive Gold 14Kt. |

Overview & setup

The packaging for the Goldfinger is identical to that used in previous Clearaudio high end cartridges, a mini locking chest with the cartridge encased in a plastic pyramid surrounded by foam - secure, elegant and cool. Even cooler is a body made from gold. It's for sonic reasons, I know - but it's nifty nonetheless.



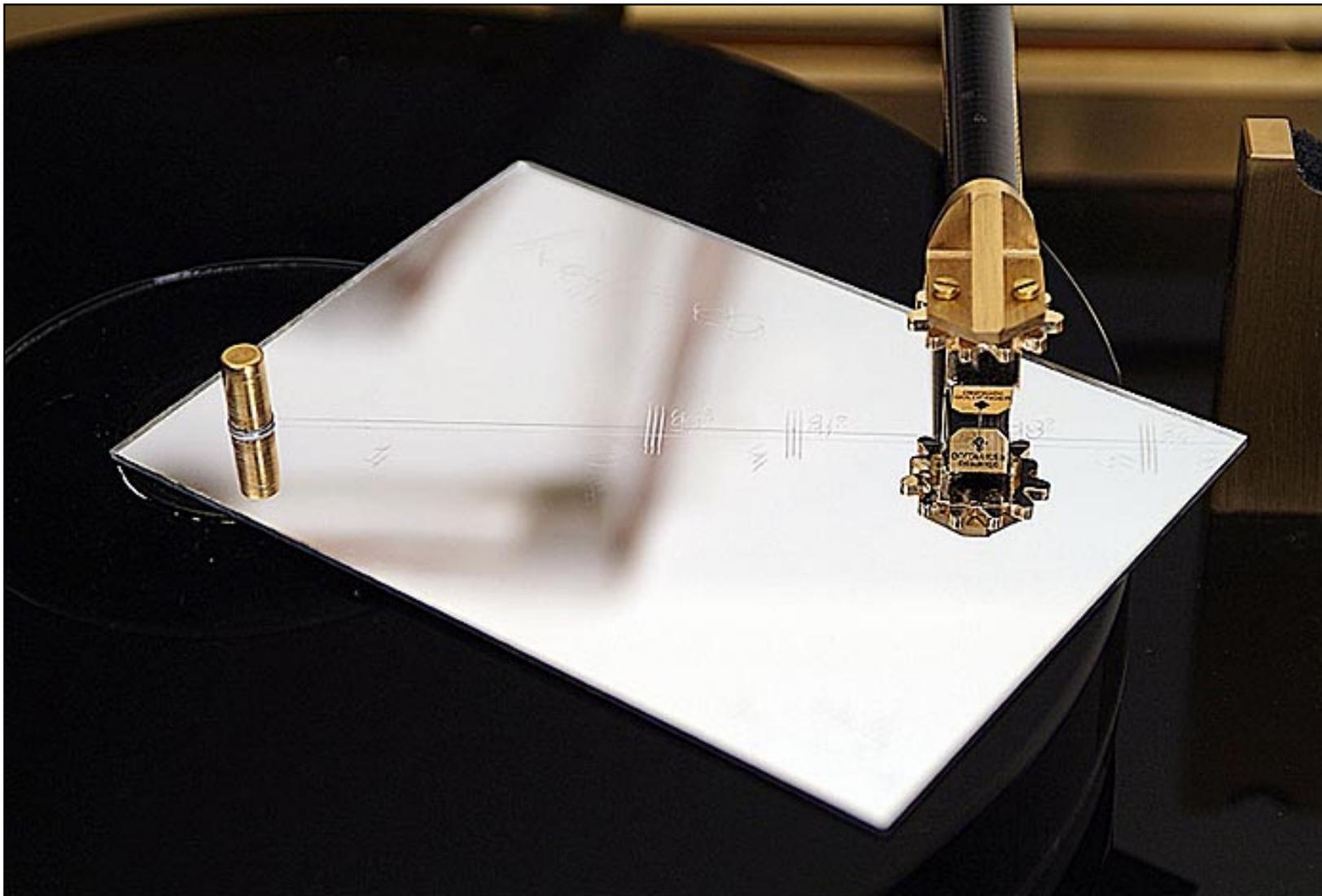
The long cantilever extending forward in a sort of phallic protuberance frankly scares the daylight out of me. It sits there naked, just ready for me to do something stupid and klutzy. Fears notwithstanding, the setup is rather straightforward. The body unlike the Reference Wood is threaded to receive the mounting screw, requiring no nuts, which I invariably lose. The snap-on stylus guard protects the cartridge from clumsiness during installation.



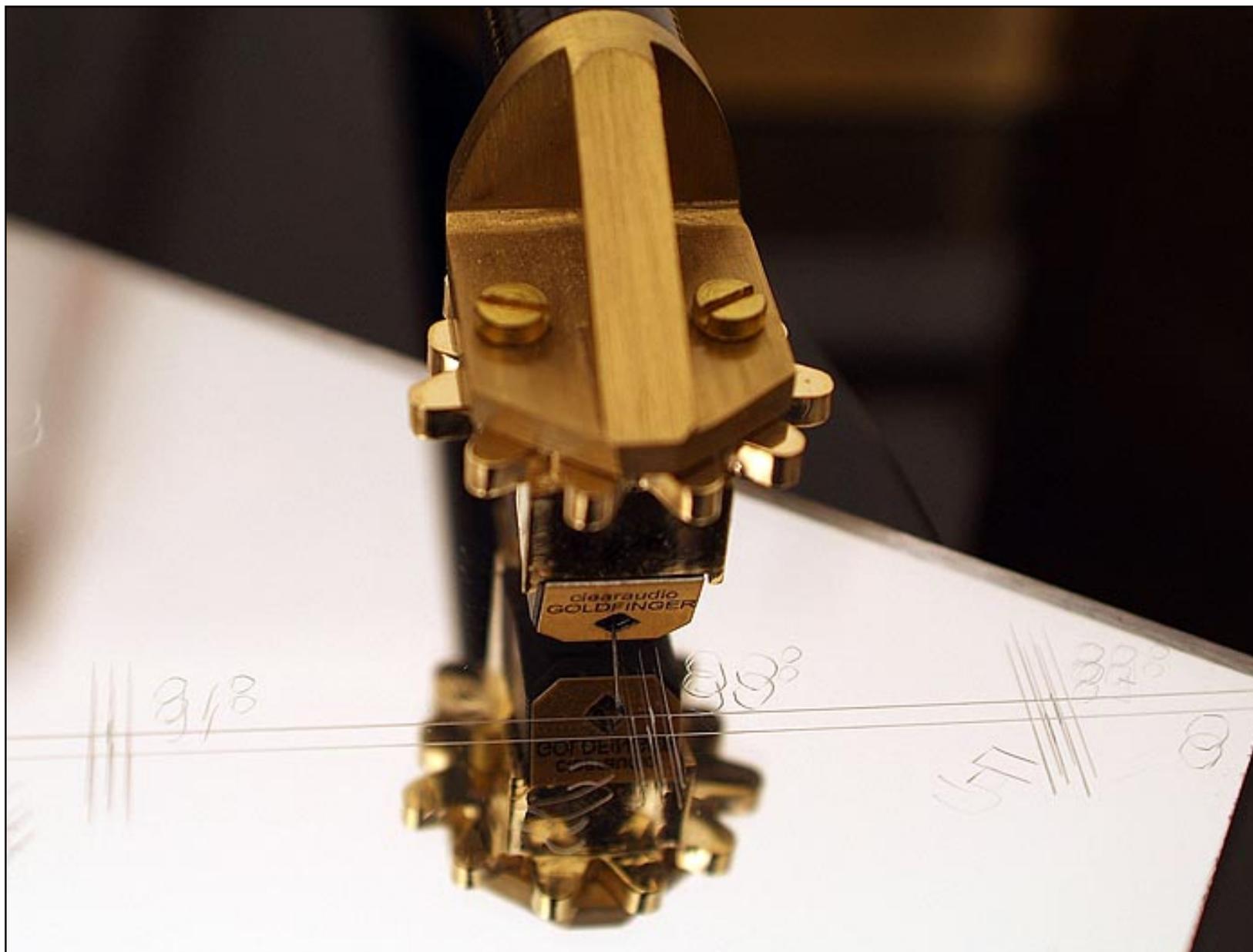
The key to any cartridge installation is, of course, proper alignment. I use the Wally tractor system which I find unmatched in accuracy and precision. It is, however, intense and requires good eyesight. The Wally system is essentially an etched mirror with one continuous horizontal line and several vertical marks along the line. The mirror has a hole which attaches to the table's spindle. There are different versions of the Wally for different types of arms. The Walker of course is a linear tracker. The installation goal for linear arms is to mount the cartridge with overhang adjusted to allow the stylus to perfectly trace the etched line on the Wally mirror. Each adjustment in or out requires painstaking visual confirmation with the magnifying loop and then multiple refining adjustments of the cartridge. Every cartridge has a certain amount of play in its mounting flange. However, due to the design of Goldfinger, this adjustment range was not sufficient, requiring the tone arm to be physically loosened and moved backwards.



Once you've achieved tangency to all points along the line, you then align the azimuth. The stylus needs to be exactly perpendicular to the line of travel. The small vertical tick marks allow you (with the aid of the magnifying loops) to align the cartridge so the stylus is parallel to a vertical mark. You twist the cartridge while mounted until the stylus aligns. Of course you could mess up tangency, so you have to recheck it, but when you are done you have a perfectly installed cartridge. There is no written description which can adequately describe this Wally process. You have to do it a few times and it then becomes quite intuitive. The entire installation process took about two hours including Wally alignment. For my system, two to three hours is typical.



The Goldfinger is a massive 17 grams and is of course made from gold. This requires a reset of the Walker VTF (vertical tracking force) by adding an additional counter balance weight. I then roughed in the VTA (vertical tracking angle) by visually aligning the base of the cartridge with the bottom of a record. The Goldfinger was more difficult than most due to the uneven non-parallel cartridge bottom. Setup would have been easier with a flat parallel bottom - a minor quibble.



My standard setup protocol is to start with a VTA -- which provides a level cartridge bottom -- and the VTF at the manufacturer's recommendation. Conveniently, Clearaudio supplies a customized recommended VTF for each cartridge. I'll then play the cartridge for ten to twenty hours or until I hear a noticeable improvement. In this case, the cartridge settled in at twenty to thirty hours.

Now the fun begins. Using Lloyd Walker's recommended cartridge setup procedure, I start by lowering the VTA until the sound becomes dead with excessive bass. I now bring up the VTA until the highs return with a wide soundstage. Then VTA is adjusted to provide a balance of bass and highs. At one point, it will all snap into place with top-to-bottom coherence, solid bass and a deep wide soundstage. Moving to the VTF, the weight is increased until the highs drop and the soundstage flattens, then reduced just to the point where the highs return and the bass is still strong. Now circle back to the VTA as one adjustment affects the other. Sometimes you get lucky with a quick setup; other times it will take all day. The

Goldfinger fell into the latter camp, but not because it was particularly hard to find good sound. Actually, the opposite was true. Many cartridges sound dreadful when VTA and VTF are off even slightly. The Goldfinger sounded remarkably good at a wide range of settings, making the finding of that one perfect sweet spot more difficult than average. It took almost a day of futzing around to get it just right.

8M 1,8S

GOLD FINGER

SM 912

TONABNEHMER TYP/CARTRIDGE TYPE: Goldfinger

SERIENNUMMER / SERIAL NUMBER: 3793.

POLARITY TEST: OK

MEASURED BY AT TEMPERATURE: 20°C

CONTROLLER: SUCHY *Suchy*

WICHTIG / IMPORTANT: **recommended tracking force**

INDIVIDUELLE AUFLAGEKRAFT : **2,8 g ± 0,2 g**

INDIVIDUAL STYLUS PRESSURE:

*UNBEDINGT EINZUHALTEN!

*MUST BE EXACTLY THIS VALUE!



The Goldfinger feeds the Walker Reference phono preamp whose 1K resistive loading provides a good match with most cartridges. The Goldfinger was no exception with its internal resistance at 50 Ω . A loading of twenty times the internal resistance generally is a good match.

The Goldfinger's relatively high output is more than sufficient to drive the Walker phono. Downstream, Omega Mikro ribbon cables feed the VTL 7.5 preamp, followed by the darTZeel amp and finally the Wilson X-2s. So much for the preliminaries, now we get to the sound.

Immediately and out of the box, the Goldfinger demands your attention. It walks up to you, grabs you by the collar and dares you to ignore it. It's excitement without HiFi artifacts - brilliant and fast without the artificial etch that can have the appearance of detail but in reality just outlines the detail instead of conveying the soul and emotion of the content. You can't casually listen to the Goldfinger. It is in charge of the listening session. It pulls you in and dares you not to pay attention, retrieving more detail from that small groove than I've ever heard. You want polite and laid back? Look somewhere else. Want to have an endless discussion about neutrality and nature and purpose of reproduced music compared to the event? Have a ball. For me, it's all about the emotion of the music. Does the sound draw you in and keep you mesmerized for hours? Do you become so immersed in the sound that you lose track of time while listening? If yes, you have that magical combination of hardware and software. The Goldfinger is such a piece; it dares you to challenge it. I love the dynamic muscle of the cartridge, the 3D soundstage, the transparency and the *thereness* of the sound.



Comparisons

I've recently lived with the Magic Diamond, Accurate and the Insider Reference - interesting comparisons to the Goldfinger. Insider and Accurate are logically cut from a similar sonic cloth, with Goldfinger offering more resolution, speed, detail, rhythm and slightly more bass. The Magic Diamond is beautiful, musical, warm and laid back - a spectacular match for those whose predominant musical tastes lean to Classical. The Magic Diamond is wonderfully coherent -- from which the music flows effortlessly -- always polite and melodic, with an open and revealing high end, which at first blush seems slightly recessed. But when you critically listen, you realize that the highs are there, they just don't stand out and draw attention to themselves. As you will see, the Goldfinger is clearly a different animal. The Magic Diamond and Goldfinger are two ends of the listening spectrum. Pay your money and make your choice; is chocolate right and vanilla wrong?

As to listening priorities, first let's forget about duplicating the exact sound of an orchestra in a 2500 cubic foot listening room. You can't. It's impossible. It doesn't exist. When you get cocky as to the absolute sound of your system, I recommend a field trip to your local concert hall. For me, it's the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Kimmel Center. When you get back to your humble abode, what we are left with is building the sonic playback picture that makes you happy, suits your needs and touches your musical soul. Back to the comparison - if it's warm, melodic and laid back, the Magic Diamond could be your choice. If you want brilliant, exciting, with in-your-face thrills, then head to the Goldfinger. For me, this excitement is one of my listening biases.



My musical tastes, with no apologies, are relatively mainstream - from classical, jazz, vocals to pop rock. From Mahler to Metallica, my cartridge of choice must have versatility and seamlessness. A problem found in many cartridges is what I call lack of sonic continuity. As the requirements of the music change, cartridges tend to emphasize certain ranges. During the natural ebb and flow of music, a cartridge can give prominence to one range over the other. The Magic Diamond is certainly one of the best at painting a cohesive sonic picture, with the Goldfinger just a small step below. Where the Goldfinger just blows away the competition is that involuntary head-bobbing, toe-tapping rhythm that just pulls you in and lets you become one with the music.

Direct-to-disk recordings provide a great test of transients, dynamics and soundstaging. *Big Band Jazz* [Umbrella] and *The Glenn Miller Orchestra* [Great American Gramophone Company] will push the dynamic limits of most vinyl systems. Unless you have heard them in an optimal system, you have not realized their potential. When the system is set up right and the stars are in alignment, you're in for a special treat. The comparison of the Goldfinger to lesser cartridges is one of a performance in a box and another in open space. The box can sound pleasant, dynamic, even exciting, but the Goldfinger goes one step further and removes the walls. The drums and brass in *Porgy and Bess* and *Tribute to Art Fern* envelope the listener, exploding into the room.



Intrigued by the brass and transient response from my D-to-D recordings, I moved to another of my go-to recordings. On "Route 66" of Nat King Cole's *Greatest Hits* [DCC], the trumpets and trombones are difficult to get just right: too bright and hard and you cover your ears from the pain; too warm and soft and you lose all of the visceral excitement. Over the years I've heard them both ways, boring and overly bright. The Goldfinger nails the brass, bringing you right to the edge perfectly.

For dynamic slam, nothing exceeds Carol Rosenberger playing Beethoven's *Piano Sonatas* [Delos Top Music] with the Bosendorfer Imperial Concert Grand Piano exploding into the room with a force that throws you back into your seat, reminiscent of the old Maxell ad. Hold on to your socks! The range of this recording will challenge most systems not in trackability, but in that seamless soundstage that presents the piano as a top-to-bottom singular musical event rather than the sum of individual notes. Each note commands an individual space while maintaining the continuous whole. Let me tell you that it was pretty damn exciting while still maintaining the musical and emotional exhilaration.



If you get the impression that the Goldfinger is detailed, then you are correct. What makes it unique is the combination of detail and conveyance of musical emotion. To me, accuracy and detail by themselves equal sterility. The Goldfinger gets the balance right by merging fast and sweet together to provide a sound that truly captivates. This balance is displayed on my long time favorite, Cat Stevens' *Tea for the Tillerman* [Mobility Fidelity UHQR], which is another difficult recording to get just right. Cat's voice borders on edginess and the bottom end can, under the wrong circumstances, overwhelm the mix. Lesser cartridges often emphasize a slight artificial and mechanical tinge, but the Goldfinger offers up the Cat (Yusuf?) naturally and richly harmonic. The bass is tight, well defined and far less boomy than I've heard in the past.

Highs

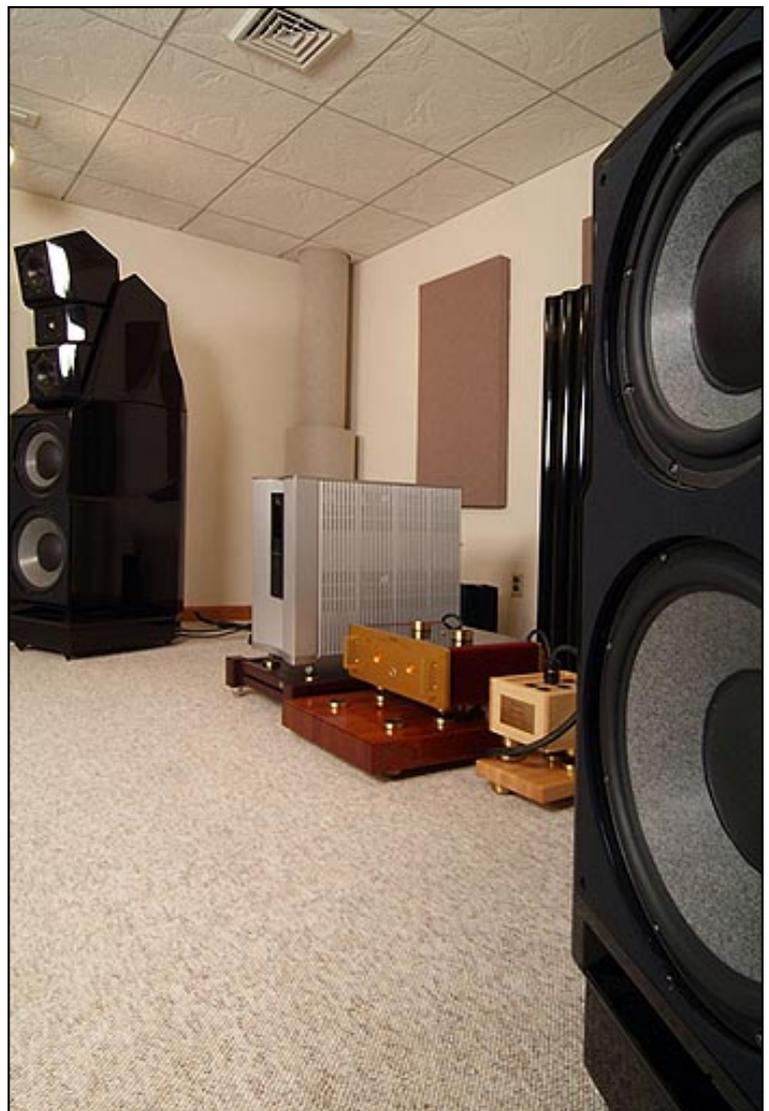
If your tastes lead to extended highs with a purity and extension that appears to go on forever, the Goldfinger hits the mark again. In reviewing my notes for the Goldfinger, the words *bright* and *extended* surface regularly. In the absolute, "bright" confers the negative connotation of cool, hard and strident; however the Goldfinger is none of these. So what is the truth? My best theory is that the extraordinary frequency response (100,000Hz) reveals more high-end musical information (and possibly inaudible cues) than other cartridges and that this high end energy makes the music at times brighter than its competitors. Combined with a purity and lack of distortion, you have a wonderful sense of aliveness.



This clarity and extension in the highs does not always bode well for poorly recorded music. There is no warm shroud over the music. What you see is what you get. A shrill 70s' transitory recording like the *Four Seasons Story* [Quality Records] is laid bare in all its grungy glory and it ain't pretty. If you want a pretty glaze over the music, again look elsewhere but on the right recordings, the highs are pure, extended and transparent.

Ravel's *Bolero* [Reference Recordings] provides an interesting challenge. Starting slowly, this ubiquitous fun piece initially offers little challenge for most cartridges; yet it takes the staccato rhythm of the percussion and builds inexorably to a thunderous crescendo. Sometime during the final third of the piece, the cartridge in question usually gives up. Detail and soundstaging, plentiful at the beginning, degenerate into constriction and congestion. None of the cartridges I have heard has truly conquered *Bolero* in its entirety. Until now that is. As I have said before, the Goldfinger loves challenges like these - keeping the focus and air while never becoming congested during the increasingly dense musical passages.

On *Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie* [Verve], Ella Fitzgerald's voice is as much musical instrument as vocal, with the ability to change from melodic to dramatic seemingly within one musical breath. Cartridges tend to put a sheen, either melodic or dramatic, on her performance. "This Year's Crop of Kisses" meanders from the most delicate to forceful and the Goldfinger captures it all. Ella's control in "Good Morning Heartache" is captured



with a continuous sonic fabric, producing a dramatic and emotional vocal recording.



Rock and/or Roll

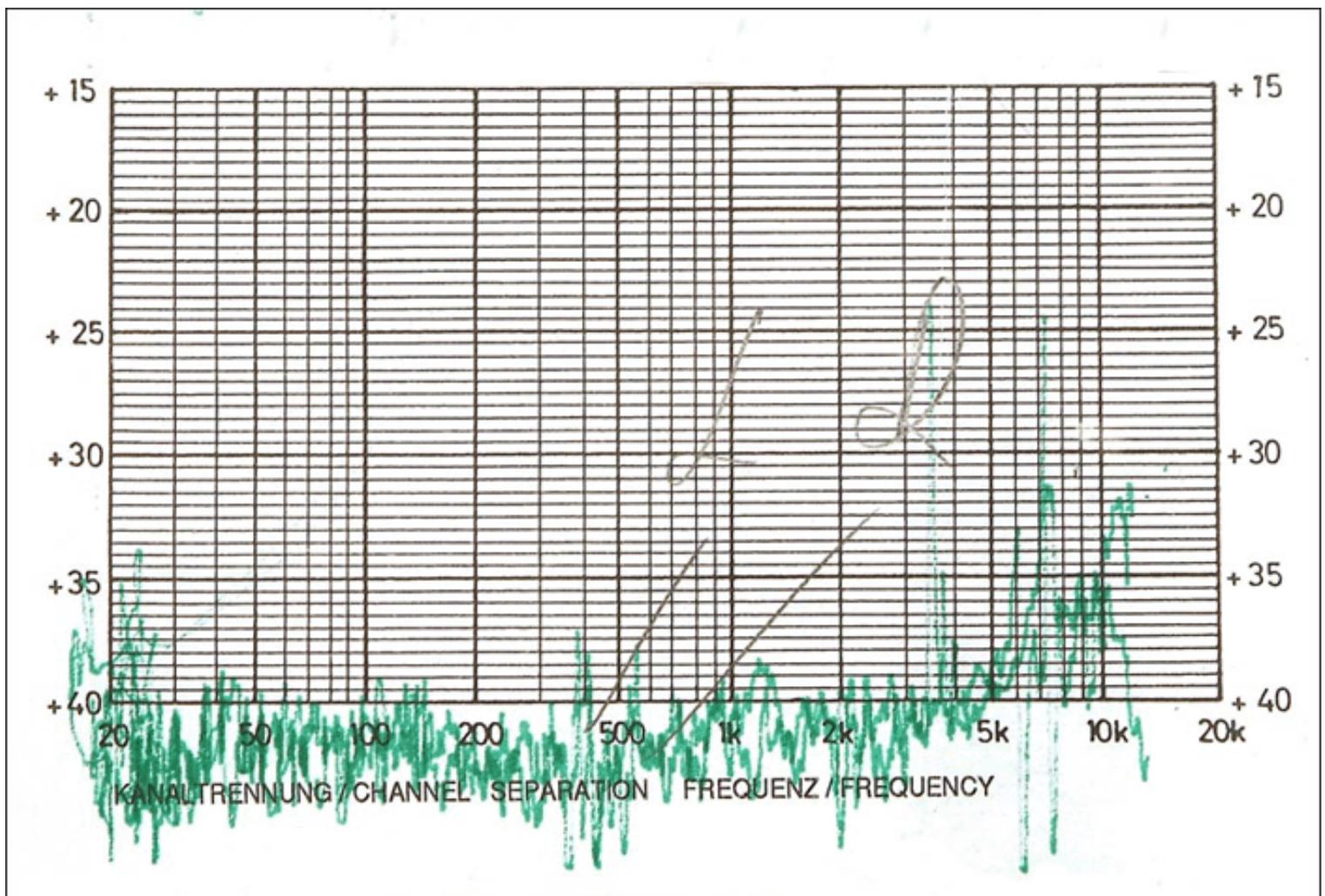
There are certain great classic rock album sides. Chortle if you wish, but a great rock album played on a SOTA system is akin to the musical equivalent of a roller coaster ride. Climb aboard, strap yourself in and hold on. For twenty minutes, you take a ride. At times, you hold your breath and at the moment of the last note, you exhale, drained and spent. You are swept up in the moment. These records demand listening from beginning to end: *Led Zeppelin I*, Heart's *Magic Man*, Pink Floyd's *DSOTM*. Stop snickering now. Admit it, you've spent time at a high end show or listening to the audiophile 'flavor of the month' and in many cases the boring blankness of the music dulls the senses. Some audiophile demo music blends into a homogenous goo of sonic sameness. You want some unpretentious sonic fun? Drop the needle on Talking Heads' *Burning Down The House* or DCC's amazing copy of Deep Purple's *Smoke on the Water*, or Styx's *Mr. Roboto*. With the Goldfinger, if you ain't dancing in the aisle, you ain't alive.

Audiophiles refer to the perceived speed of equipment and sometimes interchange this with PRaT (Pace Rhythm and Timing), but however you categorize it, the Goldfinger has it in spades and infuses rock with energy and excitement. There is a startling ability to retrieve musical info buried in those old vinyl grooves. The beauty of Goldfinger is that it extracts not just more music from the grooves but more of the emotion and feeling which, when the recording, artist, sun, moon and stars align just right, gives it that special magic.

Bass

If there is one area where digital might exceed vinyl, it is the tightness, control and definition of the lowest registers. The Goldfinger pushes this boundary. Although well defined and tight, I have heard deeper bass before but at the expense of being more woolly and less controlled. The intro to "America", Neil Diamond, *The Jazz Singer* [Mobile Fidelity], the kettle drum of Stravinsky's *The Firebird* [Mercury], the Eagles "Hotel California", *Hell Freezes Over* [Geffen] or the synthesized bass notes of Wendy (nee Walter) Carlos are produced forcefully, effortlessly and without strain - not the lumbering boom box bass sometimes endemic to vinyl. With the VTA and VTF dialed in, the Goldfinger reveals subtleties and textures in the bass. When playing Ray Brown's "Cry Me a River" from *Soular Energy* [Pure Audiophile], the sound with a lesser cartridge is full and warm but somewhat bloated. With the Goldfinger, you have the true sense of a point sound expanding effortlessly into the room. Brown's bass does not overwhelm the piano and drums, but cohesively complements it with no lumbering overhand, just natural decay. Almost eerie.

The same thing happens with Oscar Peterson's *West Side Story* [DCC]. Listening to "Maria", you can see and feel each bass note clearly delineated against the background. You sense the finger movement on the bass strings. The bass does not so much emanate from the speakers but more like *blooms* into the room.



Information detail retrieval

It all starts with the cartridge. Whatever the equipment downstream, it can only reproduce the information in the signal supplied by the cartridge. No cables, amps, power supplies or speakers can add information (or at least they are not supposed to) that wasn't there to start with.

Detail retrieval has long been a hallmark of Clearaudio cartridges, especially the Reference series. Yet as good as those were, the Goldfinger is a whole new level. Enjoying the discovery of heretofore unheard nuance and detail from 35-year old recordings frankly is causing me to rethink how much more detail could be trapped in those "obsolete" vinyl grooves.

The ability to retrieve musical information on the record puts it in a class of its own. I thought the Insider Reference to be a previous king of that arena but the Goldfinger blows that mark away. The small musical details buried in the background are now easily discernable, with micro details previously at the threshold of audibility now clearly perceptible. Previously unheard subtle textures emerge from the sonic fabric. Want to focus on the nuances of the background singers? No problem. The detail is not given equal weight to the primary musical elements and it's not forced in your face. It's just there if you choose to focus on it like music in real space. The detail is there and with some records it is startling. Is it the stylus mass reduction? The dynamic range? The new magnet design? I can't tell you but the musical effect is amazing. This stunning detail is achieved without etching, stridency or mechanical flavoring. It unifies the dynamic energy and excitement of the music, the rhythm - the PRaT. Its brethren have excelled in one, the other or a couple but never as a unified whole. The music is alive. The Goldfinger blows the Insider Reference away with its grain-free liquidity.

Continuing with a rather bizarre test of the detail and musicality, I pulled out Walter Carlos' *Switched on Bach* [Columbia]. Since this music never existed in real space but was artificially placed on the recording, there is nothing natural to retrieve; the sound of course just exists. I wondered if the Goldfinger's sharp detail and resolution would overreact and offer some sort of hyper reality. Yet in another of a series of pleasant surprises, the result was an enjoyable musical experience - sweet and unexpectedly smooth.

Holography

Today, most decent high-end systems reproduce music in some type of holographic space. It is virtually a given for a well

executed system. With the system dialed in just right, the sound takes on a weight and almost physical solidity. The sound however rarely exceeds a static presentation of reality. Live versus recorded (for you pop culture cartoon junkies) is Shrek vs. South Park. A live musical event has a physical and tangible presence that lives and breathes. Even the best systems are pale copies. The best one hopes for are some periodic glimmers of reality. The Goldfinger provides such glimmers. For brief periods, you become one with the music and during those rarest of moments, an almost physical musical presence is perceived. There is something different at play here. It's not just a few notes of reality but at times a startlingly real presentation of musicians in actual space. The Goldfinger presents it in a hugely layered soundstage, dynamically alive and when properly set up, with a top-to-bottom continuousness and lack of glare all within an envelope of an effortless sense of power. Who would think that in 2006, after the vinyl obituary has been written, such a boundary-breaking product for a dead medium would be introduced.

Audiophile pressings, logically, often sound better than their generic counterparts. But often I find the true test of a cartridge -- or a system for that matter -- to hear the results of a standard "run-of-the-mill goodwill bin" recording and see what shakes out. Soundtracks *Fiddler on the Roof* [United Artists] and *Cabaret* [ABC Records] are two random recordings of the 70s - multi-tracked and overdubbed, with fun music but about as uninspiring from an audiophile sound perspective as one could get. In an average playback system, you get the musical equivalent of MP3s on vinyl; with the Goldfinger they are, I dare say, musical, toe tapping, listenable and fun. Holographic soundstaging? Nah, but these and other old discs relegated to my 'do not play bin' have been revived by the Goldfinger's magic. For lack of a better term, on old, worn records the Goldfinger acts as a "grunge remover" without any dulling or blurring of the details. Decent multi-track recordings actually present a credible sonic picture. Ever hear the Village People's *Macho Man* [Casablanca] through a darTZeel, VTL, Walker, X-2 and a Goldfinger? Get on your disco shoes because it sounds pretty cool.

Surface noise (lack of)

The Goldfinger continues a phenomenon that I first noted with the Insider - quiet surfaces and a lack of clicks, pops and noise. At first I thought the difference was my imagination but having switched back and forth between the Magic Diamond, Insider and Goldfinger, the effect is unmistakable. Ticks, pops and surface noise are subjectively reduced, seemingly in half. Cliché alert - *the sound literally emerges from a silky blackness*. Boy, I wish it wasn't a cliché, because firstly, the Goldfinger displays this characteristic better than any cartridge that I have heard, and secondly, I don't know any better way of saying it. So there, the cliché stands. As to why? Only speculation on my part. The new HD diamond tip is designed to be an ideal fit to the groove and it is small - 0.008mm x 0.040mm. I wonder if the small and unique shape rides deeper down in the grooves below the surface noise and scratches? Or maybe it's the heavy tracking (2.8 grams) in combination with the stylus geometry? Whatever the reason, it is an order of magnitude better than anything I've heard previously. I know that many vinylholics subconsciously tune out record noise but why *have* to do it? Why not have it all? For this price, you deserve it. As a comparison, the perceived surface noise with the Magic Diamond was average. Not that the Magic Diamond was bad, not even close. The Goldfinger is just head and shoulders above it - quieter.

Reliability

The Goldfinger has performed flawlessly to date. However, I did have a defective Insider. During its second year, a slow, at first almost imperceptible decline in sound quality appeared. It was slow, intermittent and insidious. You start questioning everything, including at times your own hearing ability or lack thereof. Because the cartridge was the newest component in my system and had (up to this point) performed flawlessly, I suspected everything *but* the cartridge. I literally swapped every component and cable in and out of the system with the exception of the speakers. Somehow, a \$600 CD player sounded better than my beloved Walker Proscenium system. After questioning my own sanity and judgment, I finally swapped the Insider for the Magic Diamond. Success! The sun rose, the birds sang and all was right again in my audio world. The unit was replaced and with that one exception, all of my Clearaudios during a ten-year period have been mechanically sound and reliable.

Weakness

Aside from the price, there are not many weaknesses. You need the azimuth setting just right or you end up with a *slightly* two dimensional soundstage with a discontinuity between frequency ranges. When the setup is not right, the sound has a discrete spotlighting rather than wonderful continuity. Although not a weakness, there is no warmth or glaze over the sound. If your system leans towards brightness, this probably is not the cartridge for you. Again, if you are in love with deep boomy sound and bloomy bass, look elsewhere. Finally, the Goldfinger reproduces exactly what is in the grooves, from the exquisite to the execrable. Be prepared for the truth.

Conclusion

Listening to the Goldfinger reminds me of the opening title sequence of the old *Outer Limits* television show where you are commanded that "...We are controlling transmission. For the next hour we will control all that you see and hear. You are about to experience the awe and mystery which reaches from the inner mind to the outer limits..." Likewise, the Goldfinger

takes control of the listening session and your musical soul. It is dynamic with in-your-face gusto that grabs you by the balls and doesn't let go. If you want your music polite, then get off the bus now because this ride is not for you. But if transparency, resolution, soundstaging, detail, transient response and the ability to reach the core of the musical soul are important to you... well, then you have arrived. At this price level, there are no excuses. When you aim for the top strata of production cartridges, you better deliver and deliver it all, not just incremental improvement over the competition. No qualifications. That doesn't mean that this cartridge will be the ideal for every vinyl lover on the planet. Rolls Royce, Maybach and Lamborghini are all at the same stratospheric pricing. But for pampering, technology or adrenaline rush, each couldn't be more different. The question for any exotic product is, does it deliver the goods for its intended audience? For me, the Goldfinger with the lofty retail price delivers the goods. Just one drop of the needle and you know that you are in store for something special.



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