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Oracle Delphi Mk VI (£9345)

When the first Oracle deck arrived in the UK at the beginning of the '80s its looks certainly turned heads. Thirty years on, this latest Delphi Mk VI is as stunning as ever

Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Few would argue that the Oracle Delphi looks drop dead gorgeous. With its sleek, futuristic lines and gleaming precision-turned parts there's something about its design that makes even disinterested passers-by pause to take a second look.

Did I say futuristic? What's remarkable about the design is that the first incarnation of the Oracle, looking not dissimilar to this latest Delphi Mk VI model, first went on sale in 1979 – the year that Thatcher arrived at Downing Street, The Village People topped the singles chart with 'YMCA' and the Christmas No 1 was Pink Floyd's 'Another Brick In The Wall'.

Hailing from Quebec in Canada, designer Marcel Riendeau's Oracle Audio Technologies created shock waves among the audio fraternity on the other side of the Atlantic with his ultramodern record player. Way back then audio commentators were calling it a work of art... and a work of art it remains to this day.

TIME FOR AN UPGRADE

While there have been several incarnations of the Oracle Delphi during the intervening years, the outgoing Mk V has been on the market for nearly 14 years. For a product to remain unchanged for such a long time is rare indeed. But to be fair, Oracle has been busy building its brand. These days Oracle is not simply a quirky manufacturer of an 'out-there' turntable but is an electronics company too, with a portfolio of equally luxuriously priced CD players, CD transports and DACs and more besides. Moreover, in recent years it has also been preoccupied in negotiations regarding changes of company ownership. So, being rather long in the tooth, the Delphi Mk V was certainly overdue for a reappraisal and a performance upgrade to keep it 'up there', as well as out there.

Those familiar with Delphis will notice immediately when studying our

RIGHT: By each suspension tower a cup of silicone fluid and adjustable plunger (with locking ring) provides damping of the subchassis

photographs what look like additional stubby pillars of aluminium beside each suspension turret. These are in fact hollow 'pots' of silicone fluid, Oracle having designed a damping system it calls its Micro Vibration Stabiliser System (MVSS) [see 'Damping the Vibes' boxout]. Turning the adjustment wheels to raise the Delrin plungers out of the silicone fluid and back again – immersing them in the damping fluid to precisely the same depth – is an easy process. Straight A/B demonstrations take but a minute, and the sharpening of image focus and improvement in bass resolution is clear for any audiophile to hear within a few bars of music.

Less obvious to observe from our photographs are the different supports beneath the acrylic base on which the deck sits. All audio components are sensitive to their environment, none more so than a turntable, as you will have experienced if you've ever experimented with putting your record player on varying types of support platforms and equipment racks. The Delphi has been a suspended subchassis design since its inception, with incremental

improvements through its various guises addressing issues concerning ease of set up (the earliest decks needed constant readjusting and were sensitive to external shock such as footfall on suspended floors) and improvements and modifications to the rigidity of the subchassis, arm mounting, bearing design and so on. Different to the Mk V, the convex feet on the new Mk VI are now formed of Delrin rather than aluminium. Oracle says it found Delrin feet minimised the difference in sound observed when placing the turntable variously on shelves made of wood, glass and concrete, believing that the new feet act as a mechanical filter that reduces high frequency energy entering the suspension system.

BALANCING ACT

Look carefully and you'll observe that while the Delphi remains low-slung and sleek-looking, it does however appear a touch more 'butch'. This is because the aluminium subchassis is now thicker, especially in the front left portion where a further piece of aluminium is secured on its





underside acts as a more effective counter balance to the weight of the tonearm fitted on the opposite corner, obviating the need of the counterweight that was fitted on the underside of the platter of the Mk V.

Remove the platter of this Mk VI and you'll see that the centre portion of the subchassis is now considerably larger too, which in turn makes the three 'legs' of the subchassis that extend to the three towers containing the suspension springs shorter and commensurately stiffer. And the tonearm mounting ring support has been widened by approximately 35%, increasing the strength and rigidity of the entire arm mounting section.

The design of the main bearing has been tweaked too. When Oracle introduced the Delphi Mk V in 1996 it went over to using a 'dual-tripod' design, using six points instead of bushes for holding the centre spindle. At that time it used nylon screws and a tungsten carbide thrust plate inside the bearing. The stainless steel spindle had a tungsten carbide tip at the end to provide a rigid tungsten-to-tungsten interface.

In the Mk VI the screws are now formed of a Delrin/Teflon mixture, while the thrust plate is now made of a polyamide-imide (PAI) material called Torlon [see www.solwayadvancedpolymers.com]. In using this high-strength plastic Oracle believes it

has created a filter that prevents rotational noise from moving up the spindle and entering the platter, claiming 'much quieter background and allowing better access to fine inner details'. What hasn't changed in the transition from Mk V to Mk VI is the motor, despite it being a design dating back to the mid-'90s.

CHANGE AT THE TOP

I mentioned earlier Oracle's change of ownership. Founder Marcel Riendeau left the audio industry several years ago and emigrated to Germany. The President of the company today is Stephane Nadeau, whose association with Oracle started over a decade ago. It was his precision machine shop and skilful expertise that supplied all of Oracle's exquisitely crafted metalwork, resplendent in its polished lacquer finish. Marcel's brother Jacques worked at Oracle for 25 years, and it is he and Stephane who own the company today.

HFN had the opportunity to meet them both recently, to discuss the design details of their new labour of love, as they were visiting Oracle's UK distributor, Coherent Systems in Gloucestershire [see 'Welcome back Jacques' boxout on p24].

ABOVE: In addition to the Micro Vibration Stabiliser System, differences between the Mk V Delphi and the Mk VI include Delrin feet and improvements to the deck's bearing

'Each generation of turntable was always linked to the availability of the motor,' Jacques told us candidly. 'Remember, we were a startup company in 1979, so the first deck is one that we refer to today as the Delphi AC as it used an AC synchronous motor. Then we switched to a DC Hall-effect motor. When I think back to those early Mk I, II and III models, in each instance we were forced to introduce

a new design because the manufacturer of the motor we were using could no longer supply it. We were into the era of CD and the major corporations had ceased record player production. We had to

change motor with the Mk IV in 1990 too, that being the model where we returned to using an AC synchronous motor.

'At least we can be thankful that we haven't had to change the motor this time. We're using the same low-voltage AC synchronous motor we've been using since the introduction of the Mk V in 1996. It's proved wonderfully reliable and we have our own circuitry that we feed with a DC signal that generates the sine wave to give us the flexibility to fine-adjust the speed.'

'For delicacy and poise the Delphi Mk VI is in a class of its own'

POWER SUPPLIES

Two grades of external power supply are available. Our review sample came with the more costly Turbo supply, a £750 option. With its standard power supply the price of the Delphi Mk VI is £8595.

A flat profile rubber belt goes around a rim on the underside of the platter, and because the motor/drive pulley at the rear is concealed underneath the platter, fitting the belt is certainly something of an Ⓢ

DAMPING THE VIBES

Using silicone-filled dashpots to damp resonance has been used by tonearm manufacturers for decades. Moreover Jack Dinsdale, Professor of mechatronics at Cranfield Institute during the 1970s [see *Sound Off*, p103], famously patented the idea of a front-end damping trough first seen on the Cranfield Rock turntable in 1983 [see *HFN*, June '10] and used in Townshend Audio's Rock turntables to this day. While the methodology is far from revolutionary, Oracle Audio's implementation of dashpots to damp 'micro-vibrations' in its turntable's subchassis is most elegant. The three plunger stems below the subchassis are threaded, each turn of their adjustment wheels lowering them by a mere 1.27mm into their respective silicone-filled cups – so extremely fine adjustment is possible. Once set, locking wheels secure the plungers in position.

TURNTABLE

acquired skill. But this is soon learned after a little practice.

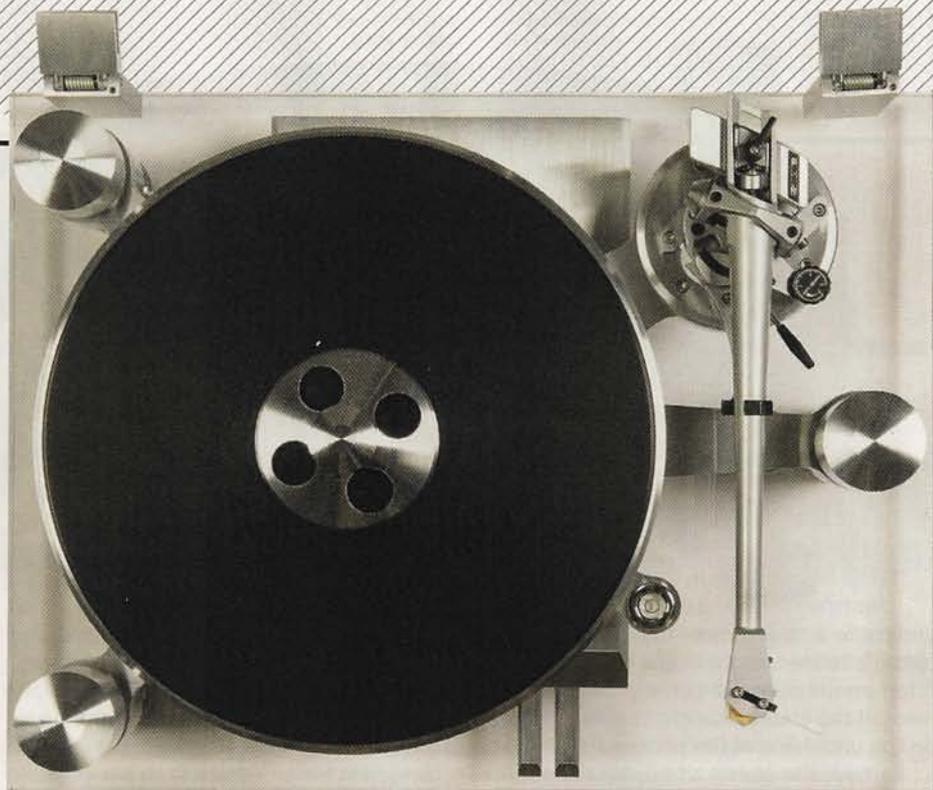
PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

Using an accompanying SME Series IV tonearm in matching silver finish, listening was mostly with a £1000 Ortofon Cadenza Blue MC into an RCM Audio phono stage. I also had the opportunity to audition the Oracle/SME combination fitted with Clearaudio's new Stradivari V2 moving-coil, of which more later.

There is pleasure to be had simply from pressing one of the 'play' levers protruding at the front, whose 33 and 45 legends illuminate after the tactile 'click' of the switch activated by the gentle press. After a pregnant pause of around half a second, the aluminium platter spins into action and comes up to speed pretty rapidly.

When the turntable is in its sweet-spot and you're playing a recording that does it justice the result is a vivid stereo image extending way behind the plane of the loudspeakers. Thanks to its 'legendary' sense of air and space it worked wonders with 'Nil Sen La' from *Clannad In Concert* [reissue, Shanachie 79030]. With no tubbiness or overhang, the clean and tuneful double-bass was nicely focused, the acoustic percussion sounding pristine and hanging in space as if suspended on wires.

I soon discovered it can dig deeply into claustrophobic, muddy-sounding recordings too. Vintage classics such as Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book* LP [Tamla



Motown STMA 8007] may lack the HF sparkle of audiophile cuts but there's treasure in the groove, the Delphi Mk VI bringing out immense detail as the 'biscuit tin' drums and fulsome bass lines were kept under strict control.

Similarly, while the title track on Johnny Guitar Watson's *A Real Mother* LP from 1977 [DJM Records DJF 20505] can so often sound bloated, soft and ill-defined, the Delphi Mk VI did what Delphis have done through the ages: without smear or bloom it bounced through the infectious

ABOVE: Three towers, each containing an elaborate spring and Sorbothane damper assembly, provide suspension for the subchassis

riff, Watson's sublime guitar technique hovering high in the image while surrounded in studio reverb.

GLOWING FOR GOLD

Like Oracle decks through the ages, this latest Delphi VI model is relaxing and pleasurable to live with, due to its sweet and unfatiguing upper midrange and high frequency character that rarely hardens other than when presented with the most strident of brash recordings. Miles Davis' searing trumpet and the challenging electronic 'treatments' on his 1986 *Tutu* album [Warner 925 490-1] were portrayed with a pleasing golden glow rather than sounding clinical and steely. Curiously the Oracle sounds 'snappy' and light on its feet while appearing simultaneously smooth, refined and gentle on the ear. I never heard it sounded etched or sterile.

Regardless of recording quality the Oracle handles everything with equanimity. Lovers of solid uber-decks with massive platters might most likely be unimpressed as the Delphi does not deliver massive bass slam. Bill Bruford's metronomic percussion on 'Heartbeat' from King Crimson's *Beat* [EG Records, EGLP 51] was razor sharp, Robert Fripp's swirling guitar and 'Friggertronics' creating illusions of fairground hysteria behind the lead vocal. But Tony Levin's pumping bass seemed to pump at a lower pressure, the low notes lacking the gravitas that many rock fans desire. If it's sonic fireworks you're after you'll be better pleased elsewhere. ⇨

WELCOME BACK, JACQUES...

After a four year sabbatical from Oracle, Jacques Riendeau – brother of Marcel who designed the first turntable – has returned to the company as co-owner and head of the design team.

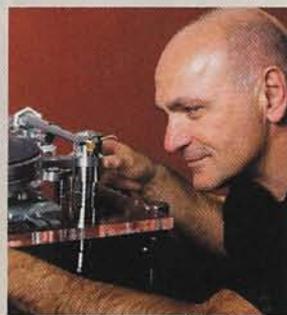
'We've always had two objectives. One was to make a piece of art; the other was making sure that our beautiful looking object was in the Formula One division,' Jacques told us. 'So we questioned every element that could possibly affect the purity of the sound, looking for any potential weaknesses in the design.'

'We always believed that our suspension

system was the factor in making our turntables sound the way they do, giving them their light, open and airy sound. But rather like that comedy movie *Honey I Shrunk The Kids*, we visualised ourselves standing in the record groove. As we "walked along the groove" we concluded that although the suspension system was very efficient there were micro vibrations that could enter the platter and be picked up by the stylus in the groove.

'For years we thought our suspension was as good as it could be, but that micro movement of the subchassis was

having an impact on the sound. Certainly the new Delrin feet and bearing modifications improve the consistency of performance somewhat. However, I believe our Micro Vibration Stabiliser System to be the most significant improvement to the sound of the Delphi in its 30 year history.'



TURNTABLE



ABOVE: Rear view shows motor housing and DIN socket for connecting the Delphi's external power supply. Trim pots provide fine speed adjustment

Having spent several days enjoying the Mk VI's serene music making, it was time for a little experimentation. Changing to the new Clearaudio Stradivari V2 moving-coil [see p50] brought about an even more polished sound, with delicate highs but at the expense of some warmth and bass weight.

As the cartridge began running in (it was brand new) it started to gain a little bass power, however the global character of the Delphi's presentation was still evident – it's relaxed demeanour and control – notwithstanding the change in tonal colour. For delicacy and poise it's arguably in a class of its own. No wonder Oracle owners adore the deck, while many are those who can't afford one and spend a lifetime dreaming of owning one.

EXTRAS AND UPGRADES

Oh yes, while the sophistication of the design and the fit and finish have improved considerably from model to model – and the setting up of the deck's suspension to level the subchassis is now child's play – so too has the price crept up over the years. An Oracle Delphi was always a big ticket item, almost twice the price of a Linn Sondek in the early 1980s I recall. Moreover, the prices quoted in this review do not include the Delphi's acrylic lid. Along with the spring-loaded aluminium hinges, which are, naturally, beautifully made as well, that'll be an additional £570 to you sir. Ouch!

And even though I wouldn't dream of owning this finely-tuned masterpiece without having the cover to protect it from dust, the design of the lid is arguably the least satisfying element of the design. Tension in the hinges at the rear holds the lid hovering in space

once you've lowered it to a position parallel with the platter. Meanwhile, the front and sides of the lid don't meet with the acrylic base to close fully like a clamshell.

Oracle has always understood that one of its turntables is a major investment for any vinyl lover. Consequently it has always served its customers well by maintaining a policy of upgradeability from one version of the Delphi to the next. Even though the changes to the subchassis and the addition of the Micro Vibration Stabiliser System are pretty major in terms of re-working decks, owners of Mk Vs need not feel disenfranchised whatsoever. Upgrade packages are already being planned and priced for those who want their decks brought up to 2010 specifications.

Even owners of earlier Delphis that featured an aluminium/composite sandwich subchassis will be accommodated eventually, although Jacques confessed it may take a little while longer to work out how to handle the upgrade process through its distributors worldwide. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Beautiful to behold, the Delphi Mk VI is also deliciously tactile in use. Pride of ownership is a given while it's reassuring to learn that Oracle is maintaining its upgrade policy. 'Bass heads' who thrive on moving lots of air might prefer a high mass, solid plinth turntable design but if you value image specificity, refinement and a relaxed balance with air and space, this deck should be at the top of your lust list.

Sound Quality: 84%

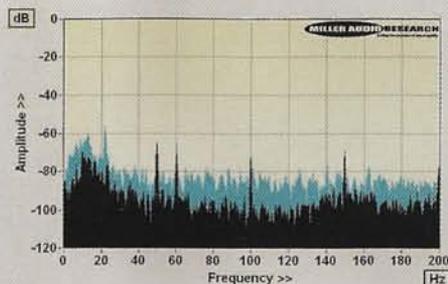


LAB REPORT

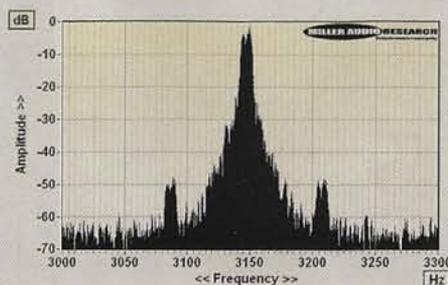
ORACLE DELPHI Mk VI (£9345)

When, on occasion, we have the opportunity to lever a genuine audio icon into the laboratory it pays to be prepared for the unexpected, or at least the unusual. So it is here with the 'characterful' Oracle Delphi Mk VI. The basics are all here – a usefully swift start-up time of around 4 seconds and a very low hum and noise of –64dB (re. cartridge output at 5cm/sec). With or without the clamp, through-groove rumble amounts to –69.0dB which is close enough to the average vinyl noise floor although, unusually, this figure deteriorates by about 2dB when we measure rumble directly from the six-point bearing. In both cases the spectrum [see Graph 1, below] reveals not only the usual sub-20Hz structural noise and minor hum components but also a 60Hz peak almost certainly associated with the AC synchronous motor.

In practice this is of academic interest because any subjective impact is uncertain. Nevertheless that 60Hz drone turns up yet again as a pair of sidebands on the wow and flutter spectrum [see Graph 2, below], albeit at a sufficiently low level to add a mere 0.03% to the weighted total. Note that the sidebands take the same appearance as the main peak, itself a 'doublet' caused by a ± 2 Hz wow. While the latter is sufficiently low in frequency to bypass both the liquid 'MVSS' and mechanical sprung suspension, I cannot help but wonder if there's sufficient short-circuiting of the (low viscosity) silicone oil at 60Hz to 'couple' the motor to the subchassis. Readers are invited to view a full QC Suite report for the Oracle Delphi Mk VI turntable by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Unweighted bearing rumble from DC-200Hz (black infill) versus silent LP groove (blue infill) re. 1kHz at 5cm/sec. Note 60Hz motor breakthrough



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ± 150 Hz, 5Hz per minor division). Speed accuracy is good but note 60Hz flutter sidebands

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.29rpm (-0.13%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.05% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-69.0dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-67.0dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-64.1dB
Power Consumption	3W
Dimensions (WHD)	475x150x363mm