

HERB REICHERT

Music Hall Stealth

RECORD PLAYER

The earliest direct-drive record player I've discovered is Garrard's Model 201 from 1930. It only played 78s. In their advertising, Garrard claimed the 201 was the world's first "transcription turntable." It employed Garrard's latest in a line of what they called "prestige" motors: an AC-induction "Super Motor." Garrard described the 201's platter as "plush covered" and said it was "popular with HiFi enthusiasts and used by the BBC." The 201 was superseded by the 201A, which rotated at both 78 and 33 1/3 rpm.¹ The venerable Garrard 301 that followed was an idler-drive design.

The next direct-drive turntable I know of is the solid-chassis Technics SP-10, which was introduced to recording studio and radio station markets in 1969. The SP-10 was quickly followed by Technics's SL-1100, launched into professional DJ/turntablist markets in 1971. This was followed by Technics's SL-1200, introduced to home audio markets in 1972—which, coincidentally, was the same year a Scotsman named Ivor Tiefenbrun launched his wood-plinthed belt-driven suspended subchassis Linn Sondek LP12 record player into Great Britain's domestic audio-ophile market.

By 1975, Ivor in Glasgow had recruited legions of Brit-fi LP12 aficionados, and they were taking up arms and talking trash about direct-drive (DD) turntables, claiming that DDs were "noisy" and "couldn't carry a tune." Ivor claimed that DDs failed his toe-tapping "pace, rhythm, and timing" tests. The English-speaking audio



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press fell 100% for his belt-and-springs pontifications.

Hi-fi scribes cared little that built-like-a-tank, never-need-adjustment direct-drive 'tables were quickly replacing rim and idler

drives in recording studios and radio stations. Or that millions of the world's young people were having no trouble tapping their feet (and dancing) to sounds derived from directly driven turntable grooves.

If the British press (or *TAS* or *Stereophile* in America) ever reviewed this "inferior" technology, I never saw it. Every reviewer I read said that a belt was a "necessary requirement" to "decouple" the platter from the vibrations of the motor. In 1992, there were no direct-drive decks in *Stereophile's* Recommended Components.

If I remember right, Goldmund's Studio and Studietto were the first DD turntables to receive positive notice from audiophiles. Then, in 2007, Michael Fremer gave a "pretty good" *AnalogPlanet*

¹ See gramophonemuseum.com/garrard-201.html.

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Three-speed (33 1/3, 45, and 78rpm), direct-drive turntable with brushless, low-torque motor, solid MDF plinth, die-cast aluminum platter, rubber mat; Sorbothane vibration-damping feet, switchable auto-stop function, static-balanced, S-shaped

aluminum tonearm with a detachable (SME-type) headshell, and Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge. Tonearm: effective length, 9" (230mm); usable cartridge weight range: 6-10gm (more with extra counterweight, included). Cartridge: output, 5.5mV; recommended vertical

tracking force 1.6-2.0gm.

Dimensions 17.8" (453mm) W x 5.8" (146.7mm) H x 14.2" (361.67mm) D. Weight 24lb (11kg).

Serial number of unit reviewed 2107001 15A. Manufactured in Taiwan.

Price as tested \$1649. Approximate

number of US dealers: 45. Warranty: One year.

Manufacturer Music Hall LLC, 108 Station Rd., Great Neck, NY 11023. Tel: (516) 487-3663. Email: info@musicchallaudio.com. Web: musicchallaudio.com.

review to Grand Prix Audio's direct-drive Monaco. After that, he rave-reviewed the Brinkmann Bardo, also a direct-drive turntable. Then, in 2014, he canonized VPI's Classic Direct Drive Signature. As far as I can tell, my 2015 review of the \$799 Pioneer PLX-1000 turntable was the first *Stereophile* review of a truly affordable direct-drive deck.

Fortunately, anti-DD sentiments have lessened in recent years. *Stereophile*'s Recommended Components now has four turntables in Class A+; two of them, the \$363,000, American-made OMA K3 and the €180,000 (without tonearm), made-in-Sweden SAT XD1, are direct-drive models based on Technics SP-10R motors. (The other two are belt drives made by TechDAS in Japan.)

It pleases me that direct drive is finally making *Stereophile* star- turns, but unfortunately, none are at the affordable end of the Recommended Components list, where I think DD naturally outguns belt drive, and where I imagined Music Hall's new \$1649 Stealth direct-drive deck might outplay its belt-driven competition. So, I was excited to try it.

Roy Hall, Music Hall's proprietor-founder, is my favorite kind of person: a natural-born storyteller with a devious smile and a good pair of ears. But until now, I've had no reason to review a Music Hall product.

Now, though, I have the perfect reason. For 40 years, Roy has been a decorated general in his pal Ivor's belt-drive army. For the sake of this review, I am choosing to regard his first foray into direct drive, the matte-black Stealth, as a white-flag turncoat product, maybe even a Trojan Horse that may or may not "carry the tune."

Design and setup

Except for the white numbers on the tonearm controls and the Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge, Music Hall's Stealth is black everywhere. In person, it looks austere and resolute, with little or nothing, stylewise, to suggest it's a direct drive. (In contrast, Music Hall's \$249 us-1 turntable looks a lot like a direct-drive Technics but in fact utilizes belt drive.)

The Stealth is a three-speed, made-in-Taiwan turntable with a rear-mounted On/Off button and three small buttons on the plinth for selecting 33 1/3, 45, or 78rpm. It features a brushless, low-torque direct-drive motor mounted in what has been styled to look like one of Roy's signature Sorbothane-MDF sandwich plinths, the ones he uses on his best belt drives. But, when I asked Roy in an email, "What is the exact composition of the Stealth's sandwich plinth?" he replied, "Sorry but that is just a design feature. It is a solid plinth." Listening to the plinth with a stethoscope, with the table running at 33 1/3rpm, I heard only the faintest motor noise, maybe 50% less than I hear from the two-motor belt-drive Dr. Feickert Blackbird.

The Stealth's 4lb, viscous-elastomer-damped, die-cast aluminum platter is topped by a 1/16"-thick, slightly hard, slightly sticky rubber platter mat, which bugged me due to its propensity to attract and hold dust. For comparison, the mat on the original Technics SL-1200 (which I still have and now use on my PLX-1000) is 3/16"



On the Stealth, [the Ortofon 2M Black] danced, sang, and smiled a naughty smile, like Tina Turner.

thick, much softer, and doesn't collect dust.

The Stealth's S-shaped aluminum tonearm sports a light, detachable headshell that does not allow for azimuth adjustment. The arm is specified to accept cartridges weighing 6–10gm—more when the included subweight is installed. Its thick cylindrical arm-pillar housing features a "window"

for viewing the movements of the arm's calibrated (in mm) arm pillar. At the top of this housing is a knurled, 1.5"-diameter knob that allows adjustment of VTA even while a record is playing. A thick, side-mounted lock nut secures the arm in place.

The Stealth's tonearm exceeded my expectations: During use, it felt precise and well-sorted. Its bearings felt just-right tight, and its arm-lift mechanism served me with more ease and assurance than the one on my Schick tonearm.

Underneath the Stealth are four viscous-elastomer-damped, height-adjustable feet that effectively isolated the deck from foot-falls and seemed higher in quality than I would have expected at this price point.

Interestingly, the MH Stealth includes an "auto shut-off" feature (also called "auto-stop") that turns off the platter motor (but doesn't raise the arm) after the cartridge spends 20 seconds riding the play-out groove. There's also an "electricity saving" feature that puts the deck into "auto standby mode" after 20 minutes of nonuse, and a motor-protection feature that turns the motor off if after 30 seconds it hasn't come up to speed.

The Stealth comes with a fabric dust cover, a set of generic-looking RCA-to-RCA cables that I did not try, a 45rpm adapter that I used a lot, and the aforementioned cylindrical, screw-on subweight.

The Stealth comes stock with Ortofon's 2M Blue moving magnet phono cartridge, which, according to my Feickert protractor, was set to a Stevenson alignment. The Blue features a Hopelex body and a well-designed, safe-to-use stylus protector. Its magnets are attached to an aluminum cantilever tipped with a nude elliptical diamond. It weighs 72gm and produces 5.5mV output. The recommended vertical tracking force is 1.6–2.0gm.

From left to right on the Stealth's rear are twin RCA connectors that are directly connected to the tonearm's wires, a ground terminal, a slider switch for turning the auto-stop feature on or off, a larger On/Off button, and a receptacle for the wall wart power supply.

Before starting my auditions, I checked the Stealth's speed accuracy with the RPM app on my iPhone. It clocked a steady 33.36rpm (+0.09%). (See the image on p.147.)

Black and Blue listening

For the whole of this month's all-analog review period, I decided to power my Falcon Gold Badge LS3/5a speakers with Parasound's Halo A 21+ stereo amplifier and use the uber-clear HoloAudio Serene preamp. I chose that combo, and my reference Tavish Design

Adagio tube phono stage, because I felt it gave the black Stealth and blue Ortofon their best chance of sounding clear and vigorous.

I played lots of records during my first week with the Stealth, to break in the cartridge and wash some of last month's digital out of my brain. I listened a lot from adjoining rooms as I cooked, washed dishes, and painted paintings. Under these conditions, what I noticed most was the Stealth and 2M Blue's high level of tone correctness.

This high level of tone correctness was most obvious playing Prince's *Piano & a Microphone 1983* (Warner LP R1 566557/603497861286), a recording that someone on an audio forum warned people not to buy because, according to him, it sounded "bright" and "poorly recorded ... like something the Prince Estate issued just to make money." Naturally, I rushed out and bought it. The fact that this recording was made by Prince himself, in his own home studio, made it irresistible. Not to mention, it was mastered by the master: Bernie Grundman.

With inferior component groupings, this recording flashes moments of compressed-sounding bite-n-glare. The first time I heard it, I thought Prince's recorder was overloading on peaks. The Stealth and Blue cartridge combo did not show any of that. They played it quietly and smoothly while pushing songs like "Cold Coffee and Cocaine" and "Why the Butterflies" along like a medium-sized wave propelling a surfer.

The stock Stealth played about as pitch-perfect and tone-true as any record-playing system I've used. What the Blue didn't do was pump the music up or present sounds with invigorating force. Overall, the 2M Blue is more passive than propulsive-sounding. In my system, its best trait was how it emphasized fine textures and the atmospheric aspects of recordings. For example ...

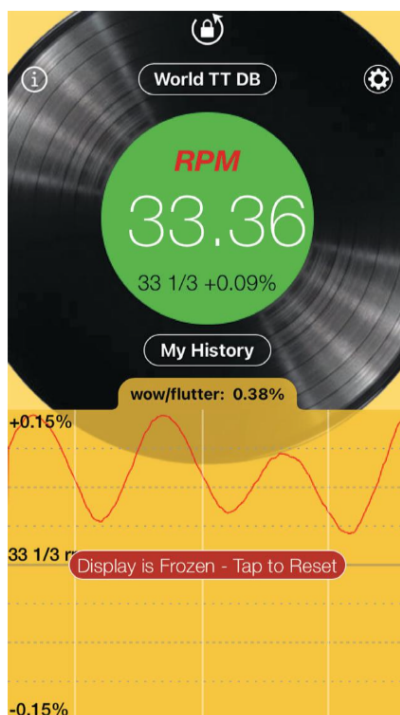
Marlene Dietrich at the Café De Paris (Columbia LP ML 4975) is far from an audiophile recording, but its humanity and artistry and historical context make it a disc I play often.

On Ms. Dietrich's first night, Noel Coward introduces her with a poem he had written for the occasion. Ernest Hemingway contributed to the album's liner notes. This is a live-in-London, 1954 recording, and at the bottom of the back cover it states, "The excitement and charm of the Dietrich voice and the reaction of her audience is faithfully captured on this recording. The recording and these notes are designed to give you the illusion you are part of the audience present on this memorable occasion. In order to make this impression complete, we have tried to recreate the picture in front of your eyes."

The Stealth-Blue combo did what those Columbia scribes said the disc should do: present *Marlene Dietrich at the Café De Paris* as a room of a certain size full of audience noises and smoky-nightclub atmosphere. Most importantly, it transmitted the tone of voice, emotional intensity, and inspiring temperament of this extraordinary 20th century woman.

Black on black

Next, I decided to make the Stealth 'table look more stealthy by installing a black Ortofon 2M Black moving magnet cartridge that Amazon sells for \$695, on an LP Gear (Jelco-type) headshell that Amazon sells for \$89.98. I set the more expensive Ortofon for a



Stevenson alignment at 1.8gm VTF. I played "Raga Malika" off Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Kahn's *Ragas* (Fantasy Records LP F24714-2), smiled, chuckled, and thought, *There it is*. It took only seconds for me to realize that the 2M Blue is only a starter-kit place keeper until users move up and "go black"; only then can they really hear what the Stealth is capable of. This Ali Akbar Kahn recording (and every other recording) sounded stronger, denser, more dynamic, clearer, and more intense than it did with the 2M Blue.

More black: With the black turntable wearing Ortofon's Black cartridge playing the Man in Black, *Johnny Cash With His Hot and Blue Guitar* (Sun LP-1220), my brain screamed: "Hell yes! That's what this record is supposed to sound like." Tone quality, and the illusion of force and forward momentum, were enhanced to a degree that made me think I could live happily forever with this setup. Each record I played made me chuckle more, wondering, is this the biggest, fullest, and most hormone-fueled robust that the 2M Black has ever sounded? I decided it was, in my system.

On the Feickert Blackbird with Thomas Schick's 10.5" arm, the 2M Black sounds restrained. On the Stealth, it danced, sang, and smiled a naughty smile, like Tina Turner. A highly recommendable combo.

Still more black

Keeping the Black Ortofon in, I switched out the Tavish Design Adagio tubed phono pre and installed Kitsuné HiFi's solid state LCR-1 MK5 phono preamplifier, which instantly kicked up the bass detail and clarified the 80–200Hz region. The beat got stronger. Tina kicked higher. Reverberant energy became more intense. Forward momentum became more pronounced. The Kitsuné phono stage specializes in iron-hulled density and *allegro vivo*; both traits kicked up the pleasure factor with the Stealth-2M Black combo.

What about low-compliance moving coils?

Once, on an audio forum, someone declared, "The Denon DL-103 is the most overrated cartridge ever." Maybe no one told him that this "overrated," almost-free moving coil has been in production since 1962. Certainly no one told him—though he may not have cared—that I've enjoyed a platoon of DL-103s over 40 years, at one point using it with spectacular results on a Denon DP-3000 direct-drive turntable with a Denon step-up transformer.

The plastic-bodied 103 weighs 8.5gm and costs \$349. It's designed to track at 2.4–2.8gm, with an output of 0.3mV, a 40 ohm output impedance, and a low (5×10^6 cm/dyne) dynamic compliance.

The DL-103 remains one of the most flat-out enjoyable-to-use cartridges I know. Its 0.2mm spherical stylus and hollow aluminum cantilever bring vibrancy and spirited dynamics to every type of recording, but the 103 famously specializes in jazz, country, uptempo rock, R&B, and blues.

I installed the Denon because for the sake of this report, I wanted to see how effectively the Stealth's tonearm would perform with a low-compliance moving coil. To that end, I tested the plastic-bodied Denon using a *Hi-Fi News Test Record* to check the resonant frequency of the Stealth arm + Denon cartridge pairing.

The combo resonated at exactly 11Hz; 8–15Hz is considered ideal. Later, after adding the Stealth's 10gm auxiliary subweight to the back of the tonearm, I performed the same test with my 15gm, aluminum-bodied Zu Audio Denon Zu/DL-103 MK.II, and it also resonated at 11Hz. Either cartridge—the basic DL-103 or the much heavier modified Zu version—will work fine on the Stealth.

It's an old story, but every time I install a conical-tipped Denon DL-103, I start digging through my boxes of 1960s 7" 45s. I collect 45s because on 7" discs, the music I grew up with sounds like it did coming out of jukeboxes and the dashboards of my cars. Back then, Denon DL-103s were common at radio stations, so to me, if a modern record player is good, I will hear some of that '60s sound I remember.

It cheered me to discover that when the DL-103-equipped Stealth played 45s, they sounded solidly present and vigorous, not emasculated as 7" 45s usually do when played on audiophile decks. The Stealth's stock rubber mat did not grip my big-hole discs in a reassuring manner, but that didn't stop the Stealth from playing my Chess, Stax, and Atlantic releases with plenty of jukebox energy and dance-party mojo. The Stealth-Denon combo played my 45s more enjoyably than the Feickert Blackbird or my Linn LP12 Valhalla.

One record the Stealth played more engagingly than the Linn or Feickert was of a 1965 radio hit called "Are You a Boy or Are You a Girl?" by the Barbarians (Laurie LR 3308). The Barbarians were an American band that ironically emulated British invasion bands while mocking the British invasion with lyrics like "You're either a girl, or you come from Liverpool." This Doug Morris-produced disc usually struggles to come completely clear and alive, even with the Koetsu on the Blackbird, but the Stealth-Denon combo sorted it out and presented it with an appropriate dose of weird charm.

The Stealth-DL-103 setup performed equally well with 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm jazz, vocal, and classical discs. Frank Sinatra's *Only the Lonely* (Capitol LP SW 1053) came through with exemplary tone and a healthy portion of that burnished Capital Records sound.

What about 78s?

Music Hall's Stealth can play 78rpm records. My Linn LP12 can't do that. Neither can most of Music Hall's other turntables.

Folks, I entreat you: if you've never tried collecting and playing 78s, you can have no idea how beautiful, exotic, and *high-fidelity* the experience can be. Especially when the discs feature rare performances from ancient gods like Louis Armstrong, Django Reinhardt, Roy Acuff, Judy Garland, Charlie Patton, or Édith Piaf.³

My long-term go-to cartridge for playing 78s is the Grado Labs 78E mono (\$160). It's another one of those cartridges, like the DL-103, that puts the music part of the recording up front.

The Stealth's firm rubber mat seemed ideally suited to heavy shellacs. The Stealth's all-over matte-blackness served to frame the beauty of those gold- and silver-lettered 78 labels.⁴ The 78E's 0.3mm conical stylus (tracking at 3gm) played noisy discs quietly, endowing every one with quick, sure flow and a full measure of dynamic subtlety. If you want to try 78s, this Stealth-Grado combo is a good place to start.



ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog sources Linn Audio Sondek LP12 turntable with SME M2-9 tonearm and AudioTechnica AT-VM95E cartridge; Dr. Feickert Analogue Blackbird turntable with Thomas Schick 10.5" tonearm, My Sonic Lab Ultra Eminent Ex moving coil cartridge. Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum MC cartridge with Koetsu SUT. Denon DL-103 with Auditorium 23 SUT. Denon DL-103, Ortofon 2M Black, Grado Prestige 78E mono phono cartridges.

Preamplifier HoloAudio Serene line-level preamplifier; Tavish Design Adagio, Kitsuné LCR-1 MK5 phono preamplifiers.

Power amplifiers Parasound Halo A 21+.

Loudspeakers Falcon Acoustics "Gold Badge" LS3/5a.

Cables Interconnect: Auditorium 23, AudioQuest Thunderbird, Black Cat Coppertone, Cardas Clear Beyond. Speaker: Cardas Clear Beyond. AC: AudioQuest Tornado, manufacturer's own.

Accessories AudioQuest Niagara 1000 power conditioner; Harmonic Resolution Systems M3X-1719-AMG GR LF isolation platform (under A 21+ amplifier); Kuzma Platis 65 isolation platform (under Feickert Blackbird turntable). Sound Anchor Reference speaker stands (under LS3/5a's). —Herb Reichert

Conclusion

B&H Photo Video will sell you *two* Pioneer PLX-1000s for \$1478.⁵ I am sure many readers are wondering whether Music Hall's \$1649 (for just one) Stealth is worth the extra money.

In my studio, the Pioneer PLX-1000 looks, feels, and plays like a well-built Technics 1200-style record player; it puts rhythm, drive, and musical content in the foreground.

The Stealth's sound has much in common with the Pioneer PLX-1000's. But in my system, the Music Hall deck played quieter, cleaner, and with sharper focus than the cheaper Pioneer. It drew more life and energy out of my records. I credit the Stealth's tonearm, and maybe its plinth, because every cartridge I tried seemed to come to life—to light up—sounding quicker and more stable than it did on the Pioneer. I felt more connected to the artists and their recordings when using the Stealth.

The Stealth's best trait was how conspicuously it carried the tune—just like Ivor said direct drives couldn't. I can think of no record player under \$2000 that I'd rather use. Or recommend. ■

³ See nytimes.com/2009/07/12/arts/music/12petr.html.

⁴ See old78s.com/78rpm_label_gallery.php.

⁵ For \$1699, you can buy the direct-drive Technics SL-1200GR, which I haven't heard. The GR is a cheaper version of the \$4000 SL-1200G, which I *have* heard, *extensively*, in a familiar system at a friend's house. Look for Alex Halberstadt's review in a forthcoming issue.