



hardware

v.y.g.e.r.

the Atlantis turntable - In Hot Pursuit of the Analog Grail

as reviewed by Marshall Nack



What is *THAT*?

The usual routine has been disrupted. When my *'phile* buds come a-calling at session time, we meet and greet in the foyer where they make themselves comfortable shedding shopping bags and excess outer garments. Then, we mosey on over to the equipment racks to have a look-see. No more.

For the past few months, once these guys pass through my portal, salutations are left dangling in mid-sentence, concentration is fractured and attention is rapt. Soon as they spy this outrageous sculptural object on the top shelf of my TAOC rack all the way at the other end of the room, thirty feet away, they make a beeline towards it. They can't take their eyes off it.

"What is *THAT*?"

MARSHALL NACK'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS

Kharma Exquisite-Midi.

ELECTRONICS

mbl 5011 preamplifier and
mbl 8011 AM monoblocks.

SOURCES

VYGER Baltic M turntable,
Shelter Harmony cartridge,
Linn LP12, LINGO, EKOS
tonearm, ARKIV II cartridge,
AHT Non-Signature phono
preamp modified by Walker
Audio, and an
Extremephono Limited
Edition cable. mbl 1521A
transport, mbl 1511F DAC.

CABLES

Interconnects are Tara Labs
The 0.8, Kubala-Sosna
Emotion, Kondo, and
Kharma Enigma. Digital
cables are Tara Labs The
0.8, Kubala-Sosna Emotion.
Speaker wires are TARA
Labs Omega and 0.8,
Kubala-Sosna Emotion, and
Harmonix. AC power cords
are Tara Labs The One,
Kubala-Sosna Emotion, and
Harmonix.

ACCESSORIES

TAOC Rack and TITE-35S
component footers, Walker
Audio Tuning Discs and
Valid Points for LP
turntable, Harmonix RFA-
78i Room Tuning Discs,
RFS-66ZX Tuning Feet,
CORE Designs amp stands,
Acoustic System
Resonators, Marigo VTS
Dots, Argent Room Lenses,
Echo Buster & Sonex
acoustic panels, TARA Labs
PM/2 and IDAT power
conditioners, and Ensemble
Mega PowerPoint outlet
strips.



Atlantis back view

"*THAT*" is the Atlantis. It is the penultimate LP turntable from the Italian manufacturer V. Y.G.E.R.

Form Follows Function

Formidable? Oh, yes, most definitely. Elegant? Perhaps a better description would be futuristic. You can be excused for not identifying its function based on a casual look.

Come closer. Examine the design features; the appearance starts to make sense. The oversize cylindrical columns around the perimeter of the plinth, for example, which look like a gigantic kitchen canister set, are the suspension feet. Three of them have a pair of protruding ridges half way down. These mate with cutouts on an even bigger center column. The ridges and cutouts lock together, in a tongue-and-groove wood joint fashion. Now, that's a novel approach to isolating the platter.



Suspension foot ridges on left; center column cutouts on right

I suspect an engineer would have a field day analyzing the novel design solutions in the Atlantis. But one thing is for sure: it cannot be ignored. Visually, the V.Y.G.E.R. Atlantis is a force to contend with. It is one of those statement pieces that go onto your rack and immediately dominate the room.

The Sound

In direct counterpoint to the exotic appearance, you will find the sound of the Atlantis to be entirely familiar. Tone, timbre... all of the comfortable analog trappings are there. I was listening to my Linn LP12 directly before it and when I switched over there was no cognitive disruption.

That initial impression remained as I clocked listening hours, for in no single way is the sound of the Atlantis eccentric. Rather, it was the accumulation of individual performance excellencies that added up to something trespassing on, how should I put it, a glimpse of the analog Holy Grail. Put succinctly, the Atlantis is 15 - 20% better in every parameter than vinyl reproduction I'm used to.

For me, the most evocative showcase of the Atlantis' prowess is an unlikely LP: violin sonatas by Nathan Milstein accompanied by Leon Pommers on piano (*The Art of Milstein*, Capitol SPBR-8502). With just two instruments there's little room to hide—besides, through the Atlantis obfuscation is not an option.



You get to hear every interpretive intent, every adjustment in bowing or fingering. There's nothing uncertain about the itinerary in the violin's (or piano's) part. Milstein is flawless on this recording. You rarely hear the bow, except on *ff* double passages, and he never slides into the note but always lands squarely in its center. The degree of nuance is perhaps beyond the pale. The violin's high notes exhibit enhanced vitality, while the low notes are warm, tight and have a tactile dimension. Usually we talk about dimension as applying to images layered in receding space; here, the tone itself has that kind of depth. Newfound inner life appeared across the bandwidth.

That this is a stereo recording is almost beside the point—there's nothing coming from the sides of the stage. The piano is dead center and Milstein is in his own space almost directly in front of it. While you can place each instrument in their own space, they're together on the same stage. Ah, but that tone! I'll tell you one thing, I've never heard a digitally sourced violin sound like this. Among my guests, those who value realism have never heard anything like it, period.

The Big Stuff

And then there's the big orchestral stuff. Go get the most complex score in your LP collection—Maurice Ravel's *La Valse* would suit nicely. I would venture you haven't really heard into the massed cacophony when the big crescendo comes rolling in at the end—I know I never did, and it bothered me.

Although I had sufficient evidence or clues to make reasonably good guesses about what's going on before the Atlantis, it required a great leap of faith to suspend disbelief. Often as not, I couldn't make that leap—the record had to come off after only a minute of play. What I was presented with wasn't enough to convince me.

The Atlantis's Major Points

The formidable foundation the Atlantis lays down scales upwards. As instruments are added, each retains the integrity of a soloist. I know I've repeated similar copy in recent reviews, but it's worth pointing out again. The best gear has an unflappable quality and stays composed even under massive signal demands. It doesn't get ruffled with demanding material. The 100 or so musicians in *La Valse* have nearly as much integrity as Milstein's solo violin in the sonatas. I don't need to tell you this is a big boost towards a convincing reproduction.

In the past I've commented about select product's ability to throw a *precision soundstage*. By this I mean instruments are arrayed unambiguously and unwaveringly upon the virtual stage. It gets even better when *precision* is bundled with a realistic amount of body weight. Then not only do they occupy unique coordinates on a topographical map, instruments exude mass, and the illusion of palpability is enhanced. Needless to say, it is most satisfying when this is present.

The Atlantis has this in spades. It takes the notion of a precision stage into uncharted waters. This is foremost among the Atlantis' attributes. It throws the most massive and spatially stable images I've experienced. The size and contours of their body are right, and they are almost sculptural in their density. This bulking up of the sound may be considered coloration. Lighter sounding instruments are rendered more massive than in life. I say that in comparison to violins I've heard at Carnegie Hall, the gold standard, which are often lighter and airier. But I also have to say, this particular coloration sounds great in the listening room—I'll take Milstein the Atlantis way, and all of my visitors agreed.

All of this is put across with impeccable frequency integration and coherence, a model of transient excellence. The Atlantis clocks in with about average speed. There are faster machines around, but you'll be hard pressed to find one with this degree of integration. Speed is easy to achieve if you hype the treble or shelve the bass.

The Linear Arm

After experiencing the Atlantis, you'll have no doubts about the superiority of the linear tracking arm—it simply tracks more accurately. Analog is all about reducing tracking errors and eliminating mechanical distortions. BTW, the US version of the table is only available with the Vision Carbon Fiber Arm (the top-of-the-line arm). In other countries you have the option of the lower model Magnesium Arm.



I can relate the unwavering stability of images, the reduced noise, and the ability to untangle any number of musical lines to correct stylus angle and constant contact with the groove walls. Just as the image upon the stage never budes, neither does the stylus in the groove; it is not bouncing off or favoring one side. This is especially important when you are nearing the center spindle.

The other accuracy-enabler is the vacuum hold-down, which flattens even warped records. If the LP is clean and in reasonably good condition, the noise level will rival that from digital.

V.Y.G.E.R. brought together an unusual combination of design elements in the Atlantis. On the one hand, a suspended and mass-loaded turntable tends to sound heavy. On the other, an air-bearing arm has opposing qualities of lightness. In the Atlantis, the weighty qualities dominate.

Additive Musical Artifacts

The absence of mechanical artifacts is matched by the absence of the other kind of artifacts, the musical sounding ones. Some components manufacture bloom. Some lengthen reverberation trails. All tables color the sound, one way or another. I find a reliable indicator of the degree of this is if the sound remains the same from record to record.

The Best Record Labels

That's not what I heard with the Atlantis. One after the other, I lined up original pressings from the most highly regarded LP labels: RCA, Capital, Vanguard, Lyrita, Decca, Argo, even modern LPs on Harmonia Mundi and EMI from the twilight of the LP era.

All sounded splendid, all sounded different, and all displayed the skills of each engineering team. Each label's house sound was clear as day. I admit to a preference for late Harmonia Mundi sound, but I have to say, if you're looking for stunning realism, nothing was better than *Travelling On with the Weavers*, an original black label

Stereolab released in 1959 (Vanguard VSD-2022).

With the Atlantis very little is added to the signal. There are no lingering resonances, no residue—everything you hear is purposeful. It cleans up very well after itself. So we are left with a very integrated, coherent, very pure sound.

For once, my panel of golden ears was mute when I invited criticism. The adjective "perfect" was floated a couple of times.

Transparency

I changed nothing in terms of room treatment or tweaks, yet the Atlantis' soundstage was instantly 15% more dimensional in all directions. The stage shifted depending on the wires I was using, but was generally slightly behind the plane of the speakers, and more sound was coming from outside the speakers than before.

To Power Condition or Not

Given all the delectable detail, the temptation is to go nuts with the newfound resolving power. A recent afternoon spent listening to original Blue Note LPs on a friend's vintage 1979 tube-based system clued me in to that creeping tendency. I came home after that enjoyable afternoon in the time warp, fired up the system and played a comparable Blue Note LP. In certain regards I enjoyed it less. Instruments were excessively focused and tight. I had the table tweaked for intense resolution. As a result, tonality was compromised. The Atlantis sounded analytical.

Choose your ancillaries with care. Stick to "musical" ones. Then you will find the Atlantis completely easy and natural and experience minimal listening fatigue. The table's greatly reduced mechanical distortions help promote an overall sweetness of tone.

I liked the Atlantis best without active power conditioning, plugged into my Ensemble Mega Powerpoint power strip. The power cord does matter. You will hear the difference when you swap them.

Set-up

When you purchase the Atlantis you get an on site visit by the importer/dealer for installation. It took him an hour or so to situate and connect the Atlantis in my room, excluding cartridge mounting—not a huge amount of time. The plinth comes ready assembled on the base in one big piece and weighs in at 150lbs. The 45lb platter and the tonearm with its rail come separately. Read over the instruction manual at your leisure.

The V.Y.G.E.R. sat comfortably on the top rung of my TAOC rack, its three built-in feet just making it inside the shelf's perimeter.

But don't underestimate the setup needs of the Atlantis. In addition to the shelf for the table you will need a fair amount of floor space. The main controller box is the Electrical and Air Preamp, which has one AC power cord in from the wall and three PCs going out to three AC/DC wall-wart type transformers—one for the motor, one for the vacuum compressor and one for air compressor. In addition there are 4 plastic air tubes running in and out.



The air compressor is unusually quiet, so it can be situated in the listening room. The only noise you *might* hear is the sound of air escaping from the air tube going into the arm rail, and this only if you sit right by the table. From my seat nine feet away it wasn't audible.

A couple of caveats: Be aware that those air tubes need to be totally unrestricted. The slightest obstruction impacting airflow will result in a stylus that likes to skip and jump around the grooves. I had this situation and it took awhile 'til I tracked it back to reduced air pressure going into the arm rail. Be mindful of those air tubes. (There is a valve controlling air pressure on top of one of the "canisters" behind the platter).

After it was situated and even before it was connected, the sound of the system changed. You can't throw 200lbs on your rack and expect things to remain the same—mass loading comes into play. Fortunately, this is one of the best tweaks around, imparting a weightier tonal balance, a degree of damping and an overall more powerful sound—all very desirable things.

Care and Feeding - The LP Routine

Playing an LP is not the casual affair I'm used to with a pivoted arm table. With the Atlantis the operation is multi-step and very deliberate.

Begin by toggling on the master switch located on the left side of the plinth. Wait a few minutes for the vacuum pressure to build up. Make sure the arm is raised and out of the way, then place a clean LP on the platter. Screw it down with the record weight, then

flick the toggle switch on top of the motor housing to engage the vacuum. You'll hear a swooshing noise and see the pressure gauge go down to zero and then back up again. This takes maybe 30 seconds.



in the meantime the two vacuum rings on the platter, one on the outer rim and the other halfway in, grab hold of the record. You'll see even warped LPs flatten after the vacuum clamps it down.

Turn the motor on with a flick of the other toggle switch on top of the motor casing. (Switch position right is for $33\frac{1}{3}$, center is off, and left is for 45 RPM.) Now's the time to use an antistatic record brush and a cartridge brush. Lastly drop the needle with the cuing lever.

When the LP is finished, lift the needle with the cuing lever and position the arm off to the side, turn off the motor, and unscrew the record clamp. Wait for the vacuum to dissipate (the time for this to happen varies from right away to as much as a minute

later). Then lift off the LP.

Conclusion

There is an old question audiophiles like to tease each other about: Which is most important, the source component, the speaker, or what's in the middle? Each has its partisans, who will be happy to supply good supporting reasons. I've always been partial to the speaker. To my mind, the range of sound you can get from transducers is more variable than any other component.

I'll stick with that assessment. But after experiencing the V.Y.G.E.R. Atlantis LP turntable, I'm forced to shift closer to the Linn point of view and move the source higher up the food chain. With the Atlantis, the potential of that link in the chain has been amply proven.

It is not that any single performance parameter is light years beyond what you're familiar with. Rather, it's that *everything* got better, on the magnitude of 15 – 20%. The illusion this front-end created can suck you in for hours and keep you happy in its embrace. It was so compelling that I was almost thankful for the occasional tic-n-pop that served to snap me out of my reverie.

The experience creates a great abyss. If you dare go back to your reference table after you have the Atlantis dialed in and have spun a few sides—ouch! My reference Linn LP12 has as wide a soundstage and equal beauty of tone, but it now seems insubstantial. Other tables' presentations sound like scaled-down reductions, in comparison. The overall quality of the Atlantis vaults into a domain where it is much easier to suspend disbelief on full orchestral recordings.

The principle enablers of the outstanding performance are the linear tracking arm and the vacuum LP hold-down. These require a lot of additional hardware, apart from the table itself, and a number of electrical wires and air hoses. The setup and maintenance of all this presents an additional burden for the consumer.

The good news is once setup, you don't have to fiddle with it. The not so good news is you run a heightened risk of part failure.

Is it worth the trouble and expense? All I can say is, I doubt I'll ever experience better vinyl playback than what I heard with the V.Y.G.E.R. Atlantis. The rig I was running for most of the Atlantis audition—the Shelter Harmony cartridge and ASR Basis Exclusive phono stage—will no doubt remain the high water mark for analog reproduction in my home. Keep in mind the sobering tally of these parts rolls up to a sticker price in the neighborhood of \$58K, not counting wires.

What could I have in my home to surpass it? If you can afford a no-compromise analog front-end, definitely consider the V.Y.G.E.R. Atlantis on your short list. **Marshall Nack**

Atlantis LP Turntable
Retail: \$40,000

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