

v.y.g.e.r.

Baltic M turntable

as reviewed by Marshall Nack

Over time, listening sessions at Nack Labs began to assume a pattern. First we listened to digital source for the get acquainted with the system period, to give people the lay of the land, so to speak. Then we moved to analog—and stayed there. Rarely did we deviate and go back for more time with digital, because invariably it's like this: if I spin an LP on my Linn LP12, listeners kick back and unwind, usually with a lowly murmured, "Ahhh..." Some take a couple of measures to deliver the expression of contentment. Amazingly, the first responders do so when the stylus makes contact with the groove.

The fact is, for a successful listening session, I must follow this sequence. Otherwise all is lost. One taste of analog and it's all over, because there are certain very important things digital, even the best digital, doesn't bring to the table. And it may turn out to be the case that these things will never be served up digitally. They may be limitations of the medium... victims of the zeroes and ones, of the on/off nature of the encoding. What I'm talking about can't be measured and is very difficult to describe, but blind test results support the conclusion that most people hear it. Just thought I would share this *pensée*, which was inspired by the multiple back and forth comparisons for this review.

Back on point, after a minute or two of vinyl grooves, there's usually a further comment along the lines of "It's lovely. But isn't it kind of romantic?" I wondered about that: what's all this romance they're talking about?

Maybe they're hearing the Harmonix TU-800EX Tuning Record Matte I use in place of the Linn felt one? But that Harmonix mat sidelined my then reference Ringmat Anniversary 330 along with the Extremephono Speed and The Skin mats. (The old Linn felt mat was jettisoned early on and never in the running.)

Un-Romantic Attractions and other Post-Millennial Developments

Now I know. The answer arrived in the form of the V.Y.G.E.R. Baltic M turntable. It is precisely the absence of *amor*, the relative emotional neutrality that is the biggest difference between it and the LP12. The Baltic M package as delivered with SME 312 arm, Shelter 90X MC cartridge and Van den Hul arm cable (which is the way I'm going to describe it, as a package—we'll do some parts swapping a little later on) goes right to the business at hand in a straightforward manner. The linear response and minimal coloration held great promise. (And as for mats, the Baltic M has an inlaid acrylic insert

on the aluminum platter that works fine; no need to go shopping for an upgrade.)

Some Music

In the course of an evening, you're likely to experience a variety of sounds with the Baltic M. An old plum-label RCA Victrola, *Tchaikovsky-Romeo and Juliet*, with Charles Munch and the BSO (VICS-1197), was warm, midrangy and fleshy to the point of calling attention to those aspects. Woodwinds were rich in timbre, a little overdone, kind of like *café au lait*, if not outright *kaffee mit schlag*. I guess this is as it should be, given the year of the recording. In 1956, when RCA inaugurated the Living Stereo recording technique and birthed the Golden Era with its first releases two years later, records had exactly those attributes: the Baltic M was more or less serving up what it was fed. (If your taste is for *café negro*, you might be happier with a table from Brinkman or Redpoint.) Hey, that cymbal crash midway through side one is really explosive... What's more, I noted it erupted without distorting. Hmm, there always used to be breakup in that passage.

Then I switched to *Music from Great Film Classics*, with Bernard Herrmann conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra (London Phase 4 Stereo, SP 44144). What an impressive display of color, variegated timbres and dynamic range! Herrmann achieves maximum timbral and colorist effects by choosing unlikely instrument pairings and frequently bringing in the artillery. But there's so much of it, I find myself distracted and paying little attention to the scoring. However, credit must be given where due—Herrmann was a great tune-meister, in the conventional sense.

The Baltic M keeps few secrets. Its honesty is to be applauded (or despised, depending on where you're coming from). On this recording the spot-miking and post-production hyping are laid bare. It was obviously intended to be a spectacular, with sounds popping out from wherever the engineer, or Bernard Herrmann, felt it would make the biggest impression. (He was famous for trespassing in the control room and fiddling with the balances.) There's lots of discrete section work going on in locations all around the stage. Width is notable; depth is good, but it is hyper-dimensional: there's no pretense at a naturalistic soundstage. (This happens a lot with London Phase 4 LPs. And, like many of these, there's no date on the record jacket, which tells me its vintage is pre-1970; that was when posting the copyright date became mandatory.)

The Baltic M exacerbates the situation by the way it hones in on notes, the way it goes right for their center, welding all of the necessary overtone components into a hefty mass of homogeneous, consistent quality. Many tables, including my LP12, encircle the note in a cloud of spurious acoustic filigree. This can be pleasing; it often sounds plausibly like it's coming from the instruments or is part of the recorded acoustic. Sometimes we call this "air," sometimes we think they're overtones. Lots of audio components and wires are voiced this way. Whatever—I don't hear this with live, unamplified music. Even though the Baltic M images are naturally shaped and sized, with slightly fuzzy borders, the focus is concentrated. Consequently, there's plenty of space between images.

You should also know that flesh is apportioned a little like a pyramid—there's more of it as you go lower in frequency. Not a big deal, it doesn't go so far as to be thin, but it does lend the treble greater exposure and texture, and at times some harshness. Bass is under control and abundant. The midrange is unremarkable. Overall, the flesh is taut. (Note: these observations were made with the supplied VdH arm cable in place.)

Timbral portraits are well drawn and tonal balance is in the zone. What I mean by this is an oboe in middle C has a dominant upper midrange with correct amounts of treble and lower mid harmonics—I didn't have to tweak to adjust these relative proportions to make it sound right. The inchoate mass of signal is fetched out of the grooves, blended into a coherent object, and dished up with a fair approximation to the real deal, such that, in short order, splendid sound was had.

Ah, I've left out its vitality. This thing is dynamically alive and capable of robust transients. Its leading edge is natural and unspectacular, without edginess or hype. Micro-transients follow suit. The latter are democratically spread out over the frequency spectrum, not favoring any particular band. Combine the crisp, time-aligned attack with the unfussy, straightforward portrayal of notes and you get damn good articulation. The Baltic M dances to a clean and infectious beat, in this regard matching the LP12's prowess—which is famous for that particular strength—however, the Scots' tune is a Celtic jig, while the Baltic M's is an American square dance.

Resolution is high enough to activate use of the see-into adjective, the much sought after transparency, but falls short of the higher accolade, where we feel we can visually walk among the performers: it doesn't have that kind of palpability.

Overall, the natural timbre, the grand-scale dynamics and the precision of the soundstaging—the absence of fluff—assured me the Baltic M, as configured with the SME 312 arm, Shelter 90X cartridge and VdH phono cable, is to be reckoned with in the competitive \$10,000 arena.

The Linn LP12

Moving over to my reference Linn LP12, I'm reminded of what's not there. The LP12 has a liquid, tactile feel, and is more forgiving, more "musical." It is all about tone. Oh yes, it has wonderful, alluring tone. Your coffee is now topped off *mit schlag*.

But it is less precise. Images are in the right place, but by comparison ill defined and large, almost soft focus. The inflated images have vague borders and the space between them is occupied by a somewhat loose and amorphous aura surrounding the notes—it lacks that centered quality. At the frequency extremes, the LP12's performance comes up short, bass is somewhat loose and boomy, but its mid-band is a marvel of inner detail and low-level information—it's just plain-old alive in there. The Baltic M trumps at the extremes; the LP12 in the mid band.

Then there's the issue of breakup. A / B comparisons made it obvious there is all too frequent mistracking on crescendos. Things get worse as the arm gets closer to the center spindle. The sad result is I never heard many LPs through to conclusion, so

often did I cut off the program, preferring not to hear the break-up. (I had always supposed these to be part of the vaunted "analog experience," something that came with the medium, something you had to learn to look past and live with.)

I know the LP12 doesn't have a high noise level, because it's very quiet playing low-level passages, but play something louder and it develops a grayish SSSHUSH sound particularly noticeable with strings. Sometimes it sounds like there's dust on the stylus. (I'm only aware of this when I do rapid A / B tests.)

I'm at a loss to account for the noise and breakup. At first I thought it was the difference between the 9" EKOS arm and the 12" SME. Then again, it could also be the LP12 armboard, which is suspended and floating on three spring-loaded screws. The new KEEL subchassis for the LP12 (a single part that integrates both armboard and soundboard in one piece) is said to have a significantly lower noise level. That hollow metal platter also seems culpable here—it produces a very pleasant bell-tone when struck. The Baltic M platter is a solid, inert chunk of aeronautical aluminum, and its armboard is rigidly bolted in place with two large screws.

And then there's the plinth. The Linn uses a solid wood box. (No doubt this contributes a lot to the LP12's warmth.) The Baltic M, a solid aeronautical magnesium-aluminum tripod.

In spite of all these criticisms, I must emphasize that the venerable greybeard Scottish table generates high involvement in the sonic illusion it conjures. It makes you feel the musicians are present in the room. It sounds pretty wonderful. Something about the way it sets air in motion, the pulse it generates, and the interior life it imbues in the still life. If you're used to this, with its drama, involvement and ripe tone, there's no substitute—you'll find its absence keeps you at arm's length.

Noto Buono:

I got my LP12 as a package for review about four years ago. Back then, the top-of-the-line consisted of the EKOS arm, TRAMPOLIN Kit and upgraded Lingo. Package price retailed around \$8480, including the ARCHIV II cartridge (MSRP \$2,000; since discontinued). The current top-of-the-line LP12, with the upgraded EKOS SE arm and KEEL subchassis, retails for a whopping \$16,680, including the \$3,600 AKIVA cartridge.

A mighty assortment of tweaks has accreted to my LP12 over the years to optimize performance. Apart from the Harmonix TU-800EX Tuning Record Matte, there is a large ERAudio board between the LP12 and the TAOC rack, and a set of TAOC footers between the shelves. The stock phono wire was replaced early on with a progression of cables, eventually settling on an ExtremePhono Limited Edition (sourced from Stealth Audio for an additional \$1,500). Its ground wire terminates in a Phono Ground Block from the defunct Versa Labs.

The Lingo speed control sits on another TAOC shelf and set of footers. Sometimes there's a Walker Tuning disc on top of it, depending on what the sound needs.

Upgrade Time: the Shelter 9000 MC cartridge

The Shelter 90X that came along with the Baltic M is now history: it is out of production. (Boohoo; this model was very popular, and for good reason—performance well above the competition.) Last retail was \$2,700. The vacancy has been filled with the new Shelter 9000 (MSRP \$3,000). This is not a replacement with a new name, but a complete re-design from the ground up: new motor assembly, new body assembly, different cantilever, but same type of stylus. It should give superior performance. I've just put it on the SME 312 arm. Let's see how it sounds.

Experience with the 90X suggested I burn in the 9000 on the Cardas Frequency Sweep and Burn-In Record for a good 100 hours, and the importer confirmed that number.

Everything the 90X is known for is there, the same frequency integration and coherency, the same warmth, but the two little fissures in the 90X's personality have been repaired: the slight dynamic reticence, the slight vagueness in imaging. The 9000 sounds BIG. With it on the SME 312 arm, the space in the front of my room is entirely filled in. This guy has powerful, yet composed, attacks: if we were talking about amps, I'd say it's like the 90X with a lot more watts. It makes the precursor seem polite.

Treble extension is just as high and now flesh is continuous. Piccolos are just as piercing, but without a hint of shrillness. Channel separation and resolution are enhanced—I'm learning more about each instrument. On the *Tchaikovsky-Romeo and Juliet* Victrola, I can make out the perimeter of the venue. In my mind's eye, it is very much like a square, extending back from each (sonically invisible) speaker, then making nearly a right angle, then stretching across to the other side and coming forward again. The additional stuff the 9000 finds in the grooves of that Plum Victrola is startling. As I noted, this is a warm recording, but that doesn't bother me as much as when the 90X was mounted.

With a lighter tonal balance than the 90X and tight, articulate bass, the 9000 has better PRAT. The low-end doesn't monopolize the sound or muddy the beat.

Keeping to character, there is still no romance here. I set loading at 300 ohms with the ART Audio VR, to keep things open and lively, and turned down the volume a bit, what with the .6 mv output. The SME 312/Shelter 9000 combination rather likes the tube hybrid ART Audio Vinyl Reference phono stage.

Guaranteed, you will be hearing more about this cartridge—a lot more—as word gets out. Stunning performance. The Shelter 9000 is the suggested mate for the Baltic M.

Phono Cables

Because it is very easy to swap phono cables with the V.Y.G.E.R. (all you have to do is slide the cables' DIN plug into the receptacle on the back of the arm tube column, unlike with my Linn LP12, which has to be put on a special rig to get at its underbelly—an evening's task and a pain in the neck), I took advantage to audition a few.

Van den Hul MC D-501

You were reading about the VdH cable above. It is built at SME's request—you can't buy it separately—and they package it with their 312 arm.

It was the most straightforward of the group. Its voice captured the essence of the note, but didn't provide much in the way of nuance or subtleties. It also had the potential for harshness on top and a reduced spatiality, a somewhat flat stage.

Among the bevy of others were the Purist Venustas, the Kubala-Sosna Expression, and TARA Labs Zero GX. All were a vast improvement over the VdH. You can read all about them in my Phono Cable Roundup next month.

the SME 312 Tone Arm

The included English SME 312 arm retails for \$2600. It is the longest in their 300 series (they also have 9" and 10" arms). As far as pivoted arms, the 12" is obviously superior in terms of tangent error. However, other factors must be considered when you increase tonearm length, i.e. the longer tube has greater mass, raising the resonant frequency of the whole assembly. Many people favor the 10" arm. Still others consider an air bearing arm the way to go, but what headaches lurk along that path! Nits to pick: all I know is, from outer edge through inner grooves, LPs play back with less evidence of the mechanics of reproduction using this arm.

Cosmetics and Setup

The V.Y.G.E.R. website is under construction. The pictures there don't do the Baltic M justice. What I saw on the web almost made it look like a toy, a miniature replica of the over-built, complicated machines that are popular today. First, the pictures give no idea of its girth. The Baltic M's tripod feet have a wingspan of 18" x 20". That about covers one of my TAOC shelves. But being tripod feet, there's still plenty of shelf space for any record cleaning brushes, etc, even after allowing for placement of the physically separate motor column.

Secondly, the Italian-made Baltic M looks expensive in person. The photos hint at a plastic-like material and make it look cheap. The plinth and matching record clamp are constructed of aeronautical magnesium-aluminum, with a quality painted finish in a wide choice of colors.

Speed is rock steady. The outboard motor is dead quiet, doesn't get warm, and is housed in an independent, matching aluminum-clad cylinder. Position the center of the drive wheel of the motor column 7.5" (280 mm) from the platter spindle. Wrap the thin rubber belt around the motor drive shaft on one end and the outside of the platter on the other, then go get your strobe or other speed-setting device. Fine speed adjustment is set with a small knob on top of the motor column. You can toggle between 45 and 33.33 RPM with the flick of a three-way metal toggle lever next to the

drive pulley: right = 33.33; center = off; left = 45 RPM.

A two-prong, un-grounded, detachable AC cord plugs into a small, plastic AC/DC switching power supply and a long, dedicated DC umbilical comes out the other side. This plugs into a 24-volt brushless motor. (Unfortunately, none of these cords use the standard IEC type plug. That prevents tweaking with aftermarket PCs.) The motor makes no contact with the spindle. The bearing is a nickel-chrome alloy that sits in a pure Teflon receptacle; the tolerance is a close 0.002 microns.

Setup time is minimal. The exploded diagrams in the product manual come in handy then, but you'll find little else of value there, not even weight and size. I found out through other sources that the table weighs in at 48.5 lbs, including the 17.5 lb platter.

Finally, where's that dust cover? That's one accessory I would invest in. Dust is a turntable's enemy and it accumulates rapidly. This thing collects dust like a Cape Cod summer rental attracts sand.

This is a solidly engineered, confidence-inspiring machine. It strikes me as a somewhat stripped down design, nothing fussy, and nothing complicated or overdone.

Tweaks Ahoy, Mate

At first I had the Baltic M plugged into an outlet strip. Noise and grunge levels were minimal and music flowed organically with long decay trails, but on some LPs it was too midrangy and diffuse. So I connected it to my TARA IDAT active conditioner, same as I have the Lingo for my LP12. Now the Baltic M had focus and extension, but it became a little uptight. Then I tried it on a passive AC conditioner, the TARA PM/2. All of these options had pluses and minuses. I preferred the TARA PM/2 passive.

It's up to you whether to connect the phono ground wire to the preamp post. It was more open and dimensional without grounding; a little darker, fuller and more focused when grounded. In my rig there was no noise in either case: I used the grounds connected anyway.

The legs of the tripod plinth employ opposing neodymium super magnets. They effectively float the table on a cushion of air (like an air bladder suspension). This was chosen because it results in a resonant frequency of 3 - 5Hz. Logic dictates this should be enough isolation to make further *fressing* pointless. Yet anything I did to the shelf, like adding some lead-filled Walker Resonance Tuning Discs for mass loading, changed the sound.

Then I found perhaps the best support: a solid walnut soundboard from CORE Designs. These come with their CLD amp stands. It happens to be a perfect size and I had an extra available. I placed some cork contact paper strips on it and laid it on top of the TAOC shelf. Wow, what mass and solidity!

If you want, try putting a large Walker Valid Point on top of the small AC/DC power converter, just to provide a little damping. It will also drop the tonal balance a notch.

Conclusion

Perhaps the telltale clue is that listening to the V.Y.G.E.R. Baltic M after spending time with my mbl Noble Line digital front-end did not cause the same mental disturbance as it would with my reference Linn LP12. There are two reasons for this. First: the customary romantic colorations are not to be found. Second: the mechanical gremlins I've taken for granted for so long with this medium are much reduced.

If you've been following my reviews, you know I rather relish discovering something unique in each product, whether positive or negative. I can't do that with the Baltic M—there's nothing eccentric about it.

The V.Y.G.E.R. Baltic M is an exemplar of the new generation of analog front-ends. You'll find frequency response about as linear as they come. Tone is a pleasant warmish-neutral; timbre is naturalistic; body mass is healthy and flesh is taut—no loose bottom to worry about here. The Baltic M throws an impressive, grand-scale, precise soundstage with life-sized images. It sounds BIG.

My reference Linn LP12 is a proxy for the golden era. In the traditional ways I'm accustomed to hearing records played back, I prefer the LP12. It has gorgeous string tone, an infectious beat, and an effortlessness that sucks you right in, sometimes even against your will. In fact, I've been searching for a DAC with some of these things. But I'm shocked to discover how noisy the venerable LP12 is. I now find its tracking errors, noise and distortion on crescendos unacceptable. The difference in gremlin awareness left me deflated and unhappy.

You may be surprised at how clean and noise-free analog can be; I know I was. Tracking errors, groove noise, etc, were greatly ameliorated with the Baltic M, so much so that the medium was often far from my thoughts—I forgot about the delivery system, and more often than I can remember, I was swept away, lost in the performance.

Rest assured that you will delight in the ineffable analog virtues. The briefest exposure will make clear why sales statistics for analog have recently surpassed those for digital front-ends.

In the market for analog front-ends there are many strong contenders at the \$10,000 price point. Taken as a package with the SME 312 arm, Van den Hul phono cable and the recommended Shelter 9000 cartridge, the V.Y.G.E.R. Baltic M is as good as the best I've heard in that competitive arena. It deserves your serious audition, especially if you like straightforward and uncolored performance. Considering that the SME 312 arm goes for \$2600, the Baltic M by itself packs a lot of value for \$5200.

And it only goes up from here. Interested parties *must* consider the Van den Hul phono cable as merely the starting point, a stopgap until you choose one to your liking. On the other hand, the recommended Shelter 9000 will be the start and end point of your cartridge quest. **Marshall Nac**