

SHINDO 301 TURNTABLE REVIEW

By: Jack Roberts | November 2010

Pushing the Art of Listening to Vinyl, Part 1:



Photo courtesy of Matthew Rotunda

Life's a Journey

The first time I ever heard a Garrard 301 that I know of anyway, was when I was seventeen and a freshman at Baylor. I was trying to get a part time job at a Stereo Shop in Waco, Texas. When I entered the store their main system was playing. It consisted of a Garrard 301, some Marantz tube electronics, and Altec's Voice of the Theater speakers. It was an exciting sound, but at that time it seemed so way beyond my audio dreams that I didn't pay it much attention. A year later, I would hear the Quad 57s, Marantz electronics again, and a Thorns TD125. That became the audio path I started down and I never really thought about the Garrard 301 or any other idler turntable again for over 30 years.

Specification:

System:

Shindo Modified Garrard 301
 Shindo 301 Plinth
 Shindo Ball Bearing Footers
 Shindo 301 Platter
 Shindo 301 Oil Bearing
 Shindo 301 Center Spindle Record Weight
 Shindo Mersault RF-773 12 inch Tone-Arm
 Shindo SPU phono cartridge
 Price \$25,000
 U.S. Distributor: Tone Imports
 URL: www.toneimports.com
 Email: shindo.usa@mac.com

Then about four and a half years ago, I went over to the city to hear the Shindo electronics. I was amazed to see that the Shindo turntable was a Garrard 301. Yes, it was a modified 301 with a plinth tuned especially for it, but it was still the same 301 I had seen 39 years ago. The tonearm, cartridge, platter, mat, bearing, and plinth were all totally Shindo's own designs. Still, it was a rim drive turntable, and everyone I knew had known for years that belt drives were the only real high-end turntables. As I listened to the all-Shindo system at Pitch Perfect Audio I knew I had never heard recorded music sound like this before. It was so relaxed, so dynamic, and just so emotionally involving. I purchased a preamp, wrote a review that was published in Dagogo and before I knew it I was meeting lots of people who loved rim drive turntables.

As my system improved I kept trying to get that something special from my system that Matt gets at Pitch Perfect. I thought the key might be a twelve-inch arm, and the ones I tried in my system were good, but as they say, no cigar. I kept thinking that there was no way a turntable that came on the market the year I was born (1954) could be as good as the magnetic bearing tables that are setting new benchmarks in transparency and detail. Still, I had to admit as good as my system sounded, when I would go over to spin a few tunes at Matt's I knew something was keeping my system from sounding quite as natural. By the way, most people including certain speaker designers, some other reviewers, dealers, and non-audiophile casual listeners all said my system was one of the very best they had ever heard, but I just knew that there was more. I had heard it at Matt's place several times. So, I broke down and decided I had to hear a Garrard 301 in my reference system.

I talked to lots of people who loved rim drives, some loved slate plinths, others liked skeleton plinths, and most said the Shindo was just overpriced. I priced out several units, and came to the conclusion that the Shindo wasn't overpriced. The Garrards I heard in heavy slate plinths sounded dead to me compared to Matt's system. I heard one in a skeleton plinth, but it just didn't sound like what I was wanting. Now, I need to admit that I didn't hear these tables in my system, but still they just didn't sound like music in the same way the Shindo always did.

You need to compare the Garrard turntables themselves. No one else was offering the same bearing, platter, tonearm, cartridge, or plinth that came standard on the Shindo. If you purchase the Shindo platter, bearing, tonearm, or an EMT tonearm, and a comparable phono cartridge, if there is one, to put on one of the best slate, or synthetic slate turntable plinths the price will come out about the same or more. So, after a year of not being able to make a decision and trying to come up with the funds, I broke down and purchased the complete Shindo Vinyl Playing System.

Well, Was It A Good Decision?

The simple answer is, "it surely was." It is simply the best way to play records that I have heard, and I have heard some pretty fine turntables. I lived for years with a Linn, I owned a Mapleknull (heaven and hell at the same time by the way), I've lived the last three years with the Clearaudio Wood Anniversary CMB, I had just finished reviewing the Clearaudio Innovation with their Universal Radial tonearm. Last year, I had the DaVinciAudio Labs In UniSon turntable with their Grand Reference Grandezza tonearm, and I have also review the Merrill-Scillia MS21 turntable with the latest Tri-planar tonearm mounted on it. By the way I would say that the wonderful Merrill-Scillia MS21a has the most in common with the sound of the Shindo 301. That's probably all I need to say, but that's never stopped me before so let's get on with a review of the Shindo 301 Vinyl Planing System.

Description and Setup

The first Garrard 301s were sold in 1954. The 301 and then the 401 stayed in production until the mid 1970s. Over those years Garrard sold nearly 100,000 301s, which explains why there are so many

still out there to be found for restoring and modifying, though you probably won't find one cheap now days. My reluctance to use such an old turntable design makes me ask the question: How does a 56-year-old design work so well today? There are two answers to that question: First, it was well designed and well built to start with. Second, Ken Shindo has taken the basic design and used the best parts available today to bring this 56-year-old design into today's world.

The original Garrard 301 required very little in the way of maintenance and was built like a tank, as the saying goes. As good as the basic Garrard 301 is, it takes quite an artist's touch to make it the lifelike music source that the Shindo 301 is.

We'll start the description by talking about the beautiful cherry plinth that Ken Shindo makes for his Shindo 301. The major drawback of a table like the 301 is its susceptibility to vibration. It can rob your system of resolution and can cause rumble. Everyone seems to know the answer to vibration is mass. The only problem is that when filtering vibration from the table we must make sure we remove it evenly throughout the frequency range or the table will emphasize one area of the frequency spectrum. Shindo has been working on his plinth designs since the sixties and the current version has been in production and unchanged since the seventies. He took years to perfectly voice the plinth for perfect tonal balance and just enough life to sound like music and not just quiet.

The Shindo plinth weighs nearly sixty pounds and is made of laminated layers of solid hardwood glued together. Ken feels that this process doesn't over dampen the sound of the table like layers of MDF or stone, but at the same time has enough mass to give you a completely quiet table that simply comes alive with music. The artisan Japanese, high-gloss cherry lacquer is done by sixth generation master carpenters. The plinth is completely solid and fits the 301 like a glove. The plinth itself has no feet, so excellent isolation feet are included that you place under the table; a version of ball bearing footers. This means that you need to be able to level whatever you choose to sit the turntable on.

Next, let's take a look at the Shindo platter and mat. I think many modern turntable designers have forgotten that the platter and thus the speed accuracy of a turntable has to deal with many different levels of groove modulation as it plays just one record. It has to handle the light modulation quietly and maintain speed for us to enjoy quiet passages. Likewise on the heavy modulation found on complex passages, it cannot let the sound fall apart or sound strained as it happens most usually. As the platter and the record plays, the stylus is offering various amounts of resistance to the platter as it navigates these various levels of modulation. It's not enough to just have a heavy platter, it's also important how the weight is distributed and where the weight is located. It seems to me after listening to various platter designs that the better the platter the more natural, more dynamic, and more organic the system sounds.

In order to handle the above problems, the Shindo platter is 20mm larger than the stock unit, and about 3 pounds heavier. The extra weight is around the peripheral of the platter. The platter is beautifully made and weighted for the best centrifugal force and speed accuracy. If you take your fingernail and flick the platter like you would a fine crystal glass, surprisingly it will ring pure like a really expensive piece of crystal. Then when you place the mat that Shindo has designed especially for this platter onto the platter, and flick the same platter with your finger nail or even a metal object, there is no sound at all. I don't mean that it goes dud, I mean there is no sound at all. This kind of design detail and sound tuning is what you are getting for your money with the Shindo. By the way, just like the plinth the platter is also very easy on the eyes.

The platter is driven by Garrard's powerful, high torque motor that is spring-suspended and uses an idler drive. As a result of the high torque design it comes up to speed almost as soon as you turn it on. The biggest problem with high torque motors has been that they can be noisier than low torque

designs. This is why the plinth is so important in the design of the Shindo 301. The motor shaft has a stepped pulley mounted on it in three separate sizes. So you can play 33s, 45s, and 78s. You can't change speed when the 301 is on. Don't force it; I'm told you can break it. It also uses an "eddy current brake" which keeps the motor loaded all the time. This load is real important to the power and flow of the 301, if the magnets in the eddy current break become weak, you will lose some of this sound. The brake also allows you to have a +/- 2% speed change.

The Shindo bearing is an 100% original, designed by Shindo and unrelated to the Garrard. Ken Shindo prefers the oil bearings to the grease ones, which has a larger diameter and is machined to tighter tolerances than Garrard's original oil bearings. He also uses his own special oil, and the turntable comes with a record weight that was especially designed for it.

The design of the beautifully simple-looking Shindo Mersault RF-773 12-inch tonearm is an aesthetic homage to the legendary Ortofon RF-297 tonearm. The Mersault is not a modified Ortofon arm though just a way to pay homage to the arm he liked best on the 301. It is Shindo's own arm in every way with totally different materials and bearing system. Thus it's made with modern materials and it has very high precision bearings. All of this is quite obvious in how this arm enables the cartridge to track.

Ken Shindo never speaks about his designs and only says "listen" when asked a technical question. Per my observations, the Shindo tonearm mounts in a very substantial mounting puck that fits securely down into, not on, the plinth. The tonearm wires terminate into a ceramic block and the silver RCA cables must be connected using this block before the arm-mounting puck is inserted. Shindo does not feel that anti-skating is necessary with a tonearm of this length and my ears tell me he is correct. I have to admit that I miss that the arm doesn't have an arm lift. I don't miss it for myself, I hardly ever use the thing, but I miss it when my wife, sons, or daughter-in-laws come down to talk. They used to just reach over and raise the arm and say what's on their mind and then lower it back when they left the room. Now I have to get up and raise and lower the arm, because they won't do it themselves. Well, you have to give up something to enjoy real art.

The Shindo 301 Vinyl System uses a highly modified classic Ortofon SPU. His mods include changing the damper, cantilever, stylus, coil as well as modifying the suspension and magnet. As a result of this work, the Shindo SPU can track at 2.8 grams instead of 3.5 to 4.5 grams for most Ortofon SPUs. I have read that the Shindo SPU equals or exceeds the tracking performance of a Shure V15 on test records. I don't know about this, but I can say it significantly out tracked the Miyabi Standard or the Benz Ebony TR even when they were used in Clearaudio's \$5,000 Universal tonearm, and that's really saying something. Another thing that shocked me was that a conical stylus could track like this and retrieve so much information so effortlessly.

There should be nothing to the set-up of this table, because as far as I know all Shindo dealers, there's only three or four in North America, will come to your home and set it up for you. Even so it is quite easy to set-up. The tonearm is built and placed so that the arm exactly meets the geometry for the Shindo SPU A cartridge. The arm is a dynamic spring-loaded arm so one balances it and then dials on the prescribed 2.80 gram tracking force. I do want to point out though, and this is very important, that the VTA needs to be set in a way that looks ridiculously high in the back. You need to get this right for two reasons: first if you have the arm too low not only is the VTA off but your overhang will be off as well; second, you can rob a lot of the life, PRaT, and detail from the system if the arm is too low. VTA is adjusted by loosening two set screws and then raising or lowering the tonearm.

There were a few things I had to get used to with the Shindo 301 system. I was concerned about not having a peripheral ring, but somehow Shindo has engineered the mat and his record weight to just

suck records down. I don't exactly understand how it works. So far the only thing I have missed about the peripheral ring is putting it on and taking it off, and who wouldn't be glad to miss that. After several months of playing records, I have come across one that I can hear the effect of its warp with the Shindo, but only one out of hundreds. Another thing that took a little getting used to is how mechanical the controls are. When you turn it on or change speed there is a definite thud. Most of all, I have had to get used to not having an arm lift. My family finds lifting and lowering the arm by hand frightening, but I've always preferred to do this by hand and feel completely comfortable putting the arm on and off the LP by hand.

So How Does It Sound?

Garrard 301s are known for their solidity, body, power, dynamics, and drive. The Shindo does all this and at the same time something fundamentally different from any other record player I have ever heard. With the right amplification and speakers, this vinyl system really sounds real. I started with the word "alive", but I have used that word most often to talk about the energy level combined with a transparency that lets voices and instruments sound very alive. The Shindo allows my system to move beyond this to sounding real. It is very transparent, and it has as much lifelike magic in the range where human voices are as I have ever heard. When you add to this a solidity and relaxed sound, it just sounds more real than any other source I have ever heard. It has an uncanny way of getting loud and still sounding natural.

Of course I'm not saying it sounds indistinguishable from live music. We all know recorded music never gets the timing quite right; I assume that's why even live music over a PA system is easy to tell from recorded music. I didn't say live music over a PA sounds better, just that you can easily tell it apart from when they are playing a recording.

The Shindo Vinyl Playback System is one of those rare products that defies being broken down into how the midrange, bass, etcetera sound. Its presentation of music is very holistic. That applies to the frequency range and the soundstage. The Shindo turntable system allows my system to simply sound so right. It's not what most audiophiles mean by immediate or palpable. It's simply like my system has a more flesh-and-bone sound, or put another way, a much more organic sound. I found it very difficult to evaluate it as in audiophile terms and in the end felt that to do so would be an insult to this work of auditory art.

Most everyone who hears the Shindo 301 for the first time is shocked by the sound. I think this is because we are accustomed to a sound that only sounds its best when restrained. We are simply not used to a system that can sound as alive, energetic, has the realistic dynamics, and power of the 301 without it sounding strained. Especially since the Shindo 301 can do all this without you having to give up the nuances, detail, soundstage, and quietness of modern turntables. If there is another turntable out there at any price that can do all of these things, I haven't heard it.

Wrong Question!

I loved the bass of the Merrill-Scilla, the transparency of the Clearaudio turntables with their magnetic bearings, the drive of the Clearaudio Innovation with the high torque motor. Does the Shindo 301 give me all that? Well, let me answer that for you with a story. Back in January, Becky and I went to New York to see the Westminster dog show. While I was there I went over to visit fellow music lover Robert Lighton. He related the following story to me, names have been left out to be nice to the musically challenged.

Robert said it happened at an audio show in the Audio Note UK room. Someone had brought in an original Mercury Living Presence and he said while it was playing there was a hush that came over

the room like someone had sucked the air out of the room. When it finished he said people just sat there in disbelief. Robert said he followed a well-known reviewer out into the hall and asked him what he thought of the performance. Robert was talking about the music, but the reviewer answered, "I don't see why everyone gets so worked up over that little two-way speaker". Wrong Question! It's wrong because the point isn't about the bass, or the midrange, the question is if you were able to emotionally connect with the performance.

You see it doesn't matter if the Shindo 301 is as transparent as the Clearaudio CMB Anniversary, or if it has the drive of the high torque Clearaudio Innovation, or if it has the deep and powerful bass of the Merrill-Scilla. The answer, if you have to know, is the Shindo 301 is almost as transparent as the Clearaudio's with the magnetic bearing, it has more drive than the Innovation, and while I'm not sure it goes as deep as the Merrill-Scilla, it surely has better bass. Still, those are the all answers to the wrong questions.

The right question is, how musically compelling is a system that uses the Shindo 301 for a source. The answer to that question is simple. Without a doubt with it in my system, I hear the most musically compelling recorded music I have ever heard.

Listenability

I'm going to get in trouble with some of you again, but that doesn't matter. With this turntable system I have to talk about the most wonderful quality of vinyl, its listenability. I've already mentioned the special quality the Shindo has of sounding relaxed and natural, while not giving up anything in the way of dynamics and detail. I've spent hours listening and sometimes wondering what gives it this quality. I've come to the conclusion that I can identify at least two things. First, with it in my system everything is just so quiet. The music doesn't so much explode out of a quiet background as it did with the Clearaudio turntables. Instead, with the Shindo it just appears in my room. Second, it has a special way of letting the air on the recording sound like it's the air in your room. The result is it transforms the listening room into whatever the space was where the recording was made.

These two traits allow you to listen more like you do to live music than you do to recorded music. You don't know that you listen to live music differently. Sure you do, unless you're a complete audio nerd, you do. When you listen to live music you rarely have to think about the music. Instead, you become part of the music and that is exactly what happens in my system with the Shindo 301 system.

Visitors

About a week after I had gotten the Shindo 301 system, Constantine came over to get his fix of Jambalaya. Afterwards we settle down to spin some tunes. I started with "Fever" from Elvis is Back, then played Nojima Plays Liszt, followed by Belafonte Live at Carnegie Hall, and ended the session with Rob Wasserman Duets. Because we live so close together Constantine and I are very familiar with each other's systems and taste in music. Still, I have never seen him react to any audio system like he did from the first cut to the last one we played. He sat and listened, chuckled, laughed out loud, taped his foot, and shook his head. When he left he was still shaking his head and said, "how are you going to write about this, people won't believe you." (Dear editor, I know I'm paraphrasing but I'm not talking about how much jambalaya you consumed.) (You keep saying that. -Ed.)

Mike Zivkovic, founder of Teresonic, brought his friend Jim Hannon of The Absolute Sound over to hear my system. Mike has heard it through stages, it was Jim's first time of hearing it. Still, the comments from both were consistent with this review. People are always surprised at how a system

can have such drive, such bite, such detail, dynamics, and still be so easy to listen to. I contribute much of this to the sound of the Shindo 301.

The last visitor I want to mention is Warren Gregoire of Ikonoklast. The reason for mentioning Warren is that he is a fellow rim drive enthusiast. He uses a modded Thorens 124 with a Dynavector tonearm, and a London Decca Reference phono cartridge. I've heard this unit and it's quite a vinyl playback system in and of itself. Warren has been listening to my system for over four hears. Warren brought over the new VSEI modded Sony SACD player. Let me tell you, it is a winner. We played Willy Nelson's Stardust on both SACD and vinyl. I asked Warren which was better. He said from the very first bars it was obvious how much better the vinyl sounded. He added it's not that big of a difference compared to his modded Thorens 124. Then I asked what was better about the Shindo, and he simply said, "everything." I think that about sums it up.

All four visitors have made one comment in common. They have all said in some form or other that all that was left to improve the sound with was just to buy new records.

Comparisons

The longer I have the Shindo 301 Vinyl Playback System, the more the thought of writing about comparisons with other table seems wrong. Why? Simple, no other turntable I have heard compares. This doesn't mean that the Clearaudio Anniversary or Innovation is any less good than I said in their reviews. They are excellent tables, with the best transparency I have ever heard. Also the Miyabi cartridges and the Benz Ebony TR are still incredible cartridges; the most musical I have heard except for the full-Shindo system. Likewise, the Merrill-Scillia turntable still is just as incredible in bass and PRaT as any table I have heard.

I could go on, but as I discussed above, to talk about the things we have to talk about to make the comparison is to ask the wrong question. The reason is that nothing else I have heard involves me in the musical event like the Shindo 301 system.

There is one place where I think making a few comparison would be in order, price. There is no doubt that at \$25,000 this is a very expensive purchase, but let's look at the total cost of some other turntable systems I have reviewed. The total for Merrill-Scillia MS21, the Triplanar, and the Benz Ebony was \$32,500 when I reviewed it. Since then they have dropped the price by \$9,600 (I don't even want to go there), and it now only sells for \$22,900; if you add an Audience Au24 powerChord, it would be \$25,100. The DaVinciAudio Labs In Unison with the Grand Reference Grandezza tonearm, the Audience Au24 powerChrod and the Miyabi Standard cartridge would run you \$42,900. Lastly, the Clearaudio Anniversary Wood CMB turntable with the way I used it with their Universal Tonearm, the Clearaudio Synchro Power Generator, their Outer Limit Peripheral Ring, their Statement Clamp, and Audience Au24 powerChord, and the Miyabi Standard phono cartridge cost \$24,600.

Now, I'm not going to say something stupid, like a \$25,000 turntable is a bargain. If you're looking for a bargain I suggest the Clearaudio Ambient. No, but at \$25,000 the Shindo 301 system is head and shoulders above the other four turntable system I have reviewed in its price range. It would be interesting to hear the Shindo 301 and the total Continuum Vinyl system in my system. I doubt anyone will make that happen though, and come to think about the Continuum tables that I have heard, they are always set up in systems with multi-driver speakers used with big powerful amps, which is a whole different sound.

Conclusion

As I reread the review with the prospective of several months of listening, I see there is something I have left out. While I felt it a mistake to breakdown the sound of the Shindo Vinyl Playback System into parts, I must say something about the bass. I don't have the right system to comment on how deep the bass is, but I can tell you without a doubt that it produces the most defined bass I have ever heard. This incredible bass definition is combined with the most powerful bass I have ever heard. The bass is just so much more like live music and less like noise coming out of a box than anything I have heard before.

Well I guess you got the idea that this is without a doubt the most significant component I have ever heard or reviewed. I'm sure Constantine is right, there is no way I can really tell you what it sounds like. There are also lots of turntables I haven't heard, but you can't overlook the system. There is really something amazing about how the Shindo 301 phono system and their preamps work together. No other cartridge, tonearm, turntable system was as quiet and hum-free in my system. In addition, no other preamp I've tried matches up with the Shindo table quite as well as the Shindo preamps. The Shindo 301 System and their Giscours preamp match up wonderfully with my Wavac EC-300B single-ended amp, and the Teresonic Ingenium Silver speakers at 103 dB efficiency. I've asked myself why everyone who came and heard the system generally had the same reaction. I think the reason gets back to not getting hung up on the wrong questions. Instead, just let yourself get caught up in the performance. For with this system, your brain doesn't have to do the work as you are experiencing the music in your soul.

Addendum: Five Things I Love About the Shindo 301 Phono Playback System

Having now lived with this system for several more months I want to add this addendum. There are some things about this vinyl playback system that I simply love, and I want to share them with you.

It's beautiful to behold, especially the tonearm. I also think the platter and plinth are exceptionally beautiful.

The stylus stays cleaner than any stylus I have ever owned, and it is equally easy to clean when it gets dirty. I don't know why, but it sure is nice.

It plays record grooves quieter than any other system I have heard, and when there is surface noise it plays it back in a very non-intrusive way. The reason this is great is now I can enjoy all the records in my collection, especially the ones I seldom listen to.

The center record weight and platter mat somehow deal with warped records almost as well as a center weight and peripheral clamp. Best of all, you don't have to fool with the peripheral ring.

Most of all, I love the way it lets me forget the equipment and simply get lost in the music.