

hot-sounding snare drum, and some loose change rattling around. Switching to the Music First transformer flattened somewhat the depth in which snare and coins appeared in space; more significant was the obvious muting of the snare's transient attack and extension, and I heard that regardless of the gain or loading setting.

I heard the same thing when comparing Chesky's old reissue of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris*, with pianist Earl Wild, Arthur Fiedler, and the Boston Pops (RCA Living Stereo/Chesky LSC-2367)—a Mohr/Layton production with spectacular sound. This edition was mixed down from the three-track master. Unfortunately, the pressing quality was short of the dead quiet we now get, but even with a bit of what sounds like nonfill, this is a benchmark recording, and it sounded far more open, transparent, extended on top, and three-dimensional through the Ypsilon MC16 step-up. (My skeptical audiophile friend who declared the Stevens & Billington transformer to be "legendary" visited and I ran the comparison for

him. He heard what I heard.)

Then I remembered my visit to Ypsilon Electronics in Athens, and my conversation about core materials with Ypsilon's Demetris Backlavas. Among the things he said was, "Nickel cores have a character that I ended up not liking anymore." I second that conclusion. That said, the Music First offers a great deal of flexibility—and had I not had the Ypsilon to compare it with, my reaction would have been different. It's not that the Music First isn't a good-sounding, impeccably built product, but that the Ypsilon sounds so much more open and transparent. Talk about lifting the proverbial veils. It was the same difference I heard when I compared the Ypsilon with the Allnic H-3000V phono preamplifier that I reviewed in March 2011, which uses 78% nickel-cored transformers.

The Ypsilon step-up costs \$2800, and its input impedance can be easily adjusted, if necessary, with resistor loading plugs. But you can't vary the turns ratio—if, like me, you have 0.2mV- and 0.5mV-output cartridges, you'll need two Ypsilons, the MC10

(20dB of voltage gain), the MC16 (24dB), or the MC20 (26dB).

If you use a step-up now and you can afford to drop \$2800 on a new one, try the appropriate Ypsilon. I think you'll find its openness and transparency to be something special.

Magico QPods: Feets, don't do your walkin'

Audiophile young'uns, there actually was a time when cones and pucks and other under-gear accessories we now take for granted did not exist. Then, in the early 1980s, the Mod Squad's Steve McCormack developed and introduced Tiptoes. By today's standards, those aluminum cones were simple and inexpensive—and they worked.

Look what we've come to: Magico's QPod is a complex sandwich of CNC-turned stainless steel, oxygen-free copper, black-anodized aluminum, and a blue elastomer damping material. The result is an equipment footer that converts vibrational energy into heat through a process called shear deformation. The QPods are beautifully made and packaged, and



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they're expensive: \$1310 for a set of three, \$1680 for four.

I placed three QPods under my Ypsilon VPS-100 phono preamp, which has one tube, and then under Manley Labs' Chinook phono preamp (four tubes), and listened for differences. With both preamps already sitting on the very effective Harmonic Resolution System platforms, the differences should have been subtle.

They weren't. When the QPods arrived months ago, I put them under the Ypsilon and noted an overall improvement in the sound—not just on the bottom, where I was expecting it, but on top as well: less smear, less brightness (not that the Ypsilon sounds smeary or bright), greater sense of depth, and overall sonic integrity. I left the QPods there until today.

At very high SPLs, I played "Can't You Hear Me Knocking," from MoFi's reissue of the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* (LP, Rolling Stones/Atlantic/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab 060). This edition supposedly has "out-of-control bass." It doesn't. If that's how it sounds, your system simply can't handle the explosive low-end energy. Mine couldn't until very recently, due to changes I'll talk about in a future column.

Then I removed the QPods for the first time in about three months, and played the cut again without changing volume. Get outta here! Before, there was one particular vocal sibilant that grated—now they *all* did, and that first one sounded worse. Depth—particularly where the center image appeared—was flattened. Bass was still extremely well controlled, but less so.

Reality check: The Ypsilon phono preamp sounded incredible either way. It just sounded better with the QPods under it, and to a degree that surprised me. Now I don't think I can do without the stupid things. I've got some Stillpoint Ultra stainless-steel feet here (\$675/set of three), and I'm going to try them soon, but the QPods are going back into my system *right now*—and *not* back to Magico's Alon Wolf.

I'm not saying you need to spend \$1310 to get this quality of sound, because maybe you don't. But if you do, you'll get results, particularly if your phono preamp is tubed. If the QPods were sold with a money-back guarantee, I don't think many would be returned.

There are less-expensive footers commensurately priced for use in less-expensive systems that you should try before you scoff at the notion that



The Magico QPods—not your father's footers.

equipment footers make a difference.

Audio Desk System Vinyl Cleaner

Getting a review sample of this unique ultrasonic record-cleaning machine took me years; apparently, Audiodesk-systeme Gläss, a small German manufacturer, couldn't keep up with demand. I've also heard from a few sources that reliability was not high in the company's early days, but that now all that's been sorted out, as has manufacturing capacity.

This compact cleaner can be thought

of as a very high-tech, automatic version of the Spin Clean Record Washer (\$79.95), which I reviewed in my February 2010 column. Like the hand-cranked Spin Clean, the Audio Desk System Vinyl Cleaner (\$3895) uses a vat full of fluid that can clean many records before it needs to be replaced, and the LP sits vertically in the vat as both sides are simultaneously cleaned. But before Audiodesk-systeme and their importer, Ultra Systems, have heart attacks, rest assured—those are the *only* similarities!

The Audio Desk is fully automatic and, unlike any other record-cleaning machines I know of, it uses ultrasound and a process called cavitation (*ie*, the forming of bubbles) to clean records, much as an ultrasonic jewelry cleaner does for jewels. If you've ever seen a tarnished piece of ornate silverwork go into such a machine and come out gleaming, even in its tiniest nooks and crannies, you know how well it works.

Slip an LP into the Audio Desk's slot, which is lined with soft rubber lips; on the left side, the slot widens into a vat. Push the Start button and the record begins to slowly rotate (it sometimes required a nudge). Fluid stored in a chamber below begins to fill the vat as four bidirectional microfiber drums adjust their proximity to the disc, then begin to rotate themselves, to spread cleaning fluid on the record.

Meanwhile, the ultrasonic condenser fires up, producing soundwaves whose amplitude is high enough to break the liquid's surface tension, causing it to tear apart and leave behind millions of microscopic vacuum bubbles that compress or implode, creating tiny liquid jets small enough to clean inside even the narrowest LP groove (think of

IN HEAVY ROTATION

- 1) **Tchaikovsky & Nielsen, *Souvenir Part I: Music for Strings (The Trondheim Soloists)***, 2L 180gm LP
- 2) **Nina Simone, *At the Village Gate***, Colpix/Pure Pleasure 180gm LP
- 3) **Sleigh Bells, *Reign of Terror***, Mom+Pop 180gm LP
- 4) **Talk Talk, *Laughing Stock***, Badabing LP
- 5) **Leonard Cohen, *Old Ideas***, Columbia 180gm LP
- 6) **Miles Davis, *In Person at the Blackhawk, San Francisco: Friday and Saturday Nights***, Columbia/Impex 180gm LPs (2)
- 7) **Lyle Lovett, *Release Me***, Lost Highway 180gm LPs (2)
- 8) **Jóhann Jóhannsson, *Virðulegu Forsetar***, Touch LPs (2)
- 9) **Ray Charles, *Genius+Soul=Jazz***, Impulse!/Analogue Productions 180gm LP

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