

EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Funk FXR II Tonearm

By Alan Sircom

The prefix 'tone' in the word 'tonearm' should be redundant, but almost never quite achieves that goal. It should be a 'no-tone-arm', because the last thing you want a pick-up arm to do is pick up some of its own tone. Trouble is, they all do; some ring, some sizzle, some clang, some go 'boing', some go 'springggg'; to a lesser or greater extent (fortunately, usually 'lesser') they all add tone to the sound of the vinyl replay process.

Meet the exception.

The Funk Firm FXR II is the least 'tone' tonearm out there. OK, those who think the key to better vinyl sound quality is a parallel tracking arm or a 12" arm might argue that they too have inherent lower distortion than any conventional 9" arm, but there's distortion... and distortion. Funk goes after the elimination of distortion in the shape of the resonance of the arm itself. Existing designs, no matter how light, or how inflexible they are end up putting resonant spikes into the sound, often smack bang in the all important midband. The FX design Funk developed is absurdly simple – imagine an aluminium straw with a carbon fibre X-shaped cross-bracing running along its length – but extremely effective. You end up with an low effective mass arm (just add weights to the headblock if you need it for higher mass MCs) with unheard of stiffness (think of what the cross-bracing does to your loudspeaker) and – as a consequence – lower resonance and arm flexure. The loudest part of the arm design is the sound of a dozen rival tonearm makers kicking themselves and saying, "why didn't we think of that?"

In the FXR II, Funk takes a standard Rega 301 and disassembles it, removes the arm tube, the plastic pillar is replaced with a machined one (itself a difficult job, because the pillar is moulded around the bearing assembly, everything is rebuilt, checked, with the new ABEC7 ball race pre-loaded, rechecked and the arm 'beam' (not tube)

is offered up, the casting machined to size, jigged and fixed in place, checked, cabled up, checked and checked again. No easy task. But it is easy to set up. The arm allows for VTA adjustment via a new collar and most cartridges only need overhang and the usual tracking force adjustment to get rolling.

There are several ways of looking at the FXR II, many of them dead wrong, in my opinion. There's the "it's just a heavily-modified Rega" way of thinking, which focuses on the vestigial Rega bits in the same way people are prone to classifying cars as identical if they use the same brand of brake pads. There's the "it's not built like a tank" way of thinking, which does have its place if you plan on using the arm for a spot of close quarter combat and there's the one that translates to "it doesn't sound like my old arm", which is just plain bonkers if you think it through.

The last exposes the problem Funk faces with the FXR II; the neutrality of 'neutral' can be a tough place for someone not really used to it. It often means that cartridge that you liked because it's warm and comfortable ends up sounding soggy and spongy, and you might end up with something far less ostentatious but far more honest that you would hitherto have laughed at. Sometimes, they make more sense than the top-table cartridge. That said, when you get a real beast of a moving coil (in all the right ways), you have one of those moments that makes you think that we were sold a digital pup many years ago. ▶



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▶ If the initial neutrality can be daunting, give it time and you are justly rewarded for your endeavours. And the time is generally less than about five seconds. In that time, you’ll discover whether you like the sound of tonearms, or prefer the sound of vinyl. If it’s tonearm sound you are after, the FXR II will probably do absolutely nothing for you. If not, you’ll have one of those epiphany moments and wonder how you are going to find time to listen to all your records anew. Because that’s what it does. It makes your vinyl sound like you always expected it to sound. The curious thing is that it’s almost pointless for a reviewer to highlight aspects of records that show what the FXR II can do, because it’s more what it doesn’t do. Which is get in the way of the music; so no glare, no blare, no ringing, no singing and surprisingly little surface noise.

I’ve not heard every arm in Christendom and beyond. But I have heard a lot of them, some in review and some in private listening, often in the company of some exceptionally fine decks, cartridges and phono stages. And the short-form version of this is the FXR II takes every one of them outside and gives them a swift kick in the bearings. It’s in another league. It’s rare to be able to say a definitive ‘it sounds better’ in audio (usually we have to put up with some hefty qualification), but this does sound better. I’ve not heard an arm that puts up anything close to a challenge against this in neutrality terms. If you imagine how your cartridge might sound if the only thing keeping it in place were the tonearm cables, that’s what the FXR II goes for and gets closer than everything I’ve heard to date. The nearest I’ve heard to this level of un-arm sounding pickup arm was a Well-Tempered... and a curious bodge thing built out of used tongue depressors, cocktail sticks and monofilament fishing wire. That gets discounted on the grounds of the ‘used’ bit being a bit weird, but it sounded great!

The limits to it are few, given the attitudinal caveats mentioned above. I’d love to hear what the whole F.X concept would sound like extended beyond the arm tube. Is the arm constrained by the Rega bits or are they all it needs? In so raising the game, would the return on investment really be good enough? In other words, is there something less to be had for more?

For the moment though, I can’t get enough of this Funky stuff and I can’t recommend this arm highly enough either. It’s a true ‘pick-up’ arm in a land of ‘tonearms’. If you can handle the truth, the FXR II is where you start to hear it. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Funk Firm FXR-II pick-up arm

Price: £1,200

Manufactured by: The Funk Firm

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