

The Audio Beat

**"The Monaco v2.0
gives the music
and only the music."**



**Grand Prix Audio Monaco v2.0 Turntable
by Roy Gregory, March 12, 2018**

Grand Prix Audio Monaco 2.0 Turntable

by Roy Gregory, March 12, 2018

© www.theaudiobeat.com

Grand Prix Audio's Monaco turntable might not be big, but it's definitely clever. It might not be new, but it has consistently set new performance standards, with each iteration further raising the bar. *Monaco* might not be the first name to fall from analog aficionados' lips, but perhaps it should be. In a market that thrives on dogma and received wisdom, blind faith and credulity, a weird mix of tradition and technology, this is a turntable that doesn't just challenge the status quo or break a few rules -- it shatters convention and simply ignores the competition as no longer relevant. Given the sensibilities of the heavily invested owners of that competition (Grand Prix Audio's potential future customers), it wasn't the approach best placed to win friends and influence people, but then that was never the intention. An engineer first and last, Grand Prix Audio's Alvin Lloyd deals in facts and realities, and that was the reality he saw -- one based on materials science and measured performance. It has taken a while, but he has finally realized that in an elective realm, analog playback, which we *choose* to visit, selective engagement makes reality and facts a little more flexible and elastic.

In some respects at least, the wider industry has been catching up with the technological step change that dive-bombed them in the distinctive flying-saucer shape of the Monaco. A lot of groove has passed beneath the stylus in the intervening years: direct-drive turntables are no longer an historical anachronism, while composites (some more advanced than others) and sophisticated polymers are becoming more common and, perhaps more important, more effective as the industry learns how to exploit them. The compact, confident and supremely capable Monaco turntable no longer seems quite so alien, so aesthetically distinctive or so philosophically challenging.

But just when you thought it was safe to include the Monaco 'table as part of the establishment, another flavor in the gourmet spread of high-end record players, it has gone and done it again. And just to really rub it in, the Monaco 2.0 is visually almost indistinguishable from the original version -- until you listen to it. That's when reality bites and those inconvenient facts suddenly solidify, stark, awkward and unavoidable, right in front of your ears. The



French Marxist thinker Louis Althusser defined ideology as “man’s imaginary relationship with the real.” Old Louis should have heard the Monaco 2.0; it might have crystallized his thinking and diverted a slow descent into his own philosophical labyrinth. There are few things clearer than this latest Grand Prix turntable, a few things that it makes perfectly clear -- and they’re all about reality.

Despite the existence of ‘tables like the Brinkmann Bardo and AMG Giro, designs that superficially resemble the Monaco, certainly in terms of general size and shape, the Monaco still stands apart from the crowd, flying in the face of both fashion and established thinking. The rules of analog replay are well defined, as are the gray areas of dispute. Yet the Monaco rode roughshod over those rules when it first appeared, and given the glacial rate of change when it comes to audio convention, it still does.

Its first departure was the use of a direct-drive motor, long frowned on by all informed analog devotees. But it compounded that heresy by being neither massive in scale nor suspended in design. It eschewed separate motor housings, multiple tonearms, a skeletal structure, an external flywheel and an external power supply the size of most amplifiers. Instead it gloried in its use of a microprocessor to ensure speed accuracy, thus introducing the specter of digital intrusion to the sanctity of analog replay. But worst and most damning of all, it was small *and* expensive -- but not expensive enough to be taken seriously.

Over the years, audio design has advanced in part through the selective rejection of accepted wisdom. But the key word in that sentence is *selective*; it’s seldom that any designer has abandoned current thinking wholesale -- unless it’s to return to an earlier model. Yet the Monaco did just that -- to spectacular effect. To appreciate how and why that was possible, it’s necessary to look at the design challenge facing anybody building a record player and to appreciate just how this design meets it.

Ivor Tiefenbrun knows a thing or two about breaking the mold when it comes to turntables. The Linn LP12 may not have been a groundbreaking design (that status belongs to the AR-XA and/or the Thorens TD150), but it definitely adopted a groundbreaking -- and confrontational -- approach to the market. At the heart of Tiefenbrun’s pitch was the simple proposition that all a turntable had

to do was turn at the right speed and do it quietly. Of course, like many simple ideas, actually achieving those things was considerably more difficult, which naturally helped to justify the LP12’s unprecedented price. But that doesn’t undermine the inherent accuracy of the statement, or the fact that it so neatly identified the essential conundrum at the center of any turntable design. Essentially a platform to spin the groove beneath a vibration measuring device (the cartridge), a turntable should offer stable, accurate rotational speed and a physical reference plane, and it should eliminate spurious vibration. The problem is that accurate speed performance demands close coupling of the platter to both whatever it spins on and whatever drives it -- and that bearing/drive system is itself a major source of vibrational energy.

The traditional response to this dichotomy, certainly at the time when the Monaco first appeared, was to use a heavy platter rotating on a conventional bearing -- standing or inverted -- driven by a flexible belt from a (generally) mass-loaded and physically independent motor housing. Large-capacity, synthesized power supplies were used to smooth the flow of AC current to the synchronous motor(s) and reduce vibration generated by stepping or hesitation in the rotor’s motion, while the rotational inertia of the heavy platter and flexibility in the belt were relied on to even out speed variation and filter noise from the motor, helping prevent it from reaching the platter and thence the sensitive cartridge. A massive chassis was relied on to sink energy from the moving parts, as well as offering isolation from the outside world. As an engineering solution, there’s enough holes in this theory to drive not just a bandwagon through but the whole orchestra too. But the real elephant in the room is the tradeoff between system noise floor and speed stability. Like any such approach, careful juggling of the parameters can minimize or conceal the compromises, resulting in remarkably effective designs. But there’s no escaping the fact that poor speed stability had become an accepted part of analog replay, the problem that nobody mentioned anymore.

Observing the problem with an engineer’s (as opposed to an audiophile’s) eye, Alvin Lloyd came increasingly to question the acceptance of this state of affairs. Instead of looking at transmitted noise as the first concern, it seemed to him that it was actually speed stability that should be the primary design objective. Rather than worrying about swamping the delicate signal in spurious noise, our first



concern should be the quality of that signal to start with -- and in that respect, speed stability isn't just part of the story, it's pretty much the *whole* story, at least as far as the turntable is concerned.

Years of embedded thinking might cause you to question that proposition, but start thinking about it from first principles (the stylus-groove interface) and it soon becomes apparent that speed stability is about much, much more than just pitch security. If music concerns the arrangement of notes, defined by pitch into an organized pattern, the precise rate at which the stylus reads the groove dictates

comes to analog replay, speed is time -- and when it comes to music, timing is pretty much the basis of everything else. Once the critical relationship between musicians starts to collapse, the music is no longer worth the listen, something that's as true of live performance as it is of recordings.

Once you reach that conclusion, the hunt for a speed-stable drive system starts in earnest, and it's but a short step from there to direct drive -- a solution that offers unparalleled speed stability yet was widely discredited by the Linn/Naim jihad and the rise of the three-point-suspended deck. As is so often the case, the reasons for the poor performance of



the placement and duration of notes, their attack and their decay. Thus, variations in speed impact the shape and pattern of notes, the spacing and shape of the musical line played by a musician -- the very thing that is at the core of individual musical expression. But it also impacts the relationship between different musicians, the arrival of their notes defined by physical placement and captured in the recording, thus undermining collective expression too. Speed stability is defined in terms of time, and any instability erodes the temporal integrity in the playing and in the performance. In fact, in a very real sense, when it

many direct-drive decks, the ones so often held up as Aunt Sallies in the great turntable debate, were often overlooked. The primary differentiator was the drive system, so that got the blame, but look a little closer and other culprits are quick to appear -- like the low price of the products in question, a price that necessitated flimsy construction, plastic moldings and poor-tolerance components -- things that would undermine the performance of any turntable, irrespective of design. Look a little closer and the real issues with direct-drive technology, as realized in the best examples from the likes of Technics and Micro Seiki, lay



in the physical implementation of the motor/bearing itself, but more critically in the motor control and servo systems used to correct any speed variation. Looking at the problem with the benefit of 30 years of technological advance, especially when it comes to the precision of computer-based control systems, Alvin Lloyd was pretty sure that he could overcome that challenge.

The second often-overlooked part of the stylus-record-interface equation is the question of vertical displacement. The stylus reads information both horizontally and vertically, so any vertical movement of the record surface relative to the stylus will generate amplitude errors in the signal. This is where the term *reference plane* comes into play. Keeping that groove stable in space is a question of tolerances, both in the nature and execution of the supporting surface and in the bearing that in turn supports it.

Once those things are right (which is no mean feat), you also have to ensure intimate contact between the record and platter, necessitating an engineered interface (rather than a loose mat) and an effective clamp. Once those issues are overcome, then you can start worrying about the generation and dissipation of internal noise and dealing with external induced noise, structural or airborne.

The Monaco met these challenges with a combination of electrical and engineering solutions. The all-important drive system was built in-house, based around a direct-drive rotor attached to a close-tolerance, standing bearing that runs on a ceramic ball. The bearing was an oil-pressure design that completely submerged the shaft and employed a proprietary alloy thrust plate mounted on a

non-compressive damping element. It was an arrangement that was both low in noise and provided a direct ground path from platter to chassis, while maintaining precise ride height and also eliminating the compressive “bounce” that can impair the performance of fully floated magnetically opposed designs.

The platter was a two-part construction: a supporting



surface of light, stiff and mechanically stable magnesium combined with an outer ring machined from phosphor bronze. Machining large-diameter parts like this that are truly flat is itself a considerable challenge, but that’s where the company’s background comes in. It isn’t called Grand Prix Audio for nothing, its major business having been building parts and subsystems for racing cars -- a history that helps explain its search for verifiable, empirical performance indicators. Machining

12” magnesium discs and getting them super flat is a specialist task -- but it’s one that Grand Prix specializes in. The end result was an incredibly stiff, self-damped, peripherally mass-loaded platter that was really flat but not too heavy (direct-drive systems don’t want to see too much inertia in the platter).

Which brings us to the really clever bit. There was a 4700-line encoder disc engraved on the underside of the platter, viewed by an optical reader that in turn allowed a sophisticated control system, using predictive motion algorithms, to apply corrective nudges to the platter’s rotational motion. By reading the platter, rather than the motor, the system eliminated the possibility of cumulative error, delivering previously unheard of speed consistency without the “hunting” issues that afflicted older servo-based systems.



Using words like “previously unheard of” might seem like hyperbole, but look at the numbers and you’ll see what I mean. The original Monaco achieved verifiable average speed accuracy across a record side of better than 0.002%, with a peak error of only 0.0014%, a figure that was halved to 0.0007% in the Monaco 1.5. The finishing touches were a proprietary coating for the platter, one that maintained its planar consistency, and a screwdown central clamp that employed a range of different damping washers, each based on the thickness of the record.

With the drive system and record support taken care of, it was time to look at the plinth system. Again drawing on the company’s racing experience, a double-skin carbon-fiber tub was constructed, with in-molded hard points ensuring precise location of the motor and optical-reading elements. A simple but effective beam was added to act as the armmount, allowing the deck to accept tonearms of any effective length. The inner void between the skins was filled with a polymer damping compound that allowed the plinth to sink the energy reaching it from the platter, motor and armboard, efficiently dissipating it as heat.

Looking at the size of the Monaco, you might well raise an eyebrow at that claim, but then the appearance rather hides the fact that, despite the low-mass platter, a Monaco turntable weighed in at around the 40-pound mark. That incredibly dense plinth sat on three conical feet, each tipped with a large-diameter ceramic ball that engaged a cup in the underside of the tub. One of these was a fixed-height unit, located beneath the armboard/plinth interface to ensure vertical stability. The other two were height-adjustable, finely threaded cups holding the balls and allowing incredibly precise adjustment of level. GPA even supplied a super-accurate machinist’s level along with the ‘table. The underside of the conical feet featured a thin Sorbothane layer, carefully matched to the turntable’s weight to create a critically damped interface with the supporting surface.

Overall, the Monaco was a technological and engineering tour de force, one that was reflected in a musical performance that completely revised my expectations of vinyl record replay. It has also withstood the test of time; the fundamental physical elements of the design remain unchanged in the Monaco 2.0. But don’t let that fool you. Underneath the familiar outer skin lie a number of

significant developmental changes that have generated a step change in performance.

The most significant of these is a new 74,000-line encoder disc that, along with revised motor-control software, a new external microprocessor and power supply, has further reduced speed error, average speed consistency now bettering 20 parts per billion and peak error now lower than 0.0001%. These numbers are becoming so vanishingly small that you might question their relevance, but consider this: these are percentage values, the Monaco 2.0’s peak speed deviation being more than an order of magnitude lower than that of the already impressive 1.5. Second, as our primary defense mechanism, our hearing is also our most sensitive sense. Can you hear such tiny differences? Oh, yes -- and how. What’s more, just like the noise floor, the already minute speed errors make the further reduction even more obvious.

Other changes reflect Grand Prix’s obsession with controlling the stylus-record interface. The platter’s upper surface and coating remain unchanged, but the clamping system has been totally reworked, with revised domed washers in three different durometers and, more important, a clamping-pressure indication system. This consists of a pressure sensor below the LP label and an LED that shines through the center of the clamp itself. Simply screw down the central boss until the LED lights -- *et voilà*, consistent clamping pressure every time, irrespective of record weight. But what’s really nice about the system is that the pressure sensor is adjustable, a simple tool being provided that allows the end user to set clamping pressure to exactly the force he prefers. That’s an important facility, because just as overdamping the record kills the sound, one man’s overdamped is another’s just so. The sensor adjustment is incredibly precise -- and readily audible. In a classic case of RTFB, it was a while before I appreciated not just that the sensor was adjustable, but how critical the adjustment was -- an oversight that had me muttering darkly about the efficacy/necessity of the system. Having recognized the error of my ways, I’m now a total convert and love the no-brainer practicality of the solution.

Other less visible changes include refinements to the motor itself and the main bearing shaft as well as revisions in the profiling and thus the total mass of the phosphor-bronze flywheel. Overall, the 2.0 modifications (which are retrofittable to earlier ‘tables) represent a comprehensive revisit and refinement of the original design, even if the

three different versions look almost identical. Perhaps cognizant of that fact, Grand Prix offers a custom-colored platter option on the 2.0 -- although the blue shade shown on Grand Prix's website has garnered mixed reviews.

Setting up the Monaco 2.0 is a familiar process for anybody who has handled the previous models, considerably eased by the fact that the turntable arrives with every conceivable tool you might require, including a dedicated spanner for adjusting the feet. Once you've mounted the armboard, a case of six bolts into the



underside of the plinth, you simply stand the motor unit on its three conical feet and level accordingly. Once you've connected the controller/power supply, the only thing that remains to be done is to fill the main bearing with oil -- and the discovery of another welcome refinement. The filler caps for the bearing used to be closed with self-adhesive metallic labels, a solution that, while practical, wasn't really in keeping with the rest of the engineering embodied in the deck. Well, they've been replaced with small screw-in plugs that are far more elegant and appropriate. Using the supplied dipstick, you top off the oil reservoir and you are ready to go.





With the Monaco 1.5, my preferred 'arm was always the Kuzma 4Point, but with the arrival of the 2.0, I took advantage of the opportunity to mount the 4Point 14 instead, a slightly bizarre combination given the contrast between the length of the 'arm and the ultra-compact footprint of the 'table, but one that proved more than capable both mechanically and musically. Despite the substantial weight of the tonearm, the Monaco 2.0's rigid structure offered the perfect platform, and if the long armboard might have looked awkward, its rigidity was never in question. The majority of the listening took place with the Fuuga cartridge, which, with its low compliance and high mass, is a natural partner for the 14" 'arm, although I did swap briefly to the standard 4Point mated to the Lyra Etna. I could have tried other tonearms, but I've done that in the past with previous Monacos and found that the deck is utterly self-effacing, allowing any partnering tonearm to display both its strengths and vices.

In that sense, the Grand Prix deck is a model of controlled neutrality, virtually devoid of tonal aberration, addition or embellishment, dynamic emphasis or compression. In a very real sense, what you play is what you get -- but that doesn't really tell the whole story. The precision with which the Grand Prix Monaco 2.0 presents the groove, the utter stability, both vertically and in the speed at which it passes the stylus, is, as far as I can tell, previously unsurpassed. The advantage it offers over alternative solutions is microscopic in measurement terms, but then the device doing the measuring -- the stylus -- exists to measure microscopic differences. More important still, this is a difference that occurs quite literally at the pointy end of the system, the very point at which the stylus meets the groove. It's all downhill from here, but believe me, as anybody who has ever indulged in gravity sports will attest, the higher up the hill you start, the faster and farther you go. A tiny difference in the integrity of the signal here is amplified by and resonates through the system as a whole. There's making a difference and then there's making a difference where it counts. The Monaco 2.0 works at ground zero in signal terms, and you hear that all too clearly in the musical results.

When Warner Classics released *Martha Argerich, The Legendary 1967 Recording* on LP (a mixed Chopin recital, [Warner Classics 0825646372867]), it was as a musical rather than a sonic treat. No audiophile recording this, it barely

rated as good in the pantheon of standard classical fare. But the performances -- they are quite another matter. I had them down as more than making up for any shortcomings in the sound quality. Except that, played on the Grand Prix 'table, there really are no shortcomings in the sound quality and the performances soar to new heights of expressive range and subtlety. This is Argerich at 26, two years after winning the Seventh International Chopin Competition, at her precocious, provocative and emotionally charged height, lacking the control and effortless technique of later years, but with a freedom and fluidity that's infectious. From the opening bars of the Piano Sonata No. 3, Op. 58, the explosive, uninhibited dynamics are breathtaking. This is the piano in all its big, rich, complex glory, mastered and made to dance by a player of remarkable talent.

But this is power and impact in the service of music. Rather than the *hammerklavier*, hit-the-keys-as-hard-as-you-can pounding of a Boris Giltberg or Alice Sara Ott, this is playing with control, measured weight, the sense that she could play louder if she needed to. As a result, there's no sense of strain, just dramatic dynamic contrasts and poised weight of notes, at both ends of the range. Chopin's brief sprays of melodic line are gracefully integrated and flow naturally one to another, the balance of left and right hands, the conversation between them beautifully captured. But the sheer eloquence of this performance extends beyond the playing. The piano itself is a solid, three-dimensional presence, with air (and silence) above and below it. You can hear the bottom of the instrument's range just as you can hear the top. It's a rendition that's remarkable in its completeness and its ability to capture and convince. The performer and her performance don't need to make up for the recording or pressing, because neither is allowed to intrude.

This is a purposeful, emphatic delivery of the musical message. Notes are placed, shaped and spaced without apparent effort, achieving maximum effect. There is a wonderful economy to the musically fluid articulation that flowed from this 'table. Far from the added temporal accuracy imposing a rigid rhythmic straightjacket on the music, the effect is quite the opposite, freeing up a whole new expressive range, precision in the placing of notes and the accenting of a line or phrase. The precision with which the stylus meets the groove translated



directly into the clarity and intelligibility of the performance. The point at which the signal starts to rise in response to a note, the arc at which it rises and the amplitude it achieves, are directly related to the attack and weight with which that note is played. Not only did the Monaco 2.0 retrieve that note with greater accuracy, it placed it with greater temporal precision, captured its harmonic character, its center and

its tail, making not just the notes more accurate but the spaces between them more accurate and blacker too. That quiet between notes was crucial to the credibility of the performance, its sense of life and presence. It underpinned those explosive dynamic capabilities, but more important (and less obvious), it was what you hear live, and that absence of noise signaled the system receding into the

A short history of time, or the long-overdue death of neutrality

This story began with the tale of the little 'table that could -- and did. It challenged the accepted norms and assumptions of record replay just as it challenged the dogma behind them. It arrived at a time when new analog movements were emerging (or reemerging) and the benchmarks for size and price were being drastically revised -- upwards. There were a lot of people with a lot invested and the Grand Prix Monaco questioned that investment on pretty much every level -- form, function, price and performance. Or, to put it another way, it was too small, it used the wrong technology, it didn't cost enough and, worst of all, it shone a pitiless light on the realities and shortcomings in established turntable performance. Popular? Not so much. Yet, quality will out, and for all those it offended or outraged, there were just enough who got what it represented to not just keep the Monaco alive but to let it quietly evolve and further improve.

Now, in 2.0 form, the Grand Prix Audio turntable has come of age, outwardly invisible changes adding up to that step change in performance and musical communication. I guess that at least now it can't be accused of being too cheap (although, thankfully, the emergence of the more affordable Grand Prix Parabolica is some compensation for the rising price of the Monaco). But more important, along the way it has taken on and slaughtered a few more significant sacred cows.

For years the audio industry has paid lip service to the frequency domain and the measurement protocols that are associated with it. Just because you can doesn't mean you should. Just because the technology to generate measurements exists, this doesn't make those

measurements meaningful. Yet, regardless of relevance, for decades those measurements have weighed down and discredited audio advancement, and not just the numbers. Along with FFT analysis and an unhealthy obsession with frequency response, we developed parallel concepts and philosophies to embody them -- of which perhaps the most misunderstood and abused was the notion of *neutrality*. Twisted out of all recognition, the gold standard for audio performance became synonymous with subtractive voicing, leaning too heavily on *nothing added* and forgetting all about *nothing taken away*, especially when that "nothing" was outside of the frequency domain. Yet all too often that "nothing" represented what made the noise into music in the first place.

Beyond its ability to play records, to reproduce great recordings, re-create events and conjure the spirit of performances past, the Grand Prix Audio Monaco 2.0 offers an even greater prize, should we choose to recognize it. In the simplest, most fundamental and most direct manner possible, it establishes the absolute primacy of the time domain in musical reproduction. Get things in the right place and everything else follows. Time is the very foundation on which musical structure and performance rest. What the Monaco reminds us is that accuracy is temporal and that timing is everything. It does so quietly but utterly emphatically. There really is no ignoring this lesson -- but then why would we? If we choose to let it, the Monaco frees us from the tyranny of neutrality -- or at least what that term has come to represent. On every level, it reminds us what matters technically, philosophically -- and that records make music. I suspect that those lucky enough to own a Monaco 2.0 will be perfectly happy with the last of these. For the rest of us, perhaps its real importance lies in the opportunity to tear down the past and see a new future.

-Roy Gregory



background. No longer an act of reproductive technology, the music became the product of human agency, more lifelike, more believable and more effective.

Piano has long been the acid test for hi-fi systems in general and record players in particular, with solo piano the most exposed and revealing test of all. But what is true for piano is just as true for violin. Play the Ricci *Carmen Fantaisie* (Bizet -- Sarasate, Gamba and the LSO [Decca, SXL 2197]) and the swashbuckling swagger takes on a new, scintillating edge of clarity and control. Even in the fastest passages the lines no longer cascade, an uninhibited avalanche of notes that risk tripping over each other. Instead they gain composure and poise, a sure-footed sense of contained control. Never have I heard Ricci sound so relaxed, his tone so secure, as with the Monaco 2.0. The dramatic hesitations gained weight, allowed to hang in space, the changes in pace and darting accelerations incisive and direct, full of the menace and intent of the bullring, the arrogant bravado and lethal precision of

the toreador. The double-stopped passage that opens the "Habanera" had a grace and rounded tone you rarely hear from recordings (even more rarely from recordings of Ricci) and the transition to the careful delicacy of the solo melody was seamless, natural and exquisite. Even the skittering glissandi were perfectly paced and pressured, the sheer brilliance of Ricci's bowing revealed in all its glory. Yet even that doesn't prepare you for the musical gymnastics and sheer fireworks of the Sarasate "Zigeunerweisen" ("Gypsy Airs"), the lightning-quick sprays of notes and catches of melody all kept in line and in place by an instrumental dexterity akin to a

juggler's art. I knew that Ricci was good -- and flamboyant; it took the Monaco 2.0 to show me just how securely that flamboyance was underpinned by technique.

But what of larger forces? The *Carmen* places Ricci stark and proud in front of a full orchestra. The Monaco 2.0 painted him large and kept him separate, but its control and delineation of the orchestral support was equally clear and just as remarkable, from the pitch and texture of the gruff bowed basses that rub away below the "Habanera's" opening bars, to the crisp snap and rattle of the percussion that stalks the violin's entry and advance

through the whole opening section. The orchestra was laid out with a spread and depth, a floor and overarching acoustic that was natural in both perspective and reverberance, rather than etched or spotlighted. The slight exaggeration of central depth so typical of early SXLs was clearly apparent, and to anybody who knows his Deccas, there was no mistaking the age (1959) or location (Kingsway Hall) of the recording -- even without the subway.



This sense of natural familiarity, the notion that you know the venue and that you know that this is how it sounds, spoke volumes about the spatial coherence and organization of the Monaco 2.0. I wasn't even born when this recording was made. I've never been to Kingsway Hall (well, I have, but it's a hotel these days). Yet the combination of natural perspective, acoustic and spatial coherence was such that I could recognize the venue, both as a credible space and from the many impressions I've heard captured on disc. A little like tapping into memory, the Monaco puts you there, even when you aren't.

Not every recording is blessed with these qualities. On many a record it's the dynamics that will strike you first, that will set the Grand Prix deck apart. Let's make no mistake -- the Monaco 2.0's ability to track and reproduce the full dynamic range captured on a recording was seriously impressive. But for me, the sense of structure and organization, the sinuous articulation of rhythm and pace, was more fundamental to the player's captivating musicality, even if it wasn't necessarily as smack-you-in-the-face obvious.

The Cure's *Seventeen Seconds* [Fiction FIX 004] was one of my first reference records, before I even really understood that as a concept. I played it when I chose the first system I ever owned (or at least the first I paid for myself) and I've played it on every system I've owned since and most of the systems I've reviewed -- both as a standing musical reference and as what is simply a great record, one with the musical integrity to pass the test of time and repeated exposure. The passage of time has seen the uncovering of successive layers of inner detail, texture and recorded artifice, a gentle unraveling of the complex musical nuances hiding beneath the apparently simplistic surface. But hearing it on the Monaco 2.0 wasn't like the gentle shedding of another veil -- more like the shocking removal of the record's last vestige of modesty. Suddenly raw, immediate and utterly unadorned, the familiar tracks were so tactile and present, so poised, muscular and powerful that I literally did a double take, letting the first track run and then immediately starting it over. I'd always considered "A Reflection" as somewhere between a musical *hors d'oeuvre* and a mere *amuse bouche*, an instrumental doodle that did little save give me time to resume the listening seat. Clever enough in its sparse melody and gently evolving structure, it is quickly swept aside by the propulsive impact of "Play For Today's" drum-and-bass intro. Yet here it was, for the first time revealed as an overture in all but name. In this single short piece, Robert Smith captured the tone and mood, the musical progression and vocabulary of the album as a whole, creating a familiar backdrop, an atmospheric context against which the rest of the tracks and the lyrics unfurl. It's at the heart of the record's immediate accessibility and appeal, creating coherence and a sense of the whole. It's rare that I play only one track or even one side of the album -- but it's not until now that I've realized why.



Increasingly with any component, I've come to think of its contribution to the musical performance in terms of articulation and intelligibility. With the Monaco 2.0, that approach has been thrown into focus. The musical impact of this record player is all about the sense and meaning of the music -- in the widest possible sense. As *Seventeen Seconds* so eloquently demonstrated, its qualities extend beyond the note or phrase to the piece as a whole. As remarkably impressive as the Monaco 2.0 is when it comes to resolution and detail, the ability to hear into a player's technique, the minutiae of the instrument or recording, it allowed me to dissect the performance without those elements ever becoming disjointed or disconnected. So, just as the sudden, uninhibited dynamics surprise and impress, the microdynamic detail and discrimination, texture, air and acoustic nuance will beguile and seduce. But it's the structural coherence that lies behind these more apparent qualities, the ties that bind, that are more fundamental and really set the Monaco 2.0 apart from the record-playing crowd. They matter because they preserve pitch and pattern -- and that matters whatever you play.

I could run through endless musical examples, but they'd be beside the point -- because that point is the Monaco 2.0's very consistency. Whether the music is big or small, acoustic or electric, plucked, wind, steam-driven or electronic, this record player's musical reproduction was utterly even-handed, presenting and preserving with equal confidence, whatever recording, genre or performance I chose to play.

No product can please all of the people all of the time, and there will be those who will listen to the Monaco 2.0 and still choose an alternative player. For them, the Grand Prix 'table might not be the answer, but at least they'll know what they're missing. Some products -- some quite famously -- just look the way they sound. Elegantly compact, planted and incredibly solid, in its latest form, the Grand Prix turntable has a physical integrity and sense of precision that are embodied in the music it plays. It's not the most obvious association, given the airy transparency and super-black background generated by the 'table, but then you need to look at what it isn't as well as what it is. The absence of an oversized and overweight plinth, a platter the depth of a wedding cake, and more belts and braces than a Bavarian glee club contributes directly to that clarity, space around instruments, low noise floor and lack of spurious clutter.



You need to look beyond the deck itself, just as Grand Prix Audio looked beyond accepted wisdom when they created it. The Monaco 2.0 gives the music and only the music, to a greater extent than any other 'table I've used. But it also gives more music, in the form of heightened insight and enhanced understanding. I hear more of the music, but I make more of it too. Those who own earlier versions of the Monaco should investigate having them upgraded without delay. The musical benefits are huge.

Technologically and philosophically, the Monaco 2.0 represents a modern take on an earlier time. Terms like transcription deck and motor unit may have faded from use, but in many ways they are more descriptive of what Grand Prix Audio has created, a pared-back performance package that is all about getting the job done the best way possible. The Monaco 2.0 is quiet -- in every sense of the word -- and it definitely turns at the right speed. What else do you need to know?

Preis in Europa: 45,000,00 €
Garantie: 5 Jahre Teile & Arbeit

Grand Prix Audio
P.O. Box 1948
Durango, CO 81302
(970) 247 3872
www.grandprixaudio.com

Associated Equipment

Analog: Kuzma Stabi M turntable with 4Point and 4Point 14 tonearms, AMG Giro turntable with 9W2 tonearm; Allnic Puritas and Puritas Mono, Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement, Fuuga, Kuzma CAR-50, Lyras Atlas, Etna, Dorian and Dorian Mono cartridges; DS Audio DS-W1 cartridge with matching equalizer; Stillpoints Ultra LP Isolator record weight; CH Precision P1, Connoisseur 4.2 PLE and VTL TP-6.5 Signature phono stages.

Digital: Wadia S7i and Neodeo Origine S2 CD players, CEC TL-3N CD transport and Wadax Pre 1 Ultimate DAC.

Preamplifiers: CH Precision L1/X1, Connoisseur 4.2 LE, Tom Evans Audio Designs The Vibe, VTL TL-6.5 Series II Signature.

Power amplifiers: Berning Quadrature Z, CH Precision M1 and Engström Lars monoblocks; VTL S-400 Series II Signature stereo amp.

Integrated amplifier: Mark Levinson No.585.

Cables: Complete looms of Nordost Odin or Valhalla 2, or Crystal Cable Absolute Dream from AC socket to speaker terminals. Power distribution was via Quantum Qb8s or Crystal Cable Power Strip Diamonds, with a mix of Quantum Qx2 and Qx4 power purifiers and Qv2 AC harmonizers.

Supports: Harmonic Resolution Systems RXR, Hutter Racktime or Quadraspire SVT Bamboo racks. These are used with Nordost SortKone or HRS Nimbus equipment couplers and damping plates. Cables are elevated on HECC Panda Feet.

Acoustic treatments: As well as the broadband absorption placed behind the listening seat, I employ a combination of RPG Skyline and LeadingEdge D Panel and Flat Panel microperforated acoustic devices.

Accessories: Essential accessories include the SmarTractor protractor, a USB microscope (so I can see what I'm doing, not for attempting to measure stylus rake angle) and Aesthetix cartridge demagnetizer, a precision spirit level and laser, a really long tape measure and plenty of low-tack masking tape. I also make extensive use of the Furutech anti-static and demagnetizing devices and the VPI Typhoon record-cleaning machine. The Dr. Feikert PlatterSpeed app has to be the best-ever case of digital aiding analog.

Vertrieb in Austria, Deutschland, Niederlande, Schweiz:

Black Forest Audio

Volker Kühn, Rosenstr. 50, D-76316 Malsch/Karlsruhe

Tel. +49(0)72466330; Fax +49(0)72466331

e-mail: blackforestaudio@t-online.de; <https://www.blackforestaudio.com>