



Lyra Titan

by Roy Gregory

At a time when analogue is supposed to be on the wane, it's amazing how many new cartridges come and go. Of course, each one doesn't necessarily represent a new manufacturer and many of these designs are actually the badged work of major manufacturers or OEM producers who remain largely unknown to the buying public. The majors have generally been around for years, with the likes of Ortofon, and Empire enjoying long and illustrious histories, producing cartridges under their own names and others. Then comes a second tier of equally long-lived but arguably more specialist (or should that be characterful?) companies such as Koetsu, Clearaudio and Dynavector. And it is here that we find the latest (and possibly the last) great additions to the field of cartridge manufacture – Lyra and Transfiguration.

Lyra started out as OEM manufacturers, producers of the Spectral MCR and Audioquest AQ 7000 cartridges, amongst others. However, their first own brand product was the Clavis, the first of what might be considered their second-generation products. It was joined by the cheaper Lydian and much more expensive Parnassus, and each in turn evolved into a DC or Beta derivative. The third generation was heralded by the Helikon and it's here that this story really starts.

The Clavis completely rearranged the market when it first appeared, and the Helikon repeated that trick, re-establishing the benchmark for performance at its price point. That wasn't all. It also established the basic blueprint for future Lyra cartridges. Its sculpted, open body and clever incorporation of an all enveloping stylus guard combined with tapped mounting

holes (first seen on the Lydian Beta) achieved a new level of user friendliness without compromising sound quality. By making the cartridge easier (and safer) to handle Lyra are tacitly acknowledging that in the absence of comprehensive dealer support it is no longer good enough to build performance potential into its designs. They need to go a step further and make that potential easier to realise. Add to that the emergence of new magnetic materials and design combined with double layer coils and it was possible to provide significantly more output than their earlier designs, again making the cartridge easier to use.

Purists however demanded a version of the new cartridge with single-layer coils, sacrificing the extra output in search of greater speed, low-level resolution and delicacy, and so was born the Helikon SL. The lower output level also didn't risk overloading phono stages optimised for the 0.2mV levels that had been the previous norm. Next up will be the Dorian, designed to fit between the Lydian and Helikon within the range, but before that we have the arrival of the new flagship model, the Titan, costing a not inconsiderable £2990.

As the name suggests, and as with the Parnassus D.C.t which it replaces, the Titan's body is worked from solid titanium alloy, although the alloy itself is actually different to that used in the earlier cartridge (it bears an uncanny resemblance to the incredibly hard 6Al/4V, but that's just speculation on my

part). The body is carefully shaped to resist standing waves, while the internals are electrically eroded to shape, a process that is at once incredibly precise and avoids introducing mechanical stresses into the cartridge structure. The cartridge generator assembly is rigidly attached to this foundation, and consists of two symmetrical discs of a new and extremely powerful neodymium magnetic material. The absence of conventional pole pieces helps eliminate non-linearities within the magnetic field.

The cantilever is a diamond coated boron rod, held by a metal sleeve that is effectively cold-welded directly to the cartridge body. Along with the incredibly short suspension wire this makes for a closely defined vibrational behavior, critical as any spurious resonance will be reproduced as distortion. The stylus tip is a line contact type specifically developed by Lyra to maximise detail and minimise record wear. The coils themselves are copper (rather than the more fashionable but problematic silver or gold) and wound single layer onto gold plated, chemically purified iron cores. The end result is a pocket battleship of a cartridge (titanium is only light when it's hollow!) that reduces its moving parts to the absolute minimum. The sheer rigidity of the closely coupled structure means that the Titan puts even more energy into the arm than normal, Lyra even stressing the benefits of cleaning the top surface of the cartridge and underside of the



► arm before mounting, in order to ensure proper coupling. Sonically speaking, the result of this is that the Titan is extremely demanding of its partnering tone-arm and turntable. The arm used better have decent bearings and the precise amount of damping used is critical, especially in a uni-pivot such as the JMW 12.5 I used for the review. The Titan weighs in at 12g and puts out 5.0mV, which is the same as the original Helikon. Compliance is 12cu and with a tracking force of 1.65 – 1.75g (I used a shade under 7g) it is ideally suited to most of today's medium mass tone-arms.

In use, the Titan proves simplicity itself to set-up, final alignment aided considerably by the clearly visible cantilever. Precise adjustment is essential, and not for the first time I blessed the adjustable vta facility on the JMW, making it so much easier to get the cartridge really dialed in. The instructions suggest that poor sound can more often than not be traced to faulty set-up, and having been through the process, I can believe it. The cartridge was played on both Clearlight Recovery and VPI TNTHRX turntables and via the Groove, Vibe, Pulse and Soul amplification combination. Speakers were the OBX-Rs and Reference 3A DaCapos, while the Hovland Sapphire and Neat Ultimatum MFS combination also played a part. Cables were Nordost Valhalla and Valkyrja throughout.

The Helikon has long been a favorite chez Gregory, so I was fascinated to see how it stacked up against the Titan. With both cartridges enjoying identical geometry it was possible to swap between them with no more than a three notch tweak on the JMW's vta dial. And impressive as the Helikon is it is clearly bettered by the newcomer. In terms of tangible differences the Titan offers a wider, better focused and more

transparent soundstage. There's much more low level detail, and the tonal separation of instruments is much more obvious. Taking the Reiner/CSO *Lt. Kije* (RCA Living Stereo LSC-2150) as an example, the opening instruments illuminate the entire width and depth of the soundstage with their echoes, the side-drum and piccolo being both better fixed and separated in space. Percussion and bass notes are handled with a lighter, defter touch than the Helikon, offering much better instrumental

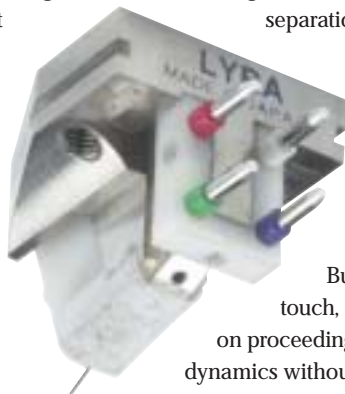
separation and texture, while the cheaper cartridge's attractive dynamic enthusiasm is made to sound crude and heavy-handed by the grip and control exerted by the Titan.

But as I said it's a deft touch, that keeps a firm hold on proceedings, precisely scaling dynamics without crushing the life out of them. Indeed, one of the most impressive things about the Titan's bottom-end is the air with which it surrounds and on which it floats bass notes. It's a subtle, rather than a sledgehammer performance, but none the less beguiling for all that. The end result is that the music's power grows from the orchestration rather than simple low frequency weight. It's a more correct and certainly more believable presentation, even if might frustrate the out and out headbangers who never venture into the realms of mere acoustic bass instruments.

At the other end of the spectrum the Titan offers a spectacular advantage in terms of high-frequency extension and detail, a benefit made all the more obvious by the application of the Valkyrja cables to the Neat Ultimatum speakers. The latter's upward firing super-tweeters made the most of the Valkyrjas' top-end air and energy, revealing the Titan's ability to extract information at the highest frequencies and present it coherently. Everything

from triangles to tubular bells (no, not those ones) rang crisp, true and clear, held stable in space and refusing to step forward or crowd the soundstage no matter how hard they're hit. Dynamic range is wide and sudden jumps in level are traced with real speed that delivers the necessary impact and musical emphasis.

Of course, these tangible differences also effect the intangible and it's here, in the sense, the communicative capabilities of the music that the importance of the Titan's superiority really lies. In comparison, the Helikon (no slouch in this regard itself) is made to sound clumsy and lacking rhythmic subtlety, almost as if its mechanical transduction is intruding on proceedings, not quite capable of keeping up with the demands of tracing the groove. In comparison, the Titan tracks like a bloodhound and the music flows effortlessly as a result. There is a poise and grace, an absolute security to the music that issues forth from the Titan's stylus tip. Shifts in pace and musical density, subtle inflexions of voice or expressive use of bow pressure are revealed and traced without becoming etched or overtly obvious. The trick of the Titan is to take all the hi-fi attributes that audiophiles crave and weld them into a coherent, believable whole. Whereas our analytical tendencies, our efforts to define and describe the performance of equipment has the effect of dividing and segmenting the musical performance itself the Titan reverses this process, almost without you noticing. The performance happens in front of you. Listen into it and you'll find that you can hear deeper than normal, with less effort. The separation and placement of the players, the definition of distinct and separate dynamic levels unravels the intricate layers of the music. Whether it's the superb ensemble playing of the Stuttgarter Kammerorchester or the angst ridden cynicism of early Joe Jackson (the ►



▶ superb *Look Sharp* A&M SHM3154) what you are hearing is unmistakably the product of human intent and purpose. Because it does the hi-fi things so well and in such a linear, balanced way, it makes the music breathe and drive and above all it makes it connect.

The Titan isn't perfect, or even close to it. The Insider Reference offers greater energy and more vivid colours, the Koetsu Red K Signature and Miyabi 47 Labs a more organic sound. But none matches the linearity, the absolute lack of license or exaggeration that characterises the Lyra. There is a leanness to its tonal palette (although I bet it disappears if you listen through the Connoisseur Definitions 4.0) and there's that lightness of touch in the bass, one that puts intelligibility ahead of weight. Indeed intelligibility is the Titan's hallmark. It achieves it through maintaining the scale and proportions within the musical performance. By refusing to embellish or enhance in any way the Lyra allows an unprecedented degree of structural insight. The timing, the placing of notes and the shape of phrases is laid effortlessly bare. If you want to hear what's happening on the record then

the Titan tells you.

Surprisingly, especially given the extension, detail and energy available at high frequencies, the Lyra is extremely forgiving of all but the most extreme surface damage – and even then it continues to track more often than it skips. It's kind to poorer recordings too. It unravels the music – it doesn't rip it apart.

Delivering unprecedented musical access and doing it with a deftness and a kindness to content that serves both the individual performers and the performance as a whole, the Titan is well named. Compared to the competition it even looks like a bargain but don't let the price fool you. A genuine flagship product that towers above run of the mill hi-fi and will rearrange the sense of what's possible in those who've never heard its like, if its strengths accord with your requirements then you'll find it hard to beat its combination of technical virtues and musical honesty. If you want to understand rather than simply being moved (although the Titan does that too) then you need to hear this cartridge. Better still, hear it anyway – you owe yourself a favour, you know you do. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low-output, medium compliance, moving coil
Frequency range:	10Hz - 50kHz
Channel separation:	35dB or better at 1kHz
Canntilever system:	Diamond-coated solid boron rod with line-contact stylus (3 x 70 micrometers profile)
Internal impedance:	5.5ohms
Output voltage:	0.5mV (5.0cm/sec., zero to peak, 45 degrees)
Cartridge weight:	12.0g
Compliance:	12 x 10 ⁻⁶ cm/dyne at 100Hz
Recommended tracking force:	1.65 - 1.75g
Recommended load:	Direct into non-inverting RIAA equalizer amplifier or head-amplifier: 10ohms - 47kohms
Step-up transformer:	4 - 10ohms
Stylus Guard:	Yes
Price:	£2995

UK Distributor:

Path Premier
Tel. (44)(0)1844 219000
Fax. (44)(0)1844 461209

Manufacturer:

Scan-Tech Co. Ltd.
E-mail: scantech@gol.com

Benz Micro LP

by Jimmy Hughes

It's still a source of amazement that the humble vinyl record manages to keep pace sonically with the best that digital audio can offer. And not just keep pace, but outshine in certain key aspects. Agreed, to hear vinyl at its very best you need deep pockets - the finest pickups, arms, and turn-

tables never come cheap. But, for those with sizeable LP collections, the investment is surely justified by the way a top analogue front end rejuvenates your interest in music. The Benz Micro LP is a case in point; at a cool £2,200 it's hardly pocket money. Can any pickup be worth

that much?

Probably not. After all, Benz themselves make a very fine, relatively low-priced alternative in the Ace that offers excellent performance without spending silly money. However, for those with fastidious tastes and the pockets to match them, Benz offer ▶