

## ANALOG CORNER

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### 4 Phono Preamps and a Phono Cartridge, but First a Turntable

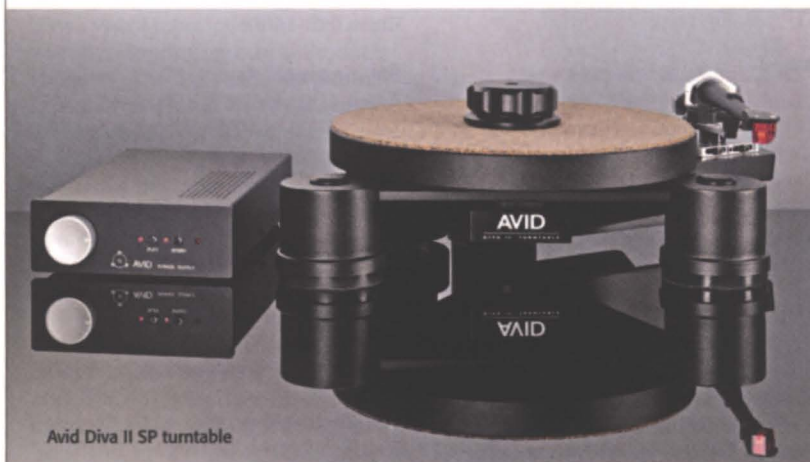
I'd evaluated the Diva II turntable from Avid HiFi, Ltd., and was just about to start writing the review. I didn't know the price, but based on its build quality, and especially its sound, I figured it was about \$4500. But when I looked it up on the website of Avid's American importer, Music Direct,<sup>1</sup> I had to call them to make sure the price shown—\$1800—wasn't a mistake. *This is going to cause a revolution, I thought.*

It wasn't a mistake, but it turned out I'd made one. I'd been listening to Avid's Diva II SP (\$3995), which includes, among other upgrades from the Diva II, a nearly 14-lb machined aluminum platter and, for its 24V AC synchronous motor, a DSP-based voltage-synthesizing outboard power supply that lets you dial in the speed. World order had been restored.

The Diva II SP (and the Diva II before it) resembles other Avid turntables, with which it shares components, including its tungsten-carbide/sapphire ball, inverted stainless-steel bearing, affixed to the hub of a three-legged chassis of cast aluminum. Part of that casting is an integral mount for an SME tonearm machined into the end of a leg that protrudes from midway between two of the support towers (adapters for other arms are available). Instead of the spring suspensions found in more expensive models, the Diva II SP and Diva II use a three-layer elastomer system that includes a "tailored Sorbothane compound" incorporated into each of the support legs.

A mat of soft cork tops the platter. The crown of the inverted spindle bearing protrudes slightly from the platter surface to provide the downforce flex for the screw-on record clamp. The platter is driven via capellini-gauge dual O-rings looped around double-grooved pulleys on the platter and motor.

Avid's ingenious belt-pin system makes it easy to fit the O-rings over the hidden pulleys: Insert a small pin in a hole in the platter's underside, close to



Avid Diva II SP turntable

its outer perimeter. Fit the belts around the platter pulley and then over the pin, which pulls the O-rings away from the pulley. You then carefully fit the platter over the bearing, placing the pin so that the pulled-aside section bisects the motor pulley. It's then relatively easy to remove the pin and let the O-rings snap into place in the motor pulley's two grooves.

With the motor all but invisible between two chassis legs, the handsome Diva II SP has a relatively small footprint. Turn on the power supply, push Play, and the platter is up to speed so quickly you'd think it was direct drive.

Music Direct supplied me with an SME 309 tonearm (\$2000). I was able to securely bolt it to the Diva in minutes, and set it up almost as easily. I used a USB-connected microscope to set a Lyra Kleos moving-coil cartridge's (see review below) stylus rake angle (SRA) to 92°, and a digital oscilloscope to set azimuth.

The results of this all-instrumentation, no-fiddling, no-guesswork setup were spectacular. While sprung 'tables do achieve excellent isolation from outside vibrations, I believe that once you set a platter spinning, no matter how carefully it's machined, it will cause the suspension to move. I much prefer the rock-solid performance of mass-loaded or elastomer-isolated 'tables like the Diva II SP, provided they're placed on a properly tuned isolation stand like the HRS SXR rack and M3

base—which is what I did.

This \$6000 combination was ridiculously good in every aspect of vinyl play. It produced an impressively quiet background out of which sprang rock-solid three-dimensional images. The Avid's bass performance was rhythmically nimble, "tuneful," and harmonically expressive. The bottom octaves were taut and impressively well controlled, yet supple and texturally revealing. In my experience, sprung 'tables have trouble keeping up with this level of bottom-octave performance.

The Diva II SP's overall attack was fast and precise, its sustain reasonably held long, and sounds decayed very, very cleanly into silence. I sat twice through an original UK pressing of Eno's *Before and After Science*, and found myself concentrating on the precision of the cymbal work, particularly when I played the album at low levels during one play, and on the "tunefulness" of the bass during the next. This 'table dug down deep to deliver foundational rhythmic grooves for which rockers will go absolutely crazy.

All of the Diva II SP's sins were of omission, and even those were minor. Overall dynamic and spatial scales were somewhat diminished, but the Avid's most significant lack was of a fully fleshed out midrange, which gave it a generally cool, detached sound. While this quality produced less "fleshy" vocals and a somewhat undernourished and mildly recessed harmonic palette

<sup>1</sup> Music Direct advertises on my website, [www.mu sicangle.com](http://www.mu sicangle.com).

## CONTACTS

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**Einstein Audio Components GmbH**, Prinz Regent Strasse 50-60, 44795 Bochum, Germany. Tel: (49) (0)234-9731512. Fax: (49) (0)234-9731511. Web: [www.einstein-audio.de](http://www.einstein-audio.de). US distributor: Aaudio Imports, 4871 Raintree Drive, Parker, CO 80134. Tel: (720) 851-2525. Fax: (720) 851-7575. Web: [www.aaudioimports.com](http://www.aaudioimports.com).

**Lyra Co. Ltd.**, 4-34-13 Daita, Setagaya-ku, Tokyo 155-0033, Japan. Web: [www.lyraconnoisseur.com](http://www.lyraconnoisseur.com). US distributor: Immedia, 1516 Fifth Street, Berkeley, CA 94710-1713. Tel: (510) 559-2050.

Fax: (510) 559-1855.

**MusicDirect**, 318 N. Laflin Street, Chicago, IL 60607. Tel: (800) 449-8333, (312) 433-0200. Fax: (312) 433-0011. Web: [www.musicdirect.com](http://www.musicdirect.com).

**Ray Samuels Audio**, 8005 Keeler Avenue, Skokie, IL 60076. Tel: (847) 673-8739. Web: [www.raysamuelsaudio.com](http://www.raysamuelsaudio.com).

**Simaudio Ltd.**, 95 Chemin du Tremblay Street, Unit 3, Boucherville, Quebec J4B 7K4, Canada. US: Simaudio Ltd., 2002 Ridge Road, Champlain, NY 12919. Tel: (877) 980-2400, (450) 449-2212. Web: [www.simaudio.com](http://www.simaudio.com).

**TDL Technology, Inc.**, 5260 Cochise Trail, Las Cruces, NM 88012-9736. Tel: (575) 405-7996. Web: [www.tdl-tech.com](http://www.tdl-tech.com).

for strings, reed instruments, and keyboards, it revealed an incredible wealth of genuine low-level detail, particularly in the recording's reverberant field. This somewhat clinical quality can be balanced out with a warmish cartridge or phono preamp.

However, even in the clinical context of a tonally neutral cartridge and phono preamp, the Diva II SP produced sound so enticing that I listened night after night to all kinds of music, constantly surprised by its high level of performance, and telling myself that if times got tough and I had to sell my big rig, I could listen happily ever after to the Diva II SP. That's how well balanced and robust its overall sound was. My only real complaint was about its coarsely threaded spindle: It was easy to misthread the clamp, especially when I was in a rush to hear the next record.

While at \$3995 the Diva II SP isn't the bargain it would have been at \$1800, it's still an incredible value for such a well-designed, well-built, superb-sounding analog rig. Combined with the precise-sounding, easy-to-set-up SME 309 tonearm, I'm not sure what's better, or even as good, for \$6000.