Hi-Fi Choice

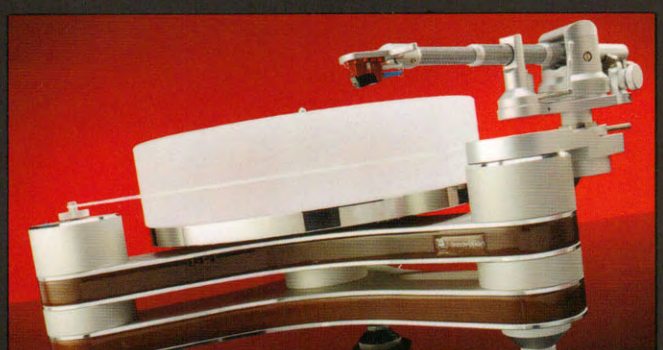
PRESENTS

THE COLLECTION -2010-

A CELEBRATION OF THE WORLD'S FINEST HI-FI

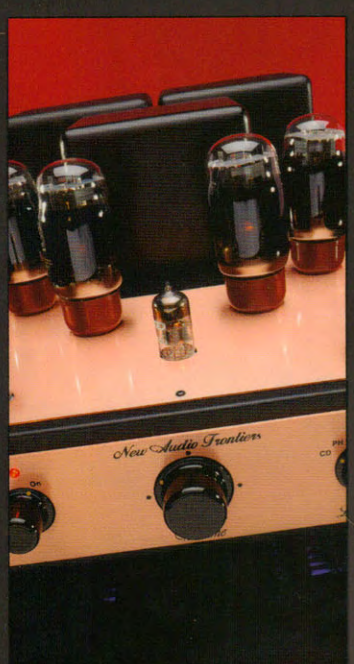
















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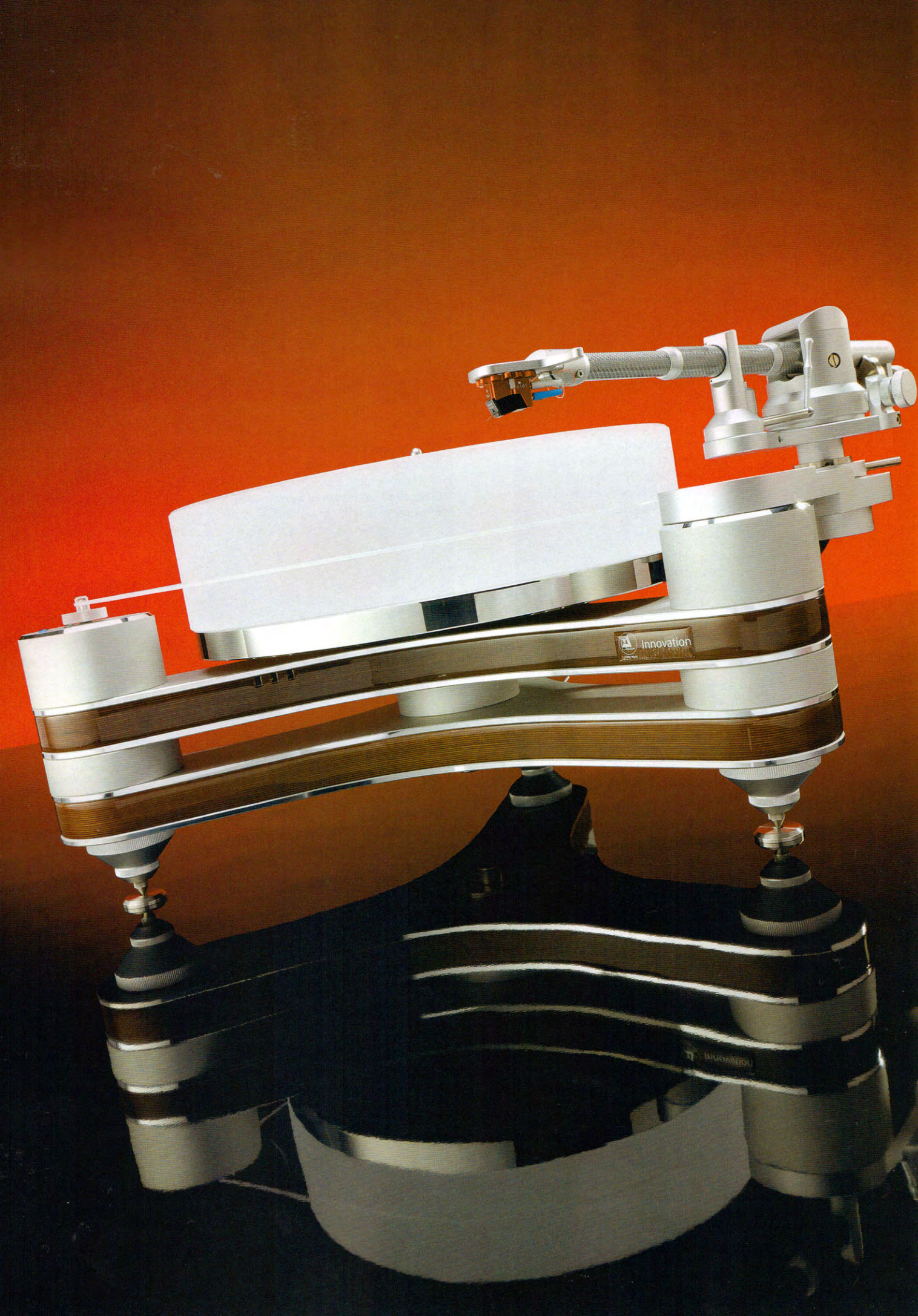
THE COLLECTION 2010

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innovation

Clearaudio INNOVATION WOOD/UNIVERSAL VTA/DA VINCI

Vinyl's new best friend. So good, we almost convinced ourselves we could afford it

Price £6,265/£3,500/£3,950 **Contact** Audio Reference ○ 01252 702705 ○ www.clearaudio.de

Few items of upmarket hi-fi are as impressive as a fancy turntable, and this gem from the German manufacturer definitely fits the bill, gloriously designed to holler 'high end' from the rooftops.

Clearaudio's engineers have come up with an attractive, distinctive and functional 'three-legged spider' shape, dispensing with fripperies like a continuous top plate. It's a shape the company has used before, but here it is double-layered, with each layer comprising a metal/wood/metal sandwich. Not just any sandwich, either: the tasty filling here is Panzerholz or 'tank wood'. But why the military pretension? As well as being used to stop shells and bullets, the same characteristics of energy dispersion that make Panzerholz ideal for defence make it disinclined to resonate, especially when sandwiched in a constrained-layer-damping assembly.

One leg conceals a DC motor. At the centre is a ceramic bearing spindle, which lacks one important feature – a thrust bearing to support the weight of the platter. This feature is omitted because the load is entirely supported by a magnetic bearing, holding up the considerable weight of the stainless steel subplatter and 70mm acrylic platter. The two remaining legs can each support an arm. Not wishing to seem greedy, we stuck with just one, the Universal, complete with its optional VTA adjuster, a calibrated screw assembly controlled by a long lever, which is very easy to use, set and read.

The same can be said for all the arm's adjustments. Its main tube is based on carbon-fibre composites, a relatively non-resonant material made more so by being built in a three-stage, stepped fashion. Its removable headshell was equipped for our review with a da Vinci cartridge, an interesting, moving-coil design with an unusually high output, a good 6dB above the average for its class. With a very low-mass diamond stylus in a boron cantilever, this model claims exceptional high-frequency extension, while its long cantilever promises low distortion.

All three speeds are available, precision-adjustable by screwdriver. The Innovation includes a servo control that reads platter speed via an optical pickup. This kind of system got a itself a bad name due to its use in cheap turntables back in the 1970s and 1980s, but given excellent mechanical precision – which we're most certainly looking at here – it can work very well.

SOUND QUALITY

Brace yourself for a spot of time travel: this combination plays music so well that it can easily take the longest-serving audiophile back to where he started, to consider the shock of the new that accompanies one's first exposure to really high-class sound.

This doesn't happen immediately, though. You lower the stylus into the groove, sit back, listen, enjoy plenty of detail and decent tonality… and then are struck a few minutes later with the realisation that the sound isn't just good, it's gorgeous. This is the sort of hi-fi where you start off listening carefully and critically to the equipment, but end up simply enjoying the musical performance – always a good sign. This is also true when the recording's not up to much, though we'd have to admit that even such an extravagant turntable as this can't salvage the worst recordings. With simply indifferent ones, technical limitations are largely spirited away by the unfussy but completely assured recovery of musical information that the Innovation and its partners achieve.

But with good recordings, the results are simply divine. Take an old classic like one of the Brahms symphonies, recorded by the Vienna Philharmonic under Barbirolli in the late 1960s, on original vinyl in good condition. There's a 'being there' quality to it that makes the years vanish and transports you to the best seat in the concert hall – but without coughing neighbours or rustling sweet papers.

Alternatively, dig out some classic 1960s' pop, familiar friends like The Beatles, The Kinks or Elvis Presley: you'll soon find yourself not just hearing the music, but experiencing the whole era, even if you're too young to have been there. It sounds like magic, and of course it is; the magic of musical evocation. Not every bit of hi-fi does it, not even every bit of high-end kit, but once heard, it's something that can make even the most cynical listener reluctant to leave it behind.

"Once heard, even the most cynical listener will be reluctant to leave it behind"

What we have here is one thoroughly delightful conglomeration of components, beautifully matched and performing superbly. It's not 'the ultimate record player', if only because Clearaudio makes several plausible-looking contenders for that spurious title. It's also arguably beyond the point of diminishing returns, but trust us, if you can afford it, you won't let a little detail like that bother you.

Richard**Black**

