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Best Lyra Yet

Equipment Report: Lyra Atlas SL MC Phono Cartridge

by Jacob Heilbrunn | August 24th, 2018

When I installed the Lyra Atlas cartridge in my system a few

years ago, I was agog at its sheer dynamism and slam. Listening to a London recording of Itzhak Perlman and Vladimir Ashkenazy playing Beethoven violin sonatas was enough to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. After a while, however, I began to feel that the Atlas might

be too much of a good thing. Thunderous? Sure. But perhaps a mite aggressive in the treble, at least in my system. Thus began my Lyra cartridge peregrinations. I turned to the Etna SL, or super-low output, cartridge. The Etna seemed to solve the rising top end problem that has been the bane of so many moving-coil cartridges. I basked not only its mellifluous sound but also its superior transient fidelity. But then began a new audiophile itch. What, I started to wonder, about that forbidden fruit called the Atlas SL cartridge? Could the higher fidelity promised by halving the output of the cartridge—to a scant 0.25mV—also result in a purer sound that gave you the best of both worlds?

So I sent Joe Harley of AudioQuest (no relation to RH), which imports the Lyra line, an email enquiring if he might send the \$12,995 Atlas SL my way. An affirmative response followed, as Joe is, for those who have had the good fortune to meet and talk with him, a very genial fellow. I had no doubt that the Ypsilon phonostage, which relies on an outboard step-up transformer, would perfectly match the Atlas. Noise and sufficient gain would not be an issue. Like the original Atlas, the Atlas SL is manufactured from a titanium billet and features an asymmetrical body. Still, as curious I was about the new Atlas, I also wondered if it would replicate some of the original issues that prompted me to move away from the 0.56mV Atlas. Nevertheless, I couldn't resist giving it a go: No one wants to take a step backward, but to move forward a certain amount of Frederick the Great's motto is necessary—"L'audace, l'audace, toujours l'audace" ("Audacity, audacity, always audacity").

Lyra itself warns that the Atlas SL is designed for "expert users" with high-gain phonostages. If in doubt, it politely urges, "Please go with the regular Atlas.

"I'm not going to contradict that advice, but neither am I going to shillyshally. After several months of listening, I can confidently say that this is by far the best cartridge in the Lyra line. Heck, I'll go even further—this thing is sonic dynamite.

The differences between it and the other cartridges Lyra manufactures are clearly audible. The Etna SL is very, very good. But this little number is better in ways both large and small. The Atlas SL couples the suavity of the Etna SL with superior dynamics and transparency. Timbral fidelity, particularly in the bass region, is most impressive. On a Horace Parlan LP that I recently picked up in Philadelphia at a used record store, Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen's bass is beautifully rendered by the Atlas SL. On songs like "My Foolish Heart," the notes ooze out with life-like realism, lingering in the air for seconds and providing a plangent foundation for the trio. On "No Blues," the speed with which the Atlas disentangles the deep bass notes is riveting. I've never heard bass articulated this clearly without any trace of the smearing or blurring that is so common in the nether regions. (Here I should also doff

the audiophile cap to the Transparent Magnum Opus cables, which reproduce bass with impressive fidelity and about which more in the future.) Transient fidelity on drums and piano on this album also have to be classed as superior. Once again, there is no sense of a collision of notes that can sometimes be detected, or subliminally felt, on rapid, dynamic passages. On the contrary, I reveled in the solidity and crunch of a loud drum solo by Tony Inzalaco on the jazz standard "Have You Met Miss Jones?" It wasn't simply that the drums were loud but that you also experienced the dynamic explosiveness of the instrument. A similarly dynamic foundation was to be found on John Lee Hooker's rendition of "Shake it Baby" on the Impulse label, which has been re-released by Chad Kassem's Acoustic Sounds on 45rpm. The sound was crisp and emphatic; there was simply none of the dreaded overhang on the bass or drums. The Atlas SL is rock solid in reproducing transients, something that endows a rhythmic solidity to track after track.

This helps to efface a sense of electronic reproduction, substituting a natural, even leisurely quality to the proceedings—as though the performers are suspended in space, removed from the temporal constraints of time. Put bluntly, you have more of the feel of being in the studio watching the performers stretch out as opposed to having sound hurled at you.

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Another jazz album that I found quite illuminating to listen to was a Blue Note recording in stereo called Open House. It features legendary organist Jimmy Smith, who recorded frequently for Blue Note, together with Jackie McLean on alto sax, Ike Quebec on tenor sax, and Blue Mitchell on trumpet. Several things stuck out for me on this album. One was the vast amount of black space that the Atlas SL reproduced. Each instrument was firmly locked down. On the title cut "Open House" Mitchell's trumpet ripped into my listening space with an alacrity and searing quality that were unforgettable. Another thing that stood out for me was the seductive quality of the Atlas: on the mellow tune "Old Folks," Quebec's breathy tenor sax was drenched in harmonic richness with overtones galore emanating from my Wilson WAMM loudspeakers.

If soundstaging was impressive on these albums, it was also clearly evident on very delicate classical music. I often listen to Schubert songs and I whipped out an album that Jerry Gladstein, the publisher of Fi magazine, bestowed upon me a few years back after I visited him in his palatial Manhattan aerie. It's a SAX label, highly prized by the cognoscenti, recording of the stellar mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig with

Geoffrey Parsons on piano. The Atlas SL consistently placed the piano back in the rear of the hall with gobs of air between it and Ludwig. The apparent physical separation also made it easy to discern every syllable and trill that Ludwig enunciated. Spooky stuff.

There was no reduction of these qualities when it came to big orchestral music, either. One album that I'm rather fond of is a Decca SXL of blockbuster overtures recorded by the Cleveland Orchestra conducted by Lorin Maazel. Here, friends, we are in vintage Harry Pearson territory. On Verdi's *The Force of Destiny*, for example, the trumpets came blazing out of the right speaker without a hint of harshness. Ditto on Berlioz's *Roman Carnival*. The power of the orchestra is simply massive, partly a product of the speed and precision with which the bowing of the string sections is reproduced, such as the repeated triplets on Berlioz's overture, which are punctuated by jolting cymbal crashes. On Beethoven's *The Creatures of Prometheus*, the Atlas captured the unstoppable surge of the orchestra, a veritable cyclone of sound.

In stressing the high drama of the Atlas, its ability to build and resolve the suspense of orchestral crescendos, I don't mean to suggest that it is anything less than a refined and elegant performer. The basis for the Atlas' performance remains its ability to resolve minute musical details with a degree of finesse that simply eluded its lineal predecessors. Perhaps the clearest example of its ability to extract detail in a winsome fashion came on a recording that I have always regarded with fondness, a performance by trumpeters Maurice Andrew and Guy Touvron of Albinoni's concertos for two trumpets on the Angel label. It was not always easy for record labels to capture the piccolo, which operates in the tessitura range. As a child I was often vexed by the inability of my father's Dual turntable to reproduce brass instruments without fracturing the notes at critical moments. In this regard, digital has long had a leg up over analog. The equipment of yore simply wasn't up to the job of conveying the delicate and fragile passages that soar above high C. The Atlas SL, better than any cartridge I have heard, is able to soar into the ether, producing not only various high notes but also a copious amount of headroom above them.

I don't doubt that you can find more refulgent cartridges than the Atlas SL, and the tariff for this Lyra is steep. But the sonic results are hard to quarrel with. To my mind, Lyra has done a superb job of balancing transparency with purity, palpability with accuracy, to create a listening experience that is seldom less than mesmerizing.