



# Abracadabra

**Our very own Professor of Defence against the Dark Arts, Adam Smith, takes a look at the latest weapon in the battle against dastardly digital; the Design Build Listen Wand tonearm...**

Ladies and gentlemen, please be upstanding and offer suitable applause, as it would appear that we are in the presence of an award winner, no less! The awards in question are New Zealand's Best Design Awards, and the Bronze trophy in the Consumer Products category was snapped up by the very item you see before you – the Design Build Listen Wand tonearm. Naturally, designer Simon Brown must be very pleased, as it marks a radical step in his product portfolio to add to his ranges of DIY amplifiers, amplifier parts and upgrades.

As Simon himself puts it in his soft Kiwi tones, the Wand is "not your gran's gramophone"! It actually consists of an unusually large diameter (22mm) Carbon Fibre tube with a cartridge mounting plate inserted into the neatly truncated tube end with holes above for ease of access to fixing screws. This effectively does away with the headshell as such, and measurements of such designs in the past suggest that this goes a long way to ameliorating the headshell resonances that can cause high frequency issues.

Once again, the Wand bears this out, with a pleasingly smooth higher frequency vibration performance [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE]. Another bonus is that the angled end of the tube obviates the need for a separate finger lift. Although I am yet to be convinced that these are actually the sonic disaster area some tweakers would claim, they are often inelegant afterthoughts, so the Wand sidesteps the whole issue very neatly.

At the bearing end, the tube is set in a compact but very heavy machined billet of stainless steel, 50mm in diameter, forming the bearing housing. This has a cutout on the underside into which the support pillar sits and various combinations of plates are fitted to the rear according to the mass of the cartridge fitted. These plates are adjustable laterally to balance the arm in the port-starboard plane and a large bolt screws in and out to provide fine tracking force adjustment. Wiring is of the Cardas variety in one continuous run from headshell tags

to phono plugs, although Design Build Listen does offer a short lead/no plugs option for terminations inside the turntable itself. As can be seen, no cueing device is fitted but Simon dropped a hint that the Wand may well be followed by other, higher specification designs which remedy this omission.

As standard, the Wand has a simple single-hole fixing but Rega and SME mounting plates are available and both were supplied with the review arm. As my Garrard 301 sports an SME cutout I made use of the latter and found it very well made and a perfect fit. Setup of the Wand is a little more involved than many arms, although certainly no less complex than some other unipivots, but a very clear and well illustrated set of instructions walk you through each step of the process in a concise manner. Finally, glowing mention has to be made of the superb stainless steel tool provided with the arm, which is a combined height gauge, alignment protractor,





cartridge alignment jig and spanner for tightening the main support rod. It's beautifully made and very cleverly thought out!

Appearance-wise, the arm is very well finished and has a magnificently purposeful air. I even thought I detected more than a hint of the mighty Continuum Cobra tonearm in its appearance, mainly thanks to the gloriously chunky main tube. My Ortofon 2M Black cartridge was less convinced however – it took one look at the Wand and hid itself in the depths of my vinyl toolbox...

### SOUND QUALITY

Having coaxed the Ortofon out of hiding and successfully fitted it, I was keen to know just what sort of magic spell the Wand would weave on me. Dropping the stylus into the lead-in groove of Caro Emerald's 'Back It Up' definitely caused my eyebrow to head northwards as the bass line kicked in. This is a punchy and rhythmic track and the Wand snapped itself straight into action, delivering a deliciously fruity and taut beat that

music-making. Whereas sometimes instruments can be lent something of a 'flavour' by an arm, albeit often a very palatable one, the Wand gave the sense that it was pulling exactly what needed to be heard from the record, without adding or subtracting anything. Drum skins sounded taut and realistic, and acoustic guitars had just the right sense of impact to the

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leading edges of their string plucks. Equally, the tail ends of the notes faded away with timing such that nothing seemed on top of each other, yet there was no sense of disjointedness.

Things were even better with classical music, as here the Wand really started to work its magic. Violins are never an easy instrument to reproduce at the best of times, straddling a thin line between veiled and screechy, but the Wand parked itself on that line expertly. As a result, Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' rang out in my listening room and, as the neighbours happened to be on holiday, I took great delight in pushing the volume to decidedly antisocial levels, and spent a good fifteen minutes or so grinning manically to myself and conducting an imaginary orchestra with gusto!

The Wand has an unerring ability to really draw you into its performance with its sheer musical vivacity, although being ultra critical, I would have liked to have heard a little more stage depth. It had no trouble in setting up very well focused images between and to the sides of my loudspeakers, nor did it effect any unease at projecting out at me, but I was aware of a rather abrupt cessation of action behind the plane of the loudspeakers. Ultimately, the likes of the Jelco SA-750D and the Roksan Nima both fare a little better in this respect.

However, where the Wand once again showed its top form was in its treble performance. Again, that well designed carbon fibre tube seems to be offering a strikingly impressive neutrality to the top end, never making things overblown or spitty, but imbuing

high frequency detail with a glorious fluidity. This ensures that everything that needs to be heard is expertly captured and, once again, I found the Wand grabbing my attention by just the right amount to make sure that I missed nothing. The triangles used at the back of the orchestra were vividly outlined within the main action, whereas so often they can

drift off into the background – and a shattering crash of orchestral cymbals made me jump by just the right amount.

Even more encouraging was the way in which the Wand moulded itself easily into any style of music. Although impressed by its abilities with 'proper' instruments, which had made up the majority of my listening initially, a good slice of 1980s electronica from Jean Michel Jarre showed that the arm was equally happy with something much less acoustic.

### CONCLUSION

I would say it is almost impossible not to fall for the Wand's charms. I love the styling, which succeeds on a purely visual level by being neat and yet very purposeful; it makes most other arms look skinny and ineffective! It is easy to set up thanks to clear instructions and the magnificent alignment widget but, most importantly, it sounds excellent. It captures the innate essence of a good unipivot and adds in a healthy dose of the strengths of a conventionally pivoted arm. The result is an effective crowd pleaser in most areas. If this really is, as Simon Brown suggests, the first of a range of arms then I can't wait to see where he will go next. As a first attempt, the Wand has certainly worked its magic on me.

#### REFERENCE SYSTEM

Ortofon 2M Black cartridge  
Sondex DE-1 phono stage  
Naim Supernait amplifier  
Leak 2075 loudspeakers (modified)

#### VERDICT

Unique, fine sounding and visually striking tonearm that represents super value for money.

**DBL WAND** (approx.) £400

Design Build Listen

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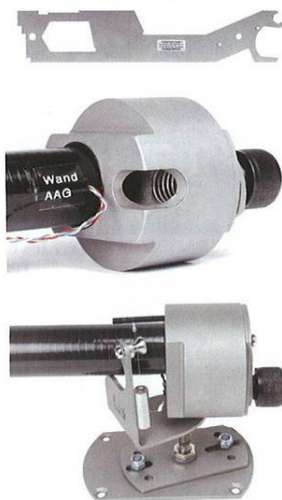
[www.designbuildlisten.com](http://www.designbuildlisten.com)

#### FOR

- excellent bass
- midband lyricism
- sweet, fluid treble
- supplied alignment widget

#### AGAINST

- curtailed image depth



is most unlike some of its unipivot contemporaries. In fact, as I listened further I became aware that the low end is a real strength of the Wand, as it captures bass lines expertly and never seems to run out of puff or feel that it is lacking authority. Much as I am a fan of unipivots generally, this is one area in which many can be a little wanting, but the Wand was right up there with the likes of the Simon Yorke S9 arm and the Audio Origami Uniarm in terms of low end weight.

Fortunately, this was not the only trick up the Wand's sleeve. It has a delightfully expressive and emotive midrange with a lovely and ever-present sense of purity to its

### MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The DBL's large diameter arm tube has a first bending mode at a high 320Hz, our analysis shows. There are two related modes, second order at 640Hz and the more common third order mode at 960Hz, but all are very well damped, showing this is another stiff arm and a well damped one. The high frequency energy pattern above 1kHz is different to conventional pattern headshell arms and this arm looks like it will have little colour or character and clean, easy treble. NK

#### ARM VIBRATION

