

Dream machine

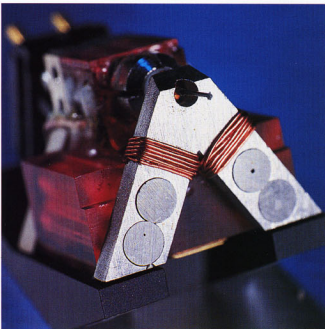
Jason Kennedy grooves on down to a simply stunning new last word in cartridges.

I know what you're thinking. A review of a cartridge that costs as much as a serious mountain bike, in an era of digital domination? These guys must be nuts. And I guess it's true, we are nuts. About great sound, especially when it comes from the most enduring format of the 20th century. But we also realise that this kind of thing is like a Ferrari: pretty impractical for the average man in the street. But it's great to dream, and even at this price it's not as unreachable as a Ferrari if you're a truly dedicated music lover.

There's almost no limit to the amount of refinement that can be lavished on a top of the range cartridge, not in the eyes of Nobu Tominari of Dynavector at least. At two and a half grand, the DRT XV-1 is the most extreme cartridge he's produced and it's one of the most radical looking to boot. The front elevation reveals a deep 'V' section which is described as the cartridge's yoke and carries stabilising coils, these combined with a flux equalising piece in the magnetic gap are said to produce an extremely homogenous and linear magnetic field around the coils. The latter only manage to produce 0.3mV of output, which even for a moving coil is insubstantial, but it didn't require any extra step-up or changes of sensitivity to my Groove phono stage to give of its best. Dynavector makes a phono head amp (MC to MM, £1,500) especially for this and its other cartridges, but it wasn't included with the package sent down by distributor Pear Audio.

One point that caught my imagination when reading the literature for this needle was the use of no less than eight alnico magnets. I'm not so sure that numbers are what counts with magnets, it's more the way the material is used, but I know that alnico is about as good as a magnetic material gets when it comes to hi-fi. You won't find alnico in many products because it's a relatively scarce and expensive material, but it features in some pretty stunning cartridges, like the Audio Note lo and van den Hul Grasshopper, as well as the older Lowther and Tannoy loudspeaker drive units, which makes it pretty choice stuff.

The XV-1 is unusual in other respects too, it weighs plenty – 13.5 grams to be precise – which is more than some arms are happy with, but most will accommodate if supplied with a higher mass counterweight. Elsewhere it's equipped with a boron cantilever and a line contact stylus. Downforce required is the ever-popular two grams that you find with the majority of low compliance MCs these days, and it prefers a 30 Ohm load at the phono stage.



Sound quality

I used the XV-1 in the stalwart SME Model 20 with Model V tonearm, a robust and precise machine that constantly impresses with its Zen-like lack of ego. The Dynavector followed a van den Hul Grasshopper II GLA into the half-inch stocks and was fed via Audio Note silver interconnects to the aforementioned Tom Evans Groove phono stage.

Initial impressions were extremely positive and these thoughts remained, whatever I clamped on the platter. Its balance is darker than that of the Grasshopper; the top end seems a little shy and the bass simply prodigious in depth and quality. In fact the best vinyl bass I've heard outside of a Townshend Rock Reference. It's also very sensitive to level changes, or dynamics, within the music and likes nothing more than some heavyweight material to get its teeth into.

Depth of image is very strong as well. This is an area where serious record players can usually outgun great CD players, but in this case we were in *absolut spitzenklasse* league, as our German counterparts used to say. From Yo La Tengo to Keith Jarrett, the space resolved between and behind performers was never less than extraordinary. There are of course plenty of LPs which are short on space and the XV-1 couldn't put it in, but there is a surprising amount of 'air' on a lot of recordings. One disc that really surprised me in this respect was the original Hot Tuna album, a live recording that Paul Messenger put me onto and which has always sounded great. With the Dynavector doing the transcoding, the speakers disappeared to reveal an in-room presence that was one hundred per cent tangible. Gobsacking doesn't do it justice.

Timbre is equally well reproduced, with both instruments and voices showing depth and colour that's usually denied to them. In particular, Terry Callier singing *Ordinary Joe* and saxophones on a variety of discs had more depth, resonance and individuality than I've previously encountered. Brass can often sound too brash and hard, but with the XV-1 you get all the energy, colour and shine without the shriek.

Conclusion

This cartridge is pretty damn special, it's extremely natural in balance but is capable of reproducing every nuance that the record player lets it get out of the groove, and with a solidity and assurance that makes some of the competition seem nervous. If you have a decent record collection and matching turntable and are prepared to give up all your evenings to audio gratification, I suggest you audition this remarkable beast. If not, then keep dreaming.

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£2,500 Pear Audio ☎ (01665) 830862