

productreview

Zavfino 1877Phono ZV-5 Turntable + Aeshna Tonearm



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In a recurring dream, I'm driving along a nameless country road on a sunny spring day when I come upon a garage sale. After spotting a few milk crates holding dozens of pristine 180 gram Mobile Fidelity vinyl records, I ask an elderly lady tending watch over the sale: "Do you have any more records like these?"

"No..." she answers flatly, "but I do have a record player that goes with them."

She leads me down to a basement 'man cave' and explains that, as her husband recently passed away, she has no reason to keep any of his toys. Sitting on an equipment rack are a Clearaudio Master Innovation Wood turntable, a Clearaudio TT-2 tonearm, and a Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement cartridge - together totaling

about \$55,000 US.

"How much do you want for this record player...?" I ask, trying to remain calm.

"How 'bout \$500... cash. That's half of what my husband said he paid for it."

And then I wake up.

Yes... sadly... it was a dream. If I ever win the lottery, though, I'd happily purchase a "reference calibre" 2-channel vinyl rig like the Clearaudio one I keep dreaming about.

One way to get closer to the last 5% of what can be achieved in sound quality is to go the D.I.Y. (do-it-yourself) route. Accordingly, when my editor at CANADA HiFi asked if I'd like to review the Zavfino 1877Phono ZV-5 turntable and Aeshna carbon-fibre tonearm, I jumped at the

chance.

design | features

1877Phono has been offering cables, components, and accessories to OEMs and the DIY market for over 15 years. Their first turntables - the ZV-5 series - and Aeshna tonearms were released in 2015.

In an email, CEO Will Trem explained: "1877 is the year that Edison invented the phonograph, so when we started the company... it felt like the perfect fit for a company name."

He further added: "Aeshna is a genus of dragon flies and I used this name because, when I started the production and development of the arm 3 years ago, my two

daughters (aged 5 and 8) always called it ‘the dragonfly’ when they were in my workshop.”

The Zavfino 1877Phono website describes the ZV-5 as: “Each of our custom, hand-painted, limited edition turntables requires up to one month to create and is painstakingly detailed, pinstriped, and airbrushed before it is protected by two coats of PU piano lacquer. The heart of the ‘table is a Zavfino engineered 50mm CNC-machined plinth, with a 35mm diamond cut aluminium platter utilizing a stainless-steel bearing, ceramic ball / POM thrust plate set-up for a super smooth rotation without noise or vibration.

The motor is housed in a four-piece aluminium housing independent from the ‘table... ..In addition, the motor is paired with our own power regenerator / regulator, guaranteeing smooth and stable 33.3 rpm or 45 rpm operation. Each ‘table comes standard with an Aeshna tonearm [which is] available in various combinations of carbon-fibre or aluminium and internal wiring (Pure Silver Ag, OCC Copper, or OFHC Copper).”

The ZV-5 plinth is available in Satin Black, Birch Two-Tone, and various custom finishes. The standard finishes are equipped with the Aeshna tonearm, a 5-pin DIN to RCA phono interconnect, and retail for \$3,200. Custom hand-painted finishes come with the upgraded carbon fiber tonearm and retails for \$5,540. The only thing you’ll need to purchase separately is a moving-coil (M/C) cartridge. My review unit came in the striking custom Badlands finish, outfitted with a carbon fiber tonearm.

As expected with this caliber of turntable, to get the ZV-5 up and running, you need to load the ball bearing, install the platter and secure the tonearm to the plinth. To accurately set this TT up, you will also need: a stylus force gauge to measure the tracking force weight; a fozgometer to set the azimuth, a test record and/or WallySkater to dial-in the anti-skating and a cartridge alignment tangency tool (i.e. MFSL’s Geo-Disc).

The kit comes with a handheld tachymeter to measure the ZV-5 platter’s rotation speed, which can be fine tuned via the outboard power regenerator / regulator.

If you’re new to turntables and have no idea of what VTF or VTA is, I’d recom-

mend getting a seasoned ‘table guru to assist you with the set-up process. After taking the time to precisely dial-in this TT rig, I achieved a far higher level of sound quality.

performance

Listening to and feeling music is an extraordinarily personal experience. So is cartridge selection. What brings goosebumps and immense musical pleasure to one listener may leave another feeling cold and disinterested. The Aeshna tonearm does not come with a cartridge. Zavfino 1877Phono recommends using an M/C cartridge that weighs between 5 grams and 15 grams.

During my listening tests, I tried several M/C cartridges ranging in price from \$1,399 to \$6,400, including the Clearaudio Concept, Benz-Micro L0.4, Lyra Delos, Sumiko Pearwood Celebration Mk#2 and Van den Hul Colibri XGP Gold Reference Mk#2.

After setting the azimuth, tangency, and VTF for each one, I spent a week or so auditioning the sound created by the various set-ups.

For phono stages, I alternated between a Sonic Frontiers Phono-1 S.E. and a Manley Labs Steelhead. I’ve owned both units for about 15 years and know, at an intimate level, the sound that each one creates.

To my ears, the ZV-5 + Aeshna rig produced the most cohesive and believable sound with the Sumiko Pearwood Celebration Mk#2 M/C cartridge. While the other cartridges excelled in certain specific areas-- the Van den Hul Colibri, for example, had the fastest transients and an astonishing amount of detail in the higher frequencies—in the aggregate, the Sumiko created the most goosebumps and musical enjoyment.

Again, this is very much a personal choice in what kind of sound an end-user is trying to get to. The wood bodied Benz-Micro M/C cartridge also sounded particularly good (read: warm and natural) with the Aeshna tonearm.

The ZV-5 + Aeshna combo produced an impressive amount of sonic information. Subtle tonal shades in vocals and instrumental timbres which I’d not previously noticed on records which I’m intimately familiar with were suddenly right ‘there’ with a jaw-dropping resolution and tim-

bral accuracy.

High frequencies were airy, clear, and detailed without any artifice, edge, or fatiguing harshness. Mid-bass and low frequency notes were taut, had excellent extension, and were communicated with a natural warmth, weight, and authority. Midrange vocals sounded organic and real.

I compared the ZV-5 + Aeshna + Sumiko Pearwood Celebration Mk#2 set-up with the following TT rigs:

A) my long time ‘bang-for-the-buck’ heavily modified Rega P-25 + RB-600 arm + Benz-Micro L0.4 M/C cartridge (as set-up with mods ~\$4,000);

B) my recently acquired Rega RP-8 + RB-808 arm + Rega Apheta v2 M/C cartridge (\$4,995 total);

C) a friend’s VPI HRX ‘table + VPI JMW 12.7 arm (\$18,499) + a Dynavector DRT XV-1S M/C cartridge (\$5,950);

And D) another audiophile bud’s Avid Acutus TT + SME V tonearm (\$28,900) and Lyra Etna M/C cartridge (\$8,995 US).

In terms of resolution, imaging, PRaT, cohesiveness, and overall musicality, the ZV-5 + Aeshna + Sumiko combo punched well above its retail price point and sounded closest to the VPI HRX + JMW 12.7 + Dynavector vinyl rig. Both of these ‘tables use inverted bearings and outboard motors. And although the VPI system produced more detail, faster transient speed, and superior timbral accuracy, I could happily live with either one. Keep in mind that the Zavfino + Sumiko rig costs about one-third of what the VPI HRX + JMW 12.7 retails for.

Recorded in London England at Addison Studios in January 1971, Emerson, Lake, & Palmer’s (ELP’s) second album Tarkus (1994 re-release MFSL-1-203) features a half-side concept album which, thematically speaking, is structured around a mechanized armadillo doing battle with a mythical beast known as the Manticore.

Featuring Keith Emerson on keyboards, Greg Lake on vocals and guitars, and Carl Palmer on drums and percussion, Tarkus is a prog-rock masterpiece of technically near-impossible to play music. And hearing the virtuoso musicianship of this monstrous album played through the ZV-5 + Aeshna combo reminded me, with shivering goosebumps, of why I love the sound of vinyl records so much.

All of the pace, rhythm, and timing



The Zavfino 1877Phono ZV-5 Turntable outfitted with the Aeshna Tonearm shown in a Satin Black finish.

(PRaT) which makes listening to this album such a breathtaking experience was there; in spades. From the bouncy playfulness of songs like “Jeremy Bender” to the knife-edge musical intensity of the entire 28 minute, 7 song “Tarkus” opus, the ZV-5 + Aeshna combo allowed me to get far closer to the music-- and to what the musicians in ELP had intended an audience to hear—than I’ve ever gotten with digital formats.

Switching gears from prog-rock to jazz, I next tried Analogue Productions’ 180 gram LP re-issue of Duke Ellington’s This One’s for Blanton (APJ 015).

The spaciousness and echoes contained on this record and the way, in particular, that Ray Brown’s bass is offset against Duke Ellington’s piano playing is striking. With the ZV-5 + Aeshna rig, the timbre of instruments sounded warm, lush, and organic; as they do in real life. Listening to a high-quality vinyl pressing of Blanton, the air, space, and resonance of the piano and bass could both be heard with a tactile resolution.

Switching back to prog-rock, I next chose Rush’s 1978 Hemispheres (Anthem ANR-1-1014). In a similar vein as ELP’s Tarkus, the entire first side of Hemispheres is a ‘concept’ album.

The main theme of the first side’s concept opus examines the battle between the two sides of the brain: the rational and logical side versus the artistic and creative side (i.e. the two hemispheres of conscious thought).

Listening to this monstrous album played through the ZV-5 + Aeshna TT rig gave me goosebumps. In particular, songs on the second side of the record like “The Trees”, “Circumstances”, and the epic 9½ minute instrumental “La Villa Strangiato” had me drifting off to cherished memories in my not-too-distant past. And to so distinctly connect with music in this fashion, to sink into it at such a profoundly deep spiritual level, truly is a remarkable thing.

Any listener with a sub-\$2,000 “entry level” turntable who’s searching for a better sounding vinyl rig should audition the Zavfino 1877Phono ZV-5 ‘table and Aeshna tonearm.

The satin black version of the ZV-5 comes equipped with the Aeshna tonearm and retails for \$3,200. Hand-painted finishes, like the Badlands finish reviewed here, comes with the upgraded carbon fiber tonearm and retails for \$5,540. The sound quality of these TT rigs will easily beat most others in the \$9K to \$12K price range.

The one caveat is this: the end-user will have to have the tools and knowledge to precisely set this ‘table and arm up. Through exhaustive testing and retesting, tiny changes in set-up consistently resulted in a vastly improved sound quality.

Zavfino 1877Phono’s goal of offering high quality sound at a more accessible price point has been achieved. While similar belt drive ‘tables with outboard motors can be found from other manufacturers, you will have to pay a lot more money—two or three times more money—to get the same quality of sound from your records that the Zavfino ZV-5 + Aeshna rig delivers.

quickinfo

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Zavfino 1877Phono ZV-5 Turntable
with Aeshna Tonearm
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