Art Dudley

Madder Music, Stronger Wine

Janet watched the record spin wildly, mildly awestruck. She nodded its way—a gesture that took in all the other 78rpm discs piled nearby—and asked, "How long have you had those?"

"I got most of them in the '70s, when I was still in my teens," I said. "Some of those records were left behind by my stepfather's first wife, and I've carted them around ever since. I can't tell you how many times I've come close to throwing them out."

"Well, they really saved your ass today, didn't they?"

Remembering the Victrola

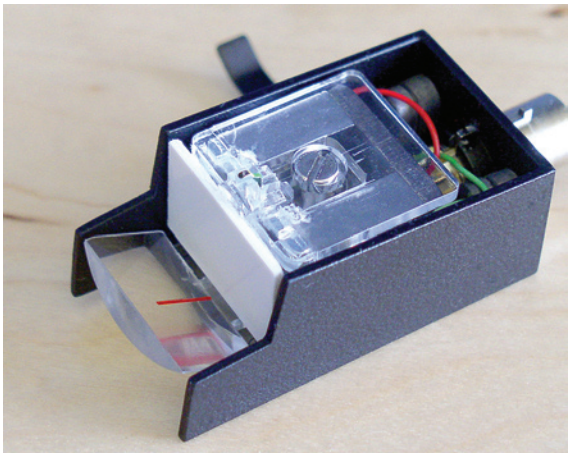
It started as a joke. With gasoline prices rising daily, my wife and I have had many a dinnertime conversation about buying a Toyota Prius or similar car—that's not the joke part—and we often wonder what other belts will have to be tightened, now that our wasteful way of life has begun to twirl down the toilet. Will the speed limits on our highways be lowered to 55, as they were in the late 1970s? Will the travel agency where Janet works go out of business? If fruit and vegetable prices are driven through the roof by the cost of diesel fuel, will we have to grow our own? Will our electric service suffer brownouts—or worse?

After a long, pleasant dinner on a Friday evening in June, with an open bottle of wine still on the table, the answers weren't as serious as they should have been: We could buy a horse. We could buy a windmill. We could build a greenhouse. We could sell the hi-fi, spend the money on horses and lumber, and listen to 78s on my wind-up Victrola.

As so often happens when the conversation turns to something I'd forgotten I own, I became restless: I had to find the thing at once, just to see if it still worked. I excused myself and went upstairs to the guest room, where my 85-year-old music system waited for me: a shockingly modern thing in which the source component, amplifier, and loudspeaker were all engineered together in one elegant hardwood box. I looked around for my carton of 78s—they turned out to be in the basement, which wasn't at all smart of me—and for the bag full of extra needles I'd stuck somewhere.

Only then did I remember: *My Thorens*. My Thorens TD 124 can play 78s.

The next day, I remembered a few other things as well: The record-cleaning fluid I use, made in France by a company called L'Art du Son, is safe for shellac records. The 10" platter mat on my borrowed Keith Monks record-cleaning machine is just right for 78rpm singles. And the EMT pickup head I recently bought for playing mono records, the OFD 25 ($1800), is also available in a special version for playing 78s, the OFD 65 (also $1800). I called Jonathan Halpern of Tone Imports (www.toneimports.com), the EMT distributor, and he offered to send a review sample—along with another interesting toy.



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Playing 78s

Magnetic cartridges meant for playing 78s are still available from six manufacturers: EMT, Grado, Ortofon, Rega, Shure, and Stanton. Whether they were *designed* for this application is another matter entirely—most appear to be little more than a stereo cartridge in which a special-purpose stylus has been installed.

EMT and Ortofon seem to be the only companies that make cartridges *expressly* for 78s. Mechanically and electrically, their 78-specific models are designed to read horizontal groove modulations only, with signals appearing only on their right-channel pins: They are, in other words, true monophonic pickups. Not only that, but their suspensions exhibit the very low compliances made necessary by very high downforces—the latter required by 78s' high amplitude levels and generally uneven surfaces—and their *spherical* stylus tips are the correct diameter for standard pre-LP record grooves: 65µm. (A 25µm tip is regarded as the correct size for a monophonic *microgroove*; a stereo microgroove can be tracked with a tip of 15µm or less.)

The EMT OFD 65 sent to me by Tone Imports is outwardly similar to the company's other pickup heads: an aluminum-alloy headshell with a built-in magnifying loupe at one end and an SME-style four-pin plug at the other—and, of course, an integral moving-coil cartridge, hidden from dust and prying eyes by a belly pan of light metal that's simply pressed into place. The cartridge's 4.25mV output is high for a moving coil—but slightly lower than that of the OFD 25, for some reason—and its DC resistance is 25 ohms, indicating the need for a step-up transformer with a low turns ratio.

The EMT's most colorful spec, of course, is its recommended downforce of 9gm—a little more than seven times the downforce recommended for an Empire 10PE. Audionerds will titter over that number in the manner of schoolboys who've just discovered the word *damn* in their classroom dictionary. Let them: After all, if you drop this sort of phono cartridge on the floor and

it lands face down, you're more worried about the floor than the stylus.

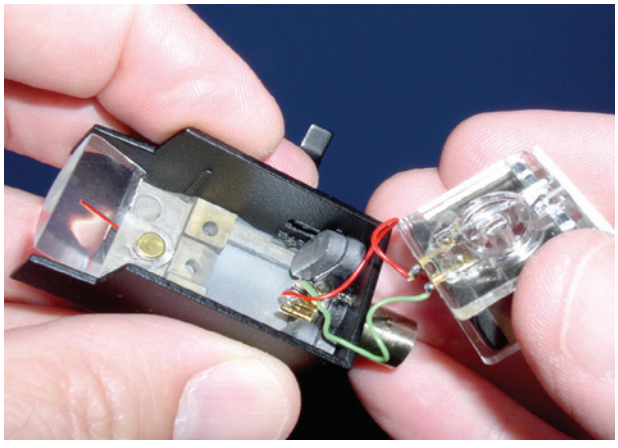
The OFD 65's generator is contained within a square little box of metal and clear plastic—the former accounted for by its combination of oblong magnets and polepieces, the latter by the upper and lower plates that sandwich the works together. The metal lever that holds the stylus—*cantilever* seems the wrong word altogether—extends straight down through the bottom, then takes a double bend before flattening out to the nib on which the stylus is mounted. The EMT's coil, which appears to have a greater number of turns than average for a moving-coil type, is snugged deep inside; to see it, you'd have to crack the thing open with a sturdy tool: a hammer, perhaps—or another OFD 65.

Paths of enlightenment

My microgroove-friendly OFD 25, which also has a spherical stylus tip, is designed to track at 5gm. Because the downforce mechanism on my EMT 997 tonearm maxes out at 5gm, the OFD 25 is an easy thing to use: All I have to do is fasten it to the end of the tonearm tube, adjust the counterweight until the arm is perfectly balanced, and pull the downforce lever all the way forward. (Because all EMT pickup heads have the same stylus-to-collar dimension of 32mm, they can be interchanged in a properly installed arm without the need to adjust overhang.)

At first I didn't worry about setting up the OFD 65, until it dawned on me that no downforce gauge on the market has a range extending beyond 3 or 4gm. (I'm talking about real consumer products, not overpriced kits cobbled together out of Plexiglas and postage scales.) Then I remembered something that Jonathan Halpern of Tone Imports had told me about EMT: Because their O-series pickup heads are derived from the professional models sold to broadcast studios, they're designed to be interchanged quickly, without having to readjust overhang *or stylus pressure*. The latter is made possible at the factory, by adding specific combinations of 1gm weights to the headshells: The OFD 25, which tracks at 5gm, weighs 33gm total; the OFD 65, which requires an extra 4gm of force, weighs 37gm total. Cool.

Other paths of enlightenment were closed to me, such as the quest to know the horizontal and vertical resonant frequencies of the combined EMT OFD 65 pickup head and EMT 997 tonearm: I don't suppose the stereo microgroove of the *Hi-Fi News & Record Review Test LP* would survive many plays with a 65µm stylus.



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As with the OFD 25, the OFD 65 responded well to resistive loads of less than 47k ohms, notwithstanding its very high output. Similarly, its treble range was sweeter and more natural when the cartridge drove my K&K step-up transformer—even though its output didn't *need* to be stepped up.

And, as serious record mavens know, *reliably* accurate frequency response can't be achieved when playing shellac records through most modern phono preamps: Standardized equalization curves for recording and playing back phonograph records didn't become a commercial reality until the late 1950s, and because every record company adhered to a different set of specs for their 78rpm discs, the fidelity-conscious collector is forced to adjust playback EQ on the fly. To that end, a number of manufacturers offer phono preamps with user-selectable EQ curves beyond just the RIAA standard.

Consequently, Jonathan Halpern also loaned me a Sentec EQ10: a monophonic phono preamp ($3000) with line-level output and nicely marked controls for adjusting bass rolloff, bass-boost turnover frequency, treble-cut turnover frequency, and output attenuation. The last made it especially easy to precede the EQ10 with a step-up transformer, for ideal electrical loading without excessive gain at the line stage. A detailed review of the Sentec is beyond the scope of this month's column, and may or may not interest a sufficient number of *Stereophile* readers to justify a "Follow-Up" at a later date.

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But the tube-driven EQ10 did nothing to detract from the EMT pickups' superb sense of flow and momentum, and added no detectable hum or noise to the music: a joy to use.

Let's play

With the hardware ready to go, I turned my attention to the modest collection of 78s in my basement. They were disgusting: damp, smelly, and overgrown with more moss than an old jar of olives.

Now, more than ever, I was glad to have a Keith Monks record-cleaning machine on hand. I looked around for the squirt bottle I use for mixing the cleaning-fluid concentrate with distilled *Holy Christ there's something's floating in the cleaning fluid!!* I've lived next to a farm for a relatively short time, so I'm still jumpy whenever I stumble on something that's dead and not where it should be. I then realized that it was just more mold. Time for a fresh batch of fluid.

The cleaner did the trick—visually, at least—and I began working my way through the few dozen 78s I've accumulated. Collectibles? I doubt it. Shellac records by pop bandleaders such as Harry James, Stan Kenton, and Guy Lombardo are in no greater demand

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than LPs by Herb Alpert or Bent Fabric, and in one especially thick album of discs I found a distressing number of frothy singles by Leroy Anderson. *Plus ça change*. But I do own an Elvis single (too bad it's on RCA instead of Sun), as well as a couple of complete symphonies, including a really passionate Tchaikovsky Symphony 6, the *Pathétique*, recorded by Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra at the end of 1936.

The first number I tried came from an album of pop singles: the Irving Fields Trio performing W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues." The opening bars startled me, if only because I wasn't expecting anything quite so subtle or percussive: a hushed two-measure figure played by the upright bass and doubled by the pianist's left hand, with gentle tapping on a side drum without snares (or maybe a small tom-tom). Then Fields came in with his right hand, and the group kicked into gear—by which time the bass sounded *electric*, in every sense of the word. The piano never became harsh, even in the loudest chords, and cymbal crashes were shockingly clean: They didn't have the natural decay of the real thing, but neither did they have that whipcrack distortion one hears on very old acoustic 78s.

I heard a backcurrent of shellac hash when I lowered the needle to the lead-in groove, of course, yet while it remained audible for the whole of the record, the music—remember that stuff?—was sufficiently clean and loud and *convincing* that I could ignore the noise entirely. The experience was, in fact, a perfect example how an analog record with even a moderate amount of distortion can be more listenable than the best digital format: In the former, most of the distortion is separate from the music signal; in the latter, *all* of the distortion is woven into the music itself.

I moved on to the Tchaikovsky, and was charmed and surprised all over again. The original recording—which would have been direct to disc, of course—must have been extremely well engineered: Instrumental timbres were more real, much less colored, than on a good many microgroove records from the 1950s. (I'm thinking Toscanini's Studio 8H recordings for RCA in particular, with their oddly pinched mids.) More important, the sound was *extremely* dramatic, with clean peaks and a superior sense of scale. Instruments seemed tangible and real, and while there wasn't the same degree of sonic presence as in the best modern recordings, there was an extraordinary kind of *musical* presence—of musical lines that were all but impossible to ignore. On the downside, the audible frequency range was moderately less wide than what n most discs, with the top-end rolloff more noticeable than that of the bass. (Actually, the most notable exceptions were those darned Leroy Anderson discs, chief among them the insufferably precious "Fiddle Faddle" b/w "The Trumpeter's Lullaby." Figures.)

I can't begin to guess how the EMT OFD 65 stacks up against other 78-specific cartridges. But I can tell you how EMT's ostensibly similar OFD 25 stacks up against other mono microgroove cartridges: It's by far the most vividly colorful and exciting mono cartridge I've ever heard. Switching to my OFD 25 after a few sides with any other cartridge or pickup head is always like inviting the Wild Man of Borneo to an Amish funeral: unsubtle, unforgettable, and the sort of experience that only a few will wish to repeat. The OFD 25 sounds big and, for lack of a better word, *juicy*, and it has superb impact and unbeatable flow and momentum. The bottom octave may be tipped up a little, but what the hell: Life is brief.

A good exercise

I can't begin to guess whether I'll ever want to own an OFD 65. Right now I have fewer than fifty 78s—and with a program time of less than five minutes per side for even the largest (12") of them, that's not a whole lot of music.

That could change. People offer cheap or even *free* 78s all the time (along with copies of Vaughn Meader's *The First Family*, Herb Alpert's *Whipped Cream and Other Delights*, and *Frampton Comes Alive!*). If I luck into a collection of sides by Dock Boggs, the Skillet Lickers, or the Quintet of the Hot Club of France, I'll almost certainly buy an OFD 65 the same day. I could pay for it by selling every Mercury Living Presence Stereo LP in my collection: a poetic way to avoid growing sick of an old passion. But the prospect of a free classical collection on 78s would be less tempting. Getting up and walking over to the record player a dozen times during Beethoven's Symphony 9 is not my idea of fun—although, as Janet has pointed out, it's good exercise. Which ties in to the whole energy-crisis thing.

Good fidelity

Back in my college days, when I worked part-time at a little hi-fi shop in upstate New York, I remember telling people: There's no such thing as a "classical speaker" or a "jazz speaker"—or, least of all, a "rock speaker." Any kind of record you want to hear should be served well by any good system. Playing records is all about fidelity to the signal in the groove: nothing more and nothing less.

What a load of shit!

Spinning wildly

She stood in the doorway with a smile on her face—I'd heard her saying *Ah* and *Wow* from the next room for the past few minutes—and asked, "Who's that we're listening to now?"

"Bing Crosby," I said, "with the Lennie Heyton Orchestra. 'I've got the World on a String.' This was recorded in 1931."

I paused in amazement at what I'd just said: We were listening to a record made the same year James Whale directed *Frankenstein*. Edison was still alive. Mahler had been dead for only 20 years, Brahms for only 34.

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