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IN SEARCH OF THE EXCEPTIONAL

LISTENING BY ART DUDLEY

THIS ISSUE: Art's enthusiasm
for phono transformers
has yet to wind down.

Windings & Washings: Two Ways to Maximize LP Playback

VINYL CLEANER PRO

At the 2016 Consumer Electronics Show, the German firm Audiodesksysteme Gläss and its US distributor, Ultra Systems, announced a new version of the Vinyl Cleaner—Audiodesk's wet-wash/blow-dry, ultrasonic record-cleaning machine. Although its name might be taken to mean otherwise, the Vinyl Cleaner Pro (\$4199) is the latest edition of its well-known forebear, not an upmarket stable-mate. That said, as Robert Stein of Ultra Systems points out, various refinements to the Vinyl Cleaner have resulted in a 20% increase in the cost of making the Pro. And *that* being said, given the current strength of the dollar *vs* the euro, the US retail price of the Vinyl Cleaner Pro actually reflects a modest *decrease*: When I first wrote about it, in the March 2015 *Stereophile*,² the Vinyl Cleaner's suggested retail price was \$4450.

Also remarkable: Since 2009, when the first Vinyl Cleaners hit the market, Audiodesksysteme has sold over 5100 of the things. For a very expensive record-cleaning machine, that's not at all bad.

Outwardly, the Pro appears identical to the original Vinyl Cleaner, save for the word *Pro* on the acrylic control panel, and the large Audiodesksysteme Gläss logo engraved on the front—which, like the enclosure's other surfaces, is made of a polymer that appears to have a very high fibrous content. (In that regard, it reminds me of the material used to make Eminent Technology's Tonearm 2.) A closer look reveals a couple of other differences: On the Pro, the cap on its cleaning-fluid drain, mounted on the rear panel, is about 1.3" in diameter and made of plastic, in contrast to the original's much smaller knurled-metal plug and smaller-diameter drain hole. On the original, the rear panel itself was threaded to accept that drain plug; in the Pro, the drain cap conceals a threaded pipe that protrudes from the panel—an arrangement that would seem to ensure an easier repair should the hapless user accidentally strip those threads.

Also, it seemed to me that the Pro's fluid-level indicator—a 3"-tall clear window on the front, behind which bobs a white plastic float—has a more unambiguously flat top, making it easier to assess at a glance the amount of cleaning fluid inside. Indeed, when first filling my

sample of the Pro, after I'd tipped in about a gallon of distilled water, I could clearly hear a satisfying *thock* as the top of the float contacted the upper limit of its travel.

Both versions of the Vinyl Cleaner are designed to be kept filled with distilled water, and have a capacity of 4.5 liters—about 1 gallon and 3 cups. A red LED on the control panel warns when there's insufficient fluid, and 1 gallon on the nose appeared to be enough to keep my sample from flashing its light. The idea is to fill the machine enough that, during its wash cycle—at which time an electric pump pushes the fluid up from its bottom-level storage tank and into the cleaning chamber, and keeps it there until the drying cycle is about to begin—there's enough liquid to cover the modulated area of the disc, but not the label. Also, the Vinyl Cleaner's filtration system works by allowing the fluid to spill over, during the cleaning cycle, into an open-topped chamber stuffed with a foam-sponge filter; too little liquid and that can't happen. Of course, with too *much* fluid, the record label would become wet and the Vinyl Cleaner would likely leak: An Audiophile Tragedy in One Act. As with my original Vinyl Cleaner, I kept the Pro filled with about 1 gallon and 2 cups of distilled water, always keeping on hand extra distilled water, in the event that enough water evaporates to trigger the warning light. (It's happened only once.)

More significant are those differences that can't be seen at a glance. The Vinyl Cleaner Pro boasts an upgraded fluid pump with ceramic bearings, and the machine's two drying fans—one each at front and rear, to straddle the record and dry both sides at once—have also been improved.

Most noticeably, designer Reiner Gläss has revised his invention's electronic switching. In the original Vinyl Cleaner, after its power switch is turned on, a single press of the Start button elicits from the machine a single *beep* and sets in motion a continuous wash-and-dry cycle that lasts, altogether, 6 minutes: 1 minute of washing and about 4.5 minutes of drying, the remaining half-minute devoted

² See www.stereophile.com/content/listening-147. Our complete coverage of the cleaner can be found at www.stereophile.com/content/audio-desk-systeme-vinyl-cleaner.

to moving the fluid up into and out of the cleaning chamber. Also, the user can add up to 4 minutes more of wash time, in 1-minute increments, by holding in the Start button and counting the extra beeps that correspond to those increments: 5 beeps indicate a wash cycle of 5 minutes. To the Pro has been added a separate 2-minute drying-only cycle, selected by holding in the Start button for a total of 6 beeps.

And that's a boon, for a couple of reasons. First, the Vinyl Cleaner's cleaning chamber is actually a cleaning canyon, within whose walls stand tall, microfiber-covered, counter-rotating barrels—two on each side of the record. The scrubbing action of those barrels removes the crud that's being loosened by the Vinyl Cleaner's ultrasonic cavitation, and keeps the fluid moving into the filter chamber. At the end of the complete cycle, those barrels retract just far enough to allow the record to be lifted free—but unless one takes care to lift the record straight up (a skill that sometimes eludes me), the record might be unintentionally re-wetted on its way up and out. For moments like that, the Pro's additional, standalone drying cycle is just the ticket.

The only thing not included in the Pro is a way to level its enclosure on whatever surface supports it: Like its predecessor, the Vinyl Cleaner Pro is built with a bubble level on its top surface, but its four thin, pliant feet are resolutely fixed in place to the underside of the enclosure's apparently thin bottom panel, forcing the owner to use shims when setting up the machine on a grossly nonlevel surface. (I keep my Vinyl Cleaner atop a record cabinet I made—badly—for my 78s, and level it with thin pieces of cocobolo veneer left over from when I made—reasonably well—the plinth for my Garrard 301 turntable.) As I mentioned in my review of the original Vinyl Cleaner, the machine's compactness is impressive, especially in the context of an industry known for wearing excessive bulk as a badge of honor; to add adjustable feet would surely add to its height, and necessitate a thicker bottom panel. Still, this seems an odd if noncritical omission.

The sample of the Vinyl Cleaner Pro I received in January proved just as easy and

pleasant to use as the original Vinyl Cleaner. (Is it my imagination, or are the new drying fans a little bit quieter than their predecessors?) And while I haven't had it long enough for a fluid change to be necessary, I imagine that task will now be easier, too, given the larger bore of its drain. Most important, the Pro's effectiveness, which I described in these pages as *transformative*, is undiminished—something that became apparent with the very first LP I cleaned in the new machine.



Two Sundays ago, I pulled out my original, early-1970s copy of Jethro Tull's third album, *Benefit* (Reprise RS 6400), which I greatly enjoyed in the day but had overlooked in recent years. Notwithstanding my decades-long impression that Reprise LPs, for whatever reason, seem to hold up better than those of most other labels, this one sounded rather scratchy—said scratches especially noticeable when I lowered the stylus to side 1's lead-in groove and heard lots of clicks, ticks, and steady-state grunge.

Into the Pro it went—and just in case, I selected a double wash cycle (two beeps, thus two minutes). I knew this LP was at least 43 years old—it has my name on it, which I stopped doing *ca* 1974! When it was done, and when I once again lowered the stylus to the same lead-in groove, the ticks and clicks and grunge were gone: not just diminished, but *gone*. Not only that, but, irrespective of considerations of noise, the music sounded better. Ian Anderson's flute in

“With You There to Help Me” was bigger, more substantial, and more silvery, and the perfect seven-note figure that bassist Glenn Cornick—Tull's best of many bass players, I think, and certainly the one with the best fashion sense—wedged between the lines of the verses was clearer, with individual pitches more apparent. Martin Barre's guitar in every number was meatier, and in “Sossity; You're a Woman,” the lyrics were far more intelligible post-Pro. (Another mixed bag: It's a beautifully constructed lyric, but also redolent of the I'm-the-smartest-man-in-the-village attitude that smudges so many of Anderson's songs.)

That experience set the tone for many discs to follow, and while not every tick turned out to be banishable—my copy of the *Tristan und Isolde* highlights disc cited above emerged with about 50% of the noise it had going in—a spin through the Vinyl Cleaner Pro always resulted in an overall improvement in sound, without penalties. In fact, as I came to realize, every time I cleaned an LP in the Pro, its sound through my system always seemed very slightly louder—perhaps as a result of having less noise yet no less signal.

Now more than ever, this very expensive audio accessory offers very high value: If you own lots of LPs and the Vinyl Cleaner Pro is within your budget, I urge you to give it a try. ■

Art Dudley (Stletters@enthusiastnetwork.com) enjoys the music on his LPs while it snows

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