

Hi-Fi News Analogue Test LP

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Review by Jas
© thevinylengine 30/05/04**Introduction**

Arguably the best turntable setup record on the market, the HFN test LP has sold over 10,000 copies since 1996. Two years ago Len Gregory (aka the cartridge man) decided to update the original release and returned to the Exchange studio for a new recording session. The album was re-cut along with a new frequency sweep test and improved pink noise tracks. Dubbed 'The Producers Cut' the new record was released in 2002 and the old version discontinued. In this article I take a look at the latest version and run through the tests on a Systemdek 2X2 turntable with a stock Rega RB250 tonearm.

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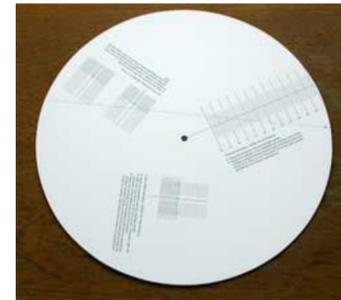
The quality of the packaging has been improved throughout and sports smart new graphics on the outer cover and a higher quality inner sleeve. Even the insert containing articles by John Crabbe has been reprinted on heavy-weight paper this time around. The sleeve notes are largely unchanged except for the addition of an advert for a subscription to Hi-Fi news!

One of the nicest additions is the new alignment protractor, a glossy card disc 12" in diameter containing 3 different alignment techniques, all accurately reproduced.

- (1) Standard Baerwald 2-point method suitable for 9" arms similar to the basic protractor included with the original issue.
- (2) Universal technique for aligning with published null points for your arm
- (3) Linear Offset technique where a base line is aligned with the vertical bearing of the tonearm and the cartridge is aligned at a single point.



Once you've aligned your cartridge with one of the protractors you are ready to run through the tests. If you are unfamiliar with test records the first thing you will notice are the widely spaced locked grooves; each 'band' contains a different test and you have to cue them individually.

**Side One****Band 1** Channel Identification

Voice on left channel then voice on right channel. Always had an uncomfortable feeling that your channels were wired the wrong way around? This will let you know.

Band 2 Phasing (voice alternately in phase and out of phase)

This track is to help determine if the polarity of the wiring in your system is correct. This is very important for bass response and imaging and the effect can be clearly heard and adjustments made if necessary. You may be surprised just how much this effects the sense of spaciousness and depth in a recording.

Bands 3 + 4 + 5 Channel Balance (-20db pink noise L+R/ L only / R only)

Allows a 'subjective evaluation of your system' in which the sound should be smooth and seamless. Use for setting channel balance before getting to the Bias setting tracks.

Bands 6 + 7 + 8 Bias setting (300Hz tone L+R at +12dB / +14dB / +16dB)

These tracks are for setting anti-skate. If the 300Hz test tone is heard distorting or buzzing on either channel then your 'anti-skate' or 'bias compensation' needs adjusting. Most cartridges seem to sail through the first track regardless of bias setting but fine tuning will be needed to successfully complete the 14db and 16dB tracks. Increasing tracking weight towards the top end of the cartridge manufacturers scale can improve tracking here.

It is interesting to note that advanced stylus profiles like the Gyger S on the Goldring 1042 seem to have a very small 'sweet spot' in bias adjustment and even tiny movements of the bias adjuster on the RB250 gave audible results. In contrast, a 1006 stylus and a AT110E cartridge were both indifferent to setting over a larger range of the scale and were unable to track the final track anywhere near as clearly as the properly adjusted 1042. All benefited from the adjustment but those of you with expensive cartridges should definitely try this.

Band 9 Bias setting (300Hz tone L+R at +18dB)

The famous torture track - just another 2dB rise over band 8 but this is very, very difficult for a cartridge to get through. If you have got through this far with reasonable results then consider this a test of your cartridges suspension design and tonearm control, not a failure. When I originally used this test on my old Zeta I was disappointed to hear a very low level intermittent buzzing on both channels that I couldn't tune out completely. Little did I realise that the Zeta was actually tracking as well as any tonearm can be expected to and only a change to a much more expensive cartridge would be likely to improve on this. It would be interesting to see how Len Gregory's own 'Music Maker II' copes with this?

Side Two**Bands 1 + 4 + 8** Tracking ability (300Hz L+R at +15dB)

Three identical tracks to test the consistency of arm performance across the record. Use these to check the final setting of your anti-skate and tracking force and then readjust if necessary so that all three track evenly with no distortion. Experience has shown that correct operation here assures good 'real world' results with 99% of recordings.

Band 2 + 3 Cartridge/Arm Lateral/Vertical resonance test (sweep)

These give a visual indication of the resonant frequency of your arm / cartridge combination. When the cartridge suspension becomes excited there is an obvious 'wobble' of the stylus and the pilot tone warbles. You are aiming for a reading of 8-15Hz and applying tonearm damping can help here if your cartridge is a mismatch for the arm.

Band 5 Cartridge alignment (azimuth) test (300Hz L+R +6dB)

If you have Azimuth adjustment on your tonearm and want to check the stylus is absolutely vertical then play this track and you should get identical output from each speaker, but when the amplifier is switched to mono you get nothing. As my arm has a rigid headshell and my Heybrook amplifier no mono switch I still don't know if this works? Alternatively use a small mirror and look at the stylus from the front to do a visual check and on fixed head arms you can use shims to fix any misalignment.

Band 6 Residual system noise (unmodulated grooves)

Unmodulated grooves which when played at normal listening levels will pick up any noise in your system such as rumbling bearings or poor plinth design. This was absolutely silent on both my sprung chassis Systemdek and Obsidian plinthed SP10 (bar the odd click and pop) so no problem there.

Band 7 Full range frequency system check (20Hz -20KHz L+R)

Not exactly indispensable but might be useful to someone?

Conclusion

As a regular user of the original HFN test record I was looking forward to getting my hands on the latest version and I wasn't disappointed. The new protractor alone is worth the increase in price (up from £15 to £25) and while the tests are pretty much as before the pressing I received is of a much higher quality with lower background noise. While this may not be absolutely necessary (there isn't any music to be heard!) it does make it feel even more of a reference product, which in the costly world of Hi-Fi accessories makes it a bit of a bargain. If you love music and want to hear your turntable at its best, buy this record!

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