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# Pure Fidelity Harmony

RECORD PLAYER



**W**hen scouring the labyrinthine halls of big audio shows for products to review in *Stereophile*, I use three main markers to determine which rooms to visit: a must-hear designation from Editor Jim Austin; a company or brand whose products always light my fire; and systems fellow *Stereophile* correspondents have described, in a text or an in-person conversation, as worth checking out. Other times, though, I just follow my nose.

Such was the case at AXPONA 2022, held at the Renaissance Schaumburg Convention Center near Chicago. At the coffee and pastry stalls on the first floor, I ran into P.J. Zornosa, wizened sage of hi-fi public relations. P.J. was involved with two rooms at AXPONA. One of them consisted of a Bel Canto, Audiovector, Cardas Nautilus, Harmonic Resolution Systems, and—handling front-end duties—the Harmony turntable, which is manufactured by a fairly new company, Pure Fidelity in Vancouver, British Co-

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lumbia. I decided to stop by for a listen.

In my show report, I wrote, “This ... setup ... made me forget the mechanics, time, and place, and simply indulge in the

music.” “Stratton”—that’s company owner John Stratton—“had an original pressing of vocalist Michael Frank’s 1975 debut masterpiece, *The Art of Tea*. ... The Pure Fidelity/Bel Canto/Audiovector system disappeared and let this epic recording shine. *The Art of Tea* is very natural sounding, with zero effects; it’s a true, flat recording on par with any Contemporary Records disc. And the rig framed it perfectly. Transparency, tone-fulness, imaging, clarity, with a comfy low-end.”

I took Stratton’s card and upon arrival in NYC, conferred with Jim Austin, who had also visited the room, then requested a review sample of the Pure Fidelity Harmony.

“Pure Fidelity started off by modifying parts for other brands,”

Stratton wrote to me in an email. “It was just a hobby at first. Encouraged by the response to these upgraded parts, we started to manufacture complete turntables. With lots of encouragement from friends and people in the industry, we sent one of our early models out for a professional review. It not only got a great review, but it won an award.

“The goal for the Harmony was simple: Build a world-class table at real-world pricing. I think we have accomplished this.”

### Sleek, slick, sumptuous

The Pure Fidelity Harmony arrived at my Greenwich Village peasant pad with a Conductor power supply, SS-10 Record Isolator clamp, three IsoAcoustics GAIA IV feet, premium Quilted Maple finish, and Origin Live Encounter tonearm. All that comes in a package for \$9995—plus \$500 for the review sample’s premium finish. The Pure Fidelity Stratos MC cartridge, which was included on my test rig, adds \$1995 to the price.

The Harmony is one of four Pure Fidelity ‘tables, offered at two price points in two basic shapes: The Harmony and the Encore ‘tables are rectangular with rounded corners; the Horizon and Eclipse both have a rounded left edge that follows the contour of the platter. The Harmony and the Horizon (which together constitute what Pure Fidelity calls its “H series”) both cost \$9995 and come with the same equipment. The Encore and Eclipse (the “E series”) are \$2500 cheaper, at \$7495, equipped with an Origin Live Zephyr tonearm and a thinner (but not thin) Delrin platter. GAIA IV footers are available on the E-series models, but they cost extra. On all models, the Stratos cartridge and premium finishes cost extra.

Pure Fidelity refers to its turntables as “hybrid” designs. “‘Hybrid’ refers to the weight of our tables,” Stratton wrote. “The strengths of a low-mass design are speed and dynamics, but they can sound bright and lack bottom end. High-mass designs can provide rock-solid stability and, of course, have a much better bottom-end, but they can sound dull.” Pure Fidelity’s ‘tables strike a balance between those extremes, producing a ‘table that’s neither superheavy nor superlight. Is that a hybrid or an average?

“The key element to our designs is our two-inch, Ultra MDF



core [plinth]. It is virtually resonance-free and completely neutral in sound. ... To my ears, tonal accuracy is absolutely a must, and I think our designs nail it.

“Ultra MDF is a *much* denser product than standard MDF,” Stratton continued, “which is already a very dense product compared to particle board.” Ultra MDF “uses 50% more wood fiber than standard [MDF]. Our 2” ultra MDF sheets are custom made for us, using two 1” sheets laminated together. Once laminated into a 4’ x 8’ sheet, the total weight is over 250lbs! We are not aware of any other manufacturer that utilizes this special makeup of MDF.”

That ultra-MDF plinth is wrapped in dyed, real wood veneer. “We use wood dyes as opposed to wood stains on our wood-veneer finishes,” Stratton wrote. “Dyes are superior for the rich color they achieve without blocking the grain patterns. After the dye process, they are grain-filled. The final process is four layers of topcoat with each layer sanded in between coats. We offer a high-gloss finish on our Quilted Maple and Piano Black and a semigloss finish in Santos Rosewood and Quarter Cut Walnut.” The finished plinth weighs 19lb.

That glossy (or semiglossy) plinth fits snugly into the cutouts of a 19lb isolation platform formed from 6061 aluminum alloy, stabi-

## SPECIFICATIONS

**Description** Belt-drive turntable with “ultra”-MDF plinth, Delrin platter, 6061 aluminum alloy and stainless steel subplatter, AC synchronous motor, 6061 aluminum isolation platform, IsoAcoustics GAIA IV feet, SS-10 Record Isolator, Origin Live Encounter dual-pivot aluminum-alloy tonearm, and Conductor speed controller. Tonearm: length: 239mm; overhang: 17°; Pivot-to-spindle distance: 222mm; internal

wiring: High-grade, copper Litz; tonearm cable: 6mm, hardwired Origin Live high-grade copper; recommended cartridge mass: 4.5–18gm.

**Cartridge** Stratos moving coil with Duralumin (aluminum, copper, manganese alloy) body, copper coils, samarium cobalt magnet, aluminum cantilever, and micro-elliptical diamond stylus; stylus rake angle: 92°; internal impedance: 45 ohms; recommended tracking force:

1.9–2.1gm; output: 0.45mV; frequency range: 20Hz–40kHz; channel separation: 25dB; recommended loading: 100–500 ohms. Dynamic compliance: 12 x 10<sup>-6</sup> cm/dyne.

**Dimensions** 17" W x 6" H x 14" D. Weight 45lb.

**Finishes** High-gloss Quilted Maple and Piano Black; semigloss Santos Rosewood or Quarter Cut Walnut.

**Serial number of unit reviewed** 21-143.

**Price** \$9995 with Origin Live Encounter tonearm and IsoAcoustics GAIA feet. Stratos cartridge: \$1995. Approximate number of US dealers: 14. Warranty: 2 years.

**Manufacturer** Pure Fidelity, 102–6200 Darnley St., Burnaby, British Columbia V5B 3B1, Canada. Tel: (604) 528-1384. Email: sales@purefidelity.ca. Web: purefidelity.ca.

lized by the three IsoAcoustics GAIA IV feet.

Another key functional element of Pure Fidelity designs is the massive Delrin platter. “Our raw Delrin comes in 3' lengths that are 12" in diameter,” Stratton explained. “We then rough-cut to the desired thickness, depending upon whether we are making them for the ‘E’ series or the ‘H’ series [turntables]. We finish it off on a CNC lathe. Delrin is a fantastic product for platters as it has very similar characteristics to that of vinyl. That is why you don’t need mats on our tables.”

That finished Delrin platter is 48mm thick. Stratton says the resulting 8lb platter mass increases the flywheel effect, resulting in improved speed stability and image size. The platter rides on a subplatter made from 6061 aluminum alloy and stainless steel, which is driven by two Viton belts. The subplatter’s spindle rotates on a ruby bearing within a bronze shaft, which Stratton says increases mechanical ease and lessens friction compared to a standard, steel ball bearing/brass shaft configuration.

The Harmony’s 12V AC synchronous motor is made by Allied Motion (formerly Premotec) in The Netherlands; it is powered by the new Conductor power supply/speed controller, a quartz-locked system powered by a 25W transformer, which replaced the previous motor controller, called “Maestro.” The Conductor has a substantial,  $\frac{3}{8}$ " faceplate and three buttons, one for power and two to choose 33 or 45rpm. Around back are dials that allow you to fine-tune those speeds.

From their manufacturing facility in Vancouver, Pure Fidelity uses CNC lathes to craft the plinths, isolation platforms—even some of the packaging. PF outsources production of platters, subplatters, bearings, and armboards to a nearby machine shop.

Also outsourced are the tonearms, which are provided by Origin Live. The supplied Origin Live Encounter arm is a dual-pivot design. “Dual Pivot bearings decouple the arm from its environment in a far more competent way than conventional bearings,” states the Origin Live website. “The result is similar to uni-pivot arms in terms of a natural, fluid-like quality to the sound. ... Dual Pivot bearings have the advantage of very low friction, which helps give the Encounter greater transparency and musicality, ... allowing you to hear previously unnoticed details in your music. ... As with all our arms, tonal balance is neutral, allowing it to work well in all types of systems.”

Also included in the turntable’s price is the Pure Fidelity SS-10 Record Isolator record clamp, which consists in part of a Delrin plate studded with 10 stainless steel bearings. The bearings make contact with the record’s label, which Pure Fidelity says avoids deadening the sound. The SS-10 weighs nearly 2lb, fits well in the hand, and provides a snug fit; using it resulted in the best sound I heard from the Harmony—not always the case with record clamps. As with any heavy clamp, be careful using it, as dropping it could easily damage the turntable, tonearm, cartridge, or a record.

To my eyes, the Pure Fidelity Stratos MC cart—which, as previously noted, costs extra—looked like a rebranded Hana, but it isn’t that. “The Stratos is built to our specs in Italy,” Stratton explained. “It’s a joint venture with a Japanese company that provides the cantilever and stylus. It’s then shipped to Goldnote for final assembly. Goldnote manufactures the special Duralumin body for us.”

The Harmony is one of the best-looking turntables I’ve seen, with striking but subtle cosmetics (including aesthetically con-



trasting functional elements like that matte-black Delrin platter)—in all, a smart, relatively compact, lovely package that would enhance any living quarters, office, or listening warren visually as well as musically.

Plus, the superglossy “Quilted Maple” finish creates a surreal effect: When you stare into the finish, the turntable seems to float.

### Setup

The Harmony was packed extremely well, each part secured in a separate, form-fitting foam rubber section, five layers in all. The manual was clear.

I placed the assembled Harmony plinth and isolation platform atop an Ikea Aptitlig bamboo platform, which sat on three stacks of  $\frac{1}{2}$ " by 2" mahogany squares layered in groups of four, arranged in a tripod below the platform. The stacks of squares sat on my Salamander rack.

The Harmony’s ruby bearing is preinstalled—no sweat required on the user’s part. I removed the black protective cap from the crown of the bearing shaft and inserted two drops of the supplied bearing oil. I removed the protective cap from the lower shaft of the subplatter, applied five

drops of oil, and carefully lowered the subplatter spindle into the bearing shaft. Following the clear instructions, I spun the subplatter by hand for one minute as it descended, the air forced out, settling, presumably, on that ruby bearing.

The 12V motor is preinstalled, its double pulley preset to the proper height. After wrapping the two Viton belts around the motor rod and the subplatter spindle, I placed the Delrin platter over the subplatter.

I’d been warned that the Encounter tonearm could be tough to set up, but it wasn’t. Unscrew two transit bolts and tighten the attached nut to the tonearm shaft on the underside of the plinth. I used my Feickert Next Generation Universal Protractor to align the Stratos cart to the Encounter arm and my Riverstone Audio gauge to set the tracking force to 1.9gm, the suggested value. I adjusted VTA by rotating a round plate at the base of the bearing assembly, similar to how it works with my Kuzma 4Point tonearm. The RPM iPhone app measured the Harmony’s speed as 33.45 rpm.

### Listening to joy

Playing guitarist Terje Rypdal’s *To Be Continued* (1981, ECM 1192), which features bassist Dave Holland and drummer Jack DeJohnette, the Harmony/Stratos combination was magical, the music detailed, dynamic, and punchy on a wide, blooming stage.

As if it had been built to emotional specifications instead of technical ones, the Pure Fidelity Harmony/Origin Live tonearm/Stratos combination took me on a joy ride, exuding all the liveliness and pace, rhythm, and timing of any well-made low-mass table but with a neutral tonal balance and a vice-like low-end grip. To my surprise, it compared well to my Kuzma Stabi R turntable/4Point tonearm/EMT TSD15 N cartridge combination, producing a different flavor/color of sound but one that was just as satisfying, with excellent transparency and surprising resolution.

The Harmony/Encounter/Stratos combo revealed the interior lives of many of my favorite records—or, rather, the artists that made them. This well-tuned trio provided supple transient attacks, thrilling retrieval of microdetail, an open, radiant midrange, and sleek, ample basslines that, while not as fat and immersive as those produced by the Kuzma, were in, well, *harmony* with the other



aspects of the Pure Fidelity system's performance. The Harmony is a coherent, fast, truth-telling analog beast.

Playing Miles Davis's "Oleo" from my 1958 copy of *Relaxin' with the Miles Davis Quintet* (Prestige PRLP 7129), the Kuzma clearly revealed the distinctiveness of Philly Joe Jones's ride cymbal touch: the stick-on-cymbal "ping," the cymbal's ambience and tone. The Harmony, though, did a better job than the Kuzma of relaying those elements within the *whole* cymbal sound. Where the Kuzma laid down muscular, copious, fleshy notes from Paul Chambers's bass, the Harmony focused on texture and speed, with no overhang. It pulled a similar feat with Miles's trumpet, which was superpresent: sizzling and immediate. Against the Kuzma's oceanic bass weight and scale, the Harmony lit the stage in a stronger light, with deeper contrast of detail and superior midrange transparency.

### Harmony Meets EMT

Mounted on the Origin Live Encounter tonearm, the EMT TSD15 N MC cartridge provided more weight in bass lines than I heard with the Stratos, though not as much as the Kuzma. The Harmony/EMT combo was less burnished and microdetailed, a mite more laid-back and tonally darker—a meatier, more corporeal presentation. Bass and drums sounded more natural and perhaps more accurate through the EMT, but also less exciting. The EMT couldn't equal the Stratos's subtle, dappled, light-filled presentation. The EMT kept a tighter grip and a cleaner view but with less romance and textural shading.

The detail, dynamics, and openness owed as much to the tonearm and cart as to the Harmony turntable. The Harmony/Encounter/Stratos combo complemented one another like Mick and Keef, John and Paul, Miles and Trane.

### Harmony Meets Luxman

Mounted on the Origin Live, the Luxman LMC-5 cartridge produced fewer thrills than the Stratos or the EMT, though the Luxman was closer in spirit, resolution, and tonal balance to the EMT. Note, though, that the Tavish Audio Design phono preamp only loads down to 100 ohms, while the Luxman specs out at 2.5 to 10 ohms, so I may not have been hearing the best the Luxman has to offer.



## ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

**Analog sources** Kuzma Stabi R turntable/4Point tonearm/EMT TSD15 N MC cartridge.

**Preamplification** Sugden LA-4 line preamplifier; Tavish Adagio phono preamplifier.

**Power amplifier** Pass Labs XA25.

**Loudspeakers** DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/96.

**Cables** Interconnects: Triode Wire Labs Spirit II (RCA), Analysis Plus Silver Apex (RCA). Speaker: Analysis Plus Silver Apex Speaker (bananas). AC: Triode Wire Labs Obsession NCF.

**Accessories** Pro-Ject VC-S2 ALU Record Cleaning Machine; Audio Desk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner Pro; Hunt Mark 6 Carbon Fiber Record Cleaning Brush; IsoTek EVO3 Aquarius line conditioner; Salamander five-tier rack (2); Ikea Aptitlig bamboo chopping boards (under turntable, preamp, power amps); mahogany blocks (2" x 2" x 0.5") under cutting boards. Hi-fi set up on short wall firing into 15' x 15' room, wood slat on plaster walls.

—Ken Micallef

## Conclusion

In this bottom-line world, where what matters most to many is cash, graphs, and statistics, joy, humanity, and the color and beauty of sound get short shrift. (It's true that the color and beauty of sound is one joyful thing that cash can buy.) Part of our role as audiophiles, I think, is to expose the unwary masses to the wondrous beauty of the sounds of music available from their favorite vinyl discs when played on an exceptional hi-fi system—one that can reveal the information ingrained in the grooves with an appropriate sense of the history, humanity, and passion in the music's creation.

In the \$10,000 price neighborhood where the Pure Fidelity Harmony system resides, you could get a J.Sikora Initial (\$9495) or my Kuzma Stabi R (\$8845) but without a tonearm. For a bit less (\$8995), you could pick up an SME Model 6 with a tonearm, or for a bit more (\$11,999), the exceptional Thorens TD 124 DD, also *with* a tonearm.

Aural memory is notorious, but among 'tables I've heard lately, the Pure Fidelity Harmony most closely resembled the Thorens TD 124 DD in terms of energy, inner illumination, and finely wrought detail; less so the Kuzma. All three—Pure Fidelity, Thorens, Kuzma—are exceptional; any one of them could be an end-point turntable for a lot of people.

The Pure Fidelity Harmony brings a beautiful sonic signature to vinyl but with enough transparency to reveal the unique personality of each LP. Every record played on the Harmony, from jazz and rock to electronic and classical, is an event. I couldn't *not* listen: Each performance demanded my attention and rewarded it with a deep musical connection.

The Pure Fidelity Harmony is one of the finest analog playback machines I've heard, worth every penny of its \$9995 asking price. ■