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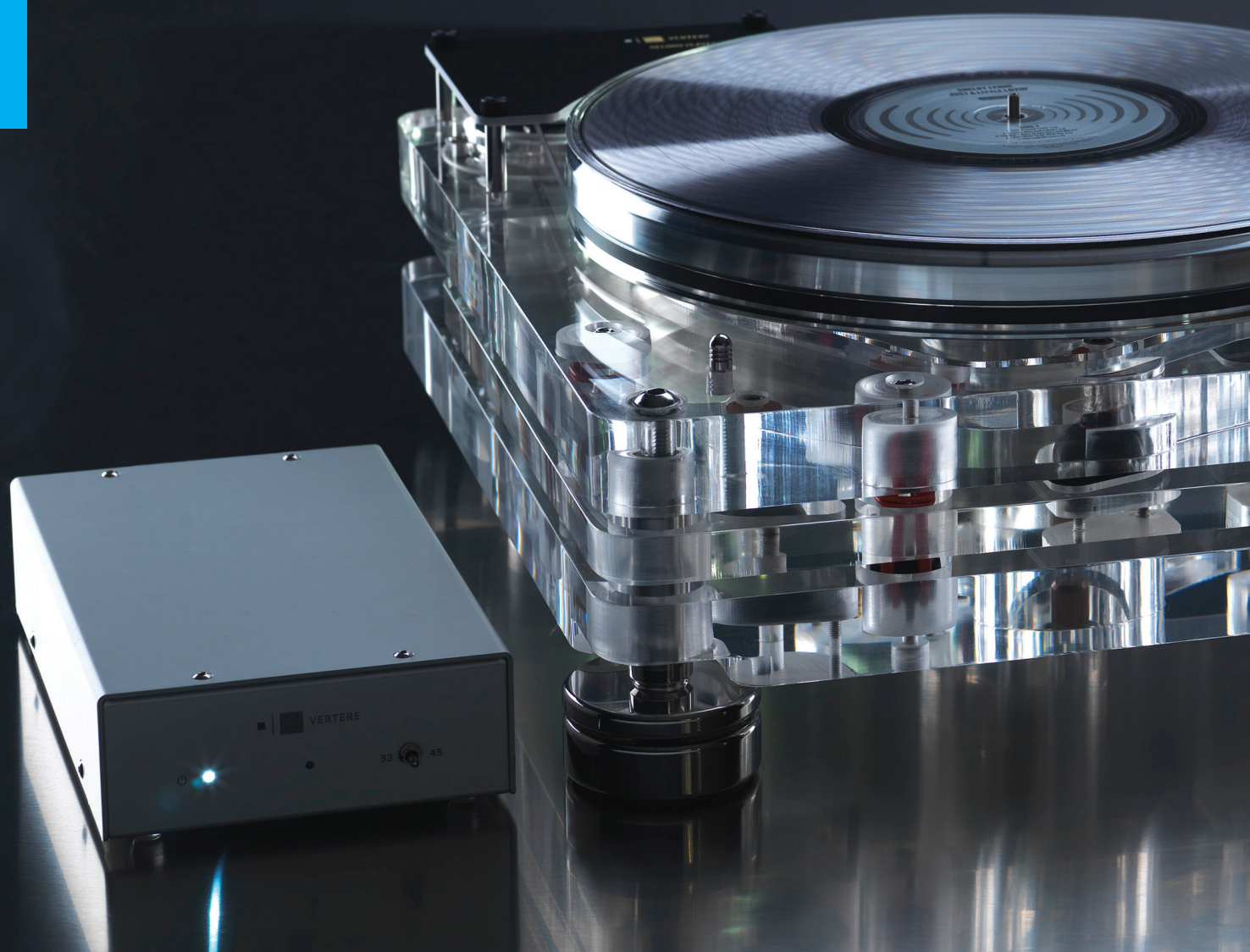
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Vertere RG-1 turntable and SG-1 tonearm

by Alan Sircom

There are two ways of looking at Vertere's turntables and arms. The first is 'what on earth is a cable company doing making vinyl products?', and the second is 'why did Touraj Moghaddam take so long to make a new turntable and tonearm?' Vertere is a brand associated with high-performance cables, from the value-driven Pulse D-Fi to the hand-built range. But Vertere is also the brain-child of the designer of the Roksan Xerxes,

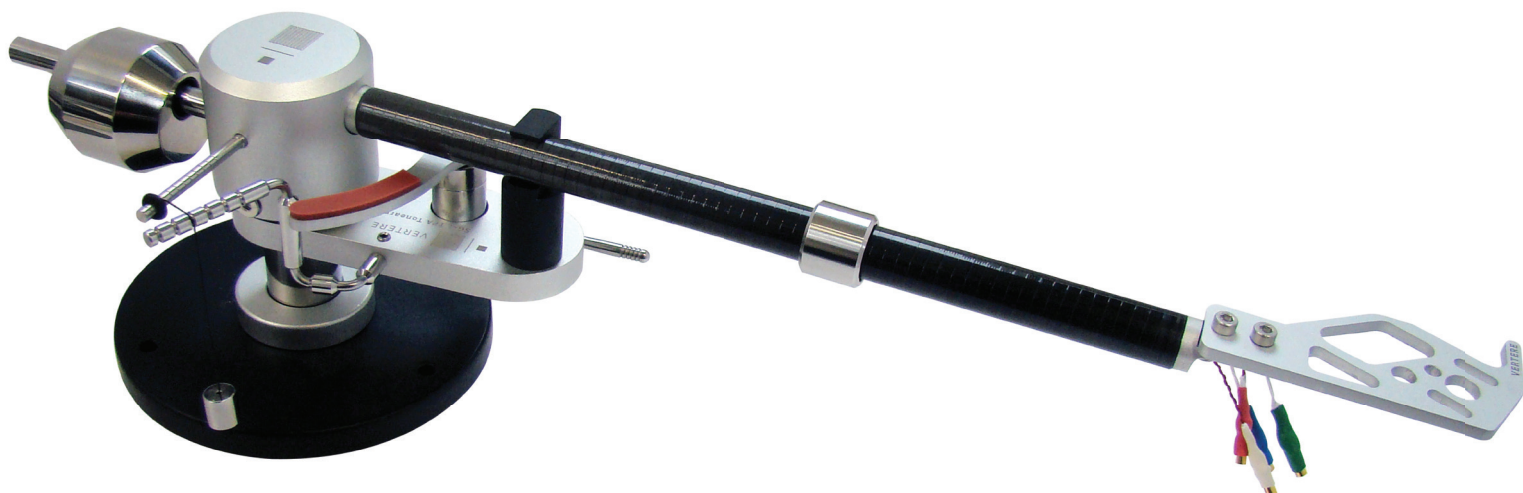
Radius, and TMS turntables, and the Artemiz, Tabriz, and Nima tonearms. The RG-1 turntable and SG-1 arm were something of inevitability.

In fact, Touraj's return to vinyl came with a sharp intake of breath; Vertere's first LP-based product – the Reference tonearm – appeared on the scene at CES 2013. All £27,000 of it. This is the most expensive 'serious' tonearm by a country mile (I'm excluding those one-off specials made out of blood diamonds and panda eyelashes and built for oligarchs and despots). Is there a market for such a thing? Patently so: the first batch sold immediately, and orders for this arm are coming in steadily. In fact, the result of the interest in this arm was effectively a green light for the turntable, and ultimately a more affordable arm. Which brings us to today. ▶



The turntable comes in two basic guises, SG-1 (presumably for 'standard grade') and RG-1 ('reference grade', perhaps). We went with the RG-1. Principally, the design brief is very similar, and those familiar with designs like the Xerxes and especially the TMS might see some common themes, albeit taken to their logical extremes. In both Vertere turntables, the plinth itself is a three-and-a-bit layer design, with 30mm clear acrylic upper and lower plinths, a 15mm clear acrylic mid-plinth, and a 25mm 'sub-plinth' (that practically everyone else would call a sub-chassis). These form a three-stage compliant and two-stage rigid system, with the turntable sitting on hard rubber/stainless steel adjustable feet, with 3mm acrylic disc stand-offs providing the rigid part, and a dozen decouplers (made of tuned silicone rings on bobbins) providing the compliance. The result is a deck somewhere between the bouncy freedom of a Linn LP12 or an Avid Acutus, and the constrained movement of an SME Model 20, but mostly in the horizontal plane. Vertical movement of the platter is fairly limited. While I don't think it's necessarily fair to both parties to keep bringing Roksan into proceedings, this compliant/rigid mix is a factor in the design of the Xerxes and TMS, but the SG-1/RG-1 turntables take this to another level.

How the two decks differ is in the motor (both are 48-pole synchronous motors sitting in a contact support housing, which is itself articulated on bearings, but the SG-1 has a 1.5m length of Pulse-C cable, and the RG-1 uses Pulse R) and more significantly, the platter and bearing. Where the SG-1 has a single-piece platter with a 3mm acrylic disc as the interface between LP and platter, the RG-1 is a higher-mass two-piece aluminium alloy, machined to interference-fit tolerances, and placing much of the overall platter mass to the periphery for the best balance between weight and inertia. The bearing itself might be similar between the two decks, but the SG-1 uses a high copper phosphor bronze, while the RG-1 uses aerospace grade phosphor bronze model, and this spells a slight — ►



▶ 2.5micron – difference in tolerance in the RG-1's favour. The mass of the platter also demands the difference in bearing, as the bigger platter would damage the SG-1 bearing in daily use. Both need to be relubed with Vertere's own LG-1 oil, and require approximately 12-15 drops every 15-18 months. It's notionally possible to upgrade from SG-1 to RG-1, but the cost of the upgrades makes it more expensive than ponying up for the bigger deck at the outset. You'd lose out to the tune of about £3,500 or so.

The SG-1 arm comes in two basic guises – standard internal wiring, and hand-built wiring for an additional £1,150. However, it's worth remembering the arm is supplied without tonearm cable, and in Vertere's line, that means you need to factor anything from £285 for D-Fi to £5,250 for Pulse hand-built, with most people thus far opting for the £1,050 Pulse-B or £2,600 Pulse-R cables. As this means the basic cost of the RG-1/SG-1 combination (*sans* cartridge) can vary from £19,585 to £26,700 depending on cable choices, this is a fairly major consideration.

The SG-1 arm uses what Vertere calls a Tri-Point Articulated (TPA) bearing. Essentially, the bearing is made up of three silicon nitride balls forming an equilateral triangle below the stainless steel pivot point, all bonded into the aluminium yoke. This supports an underslung counterweight (which is also good for correcting azimuth) on an aluminium outrigger, and a carbon-fibre wrap armtube ending in a bonded machined aluminium alloy headshell. Along the length of the armtube is a fine-tuning weight adjustment that doubles as a resonance control (the last time we saw something similar was in an arm by Funk). Anti-skate is through the typical hanging weight system, although there are no OEM parts in the SG-1.

I used this combination with the Benz Micro SLR Gullwing cartridge; a combination that worked so well together, there was no need to change. As the deck and arm get shown to more people, so more cartridge options get tried, and it seems versatility is the key.

Good turntables make you play more records, really good turntables make you delve deeper into your record collection, but the exceptional ones make you rush out and buy more records. That is precisely what the Vertere RG-1/SG-1 combination does. You listen, you look at your record collection, and say to yourself "it's not enough". Pretty soon, you are ram-raiding your credit card through the doors of the nearest record store, buying up everything vinyl you hear of, and receiving hand-written birthday cards from Jeff Bezos of Amazon, thanking you for all the business.

This is a turntable that's all about the energy and exuberance of music. That could easily be dismissed as being excitable or forward, but it's nothing of the sort. Instead, this turntable presents the leading and trailing edges of music with an accuracy that few other source components can match, whether analogue or digital. It has the kind of pitch precision that direct-drive supporters always think impossible from belt-drive, but with that inherent lower noise floor that belt-drive supporters use to dismiss direct drive.

The difficulty with commenting on a really good turntable is you end up just listing records. You burn through several albums, bringing out the focal point of the music on each and each one could be used as comment on specifics about the record deck. So, when I put 'Royals' by Lorde [*Pure Heroine*, Universal], I was shocked by the clarity of the front-and-centre vocals, the greater dynamic range than the CD and the precision of the beat. And yet, when I moved over to Dexter Gordon's *Go* [Blue Note], I was more in the groove, enjoying the laid-back cool of the album. Interestingly, as you moved from album to album, you could hear the difference in recording instantly; rather than focus on the music content, the way different mixes change is a fine indicator of performance, and the Vertere aced this test.

Every time I write a sentence here, it seems to come up with discussing the 'energy' of the system. For good reason, the energy of the music is reproduced brilliantly. But there is more to this than sheer energy. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Vertere RG-1 turntable:

Type: Belt Drive turntable

Motor: 48 Pole Synchronous

Motor Mount: Acetal Platform

DBearing Housing: Aerospace Grade Phosphor Bronze

Plinth Structure: Clear Cast Acrylic, 30mm top and bottom plinths, 20mm sub-plinth, and 15mm mid-plinth

Isolation System: Three-stage compliant; 12 decoupler sets/12 tuned silicone rings/bobbins. Two stage rigid: 3mm acrylic disc and stainless steel/hard rubber feet

Speeds: 33.3 & 45 rpm (< 0.2%)

Wow & Flutter: < 0.02%

Rumble: < -85dB

Size and weight: not specified

Price: £17,500

SG-1 tonearm

Type: Tri Point Articulated

Bearing Structure: Captive silicone nitride ball (x3) with precision stainless steel point

Effective Length: 240mm

Overhang: 17.5mm

Offset Angel: 22.9°

Internal Wiring: Pulse Hand-built or Standard

Tonearm Cable (Optional): Pulse Hand-built, Pulse-R, Pulse-B, Pulse-C & D-Fi

Weight (with standard counterweight): 397g

Price: Tonearm £1,800-£2,950.

Cable £285-£5,250

Manufactured by: Vertere Ltd

URL: www.vertereacoustics.com

Tel: +44(0)203 176 4888

► It's a masterful performance, with an integrated, contiguous sound from deepest bass to soaring treble. Soundstaging is unforced and natural – neither painting too broad a picture nor reducing stage width. It's dynamic too, with sound rising from a super-quiet noise floor for vinyl. And crucially, even the surface noise doesn't intrude; it just 'floats' above the music.

With so many super-decks, the performance fails to shine until the rest of the system is at a similar level. Often they sound overblown and ponderous until the rest of the system catches up. That's not the case here, and that makes the Vertere truly world class. This is a source component that shows just how good it is on very humble equipment, and continues to show how good it is right up the food chain. In fact, I'd argue that those big decks that sound ponderous unless all the boxes are ticked, just sound ponderous.

At the very least, Vertere joins Avid, Linn, and SME as UK contenders for the international high-end turntable/arm title fight. However, I think it's more than that. It might just be the best of the lot of them. It's possible that someone willing to spend more than £50,000 on some form of über-turntable isn't even going to put a deck like the RG-1 on their shortlist. From a sound-quality perspective alone, they should, because it stands toe-to-toe with the best of the über-decks. In fact, it jumps up and down on the toes of a lot of them.

I'm going to stick my neck out here. I think there's a sweet spot in turntable design now. It starts with the Brinkmann and AMG priced designs and ends with turntables like the VPI Classic Direct Drive and the Kronos. Beyond this, you tend not to buy 'better', you just buy 'more'. And the Vertere is right smack in the middle of that sweet spot.

It might be Londoner bias. It might be I've not spent enough time with the Premier Cru decks. It might even be that my system isn't resolving enough or lacks the bottom-end drive and energy that demands bigger turntables with more stentorian bass lines. But there's something so very right about the Vertere RG-1 turntable with the SG-1 arm that it makes me wonder how the hell I'm going to afford this combination. And that leads to a very dark place, because it makes me wonder about the Reference arm, too... +