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AUDIO REVIEWS

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WORLD EXCLUSIVE

DECEMBER 2004



BRINKMANN BALANCE

Reviewer: Jules Coleman

Sources: Analog - *Brinkmann Balance Turntable/Brinkmann 10.5 Tonearm/Brinkmann EMT cartridge* [for review]; Well-Tempered Reference/Well-Tempered Arm/ Roksan Shiraz cartridge; Shindo-Garrard 301/Shindo modified Ortofon 12" arm/Shindo modified Ortofon SPU classic cartridge
Digital: Exemplar/Denon DVD 2900 Universal player

Preamplifier: Shindo Catherine (dual mono, all tube full function with step-up transformer); Auditorium 23 step-up transformer for Denon 103

Amplifiers: Shindo WE 300B Ltd. monoblock; Cr Development Artemis Gold monoblock

Speakers: DeVore Fidelity Silverback Reference [for review]; Horning Agathon Ultimates

Cables: Stealth Indra, M-21 (female/female balanced for Shindo electronics); Shindo silver (female/female balanced); Audience Au24; Audience Au24 phono cable for EMT cartridge; Extreme Phono phono cable; Stealth Hybrid MLT speaker cable; Auditorium 23 speaker cable; Audience Au24 speaker cable; Stealth M-7, van den Hul Mainstream and *Shunyata Python* [on loan] power cords

Power Conditioner: BPT 3.5 Signature; Shindo Mr. T

Equipment Rack: Harmonic Resolution Systems M1R; HRS amplifier isolation bases

Room size: 30' w x 18' x 9'

Review Component Pricing: Brinkmann Balance Turntable \$12,900; Brinkmann 10.5 Tonearm \$3,500; Brinkmann-EMT MC cartridge \$2,500; Brinkmann optional tubed power supply \$2,700; Custom Harmonic Resolution System isolation base \$2,220



The Brinkmann Balance Turntable: Analog Extraordinaire

No point in beating around the bush. The Brinkmann Balance turntable, outfitted with the Brinkmann arm and Brinkmann/EMT cartridge, sitting majestically on the HRS isolation platform, constitutes a remarkable achievement. Indeed, no turntable in my experience approaches the Brinkmann Balance's combination of benchmark analog playback, precision engineering (at least comparable to that of SME) and stunning good looks. Its aesthetic is at once traditional and modern: strong and powerful, but soft and pliant to the touch – elegant yet inviting. One would not be surprised to find the Brinkmann Balance displayed in a museum of industrial design. Easy to admire for its natural beauty and its exceptional engineering; easier still to appreciate for its wonderful way with music.

The Brinkmann Balance reproduces music in a way that is focused, detailed and highly resolving on the one hand, yet refined, nuanced and relaxing on the other. Listening to LPs on the Brinkmann is like reading a well-crafted short story or novel. In reading, you could, were you so inclined, pause to appreciate individual sentences, paragraphs or chapters. But you don't. Instead, you read on captivated by the *movement* of the work. Only when you have completed the story do you find yourself pausing to consider the elements of the writing, the construction of the plot, the unfolding of the work's themes, the arc of the characters.

And so it is with the Brinkmann Balance turntable. All the distinct musical elements are displayed and laid bare. Everything is revealed and in its place. Still, listening never invites one to pause and attend to the parts. Rather, to listen through the Brinkmann is to want to experience the whole of a work, to understand it as something organic and complete. There will be time aplenty after the fact to go back and parse the elements that comprise the whole. But that is not time to be taken away from listening.

The Brinkmann is that rarest of rare breeds in audio, a turntable for the lover of music who believes, as I do, that not only are musicality and high resolution not incompatible with one another, but that high resolution is a precondition of musicality.



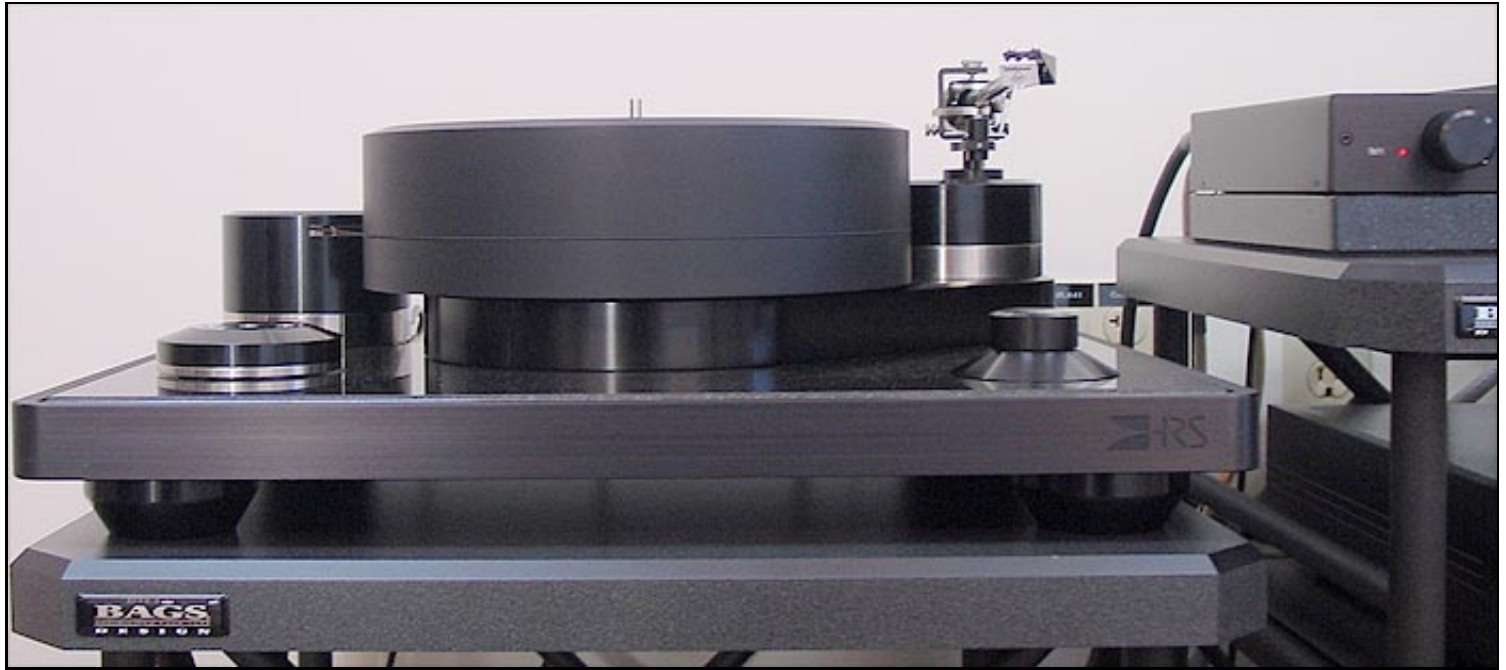
The Brinkmann Balance

No Johnny-come-lately to turntable design, Helmut Brinkmann has been designing and building turntables for the better part of three decades. The current Brinkmann line-up includes two turntables (with a mid-price third on the way) as well as a full compliment of very handsome and well-reviewed electronics.

Brinkmann turntables include the Balance and the somewhat less expensive LaGrange. The LaGrange can be configured for one or two arms, which has made it something of a favorite among European reviewers. Reviewers at *Hi-Fi+*, *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* as well as my personal favorite, Germany's *Image Hi-Fi*, have not only showered the LaGrange with praise, they have bought their review samples and employ the Brinkmann as their personal reference. More importantly, the LaGrange is mentioned in the same class as the legendary Verdier tables.

Other than exhibiting an unmistakable family resemblance, sharing a common lineage and overall design philosophy, the La Grange and the Balance are entirely different tables. They share no parts although as complete packages, both can be fitted with the Brinkmann arm and Brinkmann modified EMT cartridge. The Balance is Helmut Brinkmann's statement turntable, and though it has been in production longer than has the LaGrange, this is the first time that it has been reviewed anywhere.

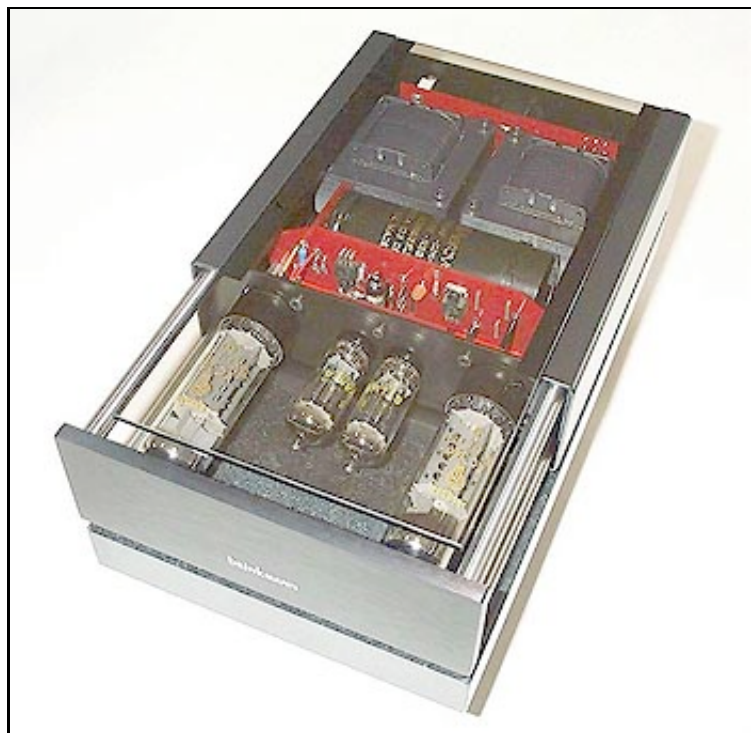
Both the LaGrange and the Balance fall into the general category of high mass, suspension-less designs. Others in this category include the Verdier, Yorke, Pluto and Walker tables, as well as the Redpoint Testa Rossa that I recently reviewed. Like these high mass designs, the Brinkmann favors metal over acrylic platters. Other high mass designs including Clearaudio, La Luce, Scheu and many Transrotors favor acrylic.



The Brinkmann employs the modular approach favored in suspension-less designs. Starting at the bottom and working up, the Balance rests on a unified chassis/plinth (base); the platter then sits atop the plinth; the arm pod in turn fits into the extended part of the chassis. This approach is widely adopted (by the likes of Nottingham, Scheu and Transrotor to mention but a few who have taken this route), but eschewed by others including Redpoint who opt for separate arm and motor pods. Separate pods allow for improved individual isolation. On the other hand, there are good reasons for wanting the arm and the platter to be moving in conjunction with one another.

The separate motor (pod) connects via an aluminum tube to a mini-pod on which the on/off/33/45rpm buttons are located. One merely has to touch, not suppress the buttons to get the player up and running or to change speeds. The mixture of high mass and powerful look combined with sensitivity to the lightest of touches is very appealing and very cool.

The Balance comes with a solid-state power supply that serves two functions: one familiar, the other unique to the Brinkmann. The supply powers the motor and heats the oil in the bearing well to a constant temperature. An extraordinarily beautiful tube power supply fitted with a clear tempered glass top that sits on a polished granite platform for heat dissipation is available as an option. When the Balance is fitted with both power supplies, the tube supply powers the motor that drives the platter, and the solid-state supply is relegated to heating up the oil in the bearing well.



I did not employ the tube supply in my review, though I did have it on hand at the end of the review period. I did not have it in house long enough to get the kind of reading on its contribution to the sound that I would be comfortable reporting on. Still, I recommend purchasing the tube power supply option, whether or not you plan on using it. It is a work of art in its own right, and I would proudly display it as such whether or not it is called upon to serve in any other capacity. Did I mention that the Brinkmann Balance is a work of extraordinary beauty as well as precision engineering?

Both the La Grange and Balance turntables feature a bearing oil heater for two reasons. First, the viscosity of oil, at a given temperature (ambient) produces drag (friction) on the bearing. When the temperature is raised and stabilizes (this occurs some three hours after the table is plugged in), the amount of drag will remain constant to eliminate speed fluctuations. Second, the bearing oil well/spindle housing is CNC machined from aluminum, and when the oil reaches a constant

temperature, that housing expands to meet the inside of the turntable platter (each are machined together and at the same time, to exacting tolerances) so that there might be no additional slippage. They thus become one then. Did I mention that the Brinkmann turntables are works of precision engineering as well as great beauty?

The plinth/chassis weighs 17.5 pounds and supports a 60-pound platter. The platter is made from an aluminum alloy containing lead and copper. The name of the game in audio is resonance control and broadband isolation. The aluminum/copper platter is designed to control vibrations and to turn mechanical energy into heat that is then dissipated.

An unusual crystal glass top the size of the typical LP sits atop the platter. The glass top serves two functions. The first is that it is easy to clean and so provides an even and clean surface for the records. The second, according to Brinkmann, is that crystal glass is a good coupler between the vinyl (plastic) of the record and the metal of the platter. I have no way of knowing whether this is true, and I was in no position to substitute a variety of mats for the glass top. I do know that the table sounded wonderful, and so it is quite clear that the glass top certainly was no obstacle to exceptional performance.

Records placed on a glass surface tend to slide around, and so a record clamp (not just a weight) is mandatory. Brinkmann provides a record clamp that is quite effective but takes a bit of getting used to. It needs to be screwed down just so – any less and the LP is inadequately secure; any more and the outer edges of the LP begins to rise. It takes no time to get a feel for proper screw-down and the clamp is not only very effective but like everything else on the Brinkmann Balance, a visual and tactile treat. I did try my reference Harmonix record weight as an alternative to the supplied clamp, the latter proving far more effective.



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To complement his earlier tables, Mr. Brinkmann chose the Breuer tonearm. Rarely seen stateside, the Breuer enjoys a legendary status that is nowadays also enjoyed by Frank Schroeder's Reference arm. Both the Breuer and the Schroeder arms are handmade works of art. Among analog aficionados with a more *global* perspective, Schroeder and Breuer occupy an exalted status that we more provincial types here in the States tend to confer on Graham and Triplanar.

And just as those who prefer either the Graham or Triplanar approach are unlikely to be moved by the other, those who are drawn to either the Breuer or Schroeder arm are not likely to admire the other. So it is in audio; so it has always been. Ecumenicalism is not a concept that has much traction in audio. My reference turntable is fitted with a 12" arm that would never be endorsed by those who favor the Schroeder approach; but then again my other table employs the Well Tempered arm that is the most important historical antecedent to Schroeder's. I tend to adopt the very out-of-date approach of listening to how the arm sounds instead of arguing a priori from theory to evaluative conclusion!

Supply of the Breuer did not keep up with demand and in time, Mr. Brinkmann determined that however much he admired the Breuer arm, he needed to design and build his own. The net effect is the Brinkmann 10.5, which unsurprisingly resembles the Breuer. It is also one hell of a fine arm. It is elegant, easy to set up and use. Adjustments to VTA, HTA, azimuth and tracking force are easily performed and once optimized, stable over the long term.



The Brinkmann arm is a fixed bearing. The ideal for those who adopt the fixed bearing approach is to eliminate any play in the arm. If the tonearm moves too much in response to the energy traveling from the groove through the arm, the arm will ultimately lose its stability and be unable to adequately track the record and reproduce the music accurately. No play may be the ideal but it is of course impossible to secure in practice. The fact that the ideal cannot be realized in practice has led other designers to abandon the pursuit and adopt a unipivot approach (e.g. Graham) or variations (SME's knife bearing; Schroeder's magnetic rejection; Well Tempered's strung paddle in silicon 'goop').



Rather than abandon the fixed-bearing 'no play' ideal, Brinkmann, like Breuer, employs extremely small precision self-aligning ball bearings machined to very tight tolerances in Switzerland which enable the arm to approximate the fixed bearing ideal while allowing the arm to move with the least possible friction. The net effect of this approach is realized in great tracking and explosive dynamics.

The Brinkmann arm is medium compliant and works extremely well with a broad range of cartridges. The Balance I reviewed came fitted with the recommended Brinkmann modified EMT. I am a huge fan of cartridges from the Ortofon SPU and EMT families. My reference cartridges are a Shindo modified SPU classic, a Denon 103 and the Roksan Shiraz. The latter is a modified EMT. Einstein (also of Germany) as well as Brinkmann modify EMTs. It is worth noting that van den Hul cartridges began life as modified EMTs as well. The Brinkmann modifications are designed to control resonance and in doing so, to increase clarity and extension beyond the original.

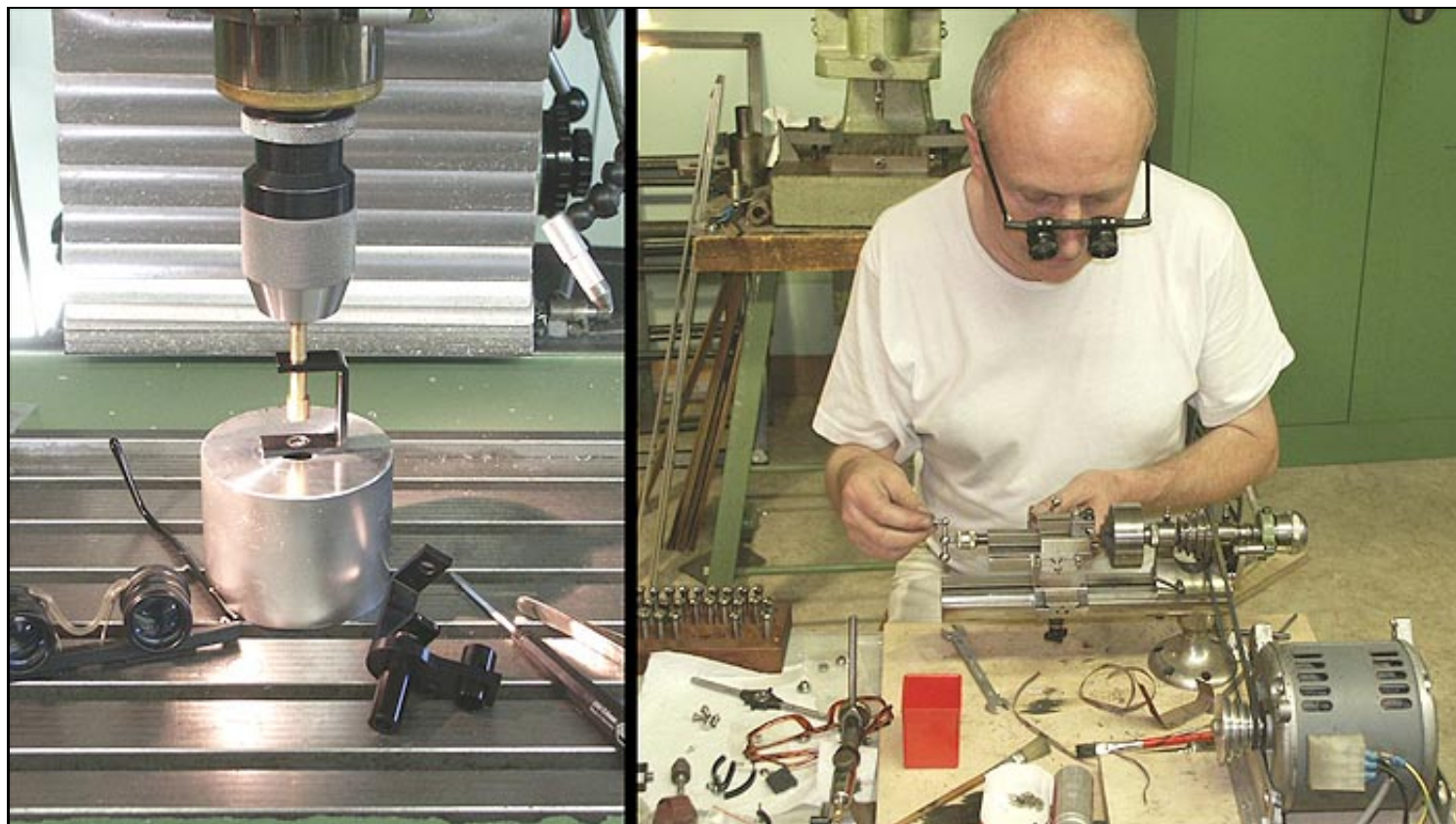
I have had extensive experience with the Shiraz. The Brinkmann and Shiraz clearly have much in common. Properly loaded into a first-rate phono stage, the EMT is dynamic, lively, extremely detailed and full-bodied. It is not a warm and beautiful cartridge like a Koetsu. Nor is it analytic and ruthlessly revealing. It makes music in an absolutely convincing and tonally balanced way. Tonally and dynamically, it is an even-handed performer top to bottom: No hype in the presentation anywhere, a model of composure and self-confidence. Behind the SPU, the EMT is my second favorite cartridge at this point, and one I much prefer to almost all modern cartridges short of the Kondo lo – though I confess to a hankering to hear Edward Barker's reference, the Allaerts. I also recently made the acquaintance of the Magic Diamond cartridge (obviously modeled on the older SPUs) favored by Lloyd Walker, and that too shows much promise.



There are many ways to construct an analog playback system in the home, just as there are many ways to construct a music playback system more generally. One approach is to find a great plinth and platter combination, then to search out a motor or motor drive, then to find an arm, get an arm board made for the table; then find a cartridge, phono cables and put the whole thing together. There is nothing wrong with this approach or the many variants of it. With a good ear and even better luck, one can find analog nirvana this way.

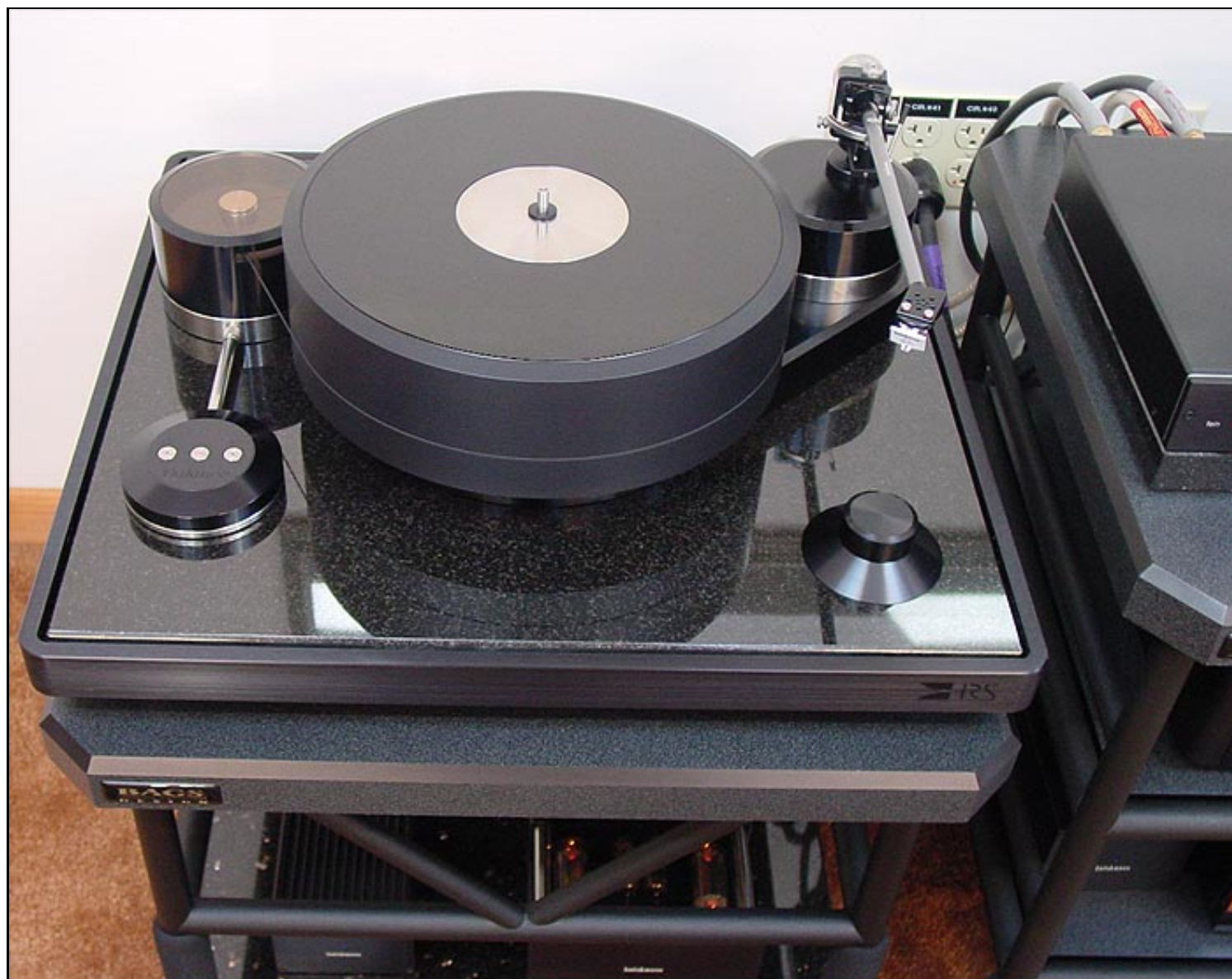
Many people put together a music playback system the same way. Sources from one company, preamp from another, amps from yet another, speakers from another still, and so on. For years this was my approach as well and I suspect it remains the dominant one among audiophiles and reviewers alike. Again with a good ear and even more good luck, one can produce a good system. More often than not, however, I fear the results are cobbled-together systems that sound like many reports produced by committees read.

The alternative approach is to have one's analog playback system reflect *one* designer's vision or voice. The Brinkmann Balance realizes Helmut Brinkmann's vision of what analog playback should be. You can pick and choose among its parts as you like. The chassis/plinth and motor combination are excellent enough to stand up to any arm you desire. By the same token, the Brinkmann arm could grace the best analog playback systems extant. And the Brinkmann EMT will never be embarrassed in any setup.



The Balance, however, is not a confluence of good parts. Rather it begins with a vision of the whole and works back from that vision to a coordination of elements sufficient to realize the vision. It is a balance of elements, all excellent in their own right, but the whole of which far exceeds the sum of the parts.

The Balance is a mature and finished product. No element of the design has been overlooked. The arm is chosen because it is an optimal match for the table; the cartridge is chosen because it is an optimal match for the tonearm, and so on. This level of maturity in design and execution reflects the designer's approach and is in turn reflected in the way the product is distributed and marketed here in the States. Everything about the Brinkmann exudes quiet self-confidence and composure. The overall maturity of the company, its products and its representatives is uncommon and stands as a welcome and stark contrast to some of my recent experiences. Very welcome indeed.



The intelligent and affable Lawrence Blair, III, distributes Brinkmann turntables and electronics in North America. Lawrence splits his time between protecting the hard-earned and well-deserved reputation of Helmut Brinkmann (and his products) and overseeing not-for-profit based initiatives that provide mental and behavioral health services to the disadvantaged and endangered. Lawrence is not just one of the good guys in this business. He is one of the ethical ones as well. And he's a good human being to boot.

Lawrence made the trip from the Pocono Mountains of Eastern Pennsylvania to my home after setting up another Brinkmann Balance at a customer's home in Westchester. I met Lawrence and his bride at his customer's home to watch him set up the table and to have a preliminary listen through a different system. I was impressed, enough so that I did all I could to encourage Lawrence to leave as soon as possible so that we might get on with the main event of the day (at least for me) - which was to get the table set up and running at *my* place.

An hour later we were at my home, and an hour thereafter the Brinkmann Balance was ready for action. Brinkmann recommends that the plinth be placed on an isolation base or platform. The Harmonic Resolution Systems M-3 isolation base has eclipsed all of Lawrence Blair's original recommendations. I reviewed these while toiling for *Ultra Audio*, and recently named HRS' M1R equipment rack my personal component of 2004. I therefore placed the HRS isolation base custom made for the Brinkmann atop the standard HRS isolation shelf in the M1R. I followed a similar procedure with the Redpoint Testa Rossa XS. Redpoint also contracts with HRS for custom-made platforms. That's where the similarities between the Redpoint and the Brinkmann ended.

The Brinkmann EMT cartridge loaded properly into the internal step-up transformer of the Shindo Catherine preamplifier. For the first part of the review, speakers were the Hørning Agathon Ultimates, which were also in house during my time with the Redpoint, making comparisons more meaningful than they might otherwise have been. The Hørnings were eventually replaced by DeVore Fidelity's Silverback Reference (review to follow). Primarily both the Shindo Sinhonia and WE300B LTD monoblocks provided amplification. I spent a solid three months with the Brinkmann Balance. It performed flawlessly and I loved every minute it graced my system.



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Of all the tables I have had around over the years, only my reference Shindo-Garrard 301 is as easy to use on a daily basis and as free of hassles and potential heartaches. Once properly set up, you don't have to think about it again: no endless adjustments. One does *not* purchase the Brinkmann Balance anticipating a never-ending series of updates that must be incorporated to keep the table from falling behind sonically. You analog aficionados know what I am talking about - even you inveterate tweekers who actually enjoy the fact that it will be a challenge when you wake up tomorrow morning to produce the wonderful sound you heard from your turntable today. Turntable owners are more likely than any other category of audiophiles to refer to the finicky and tweaky as *versatile*. The Balance is the antithesis of finicky or tweaky; indeed, it is as close to plug-and-play as one might hope to find in the far reaches of the high end.

Don't be misled by the Balance's ease of setup and use. It offers the ultimate in high-resolution playback and must be matched with like-minded components. Match it properly and you will be rewarded with exceptional and exception-less performance from the moment you drop the stylus into the groove until you decide to give it a rest - something, I suspect, you will rarely be inclined to do.



For your listening pleasure

It is now a commonplace for reviewers to assess a component's sonic performance piecemeal: begin with high or low frequencies, move on to presence region or midbass, head straight for the midrange, then pass right through to the other end of the spectrum. Of course, one could do that with the Brinkmann Balance - but doing so would miss the point.

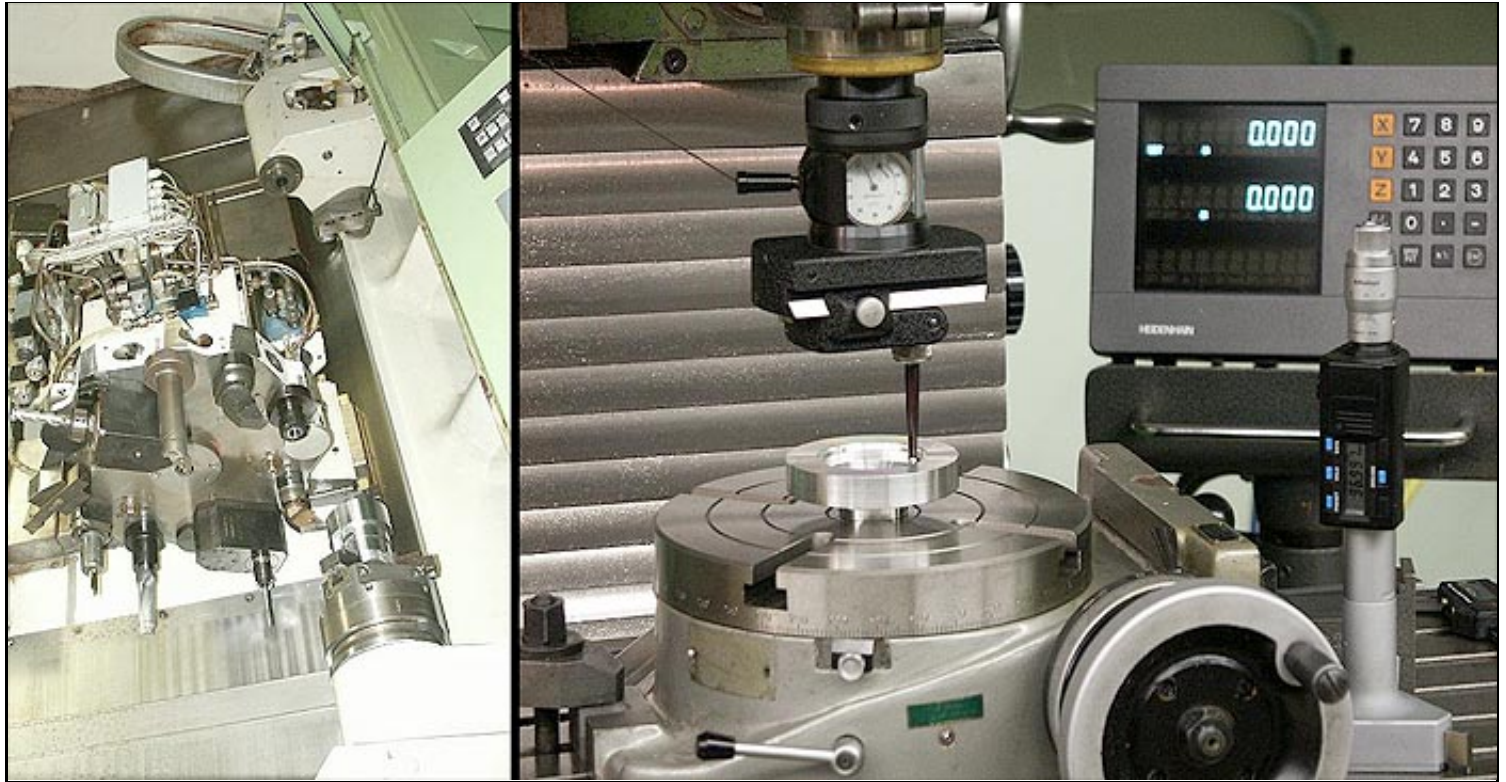
The Brinkmann Balance presents music the way you hear it live: as an organic whole, not as disconnected parts. Nevertheless, no information has gone missing and a listener intent on following particular musical parts is surely free to do so. It is all there as every aspect of the music on an LP is available for those inclined to listen analytically or as through a microscope. Still, the Brinkmann discourages detached, analytic listening. It invites the listener to embrace and be moved by the music, not to study or *scope* it.

It is also a commonplace to distinguish at least implicitly between musical and audiophile attributes of components or systems. *Soundstaging* is, if anything is, an audiophile property of components and systems. The same is true of cognate concepts like *imaging*. In contrast, the tone and timbre of instruments signify musical attributes, and a component's ability to reproduce either or both well constitutes a musically important feature of it. Other evaluative concepts, for example *image density*, are more difficult to categorize. I never listen for audiophile attributes but to be honest, I enjoy them when they are present. I just don't miss them much when they are not.

Over the years, I have become much more interested in timing and dynamics, in particular, the manner in which the music develops resolves and decays. The way in which a component or a system presents dynamics, including shadings and contrasts, can be among the most important and nevertheless misleading features of playback. To my ears, so many components present music in dynamically uneven ways: lots of punch in the midbass, but no dynamics at all in the higher frequencies. Some components are known for their big midrange bloom that is not matched anywhere else in the frequency spectrum. These are attention-getting attributes to be sure, just as a tipped up presence region gives one the impression of high frequency information and an artificially large soundstage. These are designer tricks and listeners are often caught unawares. Customers are taken by the sales pitch only to find themselves trading in their equipment a few months down the road. Too often, what passes for dynamic components or systems are simply unbalanced ones.

Timing is even more important to music and its reproduction. Many systems are let down by poor timing. Music without proper timing lacks coherence and falls apart. Rare is the backloaded hornspeaker that produces bass in time with the rest of the music. I am not passing out secrets here. Getting the timing right in such designs is as much a problem as is producing highly articulate, pitch-accurate lower frequencies more generally. It can be done of course, but it is one of the reasons why getting a full-range driver in a backloaded horn to sound right is a major engineering feat and often costly as well.

It is important to distinguish between two notions of correct timing: internal and external. A coherent playback system requires correct internal timing. When the internal timing of a system is correct, everything from the attack to the decay of notes in relationship to one another makes sense.



Still, a piece presented with good internal timing can nevertheless fail to be musically persuasive. All the elements cohere, but there is something nevertheless wrong, or better, unpersuasive about the overall presentation. Most of us have no difficulty in identifying when the overall sound is a bit sluggish - when it seems to take too long for notes to present themselves. And by the same token, the timing seems unnaturally quick when we hear lots of attack and leading edge but very little by the way of decay. In most modern systems, the sound is more likely to be a bit too fast than too slow. Long-time audiophiles know that the original Linn LP 12 was set up a bit fast. So much of what we hear in reproduced music strikes me as a bit *rushed* by comparison to the real thing. Mind you, this is very subtle and virtually no component or system really "nails" timing. But the palpability and the musical persuasiveness of a playback system and its components ultimately depends, I am inclined to think, on how close it gets to reproducing the way in which music in fact develops, resolves and decays. .

When the timing is right, when reproduced music develops as music does, it all slows down just a bit and comes across as largely unrushed. There are many analogies in other contexts. When I play music with others who are far more accomplished than I am, I feel like I have to rush to keep up. When I ask them what it feels like to play when they are in command of their instruments, invariably they tell me that time stands still, everything feels unrushed. The same is true in sports. Composure, confidence and control are associated with the game slowing down, the baseball looking like a grapefruit traveling so slowly you can see the laces of the ball rotate individually. And so on.

Timing is a relational notion. Good internal timing gives reproduced music coherence, but it is not enough to render the experience persuasive or palpable. It is not enough to make it real. For this to occur, the timing of the reproduction must capture the timing of the real event. The notes must develop, resolve and decay as they do in life and not just in relationship to one another. When that happens, the listener can see deeply into the music - not just deeply into the soundstage as a physical space. This is what separates listening to music as a physical experience from listening to it as an emotional one.



The Brinkmann Balance is one of the very few turntables I have heard that pretty much gets the timing right. Because it gets the timing right, it plays music and invites the listener to see deeply into the music, to embrace and be moved by it: to experience its meaning while avoiding any tendency to parse it into component elements.

As with other high mass designs, the Balance has a deep, full and authoritative bottom end. Unlike some others I have heard, however, it stops and starts on a dime. It is much more agile in this regard than are some of its competitors. I like to put this in terms of recovery rate. After big, powerful moments in large orchestral pieces, there is no sense that the piece is starting back up too slowly or too quickly. There is a breath, a pause, a gathering of thoughts, and off we go again - all in order. I cannot tell you how often tables get this wrong.

The midrange is extremely detailed but natural. Improperly isolated high mass tables can be unnaturally edgy on top, but no doubt thanks in part to its HRS isolation platform, the Brinkmann is extended, airy and edgeless on top.

But is there anything to complain about sonically?

Not really. After listening for two months, I had the sense that Helmut Brinkmann likely voiced the table around classical music and small Jazz combos. I had gotten this impression from the fact that no matter how I tried, I couldn't get the table to play dirty or nasty.



The Chemical Brothers' "Hey Boy, Hey Girl" never fully came across as the ode to the Club Ecstasy scene that it is. Even Roy Buchanan's ear-piercing Telecaster on his signature "The Messiah Will Come Again" [Roy Buchanan, Polydor, PD5033, 1972] comes across somewhat tamer than it is in life. I couldn't get the Brinkmann to display bad manners - no matter how hard I tried.



If the Brinkmann has a character trait that leaves a fingerprint on the music, it resides in its refinement and good manners. The Brinkmann is well behaved and mannered, even on those rare occasions when you might want to see it throw some dirt in your face.

And there is more

The Brinkmann sounds great, looks great and is a work of exceptional engineering. But there is more. The more is reliability and service. Purchase the Balance with the Brinkmann arm, EMT cartridge and the HRS isolation platform and you are likely to have trouble-free world-class performance for years to come.

The extreme high end is populated by products that are made by hand. This is part of their charm and much of what accounts for their exceptional performance. These are not products designed to price points or to appeal to a mass audience. They express the designer's vision. They have a signature that is unmistakable. Often this can come at a cost, sometimes in terms of piece-to-piece consistency. Other times, there is a price to be paid in terms of delivery time or service.

Not so with Brinkmann. Should you have a problem, you can count on good service. Lawrence Blair protects the Brinkmann name. To that end, he has developed a first-rate dealer network that he supports who in turn support their customers. And Brinkmann itself has been in business for quite some time. If you have questions, Lawrence Blair will answer them patiently. If he cannot answer your question, he will call Mr Brinkmann and get the answer for you. I know, I asked many such questions. Should you need a replacement part, Brinkmann will have one to you in short order.

With the Brinkmann Balance, you are not only buying a state-of-the-art turntable, you are buying a commitment to excellent service and to your ongoing enjoyment of the table. And given the Brinkmann Balance, enjoyment is the least of it. More likely you will find insight into music and into the importance of music in a full and, one might say, *balanced* life.



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Jules Coleman

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