

# ONE OF THE GREAT TONEARMS **JUST** **GOT BETTER**

TRI-PLANAR ULTIMATE VII U II  
PRECISION TONEARM

WAYNE GARCIA

**T**he number seven is considered to be lucky. And indeed, the number seven plays a lead role in the life of the tonearm under review here. Most obviously, of course, in its name: Tri-Planar Ultimate VII U II. But it isn't luck alone that makes the improved Tri-Planar such a fabulous device for listening to records.

In fact, it is now seven years since a young enthusiast named Tri Mai purchased the rights to produce the Tri-Planar from its inventor, the late Herb Papier. (This, mind you, after a ten-month apprenticeship under Papier.) "Herb and I had an agreement," Mai told me, "that I would not incorporate any of my own ideas into the arm until I'd been building them for seven years." (The "U II" in the model number designates this second-generation of Tri-Planar builders.)

I last reported on the Tri-Planar (then called the Mk VII) nearly three years ago [Issue 156], at which point the arm had been my reference for the same period of time. It, along with Bob Graham's also superb Phantom B-44 unipivot [see Issue 173] have been my main reference arms since then, and they are among the finest devices of their types coming from these or any shores.

When Tri Mai suggested that he send me a new version of the arm to audition, I assumed that the new VTA-tower gauge



seen at last year's CES, and maybe a few other tweaks had been added, but didn't think I'd hear any real difference. Boy was I wrong.

In the midst of Blue Note fever for the Music Matters feature I wrote for Issue 180, I swapped arms on the Redpoint Model D table, retaining the same Transfiguration Orpheus cartridge. After making the basic adjustments (the Tri-Planar is not difficult to set up, once you've done it a few times), I lowered the stylus into Art Blakey's *The Big Beat*, and nearly fell off my chair.

If the Mk VII version improved on earlier models and is characterized by its tremendous solidity, focus, dynamic agility, bottom end reach, overall neutrality, and transparency to the source, then the Ultimate is quite simply all that multiplied.

For example, whereas the previous arm had done a marvelous job conjuring Blakey's Jazz Messengers—and conveying this record's lovely stereo mix—the Ultimate, like low-lying autumnal sunlight, illuminates a far more holographic soundstage. One where you can clearly picture the distance each player is from the other, one where the size and body of each instrument seems that much more realistic, one in which the slightest change of distance from a microphone—say, when a horn player moves during a solo—is nakedly revealed, one that brings the musicians all but into your room.

Dynamic explosiveness is another obvious area of improvement. The previous Tri-Planar was already excellent in this area, but now, when Blakey smashes a ride cymbal, or smacks the hell out of his snare, the air in the room all but explodes with his energy. And when Lee Morgan launches into a trumpet solo, Wayne Shorter blows his tenor, Jymie Merritt marks time with his bass, or Bobby Timmons fills in with his keyboard trills, the entire band jumps with a physicality like never before. It's a thrilling thing to hear.

I phoned Mai telling him I didn't think I was hallucinating these differences, and asked him what he'd done to achieve such dramatic improvements. "First of all, tolerances on the Ultimate have

tightened significantly—from .001 to .0001 on all critical parts. We've also moved towards more environmentally friendly materials. Gone are the lead in the damping trough and the headshell; these have been replaced by an alloy with similar weight and properties. And where earlier Tri-Planars used brass parts, such as in the counterweights, all the brass parts have been changed to certified surgical-grade stainless steel to increase longevity. In addition, the arm tube has eight layers of internal damping, the new VTA-gauge is laser-etched [as opposed to silk-screened], as is the logo, and there's a new micro-weight at the rear of the counterweight mounting tube."

Mai went on to say how difficult it is for small manufacturers of such precision devices to produce them in the U.S. "Guys like me and Bob Graham are having a hard time because the raw materials and craftsmanship have left America. My bearing costs have tripled over the last three years, as has the price of stainless steel.

It makes it harder to operate a business. And even though I'm doing my best to project a few years out and am working with my suppliers to stabilize prices, I've been forced to raise my own." Meaning that the Tri-Planar Ultimate VII U II costs \$550 more than the Mk VII, going from \$4400 to \$4950. This price includes a color option (silver or black) and termination choices (one-meter direct RCA or XLR, or RCA jacks on an output box. A DIN connector will be available in June, 2009.) And thanks to a pair of apprentices Mai is mentoring—he oversees each step and still does the final calibration on each arm—the wait time for an Ultimate VII U II has been reduced from six-to-eight weeks to two-to-three.

At the end of our chat, Mai said, "Look, Herb left me with a good architecture to work with and to build on, but there is only so far you can take any design before you max out ideas. I expect the Ultimate VII U II to remain stable for the next three to five years." **TAS**

## SPECS & PRICING

### TRI-PLANAR

3611 Snelling Avenue  
Minneapolis, MN 55406  
(612) 623-0922  
triplanar.com  
Price: \$4950

### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Redpoint Model D and TW-Acoustic Raven One turntables; Transfiguration Orpheus and Axia moving-coil cartridges, Artemis Labs PL-1 phono stage and LA-1 linestage, Kharma MP150 monoblock amplifiers and Mini Exquisite loudspeakers, Tara Labs Zero interconnects, Omega speaker cables, The One power cords, and AD-10B Power Screen, and Finite Element Spider equipment racks

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