

The Brinkmann 12.1 Tonearm

by Roy Gregory

As reported in Issues 50 and 51, it's becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the claims for inherent superiority made for 12" tonearms over their shorter (or should that be "stunted") nine-inch relatives. It's not just the sonic evidence either. Whilst this trail arguably started with the revelatory uplift in performance offered by the SME 20/12, and was significantly reinforced by subsequent experience with the VPI JMW 12.7, Kuzma 313 and Schroeder tonearms, there seems to be no abatement in the flood of new arms reaching the market. Time then to examine these newcomers and discern whether the 12" effective length is of special significance or just a happy accident.

There's no denying the significant reduction in tracing distortion that comes with increased effective length. The questions that go with that observation are whether that increase can be achieved without compromising other areas of tonearm performance (effective mass, structural integrity and resonant behaviour) and perhaps more pertinently, if it's so significant, wouldn't we be better off using a linear tracking design? With these issues in mind, I've assembled a second group of tonearms to assess just how consistent the musical qualities detected in the previous reviews prove to be. Is this a function of arm-length and reduced tracing distortion, or something else entirely?

The Brinkmann Tonearm 12.1

The Breur tonearm is justifiably legendary, both for its establishment of the high-rigidity, medium-mass, gimbal-bearing model that has dominated the tonearm market ever since – and for its cost and limited production that helped contribute to its scarcity. It was these latter factors that encouraged German turntable manufacturer Brinkmann to

create their own version of the basic design, the heavily Breur "inspire" Brinkmann 10.5 tonearm.

Of course, combine the elegance and basic layout of a classic design with Brinkmann's superb standards of engineering and you end up with something quite special; something that has been even further refined into the longer, 12.1 tonearm reviewed here. Aesthetically the Brinkmann arm is dominated by the contrast between its immensely long arm-tube and the compact delicacy and obvious precision of its bearing assembly and lift-lower arrangements. Starting at the front, the parallel-sided aluminium arm-tube is of thinner diameter than the majority of the competition, while the elongated and tapered headshell, beautifully braced and perforated to save mass, which has replaced the rather blocky affair used

on the 10.5 adds to the sense of elegance. The cueing platform and post and collar mounting arrangement are incredibly compact, almost bijou in their diminutive dimensions, but there's no ignoring their beautiful execution. The large barrel of the nicely damped cueing mechanism and the integral armrest are models of effectiveness and understated visual simplicity, while the almost skeletal gimbal housing contrasts dramatically with the massively overbuilt structures employed elsewhere.

The sense of compact precision is enhanced by the short counterweight stub and the massive diameter of the weight itself which snugs in ideally close to the bearing housing. This is a composite design that allows the use of two different main weights on the sub-carrier, in order to accommodate a wide range of cartridges. The carrier itself

locks in place once the tracking force has been adjusted.

Bias is set using a tiny knurled screw that fixes the position of a contactless magnetic coupling, dispensing with the intricacy of falling weights and supplying a consistent force across the entire record: neat and extremely effective. The minimalism is continued in the simple post, sunk through the cueing platform that allows micro-adjustment of VTA (a system similar to that adopted by SME) and the lack of a finger lift, although with a cueing system this good you won't miss it anyway. There is no provision for azimuth adjustment, but in every other respect, set-up is as intuitive as any tonearm I've ever used, each



and every adjustment falling exactly where you expect to find it, the attention to detail typified by the split collar that clamps the whole circumference of the arm pillar rather than the single allen bolt

fixing adopted by most manufacturers. You even get spring washers to fit under the two mounting bolts nearest the slot, allowing the requisite movement. Nice.

In stark contrast to the self-contained completeness of the arm itself, set-up tools provided are minimal, with no protractor (a card item is available), scales or even arm-lead provided. You get all the fixings necessary and the allen keys to match, but that's pretty much it. This might seem odd at first, but really only reflects the fact that somebody purchasing this arm or a dealer installing it will have superior examples of all these items anyway. One anomaly I was unable to resolve was the stated spindle to pivot distance of 293mm. Using this I was unable to achieve correct alignment with the Feickert. I ▶

▶ suspect that this is actually the effective length, and shortening the dimension to 290mm allowed perfect alignment, albeit with the cartridge mounted well forward in the slots. I'm trying to run this aberration to ground but until I do, the performance doesn't seem to suffer, so I'll go with what works.

Pick this arm up: handle it and marvel at the quality of the finish, the almost watch-like delicacy of the engineering. Suddenly a price of £3295 if not exactly a bargain, certainly seems more than reasonable. In a world of heavyweights the Brinkmann is the exception; a rapier amongst broadswords, it has a rapier sound too...

If ever a product sounded the way it looks then it's the Brinkmann 12.1. The sound of this arm is all about quick, precise, delicate resolution. It unravels recordings with a consummate ease, separating instruments and voices, deftly revealing reverb or acoustic details, synthetic or natural, without fear or favour. Listen to a familiar disc and the first thing you'll notice just how quick the system sounds, the speed with which it reacts to musical and dynamic demands. Nothing demonstrates this better than that old audiophile chestnut, Ulla Meinecke's 'Die Tanzerin', with its sparse mix, sudden low frequency eruptions, reverb effects and myriad incidental noises used to punctuate and accent the track. Indeed, it's all those little touches: taps, finger snaps, claps, rubs, knocks and the rest of the battery of human percussion that underlines the effortless precision with which this arm goes about its business. The Brinkmann renders each individual sound so instantly identifiable, it's nature (human or mechanical) and source (even down to the finger in the cheek 'pop') so apparent that the song takes on a new level of fascination, becoming a shop window of percussive interjections and subtle textures, all underpinning the carefully constructed mix. That might sound largely academic but it's not. In a recording this meticulously constructed, there's no question that each and every

sound, the sheer range of sounds, was chosen deliberately. The ability to really appreciate that range adds subtle layers and emphasis to the music that has a less than subtle effect, especially when combined with the articulate and expressive vocal.

This clarity, speed and wide open, uncluttered presentation is accompanied by (and in no small part down to) a lightening of the tonal balance, a lean dryness at low frequencies that robs the mid and treble of substance and harmonic body, bringing a coolness to the tonal balance, but it's a relatively subtle effect and one that is readily compensated for elsewhere in the system (all too often inadvertently – making the 12.1 a welcome addition indeed). Musically, it means pairing the Brinkmann with products that don't want for presence, and it's no surprise that the company's cartridge is based on the EMT generator, with its reputation for muscular dynamics. With that in mind I mounted my own modified EMT and sure enough, both it and the Koetsu delivered the musical goods, the former lending an impressive solidity to dynamics, the latter a welcome touch of warmth and colour.

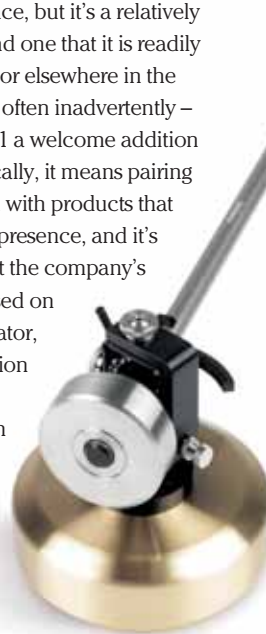
This lightness of touch gives the 12.1 the ability to tease out the deftest of musical flourishes, the most intricate details of technique. So, taking two examples from a single label, its strengths make more of the absolute pitch precision and control of Zinka Milanov than the lyrical phrasing but perfectly centred notes of the young Leontyne Price. Or coming from the opposite direction, the emphasis in Martzy's 'Kreutzer' Sonata leans more to her playing and less to the musical whole. Her flawless technique and poise are impressively apparent, albeit at the

expense of the intuitive intimacy and balance that she enjoyed with Jean Antonietti.

In many ways the Brinkmann's presentation favours the smaller, more intricate and delicate works that thrive on its clarity, rather than the larger scale musical forces where something a little more visceral suits better. But like everything else it's a question of balance, and if your turntable or system wants increased resolution and separation then this is one product that will provide it with a beguiling grace and musical ease. Only one word really describes the way the Brinkmann is built; the same word that describes how it sounds – exquisite.

Conclusion

This arm, along with the 12" VPI JMW, Kuzma 313 and Scroeder, all share a common quality, a sense of uninhibited musical flow, that can only derive from their increased effective length and the subsequent reduction in tracing distortion. Reduce that factor still further and the gains become greater still. For once the verdict is clear; despite the associated compromises when it comes to complexity, rigidity and effective mass, as far as pivoted tonearms are concerned, longer is indeed better. Factoring parallel trackers into the equation simply demonstrates just how important this issue really is, with even significant deviations from the mechanical ideal easily being outweighed by the performance gains overall. For serious record replay 12" arms are fast becoming the de facto standard – and rightly so. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Brinkmann Tonearm 12.1
 Price: £3295
 UK Distributor: Symmetry Systems
 Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488
 Net. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk