

EQUIPMENT REPORT



Lyra Atlas Phono Cartridge

The Truth Spoken Here

Jacob Heilbrunn

Harry Weisfeld, the manufacturer of VIP turntables, stared at me excitedly. “How much better can it be than the Kleos?” he said. “We’re all wondering,” Weisfeld was visiting the annual Capital Audio Fest in the Washington, DC, area and demo’ing his own spiffy VPI Classic 4, which was decked out with a Lyra Kleos cartridge.

I didn’t miss a beat. “A whole lot better,” I responded. Weisfeld and I were talking, of course, about the new Lyra Atlas cartridge, which has created considerable perturbation among those interested in high-end vinyl playback. In a crowded field of contenders, the Lyra Atlas may not be the leader of the pack—can any cartridge really satisfy everyone?—but it is indubitably jostling with its competitors at the front of it. The brainchild of Jonathan Carr, the Atlas has a number of features that contribute to making it the most exciting cartridge that I’ve ever heard.

The Atlas is the successor to two cartridges: Lyra’s popular Titan i cartridge, which was fast and dynamic but a little zippy on the top end, and to the Olympos, which was also resolute but a bit colored in the upper octaves. Now Carr has created a new design with the Atlas that solves that problem. The Atlas features what Lyra is calling an “asymmetric” design, which is another way of saying that it has nonparallel structures on the left and right side that are said to reduce resonances. The design also means, Lyra says, that the front magnet carrier is not in line with the cantilever assembly, which in turn means that vibrations from the cantilever can be quickly drained away. Nor is this all. The body itself is carved from a solid billet of titanium. Perhaps

most importantly, the efficiency of the generator coils has been markedly improved. The Atlas is said to have an output voltage that is 125% higher than the Titan’s, although it also has almost a fourth fewer coil windings. The overall output of the Atlas is a healthy 0.56mV. You can load it down, but I’ve been running it unloaded through the Ypsilon MC-10 step-up transformer and phono stage.

One of the nice features of a higher-output moving-coil cartridge is that the noise floor seems to diminish. I was thus able to go from the MC-10 to the MC-16 step-up transformer, which has more windings for more gain. In the case of the Atlas, the noise floor doesn’t simply appear to be lower; it seems to vanish. Consider the famous Itzhak Perelman and Vladimir Ashkenazy rendering of Beethoven’s violin sonatas on Decca. I was not prepared for what I heard. On the *Spring Sonata*, Perelman dug into the violin with a ferocity that I have not heretofore experienced. The same could be said of the piano. The music seemed to acquire an agility and dynamism that lent it a quality of immediacy that was new to me on vinyl. To hear this duo negotiate hairpin musical turns with such alacrity and thunderous power is a thrilling experience. The Atlas offers a potent reminder that there really is more buried in the grooves than often seems possible to imagine.

The Atlas’ extension at both frequency extremes, bass and treble, is irreproachable. Nothing seems to faze it. On a recent trip to Munich, I happened to acquire a Jimmy Smith LP on Verve called *Root Down—Jimmy Smith Live!* that I’ve coveted for

SPECS & PRICING**Type:** Moving-coil phono cartridge**Output level:** 0.56mV**Compliance:** 12**Price:** \$8500**AUDIOQUEST**
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years. This isn't the Jimmy Smith of the Blue Note era, but a more audacious one, ramped up considerably with Wilton Felder on bass and Buck Clarke on congas and percussion. The last cut, "Slow Down Sagg," is a powerhouse number. In this howling inferno of music, the Atlas produced each instrument clearly, never losing the cymbals, which are crashing away. John Quick of Tempo High Fidelity and dCS, who was visiting, estimates that my stereo was routinely reaching peaks of 105dB on this cut (I should hasten to add that I do not usually listen at that sound pressure level). All of this suggests that the Atlas is also a superb tracker, adept at sailing through fiendishly complex passages without losing its composure.

But for all its dynamism, the Atlas also conveys shadings and nuances and slight tempo shifts with wonderful fidelity. Consider *Count Basie and the Kansas City 7*, the Impulse LP reissued by Chad Kassem's Acoustic Sounds on 45 rpm. Perhaps my favorite track is "I Want A Little Girl." On it, the trumpeter Thad Jones, who had apparently forgotten his derby, had to use a Harmon mute to produce the wa-wa sound. The Atlas delivers, or appears to deliver, every last delicate overtone on Jones' trumpet. And, oh, the black backgrounds on this nifty number!

It was possible to hear a similar rendering on an Erato recording of the French trumpeter Maurice Andre playing a fairly obscure but lovely trumpet and organ sonata by the 18th century composer Thomas Vincent. In the first movement, the organ and trumpet achieved a kind of lyrical unity that I've seldom heard, particularly on the soft passages. One of the things that becomes apparent as high-end equipment keeps improving is that the hardest things to replicate with utmost fidelity are the *pianissimo* passages. But when they are well reproduced, it contributes to the sense of dynamic range across the frequency spectrum. What I'm trying to suggest here is that, as one of my trumpet teachers told me years ago, if you can't play at a whisper-quiet level—which means practicing your long tones as much as possible—then forget about trying to play loudly with any real impact. Instead, it will simply sound thin and etched. The same holds true when it comes to stereos.

Perhaps, then, it should not be surprising that the Atlas scales so well. On *Laudate*, a recording on the Proprius label, the chorus seemed to reach to the very back row on Stefano Fabri's *Laudate pueri Dominum*. Admittedly, this was stacking the deck somewhat—Proprius is storied for its excellent recordings. This happens to be one that I snagged off eBay at a reasonable price. But it would be wrong to surmise that the Atlas only sounded good on stellar discs. Quite the contrary. One of the things that floored me was its ability to rescue a few LPs that I had viewed as

sounding somewhat boxy and etched, whether it was a Deutsche Grammophon recording of Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic playing Tchaikovsky or a later Lyrita pressing of Malcolm Arnold. Both sounded entirely engaging.

So what's the downside of the Atlas? Surely there must be a hitch somewhere? Well, I can't honestly say that the Atlas sounds as ethereal as the Air Tight PC-1 Supreme. At this level you are getting into taste and choice. The new "Statement" version of the Clearaudio Goldfinger, which I have not had the chance to audition, also sounded quite formidable to me at the 2011 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. Overall, the Atlas does not land on the Koetsu side of the spectrum. Don't get me wrong: it's not abrasive. Not in the slightest. It sounds liquid and emotionally engaging. But the truth, to the extent that we can know what it is, is spoken here. The Atlas seems to slow down the LP and extract more ambience, information, and dynamics than almost any other cartridge.

Having heard a number of Lyras over the years—and recoiling at the sound of some of them, such as the Helikon—I can unequivocally state that Lyra has handily surpassed its previous efforts with the Atlas. The Atlas is not a cartridge that will leave anyone shrugging his shoulders in indifference. Instead, it is likely to leave you most impressed with its fidelity, purity, and speed. If you possess a large vinyl library and a fine turntable, then auditioning the Atlas is a must. My guess is that Harry Weisfeld is in for a considerable shock whenever he receives an Atlas. **tas**

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