

# LISTENING BY ART DUDLEY

**THIS ISSUE:** A belt-drive turntable with a skeletal plinth, an acrylic platter, and an apparently lowish-torque DC motor. From Serbia.

## From Serbia with Love

Sometimes I feign interest in living in the Soviet Union of the 1950s and '60s. This happens mostly when I'm shopping for toothpaste at my local supermarket, where the toothpaste aisle is as long as a football field. "I don't *want* so many choices," I say in my Abe Simpson voice, "because all these choices are stupid. I wish I lived in the USSR: Shopping for toothpaste wouldn't take so long." But I'm only kidding.

Now I see dozens of high-end audio manufacturers popping up every year, with new turntable companies leading the charge. Virtually all of them offer at least a half-dozen different turntables, and sometimes the various models in a given company's line represent a variety of different design philosophies: *You want high-mass, we got high-mass. You want low-mass, we got low-mass. Whatever you want, we got it.* Those companies act as if they're in the toothpaste business: They offer a bazillion different choices, just so they can occupy more shelf space or catalog pages than their competitors—and their competitors will always be more than happy to up the game and demand even more space on those shelves and pages.

So I was cheered when, at the 2015 New York Audio Show, in suburban Rye Brook, New York, I first encountered the Serbian turntable manufacturer Soulines. All five of their models featured acrylic platters, belt-driven by DC motors of moderately low torque. (I define *moderately low torque* as just enough to start the platter spinning without assistance, but low enough that the platter or motor can be easily stopped by hand.) Each model was no larger than necessary to accommodate a 12" platter and a 9" tonearm. The plinths or chassis of all were on the low-mass side of average—though apparently not as low as, say, the plinth of a Rega Planar 3. There appeared to be a point of view at work here, and you *know* how I love those.

The icing on the cake was that all five Soulines models came with a cleverly designed, minimalist dustcover, and each turntable was fancifully named for a famous individual: two composers, one novelist, one film director, and one Greek god—respectively, Elgar, Satie, Dostoyevsky, Kubrick, and Hermes. These elements, and the fine sound produced at NYAS 2015 by Soulines-fronted systems—this was in the suite sponsored by retailer Adirondack Audio & Video,



**Above:** The Soulines Kubrick DCX, seen without its platter (but with its extra armboards). **Left:** The same turntable, with platter and dustcover.

Soulines' US distributor—offset whatever doubts I might have had owing to the Soulines' lacks of those design elements I've come to favor: heavy platters, idler-wheel drive, and, above all, high-torque motors. I wondered:

might one of these turntables nonetheless shine in my system? Is there life beyond my own hi-fi hobbyhorses? I decided to find out—and, a year and a half later, I borrowed a review sample of Soulines' top-of-the-line turntable, the Kubrick DCX (\$4000 without tonearm).

Its name a nod to the space station in the Stanley Kubrick film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the Kubrick DCX lacks a plinth in the usual sense, and is supported instead by a skeletal aluminum chassis in which three elongated pods of unequal length extend from a central point that also serves as a base for the platter bearing. Given the pods' unusual shape, accurately measuring each from the chassis center out to the center of its supporting foot wasn't possible, but I estimated 150mm for the rearmost pod, 200mm for the left-front pod, and 250mm for the right-front pod; interestingly, the supporting feet at the ends of those pods, also machined from aluminum, are also differently sized, with diameters of 40mm for the rear foot, 70mm for the left-front foot, and 60mm for the right-front foot. (On their website, Soulines claims for the Kubrick's design an adherence to the Golden

Ratio/Fibonacci sequence, but without going into detail; while noting my lack of mathematics training or any intuitive sense of spatial relationships, I just don't see it.) The height of each foot is adjustable, and all have rounded, soft-polymer tips.

The platter bearing is an inverted type: a stainless-steel axle is held stationary within a round brass plate that's rigidly affixed to the center of the chassis; a steel ball sits in a recess atop that axle, on which rides a very hefty and obviously well-machined brass outer hub with a diameter of 45mm and a bore just large enough to accept the whole of the bearing shaft, with freedom of rotation but zero apparent play. A small amount of 30-weight synthetic oil is used between the shaft and the hub. The 40mm-thick acrylic platter is machined with a bore that snugly fits atop the brass bearing hub, which is also fitted with a record spindle. The platter, whose edge is ungrooved, is driven by a polymer belt of round cross-section; supplied with the Kubrick are two belts, one black, one white, apparently made of two different materials. I thought the turntable sounded

pleasantly louder and more forward with the white belt, but I may have imagined that.

Another aluminum pod of sorts is fastened to the underside of the main chassis with 32 stainless-steel bolts; this extends into a vaguely kidney-shaped substructure built up of multiple layers of machined aluminum, in which are mounted the Kubrick's DC motor and drive circuitry. On the kidneypod's upper surface are an on/off toggle switch, another toggle for selecting between 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  and 45rpm, and two tiny, recessed trim pots for fine-tuning those speeds with the aid of a similarly tiny screwdriver (not included).

A separate aluminum tonearm-support structure, also kidney shaped, attaches to the main chassis from above but is compliantly mounted, said compliance provided by cork washers and grommets of various diameter. To its outer end is bolted a round tonearm board, machined with an opening for the arm of choice. Three boards are supplied with the Kubrick: one for Linn/Jelco-style mounts, one for SME-style mounts, and one for Rega tonearms—which is the one I used, with my own Rega RB300.

### Expectations confounded

The first thing that impressed me about the Soulines Kubrick DCX was its very well-designed and well-made packing. The sturdy white carton with its multilayer, compartmentalized foam inserts reminded me of the packing for the Linn LP12, Roksan Xerxes, and other products from long-established companies—and while many good products have reached me, intact, in far less sophisticated boxes, I'm always impressed when a manufacturer invests greater-than-average amounts of money and effort in getting their designs to their dealers and customers.

Setup was a breeze: The main chassis, support feet, motor pod, and tonearm pod are preassembled, and the Rega armboard—which can be used with either old-style single-nut RB250s and RB300s or newer three-bolt Rega arms—was already in place. My chores were limited to fitting the platter atop the pre-assembled, pre-oiled bearing, fitting the drive belt, installing the tonearm on the armboard, and installing and aligning my Denon DL-103 cartridge. For that last chore, the Soulines Kubrick DCX comes with a laminated alignment tem-

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plate with calibrations for the three most popular geometries: Baerwald, Stevenson, and Löfgren. Normally, my preference is for the Baerwald variation devised by Keith Howard,<sup>1</sup> but for the sake of ease I sometimes opt for traditional Baerwald with my Rega arm, whatever the turntable. When the Kubrick arrived, I removed the RB300 from my LP12, cartridge intact—and was happily surprised to see that the cartridge alignment was still correct after I'd installed the arm on the Soulines. I took this as confirmation that its armboard was correctly machined.

The very last chore was to fit the platter with the supplied cork platter mat, which brings me to the second thing that impressed me about the Kubrick: Its platter bearing and platter are so beautifully machined that, looking at the platter from the side, I couldn't tell when it was spinning. I could detect no platter wobble—zero. To put into proper context this often underemphasized aspect of turntable construction: Lack of unwanted movement in a device whose sole job is to measure, at correct and steady speed, bumps in the record groove that range

in size down to that of dust-mite feces is *always* a good thing.

That brought me, in short order, to the third thing that impressed me about the Soulines Kubrick DCX: When I lowered the stylus of my Denon DL-103 to the lead-in groove of the first record I tried—Mendelssohn's Octet for Strings, performed by the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields Chamber Ensemble (LP, Argo ZRG 569)—I was shocked by how *big* the ensemble sounded. I'd been listening to that record a lot in the days leading up to this review, and the difference I heard compared to my Garrard 301-based player—which itself has a typically large sense of scale—was unmistakable. In previous columns and reviews I've wondered about which design aspects of playback gear might contribute to generous scale—and I've mused that, in loudspeakers in particular, one might consider that quality an additive distortion, owing to unintended sound reflections from physically large cabinets. I still haven't got the slightest idea what's responsible for this effect, but I like it.

Listening closely to that Mendelssohn recording, I heard that the

Kubrick-based record player also focused more on the sound of the recording space than did my Garrard rig: reverb, like scale, was far more generous. Yet this did not come at the expense of any of the performance characteristics nearest and dearest to me. Musical momentum and flow were superb—and, especially in the final movement of Boccherini's Cello Quintet in C, Op.37 No.7, also included on this LP, the sense of bounce in bowed note attacks was delightfully real. Overall tonal balance was very slightly dark, yet with no lack of sparkle—and surface noise was never brought to the fore.

As I said: I was impressed!

I moved on to a new LP acquisition: the Incredible String Band's wonderful *Liquid Acrobat as Regards the Air* (LP, Island ILPS 9172). The first time I heard this record was in March, at the Montreal Audio Fest, in the room sponsored by Toronto dealer Sonic Artistry. It was also the first time I'd heard the Döhmman Helix 1 turntable

<sup>1</sup> See Keith Howard's "Arc Angles: Optimizing Tonearm Geometry," in the March 2010 issue: [www.stereophile.com/reference/arc\\_angles\\_optimizing\\_tonearm\\_geometry/index.html](http://www.stereophile.com/reference/arc_angles_optimizing_tonearm_geometry/index.html).

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and Frank Schröder–designed CB 12" tonearm—and it was to that player I attributed the remarkable touch and force and presence I then heard from that LP. I heard the same qualities when playing my own copy of that record on my idler-drive Garrard, and while the Soulines Kubrick DCX delivered the same nice things in somewhat smaller measures, deliver them it did. But the Kubrick told me what the Kubrick wanted to tell me, which was all about the very large recording space captured on this record. In the opening track, “Talking of the End,” there are, among other instruments, a pennywhistle at far stage right and a violin at far stage left—and with the Soulines Kubrick, those sounds were spaced farther apart than with my Garrard. The other sounds—including those of a harmonium, an oud, and various percussion instruments—were also generously sized, and the first lead vocal, from Robin Williamson, had really good presence and body. No less important, his voice was clear and without apparent colorations, and the violin and harmonium in particular displayed believable, natural textures.

One eccentric British pop record leads to another, and so, as the time had come to get a handle on the Kubrick’s bass extension, I reached for the better of my two copies of Genesis’s *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* (2 LPs, Atco/Classic SD 2-401), and listened for the bass pedals that begin halfway through “Fly on a Windshield,” as well as the lowest of many similarly deep tones—a D-flat, I think—in “The Chamber of 32 Doors.” From those experiences and that of listening for the weight and impact of the orchestral bass drum in the recording of Elgar’s *The Dream of Gerontius* with Sir Adrian Boult leading various soloists, the New Philharmonia Orchestra, and the London Philharmonic and John Aldis choirs (2 LPs, EMI SLS 987), I found the Kubrick’s performance better than average—at least as good as my Linn LP12 with the same arm and cartridge, if not up to Garrard 301 or Thorens TD 124 levels. That said, the Kubrick’s very good momentum endured, making this an involving listening experience, and the combination maintained its composure throughout this set’s many very loud moments.

But all of the above paled in comparison with the experience I had when I played on the Kubrick my



**Fig.1** (left) Soulines Kubrick DCX, speed stability (raw frequency yellow; low-pass filtered frequency green); **Fig.2** (right) Soulines Kubrick DCX, speed stability data.

**“If it catches mice, it is a good cat.”**

copy of Sonny Rollins’s *The Bridge* (LP, Japanese Victor/RCA RCA-6011). For whatever reason, that record and that record player just fell in love with each other. Unsurprisingly, the soundfield was huge—and Jim Hall’s guitar, in the left channel, had a size and presence that can be described only as magisterial. Bob Cranshaw’s double bass had heft, power, speed, color, and, above all, drive. Ben Riley’s drumming was energetic and well-paced. And Rollins’s tenor sax had tone and substance, flesh and blood, in great abundance.

#### Dr. Feickert will now say a few words

And now for the measurements, such as they are, made with Dr. Feickert Analogue’s *Adjust+* test record and PlatterSpeed software for Apple iOS. Out of the box, the Kubrick was a bit slow, outputting a mean frequency of 3137.4Hz for a 3150Hz groove modulation. Using the appropriate trim pot, I brought the speed up to a remeasured mean frequency of 3149.5, and then got the wow measurements shown in figs. 1 and 2: decent, if not up to the standard of my late-1950s Garrard 301.<sup>2</sup>

Unfailingly musical, and big, forward, and impactful—I keep thinking about the realistic sense of force the Kubrick DCX put across whenever guitarist Jim Hall raked his pick across those heavy-gauge strings of his—the sound of the Soulines impressed the hell out of me. And, again, this without adhering to any of the design

approaches that, from experience, I’d associated with turntables that excel in all aspects of playback that are important to me. But there you go: Chinese statesman Deng Xiaoping, another communist, famously said, “It doesn’t matter whether a cat is black or white: If it catches mice, it is a good cat”—a statement that put him at odds with Mao Tse-Tung’s widow, whose mistrust of all things Western never dimmed.

How or why should a belt-drive turntable with a skeletal plinth, an acrylic platter, and an apparently lowish-torque DC motor pull so much impact, tone, and musical satisfaction from my LPs? Damned if I know—but it did. Next to the enduringly recommendable PTP Solid12 turntable<sup>3</sup>—which itself uses some vintage components—this is one of the very best non-vintage turntables I’ve heard outside of the enormously expensive Döhmman Helix 1 (\$40,000). Very highly recommended. ■

Art Dudley (Stletters@enthusiastnetwork.com) admits to having a passion for *The Incredible String Band* on LP.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.stereophile.com/content/listening-168-ortofon-spu-1s-phono-cartridge-page-2](http://www.stereophile.com/content/listening-168-ortofon-spu-1s-phono-cartridge-page-2).

<sup>3</sup> See my June 2013 column: [www.stereophile.com/content/listening-126](http://www.stereophile.com/content/listening-126).

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