

The Audio Beat

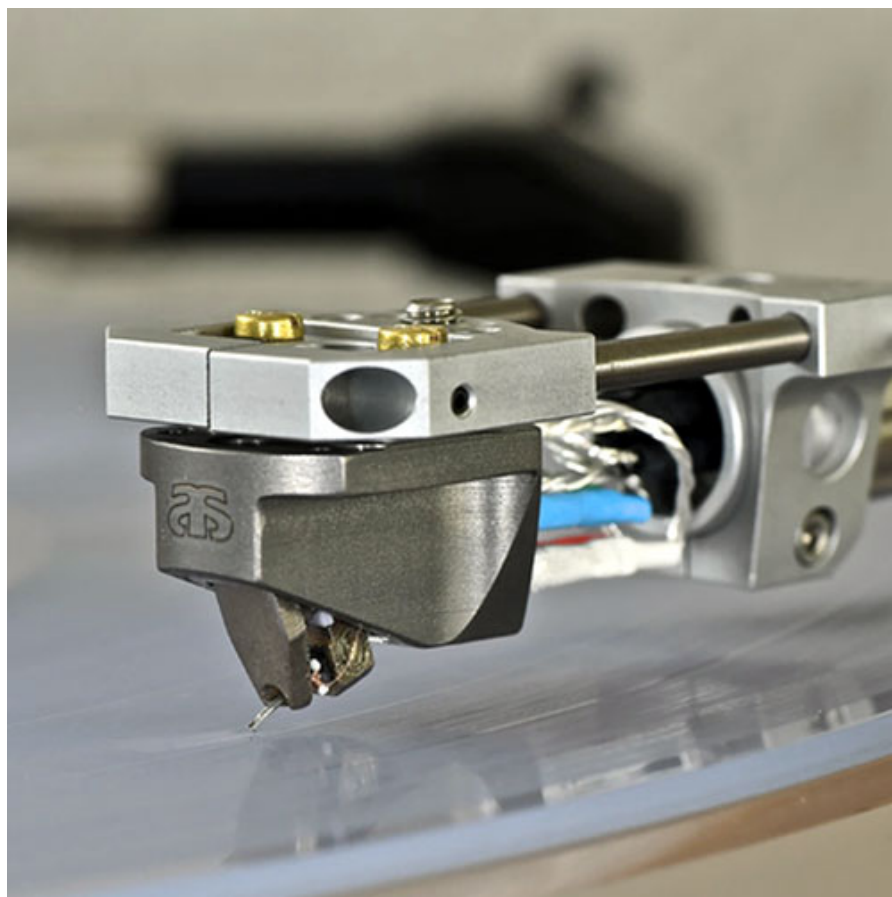
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Acoustical Systems • Archon Phono Cartridge

"Buy an Archon and for once you won't be sorry you played it safe."

by [Roy Gregory](#) | March 31, 2017

Acoustical Systems is probably best known for the SMARTractor, an alignment device that allows a previously unheard-of degree of both choice and precision when it comes to mounting phono cartridges -- and this at a time when too many commentators and manufacturers are trying to dumb down analog setup in the mistaken assumption that making analog easy will somehow broaden its appeal. It's an assumption that is mistaken because analog's appeal lies in its *superior performance*, and that depends on careful setup and alignment -- things that become all too clear as soon as you start playing with a device as beautifully executed and thought through as the SMARTractor. Superior precision and greater clarity when it comes to execution deliver more accurate results -- results that you can hear clearly. The real beauty of the SMARTractor is that rather than simplifying the process itself, it makes the process simpler, a critical distinction that displays a deep understanding of, and commitment to, just what matters in analog reproduction. This conclusion is underlined by the SMARTractor's inclusion of not just Lofgren and Baerwald geometries, but also UNI-DIN, an all-new geometry developed by Acoustical Systems, the first such advancement since the 1940s and the advent of the microgroove LP.



Price: \$3295.

Warranty: One year parts and labor.

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Not surprisingly, Dietrich Brakemeier, the man behind Acoustical Systems, has clear ideas on and has applied himself to all aspects of analog replay, reflected in his distinctive tonearm designs and embodied in the Apolyt, which might just be the most ambitious turntable ever built.

So, having enjoyed the considerable benefits of the SMARTractor and the UNI-DIN curve, both having become key components of my analog set up regimen, I think it's hardly surprising to find the notion of an Acoustical Systems cartridge intriguing -- which brings me to the Archon, the subject of this review. The company actually offers four closely related cartridges, of which the \$3295 Archon is the most affordable. Next up is the Astron, which is essentially a selected Archon, and above that is the Aiwon, a further refinement of the basic design with around half the output. The finer details of the flagship Palladian remain shrouded in mystery, although it too shares the basic presentation and layout of the other cartridges.

All three of the "A"-series cartridges share silver coils, a Shibata EVO stylus profile, an aluminum cantilever and low compliance (around 9cu -- the stated figures are "static" values) -- all of which are interesting but hardly unique. What is unique -- at least as far as I'm aware -- is that the open-plan body, machined from a solid block of Timet 1100 titanium alloy -- is selectively liquid damped by small, critically located oil wells (as in reservoirs, not gushers). As far as I've discovered, that's a first.

However, as in all things audio, particularly all things analog, the simple facts fail to tell the whole story. The Archon isn't the prettiest-looking moving-coil cartridge, its inverted-hip-bath bodywork and exposed generator sitting uncomfortably (at least aesthetically speaking) between naked designs like the Lyras and more conventional, fully clad models. That's a personal thing, obviously, but, not surprisingly, there's logic at work here. That body is cut away for the same reasons that naked designs exist in the first place (lower mass and reduced mechanical signature from the body), yet it still shrouds the vulnerable hair-fine wiring on the outside of the generator, while also making the cartridge easier (for which read *safer*) to handle. The top plate of the cartridge also displays more than the average consideration. Rows of three threaded holes ensure that correct overhang can be achieved in almost all situations (the possible exception being the now-defunct Naim ARO, with its fixed mounting holes) with raised lands around them ensuring intimate mechanical contact with the headshell. The exposed generator and protruding cantilever may give installers sleepless nights, but as I've already noted, the Archon is considerably easier to manipulate than other naked cartridges, while the open physical arrangement and pale aluminum cantilever make this possibly the easiest cartridge I've ever had to align.

Talking about the cantilever, peruse the accompanying literature and you'll see reference to it being coated with C-37 lacquer. For those unfamiliar with this, it is a varnish developed by German violin maker Dieter Ennemoser and is perhaps best thought of as equivalent to the dopes developed for and applied to speaker drivers. In fact, you can use C-37 lacquer on driver diaphragms, but that only scrapes the surface of its applications. The clue lies in the C-37 moniker, which relates to Ennemoser's wider C-37 system, a concept that expresses the sound character of different materials in terms of temperature. By now, the sharper knives in the audio box will have twigged that 37° C is body temperature.

Despite the appearance and a distinct whiff of snake oil, Ennemoser's demonstrations are impressive, and his lacquer is starting to crop up in more and more products. What I find so interesting about its application to the Archon (besides the obvious impact on the resonant character of a crucial component) is that it indicates that the extreme mathematical rigor represented by the SMARTractor is accompanied by an open-minded approach to the audible impact of less explainable factors. It helps explain why the Archon manages to tread so deftly along that fine line where *musical* and *technically correct* meet.

Other points worth noting are a sensible total mass of a shade over 11 grams, a recommended tracking force of 1.8 grams and a healthy 0.5mV output -- all in line with currently accepted norms. Acoustical Systems supplies non-magnetic brass fixing screws in a range of lengths, although that means using slot heads that can be fiddly as compared to Allen bolts. Don't be tempted to swap them out for the easy option: unless your Allen bolts are similarly non-magnetic (and most aren't), then you will hear the difference. The cartridge pins are standard size, which is always a welcome discovery, with the channels clearly identified, which rounds out the description of what is a thoroughly sorted and practical design.

The only omission that some might note was the stylus guard on the review sample, although I for one hate the things. In my retail days, owners' clumsiness with stylus guards killed more cartridges than cleaners or cats -- and that's saying something! Recently, Acoustical Systems has added a guard to the Archon's equipment (as well as creating the all-enveloping SMARTguard, that works with their tonearms and headshells), but I haven't seen it, so I can't comment.

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I used the Archon initially in both the Kuzma 4Point and Tri-Planar Mk VII tonearms, with impressive results all 'round, but the arrival of the Kuzma 4Point 14 raised the performance bar significantly. The low compliance of the cartridge combined with the additional stability of the 'arm created a significant increase in dynamic authority and presence, while the open, grain-free character of the 'arm, with its expansive and natural stereo perspective, provided the perfect platform for the Archon's musical strengths. Those strengths are considerable, but to get their full benefit you'll need to approach setup in a very particular way. With the Archon mounted in the standard 4Point, there was a significant step up in performance when aligning it using Acoustical System's SMARTractor and UNI-DIN geometry -- a more noticeable change than with many other cartridges.

This came as no great surprise, the protractor and cartridge being in a very real sense, two sides of the same coin -- although it does underline just how interrelated all aspects of cartridge setup and design really are. But it created a problem when it came time to move the cartridge into the 14" 'arm: the SMARTractor alignment beam only extends far enough to encompass 12" 'arms. No SMARTractor, no UNI-DIN. A new, longer beam for the protractor (now available as an option) duly replaced my jury-rigged solution and the cartridge could finally be aligned with both the necessary precision and its preferred geometry in the longer 'arm. Once again, the results demonstrated just how responsive the Archon's musical performance is to the UNI-DIN setup, suggesting that if you are going to go the Acoustical Systems route, then you need to think of it as a total replay solution, not just another pickup. Hopefully, any Archon dealer will also have the SMARTractor on hand.

One other aspect of setup proved unusually significant in terms of overall performance. All cartridges respond to tiny shifts in VTF, but in the case of the Archon, VTF was super-critical to not just timing and gaps between notes, but also instrumental color, body, presence and the overall sense of the acoustic space. It really was a make-or-break factor, the difference between a polite but rather bland presentation and the dramatic, communicative performance this cartridge is capable of. This is something that whoever is setting the cartridge up will have to work at, but the incremental steps are going to be tiny. Fortunately, the composite counterweight on the 4Point makes such changes simple and repeatable, but irrespective of the 'arm in use, this is something that you'll need to do if the Archon is going to reveal its full range of musical talents.

This cartridge's performance rests on its calm, unflustered sense of confidence. There's nothing frenetic or hyped about its presentation, nothing spot-lit or exaggerated, etched or artificially airy. In fact, it's self-effacing to a fault. If I were hearing this cartridge for the first time without knowing what it was, I'd be forced to wonder if Ortofon had finally hit the musical jackpot. More than anything else the Archon reminded me of the neutrality, rich colors and intimate textures of the Ortofon MC7500 -- just without its cripplingly low output and muted dynamics. Or, to put it another way, this might just be the best moving-magnet you've never heard -- but without the lack of resolution and microdynamic discrimination. There's more than a hint of the sweet, refined grace of the low-output SoundSmith designs, a healthy dose of the midrange body and presence that set the Supex cartridges apart.

Hmmm, I think I see a pattern developing here. Every time I try to pigeonhole this cartridge I find myself thinking, *It's like this or that -- but not quite*. That's significant because what it reflects is that if the Archon might not be exactly revolutionary, then it is definitely something distinctive and different. There are cartridges (like the Fuuga) with a greater sense of musical power or dynamic range. There are cartridges that sound noticeably quicker and more immediate (the Lyra Atlas). There are certainly cartridges that sound more obviously spectacular (various Clearaudios). But there are very few cartridges that sound as stable, solid and calm as the Archon, while at the same time flowing so effortlessly through the music. Hand in hand with that confidence comes a sense of easy order and musical organization, the impression not just that everything is where it should be, but that things happen just when they should too. This natural sense of fluid pace and progress, the relaxation it brings to listening, is what really sets the Archon apart -- and it is also the quality that characterizes the UNI-DIN alignment. After this cartridge, all but a very select few sound forced and false.

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With any component that excels at the natural as opposed to the spectacular, the acid test will always be voice, the instrument we all know best. The smaller and more intimate the recording, the more critical it is of the system, its intrusions and aberrations. The better you know the voice(s), the more obvious the shortcomings.

Let's start with Eleanor McEvoy's familiar delivery, with its characteristic diction and that soft Irish accent that continually lurks behind the lyrics. The vocal on "Last Seen October 9th" (from *Yo!a* [Market Square/Vivante VA 302]) is about as exposed as it gets, because of the sparse piano accompaniment. Using the Archon, the voice was unmistakable -- possibly the most natural and identifiable rendition I've ever enjoyed and that of a voice, speaking and singing, that I know really well. It wasn't just the tonal and harmonic quality, but the scale and dimensionality, the phrasing and immediacy. The Acoustical Systems cartridge couldn't match the likes of the Lyra Atlas for sheer definition and transparency, but it had an intimate, communicative delivery that was a function of its overall coherence rather than individual strengths, a palpable presence that made a song like "Last seen . . ." almost achingly painful.

That holistic sense, the feeling that you are listening to a single, continuous whole, was more than just dimensional. It was temporal too. Just as Eleanor McEvoy's phrasing and enunciation were immediately recognizable, so was Suzanne Vega's eclectic phrasing and her magpie tendency to adopt disparate rhythms. *The Close Up* series of albums, *Volume 2, People and Places* in this case [Amenuensis/Music On Vinyl MOVLP 231]), feature her singing almost unaccompanied and highlight her fascination with rhythm and meter. Whether it's the hypnotic repetition of "Tom's Diner" or the gently uncurling flow of "The Queen & The Soldier," the fractured dissonance of "Luka" or the straight-ahead rock rhythm of "Neighborhood Girl," each song is allowed its own character and pace, its own sense of progress, whether languid or pressing, behind or on the beat. Turn to Dolly Varden's *The Dumbest Magnets* [Diverse Records DIV 007LP] and we're talking a different kind of intimacy, the fragile beauty of those Dawson/Christiansen duets and the way they weave around each other and against the beautifully arranged instrumental backing. Here again, the Archon delivered a sound that was clear and unforced, all the musical elements fitting effortlessly together to create a single, meaningful whole.

But there's something that all of these examples have in common: an engaging, communicative quality that makes listening to these records a serious sing-along experience. And just as that quality extended across the different scales and complexities of the tracks involved, so it extended across records and recordings. Stepping up across jazz bands to chamber music and beyond to full orchestral works, the Archon retained this sense of compact presence and solidity, its open, uncluttered presentation allowing the music to breathe. Just as UNI-DIN is characterized by its easy, unimpeded sense of musical progress and flow, so the Archon's fluid grace and sure-footed sense of pace built on that quality, the whole making the most of the separate parts to create a sound that seemed to almost lead the listener through the performance. The more I listened, the more it became apparent that there was an easy sense of rightness to the Archon's presentation, built on an inner sense of proper proportion, in both dimensional and dynamic terms. This cartridge absolutely gets relative scale, whether it's Eleanor McEvoy's voice and the piano behind it, or the hushed timps that underpin the closing bars of the Sibelius 2nd Symphony. Or to put it another way -- it allows music to breathe and expand, advance or decay in perfectly scaled steps, and that makes it seem more natural still.

One other quality that added to the Archon's relaxed yet musically communicative delivery was the way it dealt with surface noise, relegating it to a different plane and a lower level than the musical signal. Few cartridges are as kind to less-than-pristine pressings as this one, and even fewer render the noise and interjections of unavoidable surface imperfections as innocuous. Pops and clicks lost that sharp, aggressive leading edge that made them so intrusive, while I've yet to actually provoke a bona fide crack from this cartridge -- ever. Does that signal a lack of top-end energy and air, resolution and speed? I'd argue that it's more to do with that lack of overshoot and exaggeration. After all, you don't get that natural vocal delivery with an enclosed or shut-in top end. Nor do you get the vivid, vibrant attack and energy, cut and thrust of the violins and other strings on Britten's performance of the Mozart Symphony No.40 (with the ECO [Decca SXL 6372]) a recording that also captures the naturally balanced acoustic of the Snape Hall -- so no help from that quarter when it comes to top-end lift. Instead, the Archon was just better behaved and less obvious than most other cartridges -- certainly than the other cartridges I have in-house.

A more pertinent observation echoes the use of the word "compact" to describe the sound. The Archon didn't stretch as wide or dig down as far as the other cartridges I've mentioned. It lacked the incredible musical power and bottom-end weight and authority of the Fuuga, the extraordinary width of the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement or the sense of acoustic space and proportion that comes so easily to the Lyra Etna -- but then it also lacks those cartridges' elevated price tags. I constantly had to remind myself of the Archon's comparatively modest asking price throughout the review period, something which is as unusual as it is welcome these days.

Which I guess brings us to the whole question of value. For some listeners, there's no question that bigger is better and that eye-watering prices need to be matched by spectacular sound. For others, the very idea of spending over \$3000 on a cartridge -- a component that actually wears out each and every time you use it -- is the very stuff of audio excess. Neither of those groups is likely to be won over by the Archon. It's simply too middle-ground for that: too expensive for some, not showy enough for others. But cartridges enjoy the unique privilege of sitting right at the business end of our systems. As such, the job they do impacts on and limits the contribution of everything that follows in their wake. No other individual component has the same ability to shape the nature and performance, character and presentation of our systems, so every dollar you spend on a cartridge gets amplified by the rest of the chain, just the same as the signal it produces, a fact that should give you pause.

Seen in that light, the Archon's extraordinary neutrality and innate musicality, together with its practicality, both in terms of installation and interfacing, take on new significance. It was not just that its natural balance of virtues didn't play wrong; they actually acted to lead or lean the entire system down the path of sonic safe passage. Now, I know that "safe" -- just like "sensible" -- isn't exactly sexy, but that's what makes the Archon special. Whilst it is definitely safe, it's also very sexy; just listen to those female vocals over again, or listen to Martha Argerich playing Chopin (oh, yes, piano was another realm in which the Archon excelled). The sheer humanity and intent, the emotional connection this cartridge made in turn made it very sexy indeed. So no, the Archon may not have the astonishing speed, resolution, dynamics or transparency of the very best cartridges. It cannot match them for sheer drama. But it at least matches and often betters them when it comes to neutrality and musical articulation -- and did so at something like an approachable price.

Coherence is the key word here: the Archon's core musical virtues are solidly intact. Better than that, they worked together and, like any well-drilled team, that teamwork enabled them to overcome more extravagantly talented but less balanced opponents. It was not hard to find a cartridge that bettered the Archon in at least one regard, although the cartridges that did so were inevitably more expensive, while only the best (and most expensive) cartridges could better it

both sonically *and* musically -- and that made it not just a bargain but a serious investment in your system's future health and direction. No more trying to compensate for that one little niggle with the analog front-end.

When it comes to musical genres, the Archon does it all. It's kind to recordings and cuts right to the heart of the performance. Its natural tonality, unforced presentation and sense of inner balance made for a musically versatile and convincing performer. If you are looking for a cartridge upgrade but you're not yet ready to open your wallet and say "Help yourself," the Archon should be right at the top of your shopping list. In that strange area of the market that sits above starter 'coils but below the true exotics, the Archon sets a solid marker against which others can be judged. If you want bigger and bolder with greater drive and energy (particularly at the bottom end), then the Kuzma cartridges set the standard, but for a more balanced and less obviously demonstrative delivery, insight rather than impact, the Archon is hard to beat.

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Just *how* good is this cartridge? I have some very nice, and very expensive, cartridges here. They're all superior to the Archon, while costing around twice to five times its price. Yet, while listening to the Archon, I rarely felt a burning need to swap it out for one of the more exotic alternatives just waiting to take its place. This cartridge was capable, engaging and beautifully balanced, but, above all, it was inherently satisfying. It might just be that last stop before you plunge over the audiophile and financial cliff. Buy an Archon and for once you won't be sorry you played it safe. ☺

Associated Equipment

Analog: VPI Classic 4 with SDS and VPI JMW 12.7 and Tri-Planar Mk VII tonearms; Kuzma Stabi M turntable with 4Point 14 tonearm; Allnic Puritas and Puritas Mono, Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement, Fuuga, Kuzma CAR-50, Lyra Etna, Dorian, and Dorian Mono cartridges; DS Audio DS-W1 cartridge with matching equalizer; Stillpoints Ultra LP Isolator record weight; Connoisseur 4.2 PLE and Tom Evans Audio Designs Master Groove phono stages.

Digital: Wadia S7i and Neodeo Origine S1 CD players, CEC TL-3N CD transport.

Preamplifiers: Connoisseur 4.2 LE, Tom Evans Audio Designs The Vibe and VTL TL-7.5 Series III Reference.

Power amplifiers: Berning Quadrature Z and Jadis JA30 monoblocks, two VTL S-400 Series II Signature stereo amps.

Speakers: Wilson Audio Sasha W/P Series 2 and two WATCH Dog subwoofers, Wilson Benesch Square Five and Endeavour.

Cables: Complete looms of Nordost Odin or Valhalla 2, or Crystal Cable Absolute Dream from AC socket to speaker terminals. Power distribution was via Quantum QB8s or Crystal Cable Power Strip Diamonds, with a mix of Quantum Qx2 and Qx4 power purifiers and Qv2 AC harmonizers.

Supports: Harmonic Resolution Systems RXR, Hutter Racktime or Quadraspire SVT Bamboo racks. These are used with Nordost SortKone or HRS Nimbus equipment couplers and damping plates throughout. Cables are elevated on HECC Panda Feet.

Acoustic treatment: As well as the broadband absorption placed behind the listening seat, I employ a combination of RPG Skyline and LeadingEdge D Panel and Flat Panel microperforated acoustic devices.

Accessories: Essential accessories include the SmarTractor protractor, a USB microscope (so that I can see what I'm doing, *not* for attempting to measure stylus rake angle) and Aesthetix cartridge demagnetizer, a precision spirit level and laser, a really long tape measure and plenty of low-tack masking tape. I also make extensive use of the Furutech anti-static and demagnetizing devices and the VPI Typhoon record-cleaning machine. The Dr. Feikert PlatterSpeed app has to be the best ever case of digital aiding analog.

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