


The TW-Acoustic Raven Two

A Must for the Analog Aficionado!

By Jeff Dorgay



Unless you are one of those fringe audiophiles with a very small collection of brand new records, you soon realize that not all records are created equal. As much as you would like that perfect table/arm/cartridge combination, it just doesn't exist. What we all end up doing is shooting for a reasonable average spot that will work well for most of our collection and deal with the rest. Or perhaps you are one of those maniacal audiophiles that are constantly fussing and fiddling with multiple VTA settings, etc. Having a large collection of Mono records can also present a challenge, because they truly sound their best when used with a mono cartridge.

The wider in scope your collection becomes the need for more than one turntable becomes clear, but not everyone has the space. Wouldn't it be handy to have a turntable with two tonearms? The answer to that question is "yes, without question".

From a reviewer's standpoint, it is awesome to have an identical pair of everything; tonearms, cartridges and cables. This makes it much easier to evaluate the missing item in the group. With everything else equal (and a two input phono preamplifier) it becomes a very simple process to identify what is different in the analog chain. The Raven Two is indispensable as a tool for comparing analog gear.

But you probably don't care about that, so let's have fun!

The Raven Two is an unsuspected turntable with two arm pods that can easily work with any of the major tonearms. It costs \$7500 with two armboards, and the motor assembly is out to the left side on the front of the turntable. A small outboard power supply tethers to the motor and has two speeds, 33 and 45 r.p.m, with adjustments for each on the back panel. If you have no use for a second armboard, you can order this table as a Raven One, with the motor fitting where the second armboard would go, for \$5500 with the standard composite armboards you see here (an upgraded bronze armboard and OEM Stillpoint feat raise the price to \$6300). Trust me, if you start there, the lure of a second arm will eat away at you until you get one!

I have tried four different tonearms on the Raven, all with excellent luck. The main arm used for most testing has been the SME IV.Vi, with the second position being occupied at times by an additional IV.Vi, an SME 309, the Rega RB1000 and the current Tri-Planar arm. All have been very easy to setup and have proved very compatible with the Raven. I have seen the Raven tables used with a number of the Schroeder arms with excellent luck as well.

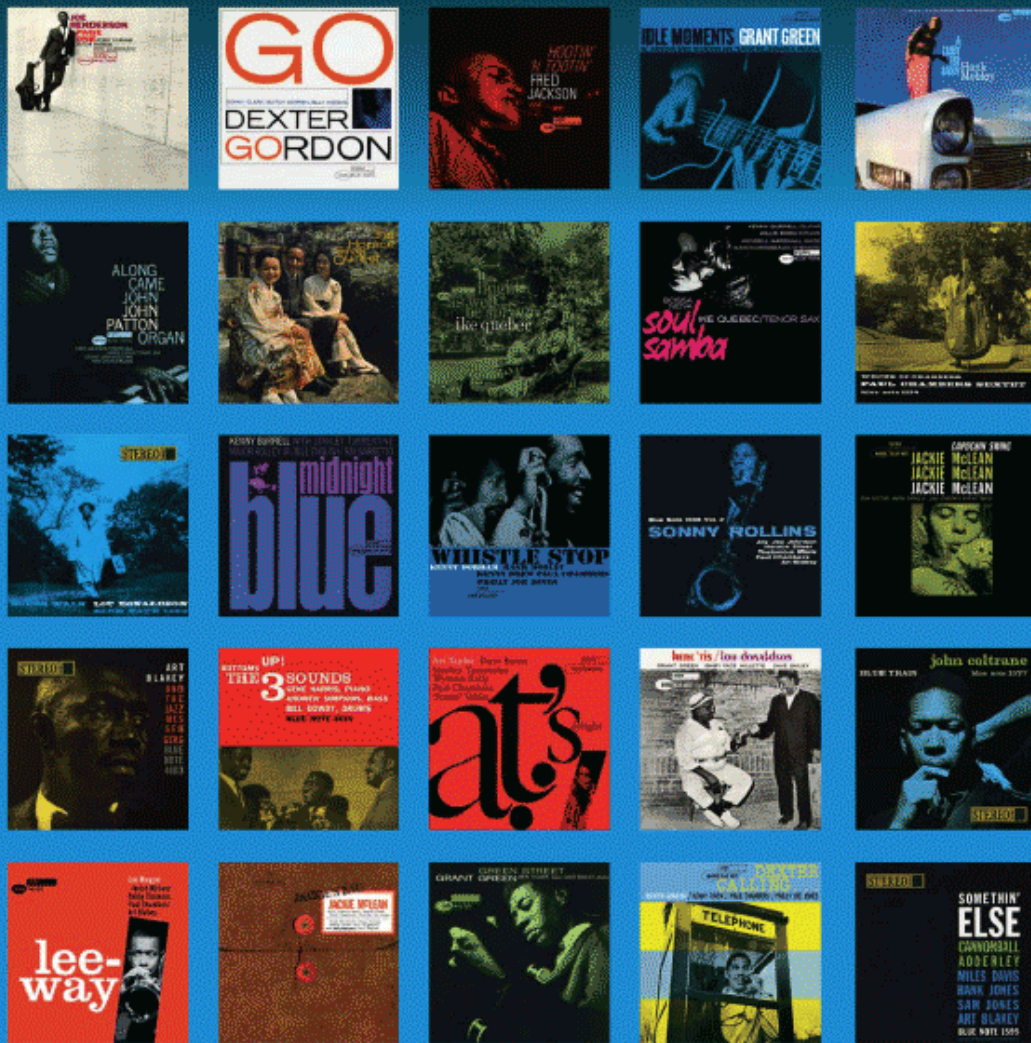


The arm pods screw down with a 5mm hex bolt and can swivel, making it very easy to adjust the pivot to spindle distance of your tonearm. I used the Acoustic Sounds protractor for every arm I worked with and this made removing one arm and resetting another a snap. If you do not have a system that you enjoy, I highly suggest the Acoustic Sounds protractor.

Because the Raven is machined from a solid billet of aluminum, the plinth is massive. The platter is made of a very dense acrylic and weighs about 20 pounds. Assembly couldn't be easier; unpack the parts, slide the platter on the bearing and install the arm board. If you are familiar with your tonearm, you should be able to be spinning records in under an hour. *(continued)*

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I set the speeds optically with the Cardas test record just so I could start listening. Coming back to fine adjustment later, I managed to nail the 33 r.p.m. speed right at 1000hz when playing the Acoustic Sounds test record, but the 45 r.p.m. setting was a bit fast and needed a bit of touching up.

My test sample came with a carbon fiber mat, but importer Jeffrey Catalano suggested that I try the table with and without. After extensive use, I ended up liking the mat, so it stayed for the duration of my listening sessions.

So many choices

If you aren't careful, analysis paralysis can set in once you have two choices for your tonearm and cartridge. After a number of options, which you have probably read about a bit in the last issue, I finally settled on SME, because I am the most familiar with these arms and they are the easiest to adjust. If I were strictly doing this for fun and settling on two arms, I would choose the excellent Rega RB1000 in the arm two position.

With the SME IVvi in position one, with my trusty Dynavector XV-1s, I was ready to take on the world and this is now the standard by which I am evaluating everything else. Tonearm two is the SME 309 with the IV series damping trough attached. Both arms use the new Furutech AG-12 tonearm cable (review in process) which has become my favorite. (continued)

Can We Play Records Now Please?

Whenever I have heard the Raven turntables at shows, I have always been impressed with the presentation. Mr. Catalano likes the XV-1s, so I had a great degree of confidence that I would also like the sound, but you know how the show thing can be.

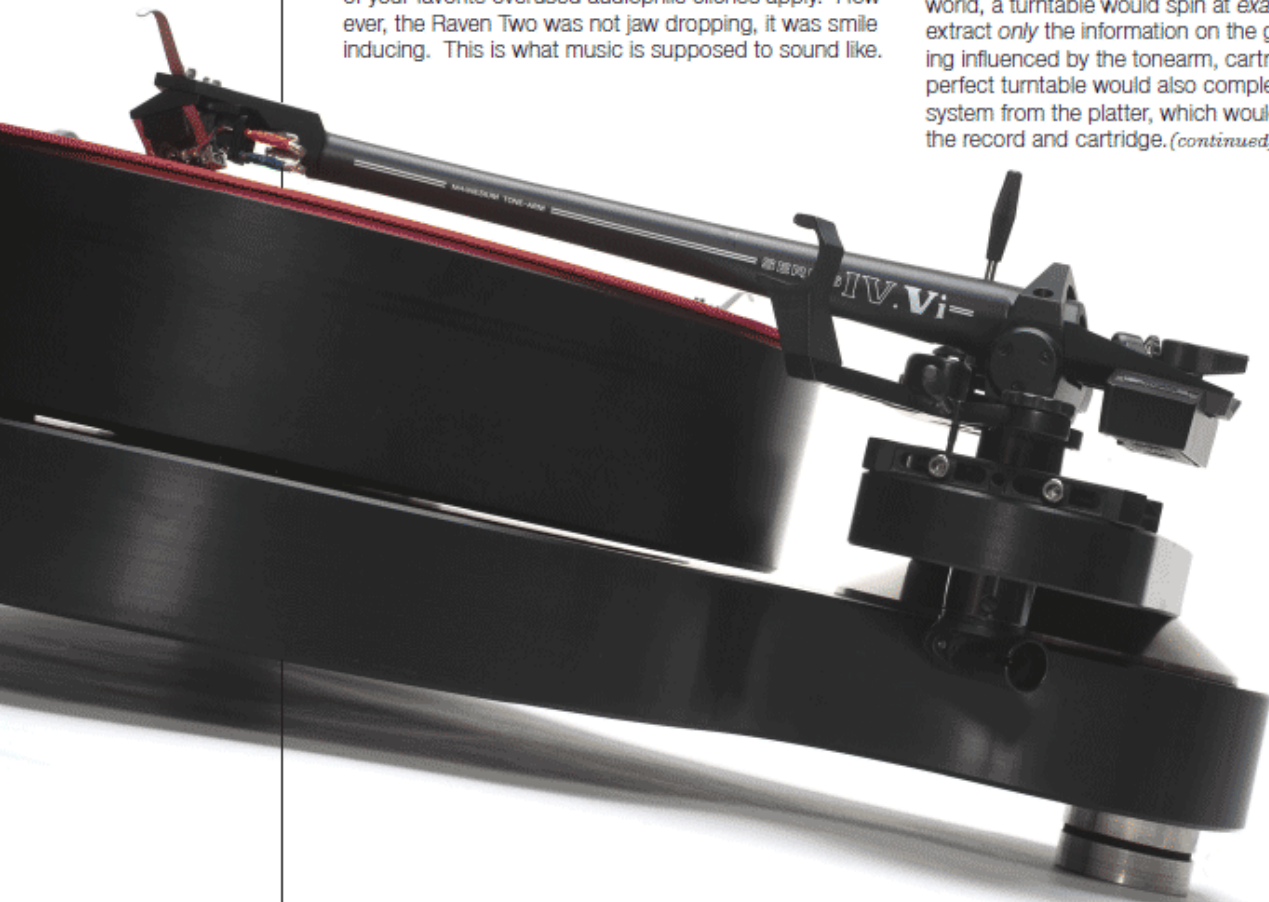
I was even more impressed when I got to hear the Raven in my system. After spending a few weeks listening to the Continuum Criterion, (with an identical XV-1s) I was not ready for the stunning capabilities of the Raven. Yes, the 56 thousand dollar Continuum had a slight edge in bass detail and ultimate weight, but a minute into "Strawberry Fields Forever" and I wasn't thinking about the Continuum any more.

Folks, this is a pretty amazing turntable and yes, all of your favorite overused audiophile clichés apply. However, the Raven Two was not jaw dropping, it was smile inducing. This is what music is supposed to sound like.

The true test of fire for a great audio component is when it just gets out of the way and you completely forget about it, not worrying about VTA, cables, etc. The closest thing I can compare the Raven to is the SME 10. The two tables are very similar tonally, but the Raven has more weight and a larger, more dynamic sound. A casual listener might even mistake them if you were just playing vocal music or perhaps a string quartet. But when playing heavy rock music or a full-scale orchestra, the sound is much more expansive and it feels like someone turned the subwoofer up a click. (The SME is already excellent in this department).

Simple Yet Complex

Even when everything else is the same, it is often hard to describe the "sound" of a turntable. In a perfect world, a turntable would spin at *exactly* 33.33 r.p.m. and extract *only* the information on the groove without being influenced by the tonearm, cartridge or room. This perfect turntable would also completely isolate the drive system from the platter, which would perfectly couple to the record and cartridge. *(continued)*



As you inch up the ladder improving your vinyl playback system, you should keep getting more of everything; detail, tonality and weight. Things should sound more real and at the same time more natural. This is what the Raven Two does on par with the best of them and considering it's price has to be one of the best values in high-end audio today.

All this idealism goes out the window when you go to play a bargain copy of Boston's *Don't Look Back*. It was all good with your Pink Island pressing of *John Barleycorn Must Die*, or that mint, first run Blue Note of *Saxophone Colossus*. This is about the time your smart ass friend comes over wanting to hear one of his crappy records on your high zoot analog rig and says something really stupid like: "this doesn't sound that much better than my SL1200!"

Voila, It's Second Tonearm Time!

This is when you put him in the weeds; after all, your honor as an audiophile is at stake. Now is when you leave the killer arm on its perch and go to arm two with a 500-dollar wood body Grado and Kapow! Boston never sounded so good and you shut him up forever!

Ok, so even if you don't need to be an Audiophilus Jerkasaurus, this is mighty handy when you acquire records that contain music you love, but with less than average recording quality. As a lover of popular music, I've had more than my share of mediocre pressings. Having that second arm and cartridge on the Raven has made at least a third of my records that I used to only play on my second (i.e. much lower resolution) system, much more enjoyable. In my book, anything that makes the musical experience better is a winner.

The combinations are endless, as I mentioned earlier you could have one arm with a mono cartridge, perhaps two identical arms, one set for 140g pressings and one for 180, eliminating the need to futz with VTA forever. (Except for those 200g pressings!) If you really want to go nuts, step up to the Raven AC, it will let you use four tonearms! *(continued)*



Better or Different?

That is always the most difficult part of trying to describe the sound of a turntable to someone. It's like trying to teach a friend how to drive a car with a clutch and stick shift for the first time. You know just what to do; the problem is you know it so well, you can't really tell them how to do it!

But I can tell you this about the Raven One/Raven Two; I have the privilege of listening to a lot of great analog and this is one of the most musically rewarding tables I have heard at *any* price. I have my favorites at certain price points, and while these usually present compromises, the Raven truly does not. Are there better (i.e. more musically revealing) tables out there? Yes there are, but the gap is not that big and you are going to have to pay quite a bit more money.

If there ever was a product that epitomized the point of diminishing returns (and I *hate* that term) it's the Raven Two. It raises the bar for what a \$7500 turntable is capable of so high, it's on par with some of the best tables out there; especially if you can afford a world class cartridge and arm. The added flexibility of the second arm makes it even more so. ●



The TW Acoustic Raven Two
MSRP: \$7500 (with standard
composite armboards)

IMPORTER

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PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson
ACT2/Series 2

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson
Premier 350

Phono Preamplifiers: Conrad-
Johnson TEA-1, Nagra VPS, ASR
Basis Exclusive, Modwright 9.0
SWP, Audio Research PH7

Phono Cartridges: Dynavector
XV-1s, Lyra Skala, MoFi 3.5C, Rega
Apheta, Grado Statement

Tonearms: SME IVVi, SME 309,
Rega RB1000, Tri-Planar Mk.7

Speakers: MartinLogan Summit
w/Descent i subwoofer

Interconnects: Cardas Golden
Reference, Shunyata Antares

Speaker Cables: Shunyata Orion

Power Cords: Essential Sound
Products The Essence "Reference",
Running Springs Mongoose,
Shunyata Helix Alpha VX

Power Conditioning: Running
Springs Jaco and Dimitri

Vibration Control: Finite Element
Pagode Signature, Cereballs,
Cerepucs

Room Treatments: Sonex Classic,
GIK 242 panels, GIK tri traps

Accessories: Furutech De-Mag,
Clearaudio Simple Matrix record
cleaner