

## Vital Stats

Initial generation and regulation is achieved in the confines in the dedicated power supply module on the left of the Whisper.

In addition, each channel module is fitted with individual HT voltage regulators, while the heater supply voltages are regulated DC supplies. All of this translates into extremely low noise levels – vital when the signal itself is so susceptible to interference.

The review unit came to me virtually brand new, and I took the advice about an extended break-in period seriously, allowing for about 150 hours of use before commencing any concerted listening. Havenga suggests 300 hours, but I think it sounded pretty good at the 150 hour mark – and even before that.

One small comment on RF interference – be careful where you locate the Whisper. In the AVSA listening studio, the close proximity of an Ayre K-5XeMP pre-amp directly below the phono stage created a disturbing hum. However, once we moved the two apart, the Whisper became its quiet self again ...

Both my regular turntables (Linn LP12/Ittok/Ortofon Cadenza Black and Avid Diva 2/Encounter/Benz Micro Wood L) got roped in for this review, as did an underutilised Rega 3/Moth RB250/Ortofon 2M Red as the MM representative here.

Accompanying electronics were Ayre's A-7Xe integrated amplifier, together with Vivid Audio VI.5 speakers. Later, I also used the Whisper for an upcoming review on a Dr Feickert Woodpecker/Jelco/Ortofon Bronze, partnered by Ayre 5-Series ancillaries and Vivid Audio KI speakers.

What was interesting was that the Whisper was able to remain a consistently sympathetic partner to these decks, extracting the best from each combination, without imparting any specific sonic signature of its own.

Thus, it gave full credit to the exquisite detail, pin-point imaging and deep, articulate bass of the Linn/Cadenza Black combo, but was equally adept at exploring the luscious midrange, sweet treble and dimensional staging of the Benz. And it did full justice to the impetus, bass punch and musical flow achieved by the Rega/2M Red deck.

Given the extended review period, the list of vinyl that spent time on my decks during the Whisper's tenure is simply too extensive to list here. But on heavy rotation were the 45 rpm double-disc reissue of Fleetwood Mac's seminal 'Rumours' set, as well as a Tacet box set of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*,

**MM/MC** ..... Both  
**Selectable loading**..... Yes  
**Gain**..... 72 dB  
**Frequency response**  
 .....RIAA Curve + 0.5 dB, Passive  
**Signal-to-noise ratio**  
 .....-78 dB below output

### VERDICT

Superior sonic integrity and ultra-low noise levels ensure access to the full scope of the music. Meticulous attention to fine detail, a wide-open soundstage and an overall sense of musical integrity. A true giant-killer – and its South African, too!

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and Holly Cole's dark and spine-tingling 'Don't Smoke In Bed'.

Then there was Diana Krall's 'Live In Paris' set, the Cowboy Junkies' 'Trinity Sessions Revisited', and the collective acoustic guitar wizardry of Paco de Lucio, Al di Meola and John McLaughlin on 'Saturday Night in San Francisco'.

Immediately apparent with the latter was the large and accessible soundstage that the Whisper managed to create – and how deeply silent the backdrops were. That, in turn allowed for the music to take on a visceral, tactile and thoroughly convincing quality.

Instruments sounded, well, real: the guitars had such presence and timbre that they seemed close and real enough to touch. And the individual efforts of the three maestros could be perfectly, discretely distinguished: each pluck of the string, every rippling arpeggio, was recreated with almost startling realism.

The Whisper had absolutely no problem coping with the powerful, acoustic bass on 'Trinity Sessions Revisited'. It's the kind of bass that you hear as much as you feel as hear, that will rattle cupboard doors and invoke buzzy resonances in loose floorboards.

To the Whisper's credit, it never allowed the bottom-end to become overpowering, and also allowed the overall richness of the recording, the atmospheric ambience of Toronto's Trinity Church, and the sweetness

of Margo Timmins' voice to shine to come to their fullest, most compelling right.

I like Diana Krall's 'Live In Paris' because it shows off a slightly more naïve, spontaneous artist and her almost bemused interaction with an adoring audience. The Whisper was able to dig deep into the performances here, so that the electricity and spontaneity of the performances were convincingly captured and portrayed.

The tube-based Tacet recordings are legendary for their flow and crystalline detail, showcased to perfection on the *Brandenburg Concerto* recordings. The Whisper allowed the turntables to extract the essence and brilliance of these performances, again opening up the music so that there was space and air for the music to blossom and bloom.

Here, in particular, one might have expected the phono stage to impart a slightly smoother character to the brass and the woodwinds, but the Whisper retained its commitment to accuracy, and never allowed the upper trebles to sound rolled off or smoothed out.

'Rumours' is one of rock's classic masterpieces, and one that sounds as fresh and incisive as it did when released in 1977. Again, the Whisper was the perfect foil to the ability of the turntables here to cope with the driving rhythms, the biting lyrics and the melodic energy at the core of this seminal recording.

I could go on, of course, but that wouldn't leave much space for any reviews, and by now, I think you've got the gist of my opinion of the Whisper. Yes, it is beautifully built. Yes, it offers a level of versatility and convenience rare in even upper-end phono stage design.

But most of all, the Whisper is highly accurate and yet musically sympathetic piece of equipment, that allows a record deck the fullest possible scope to translate and portray the signal originally deposited into a vinyl record's groove.

In that sense, it achieves the inherent goal all phono stage designs strive for, but only the very best achieve: accuracy, transparency and musicality, together with the ability to make the most of any deck/arm/cartridge combination it may be subjected to.

The Valve Audio Whisper convinces on every level, and soon becomes an indispensable part of the vinyl playback chain. It does everything just right – and in the audio domain, there can be no higher praise. This is a giant-killer!

**Deon Schoeman**