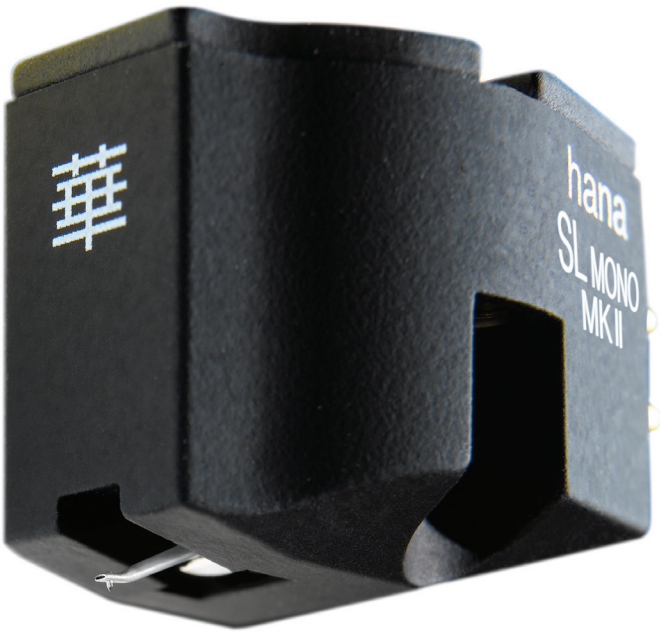

Hana SL Mono MK II Phono Cartridge

The Case for a Mono Cartridge

Paul Seydor

During these last few years *chez* the vinyl sector of the audiophile marketplace, monophonic LPs and phono pickups dedicated to playing mono only seem to have become all the rage. Once a week I get together with a couple of friends, audio industry professionals both, for an afternoon of listening, mostly to vinyl. One of them has a 7000-LP collection going back over half a century with countless vintage mono recordings. "You have to get yourself a mono cartridge, Paul," they've been insisting for several months now, "or you can't know how good many of these old records really do sound."

I suppose it was inevitable that the vinyl renaissance would be followed by a renaissance for mono playback of mono sources. Do the math. The long-playing vinyl record was introduced in 1948 by Columbia Records with a launch of 133 LPs, most of them 12-inch, several 10-inch, all monophonic, just as the 78s they would soon replace were. It would take nearly a decade before stereo LPs even *started* to proliferate in the market. By the mid-sixties most recording was two-channel for playback on a left/right pair of loudspeakers, and by 1970 parallel mono/stereo releases were a thing of the past.

But hidden in these numbers is what my friend's extensive collection reveals, namely, that for its first decade the long-playing record was mostly a monophonic medium. How much great music and music making that era brought forth! Toscanini, Furtwängler, Walter, Beecham, Szell, Karajan, Ormandy, Callas, Flagstad, Sinatra, Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Nat King Cole, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Thelonious Monk, Buddy Holly, Little Richard, the list goes on. This means most die-hard record collectors of my generation and older still have lots of mono records, which is to say recordings conceived, miked, and *optimized* for single-channel playback. Mono records have only laterally cut grooves, not vertical ones. Stereo records have both lateral and vertical information cut at a 45-degree angle to one another. Using a mono pickup, it is argued, eliminates any contribution from the vertical direction for reproduction that is quieter, cleaner, purer, with lower distortion. Many mono buffs also feel full mono playback is punchier, more powerful and dynamic.

The irony here is that like most consumers, most audiophiles who, like me, cut their teeth in the sixties also played their mono records with a stereo pickup. This state of affairs persisted well into the aughts, despite the fact that I learned a long time ago that my mono records sounded better played back in mono. My solution was the stereo/mono switch that used to be a fixture on most control units until insane minimalism took over. But it never occurred to me back then—nor did it to most audiophiles I knew—that our mono LPs might sound better still with an actual *mono* pickup. Of course, now we all take this for granted, but look through back issues of audio magazines, commercial and underground, from the late fifties through the end of the century, even into the aughts, and count how many mono pickups were reviewed or how much attention was paid to anything mono (except mono amplifiers paired for stereo). I'd be amazed if you'd need all the fingers on both hands.

Another, perhaps more musically valid reason for a dedicated mono pickup is that mono recording persisted well into the first decade of stereo.

Apart from sonic considerations, another, perhaps more musically valid reason for a dedicated mono pickup is that mono recording persisted well into the first decade of stereo. The reasons are not hard to find. Despite experiments in two channel dating back decades, stereo as a practical medium for widespread commercial recording was largely untried and untested; many professionals, especially on the business and marketing side of the industry, even considered it a fad. Once the first stereo recordings began to appear, labels routinely made two sets of recordings, with different mike setups and different mixes. "I ran a separate set of mikes for stereo, and I mixed them in a different room," recalled

Specs & Pricing

Frequency response: 15–32kHz
Impedance: 23 ohms/1kHz
Suggested load: ≥230
Stylus: Shibata
Output: 0.4mV@1kHz
Tracking force: 2 grams
Weight: 8.6 grams
Price: $850

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musicalsurroundings.com
(510) 547-5006

the Capitol engineer Carson Taylor, "because at that time mono was still 'king.' But there were two separate boards, two separate rooms, and two separate mike setups." Capitol was far from alone in this practice.

In the early years of stereo, it was mostly so-called serious music—classical paramountly, Broadway, movies, some jazz and traditional pop—that first embraced the advantages of two channel in reproducing spread, depth, space, and air and began optimizing the miking for stereo. (I do not count all those gimmick records with ping-pong effects or trains passing one side to the other.) In 1953 RCA made experimental stereo recordings with Stokowski and Monteux. As early as 1955 Mercury Records started using its three-mike layout for two-channel recording and Decca was modifying its storied "Decca Tree" for the same reason. And remember that it was in 1959, a mere two years after stereo LPs *began* their eventual take over, that the first installment of the celebrated Solti *Ring Cycle* appeared on Decca with John Culshaw's pioneering use of stereophony for staging operas in sonic terms alone. In other words, for the consumer market, what drove the development of stereo was music for *grown-ups* with the means to equip themselves with good sound systems and to purchase the more expensive stereo LPs. In the late sixties throughout the early seventies, mono recordings cost a dollar less, which in today's terms translates to $9.05.

But in the world of popular music, particularly the popular music of impecunious teenagers and college students, both of whom bought a lot of 45-rpm singles, if mono was king, stereo was virtually an afterthought. The most famous example is the Beatles, who, it's widely known, spent more time getting the mono sound the way they wanted because that is what they knew as teenagers themselves, cheap mono rigs like table or car radios being what most of their fans would be listening on. Up until, I believe, *The White Album*, the Beatles left stereo releases to their producer George Martin and the EMI staff engineers. Nor were they alone. When Capitol shifted to stereo for its Sinatra recordings, it took them a while to get the mixes to sound as good as the earlier mono ones or the mono versions of some of the stereo mixes, not least owing to the relocation from the Melrose studio to the famous stack-of-LPs Tower on Vine Street with its less appealing acoustics.

Hana SL Mono MK II Pickup

Plainly time for me to start investigating mono pickups, I telephoned Garth Leerer of Musical Surroundings and asked if he had anything in his pickup lines that I might start with. He dispatched a Hana SL Mono cartridge that day, the precursor to the Mk II, which arrived some months later. See sidebar for differences between the two. Hana phono pickups burst on the scene several years ago to universal acclaim in the audiophile press. Unusual for a high-end pickup manufacturer, the company actually trumpets the fact that it eschews rare, esoteric, or exotic materials in favor of conventional, time-proven materials carefully sourced and quality controlled, such as aluminum for cantilevers, Alnico for magnets, pure iron for magnetic circuits, 4N copper wire for wiring, and ABS plastic for the bodies. Add to these, scrupulous production methods and meticulous hand-assembly and the result is a line of products that are genuinely value-driven yet able to compete in the big leagues.

Speaking of value-driven, at $850 retail, the SL Mono Mk II is exceptionally reasonably priced for a high-end moving coil. Low output and outfitted with a Shibata stylus, it remains the company's only mono pickup, tracks at two grams, and works well in the medium to higher mass tonearms I use: SME M2-12R and Ortofon AS-212R (reviewed in the previous issue), both mounted on a Garrard 301, and the SAEC arm supplied on Luxman's flagship PD-191A (reviewed in Issue 357). The phonostage is my reference Musical Surroundings

Sonically, the Mono MK II is a beauty.

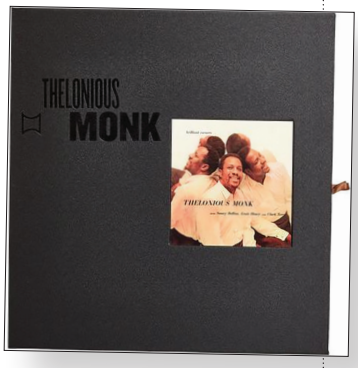
Phonomena III with Linear Power Supply and Ortofon's St80E transformer. Linestages are Benchmark LA4 or Townshend Allegri Reference, power amp Benchmark AHB-2, loudspeakers Harbeth Monitor 40.3 XB (interconnects, speaker cables, and power cords by AudioQuest, Benchmark, and Kimber, power conditioner AudioQuest's model 1200).

Sonically, the Mono Mk II is a beauty. Every Hana pickup I've heard has a luscious midrange and lower midrange: rich, warm, even gorgeous, with exceptional body and dimensionality that bring instruments and voices vibrantly to life. Going down from there is a full upper bass, a weighty midbass, and a bottom end of real power, none of which sacrifices definition, articulation, and clarity. Moving up from the midrange is a largely neutral presence region that ascends to a top end with a bit of silver that brings with it a very nice sense of air and a perfect dash of tingle, tickle, and mild but pleasing bite when cymbals and triangles are struck or tambourines shaken. Tracking is excellent, as are detail and resolution, but the main story here is about musical naturalness that tilts in the direction of yin as opposed to yang. In tonal terms, this is a pickup I never tired of.

In the remainder of this review I'm going to concentrate on six representative examples of mono recording and the sonic benefits of full mono LP playback, at least to the extent they can be isolated.

Thelonious Monk: *Brilliant Corners* (Riverside/OJC and Craft Recordings 1-Step)

It's worth bearing in mind that during most of the LP's first decade musicians and recording personnel did not necessarily regard monophonic recording and reproduction as a limitation thusly defined. It was the state of the art in recording at the time, and they exploited it to its fullest potential as they knew how. That is why I begin with *Brilliant Corners*. Recorded in 1956, it's not only among the greatest jazz recordings, one that, according to Monk's biographer Robin D. G. Kelley, "marked a major turning point in his career," but it's also a reference-caliber sonic spectacular and a model example of one way to record in mono. The title number, seven minutes and 42 seconds of musical dynamite that proved so fiendishly difficult to play it still took a stellar lineup of jazz luminaries four hours of one whole session just to lay something down, this despite several days of rehearsal. Even then, there evidently wasn't a useable through-performance, instead 25 incomplete ones the producer Orrin Keepnews had to piece together. You'd never know it from this thrilling, hair-raising performance. It opens with Monk alone plunking out a melody so lurchy, jerky, and fitful you wonder if it's a joke, but then Sonny Rollins' sax announces itself with what might almost be called a jazz version of a chorale that doesn't have a chance to settle itself before he plays some chords that resemble nothing so much as the musical equivalent to blown raspberries. Far from a joke, this was serious business, and the fact that it still sounds crazy, even a bit demented after all these years is testimony to its extraordinary originality and power.



The miking is fairly close, every player given his prominence, none over the others, with virtually no depth of image, which appears to have been intentional and certainly functions positively in musical terms. It put me in mind of Picasso's cubist period, particularly *Three Musicians*; and as with that masterpiece, the flatness of perspective accentuates the riot of shapes, sizes, textures, and bold, vivid colors. Dynamic range is remarkably wide even without the usual "for its time" qualification, and it sounds as if there were little or no manipulation from the mixing board, which is to say that once the levels were set, they were apparently left pretty unfussed with.

Brilliant Corners was recorded over a nearly three-month span with what sounds like different miking and mixing for each session. "Ba-lue Bolivar Ba-lues-are," the second cut, is more conventionally miked, though you still don't hear much spatial separation of the instruments. When Monk is accompanied by cymbals up high and bass down below, all three instruments appear vertically stacked to a novel effect: almost as if it's a single instrument with very different sounds in each range rather than a trio of instruments. Later there is a bass solo captured with notable realism as to pitch, definition, and a roundedness that precludes so-called "tight" audiophile bass. On "Pannonica" Monk plays a duet with himself on piano and celeste, the instruments set at a right angle to each other so that he could play both at the same time, the former with his left hand, the latter with his right. Inasmuch as in the early days of stereo, which this was, and the temptation was always to place things left, right, and center, thank goodness for mono here, which leaves them next to each as they actually were in situ. One song, "I Surrender, Dear" has Monk solo, which shows you how really good monophonic recording can be when it comes to pianos (more on this later). No Daliesque pianos that stretch across the soundstage, instead occupying a fixed space and staying in it.

Brilliant Corners has been lucky. The vintage LPs are superb, the various reissues are better still (including, arguably, even the compact discs), but the best is unquestionably Craft Recordings' recent one-step. Pricey though it is, it boasts the widest dynamic range of all, the most intense instrumental color and density of tone, and the most lifelike vitality and involvement.

Heifetz: *The Lark* (RCA/Impex)

There is so much repetition of vintage titles in audiophile reissues that we must thank the enterprising people at Impex for unearthing this wonderful recital from the great violinist Jascha Heifetz, featuring two relatively obscure works (outside the sphere of violinists, that is) and the Fauré sonata for violin and piano. They were recorded over five years in two venues, so unsurprisingly, the sound differs in each one, as does the sound of Heifetz's violin. Wherein lies the rub and part of the interest. A violinist I know who heard Heifetz in the flesh insists recordings did not come close to capturing the sound of him in concert and recital, at least not in timbrel/tonal terms. The principal culprits were the limitations, notably the colorations and distortions, of the microphones RCA used and how close they were typically placed to Heifetz's instrument.

A composer I know regards this release as the best sound he's ever heard of a recorded violin.

What the recordings capture, apart from his Olympian perfection at practically everything, is his brilliance, color, rapid (virtually omnipresent) vibrato, laser-like attack, and sometimes the body but only

inconsistently the warmth, or, rather, such warmth as he allowed himself. Be that as it may, Andres Meyer, the engineer who restored most of the violinist's disc and tape masters, is quoted in the accompanying booklet to the effect that Heifetz "knew it was about him. On every recording the microphone is placed close to his instrument, making it the most prominent in the mix. His sound wasn't overly warm; he prided himself on clear, clean sound . . . the tonality of the violin on his recordings tends to be a bit trebly, so as to emphasize the high end . . . his violin cuts through—it penetrates—like almost no violin I've ever heard." Another violinist friend of mine contests this, saying most violinists feel Heifetz's tone does have warmth, owing to the passion, energy, and vibrancy of his playing. Although like all great violinists, Heifetz used a number of prized vintage instruments—he owned five, including three Stradivariuses, but his personal favorite appears to have been a 1742 Guarneri del Gesù (literally "of Jesus"), which he acquired in 1920, kept to the end of his life, and used in all three recordings here. Recording it close up, Meyer points out, "can make it sound slightly harsh," to ameliorate which may be one reason Heifetz preferred the warmer, softer gut strings over modern steel ones.

Inasmuch as we are dealing with memories of live performances from long ago, not to mention subjective impressions of recordings, many of which have been reissued in different masterings and rebalancings over the decades, it's doubtful the disputes over the tonal fidelity of Heifetz's recordings will ever be satisfactorily settled. (And let's not forget that the number of people who actually heard him has declined vertiginously since the decades when he was an active performer, and of course as time goes on, they will eventually disappear entirely.) A composer I know regards this release as the best sound he's ever heard of a recorded violin. Fair enough as an expression of enthusiasm, but under the circumstances, absent any sort of objective reference, all the audio reviewer can do is comment upon what he or she is hearing. I was never privileged to experience Heifetz live, but of the present release I will say that quite apart from whether it accurately reproduces the tonality of his instrument, the violin sound on this release, purely in terms of immediacy, tactility, impact, vividness, and power, is quite amazing simply *as* sound. Tonally, it's bright, bold, assertive, and while I wouldn't call it cold, clinical, or impersonal, neither is "warmth" the first adjective I'd reach for. Meanwhile, those who argue it doesn't truly replicate what he sounded like live must contend with the fact that, a notorious control freak, at least when it came to his recordings, he worked closely, carefully, and tirelessly with producers and engineers, often giving them explicit instructions and monitoring the results, to get a sound he felt represented him, which he approved for release (knowing, as he surely must have, that that sound would be heard by a much, much larger audience than all his live appearances combined and that it would far outlive him).

The earliest recording here, from 1950, is of the Baroque composer Tomaso Antonio Vatali's *Chaconne* in an arrangement by Respighi for violin and organ. Rather opposite to the equality of the performers on *Brilliant Corners*, Heifetz's violin is hugely prominent, the organ a somewhat distant second, though you can certainly hear it well enough. But while the violin is marvelously centered right in front of you, the organ is back there—perfectly, even clearly audible but in nothing like the relative levels and separation you would hear in a typical venue, even a small one with a small organ (here Mabel Shaw Bridges Hall of Music at Pomona College in Claremont, California). When the organ is at its loudest, the violin still bests it. Another anomaly is that owing to the more distant miking, the organ is surrounded by some very nice atmospheric space, while the violin's space is relatively dry (imagine Peter Walker's metaphor of the ideal recording as a window onto the concert hall, then imagine Heifetz just inside the window, the organ well outside it). The overall tone of the del Gesù sounds richer and fuller than on the other two recordings.

And, yes, you will hear it to best advantage with a fully mono phono pickup, especially in terms of focus, immediacy, and projection.

The album takes its title from the twentieth-century Italian Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's piece, commissioned by Heifetz and inspired by lines from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*: "Hark! Hark! The Lark at heaven's gate sings." Recorded later, over two sessions in 1953 and 1954 in a Hollywood studio, which sounds small and dry, *The Lark*, a tonal and tuneful rondo, is an unashamedly virtuosic showpiece that Heifetz exploits to the hilt. Meant to imitate birds, the piece is something of a stunt and less substantial musically than its disc mates, but I had a lot of fun with it. This time the violin seems to me rather less in one's face, tonally smoother, even sweeter, and altogether lighter in overall tonal profile, which suits the music. The pianist here doesn't appear distant, rather, pretty close to the violinist, but vaguely blanketed, quite without the latter's immediacy.

Same studio, a year later, Fauré now and pretty much the same sound. This time the pianist is Brooks Smith, Heifetz's favorite accompanist for much of his career, so he's more present in the space and closer, but still a little muffled, or hooded, next to the star himself, who occupies the spotlight in every sense. Also, perhaps owing to the nature of the music, the del Gesù sounds even lighter in overall tonal balance, yet palpably present and immediate. Interpretively, the piece is powerfully projected—I doubt the composer ever imagined it this forthright or with such tonal heft—yet by no means overpowered, and there are ravishing pianissimos. When it gets really loud—not often in this piece—I do wish the mike were less close. And, yes, you will hear it to best advantage with a fully mono phono pickup, especially in terms of focus, immediacy, and projection.

(P.S. For what it may be worth, sonically two of my very favorite Heifetz albums, both in glorious stereo, are the magnificent Beethoven concerto conducted by Charles

Munch in Boston, recorded in 1955, one of the first of RCA's legendary "Living Stereo" releases, now available partnered with the Mendelssohn concerto on SACD; and Bruch's beautiful *Scottish Fantasy*, his first violin concerto, and Vieuxtemps' fifth concerto, Malcolm Sargent conducting, all recorded in 1961–62 in London's Walthamstow Town Hall and reissued as a compilation, again on SACD. There's also an Analogue Productions LP reissue. Remasterings and sonics in all cases are outstanding.)

Ella Fitzgerald: *The Duke Ellington Songbook: Volume Two, the Small Group Sessions* (Verve)

In addition to its musical pleasures, this album has been a reference of mine through 40 years of equipment purchases and reviewing activities. Go immediately to "Do Nothing Till You Hear from Me" and Fitzgerald at her lyrical, soulful bluesy best as chanteuse and interpreter. She's just there, between the speakers, transparent, dimensional. And then in comes Ben Webster's tenor sax, rich, voluptuous, even fat of tone, the sonorities expanding into the space and filling the room. After him, Stuff Smith's violin, still as present, but now more intimate, the contrast in sonority, projection, and volume drawing us toward him, whereas with Webster you wanted to move back a bit to accommodate his larger sound and size. When Fitzgerald comes back in and Webster joins her, the miking favors neither over the other and they finish as equals. I doubt any of them was ever better recorded: the palpable presence, the tactile body and dimensionality of the musicians, the generous acoustic (with judiciously added echo to moisten things, as it were).

***Frank Sinatra Sings for Only the Lonely* (Capitol)**

Capitol in the fifties made some of the some of the most beautiful recordings of voices in the history of audio, headlined by Sinatra. Charles E. Granata expressed it as well as anyone and better than most in his seminal *Sessions with Sinatra: Frank Sinatra and the Art of Recording* (1999): "The Capitol recordings of the era are, in a word, sumptuous: the perfect balance of clear, sweet treble and deep, rich bass, tempered with a characteristically mellow set of mid-range tone. They create a warmly silken sound that, even on the earliest monophonic recordings, is exceptionally clear." A good bit of this mellowness owed to a new microphone, the Neumann U47, an ultra-sensitive condenser tube/microphone that, according to Jim Webb, a veteran of many Hollywood films, was "transparent" but had some "good coloration": a "slight darkening of the color in the woodwinds," and, of course, in the voices. Another reason for the specific color and character of Sinatra's voice on these classic recordings is that John Palladino, one of the mixers, says he would cut off the vocals at 8-10kHz because the tape machines then didn't handle the sibilance very well.

The mono is immediately different in the dead-center focus on Sinatra's voice, which also sounds noticeably forward of and louder than the orchestra.

This is Sinatra's third album recorded in stereo for Capitol, the one he and Riddle regarded as their best work, individually and collectively, and the only version I knew until a couple of years ago when I bought the Mobile Fidelity mono reissue. Like other parallel releases, though simultaneously recorded, the mono and stereo versions are differently miked and mixed. The mono mixes employed several microphones (at least eight for these sessions, some reports say ten), while the stereo mix is simpler: three mikes, left and right on the orchestra, a center on Sinatra, who always preferred to be in the studio with the musicians, not sequestered in a booth. I compared five different issues of this album: a vintage stereo LP; the Mobile Fidelity mono LP from 2008; the MoFi stereo LP from the early eighties box set of Sinatra's Capitol recordings; the 1998 "Entertainer of the Century" compact disc; and the 2018 60th Anniversary Capitol LP and CD.

There are tonal differences among all of these that have nothing to do with mono ver-

Hana Mono and Mono MK II Comparisons

I USED THE original Hana SL Mono for about two months before Garth Leerer informed me it was being replaced by a Mk II version which he sent along. The good news is that the Mk II does not radically alter the overall tonal balance which I find so appealing about the original. There's the same warmth, lower midrange weight and solidity, with a slightly more extended top end that results in greater air and extension. In other areas, the differences are more evident without being huge, notably increases in clarity, transparency, and resolution. As for engineering and other technological changes, a tapered aluminum cantilever is now more rigid and lower in mass. Wiring plus yoke, pole-pieces, and terminal pins are cryogenically treated, and the body is now modeled after Hana's upscale M series, damped with a matte elastomeric resin paint; the Shibata stylus remains the same. Perhaps best of all from an ergonomic standpoint is that threaded holes for pickup mounting are now tapped directly into the body as opposed to the open slots of the original. All this with better sound exacts a mere $100 increase at the retail level: $850 for the Mk II over $750 for the original (now discontinued).

sus stereo, deriving instead from the tonal differences in the pickups' frequency-response profiles and the mixes and remasterings themselves. So far as I am aware, every time a new reissue was announced, it was remixed, which is to say rebalanced, the rebalancing left largely to the taste and judgment of the producer or mixer in charge of the task. Nor are the programs the same, the original mono LP containing 12 songs, reduced to 10 for the original stereo LP (both the MoFi box and Capitol's 60th anniversary restore the missing songs).

Inasmuch as I've known the stereo versions longest, I began with the vintage stereo from Capitol (I don't know the exact provenance, but at the latest it would be from some time in the early sixties). Played back with a stereo pickup (DS Audio E3 optical with E3 Equalizer), this has fairly noisy surfaces, but the overall sound is still vintage Capitol. Riddle used a much larger orchestra than usual for these sessions (46, almost the number in a medium-sized symphonic ensemble), and the sound has apposite bloom and scale both side to side and fore and aft. Yet despite the scale, Riddle's orchestrations are everywhere transparent of texture with his typically carefully chosen colors. Sinatra is front, center, and present, but he also sounds very much in the same space as the orchestra and at one with it. The result is both a stereo image and a dynamic range that sound very natural, with wonderful air and openness (due in part I suspect to those famous Capitol echo chambers, which the engineers applied with immaculate taste and judgment).

Next I played the MoFi mono. Apart from the obvious lack of spread, the mono is immediately different in the dead-center focus on Sinatra's voice, which also sounds noticeably forward of and louder than the orchestra—keep in mind that most mono recordings, including this one, are multi-miked and the levels of each mike manipulated. When MoFi brought out this mono *Lonely*, a number of audio reviewers immediately pronounced it vastly superior to the stereo. I disagree. While I appreciate its focus on Sinatra's voice and the easy coherence of mono, I miss the expansiveness of the two-channel version, and I especially miss the way it captures Sinatra's spatial relationship to the orchestra, which, I repeat, sounds more natural and realistic, and also the way it presents Riddle's charts and orchestrations, letting you hear how exquisitely he paints his instrumental canvas, especially with respect to lateral spread and separation and not reduced in volume to accommodate single-channel balancing. On the mono, the orchestra and the individual instrumental solos appear not just behind the singer but a mite too far behind him and not quite in the same space, either physically or acoustically. To put it another way, the instruments sound a bit small next to the voice and a little detached from it. Near the end of "One for the Road," there's a lovely melancholic obligato by an alto saxophone—a typical Riddle touch that comes out of nowhere yet is exactly on point. With the stereo, you hear it far right and appropriately present, on the other side of the piano, which is to Sinatra's left; on the mono, both are behind the singer, smaller and less present.

Of all these releases, the two I liked most are Capitol's 60th anniversary 2018 remasterings of the stereo mix on both vinyl, pressed on four sides with very quiet 180-gram surfaces, and compact disc. The latter also includes a mono mix remastered at the same time, to my ears the best mono mix too, and by a fair margin, not least because it somewhat improves upon the spatial issues already noted of MoFi's mono release. (I'd avoid the 1998 remasterings for the "Entertainer of the Century" compact disc series because it sounds dull and lifeless, maybe owing to excessive application of noise reduction.)

Arturo Toscanini: *The Philadelphia Orchestra: Complete 1941-42 Recordings* (RCA)

If you're seriously into historical recordings, then most of them are by definition mono and most of those date from the 78rpm era. Between 1940 and 1942 Arturo Toscanini conducted several concerts with the Philadelphia Orchestra, which included seven recording sessions of repertoire chosen from the concerts themselves, much of it of works the maestro specialized in, notably Schubert's ninth symphony, Debussy's *La Mer* and *Iberia*, Strauss' *Death and Transfiguration*, Berlioz's "Queen Mab" scherzo, and Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*. There are many who consider these recordings pinnacles of the conductor's career, not least because he had here an orchestra, trained by Stokowski and Ormandy, of greater opulence and tonal beauty, and arguably greater flexibility and virtuosity than any he had conducted before or since, including even the New York Philharmonic from his years as its music director. Unfortunately, these recordings suffered one of the worst calamities in the history of recorded music. Test pressings revealed all sorts of noises that occurred during the plating process—ticks, pops, swishes, and other surface detritus, not to mention dropouts and similar defects—so many and so much RCA shelved them. Decades passed before they were released commercially, in versions culled from various sources (including shellac) and meticulously doctored to eliminate or otherwise ameliorate the noises with as minimal effect as possible on the recordings themselves.

One of the arguments for full mono playback of vinyl mono sources is that you lose a lot of vertical groove noise.

This may be the place to introduce the subject of noise. One of the arguments for full mono playback of vinyl mono sources is that you lose a lot of vertical groove noise, i.e., surface noise, tick, clicks, pop, and other detritus, which on a mono recording is the *only* vertical "information." If you play a mono record with a stereo pickup in full stereo through your speakers, then your stereo pickup's stylus will reproduce this groove noise along with the music, and will often render clicks, ticks, pops, and other surface noise and detritus stereophonically, in one channel or the other or points in between. Even if you do switch to mono playback after the signal leaves your preamp, these noises don't necessarily go away because the stereo pickup is still reproducing them, only now they tend to get somewhat

buried into the rest of the signal where they are often less noticeable because they're not as loud (nor are they reproduced stereophonically). All of which is to say that you will always get the lowest or least obtrusive noise with mono sources if you preserve mono from stylus to speakers.

The recordings here are the product of the excellent restoration work the engineer John Corbett did for the Toscanini estate in 1963. Make no mistake, these are noisy recordings and thus benefit from mono-pickup playback more than any of the other recordings discussed here. That said, what Corbett managed was corrective enough to allow us to hear how good the sound the RCA engineers captured for these sessions really was. Alas, among the least responsive to Corbett's fixing is *La Mer*, a pity because Toscanini adored this piece and made several recordings of it, the best in my view his last with the NBC. In Philadelphia, he still moves things along at good clip, as he always did, but there is a tonal sheen and color to the playing, which can be discerned and appreciated despite the noise, that the NBC recording does not match (under both Stokowski and Ormandy the Philadelphia was always one of the great impressionistic ensembles and they reveled in the coloristic possibilities of the style).

Better still are the two symphonies. Toscanini enthusiasts speak of the Schubert in the same hallowed terms as Furtwängler fans do the German conductor's, though they are very different interpretations. Toscanini's is the more direct and propulsive, also lighter and nimbler on its feet, yet exquisitely phrased and *sung*, and in most places rather remarkably well recorded despite the noise. Yes, the coda of the first movement is congested and gets harsh, but otherwise, whatever the engineers did with the miking and mixing, the orchestra appears as a solid body of considerable depth and even some width, with Toscanini's typical clarity, drive, and plasticity of phrasing. In the scherzo, the bass line is articulate, very well defined, and in excellent balance, while the energetic last movement, gloriously shaped, has a spaciousness that feels almost stereophonic.

Just as good, if not better, is the *Pathétique*, which captures Toscanini at his bracing best in a powerfully dramatic reading. The booklet notes call attention to Toscanini's avoidance of sentimentality in this score—perhaps so, but it's still expressive enough in the first and especially the anguished last movements, and the tragic effect is formidable indeed. I must single out the reproduction of the brass, which have real weight and brassy sonority, while the plush string sonorities are reproduced with great timbral beauty (for which the Hana must deserve its share of credit), and there's marvelously individual character to each of the winds. The whole sonic picture has impressive integrity and coherence, again despite the noise (less intrusive than on some of the other recordings). As for the dynamic range, if you can listen past the noise, you will hear that in the big passages (the first movement development, the third movement march) this performance must have packed tremendous wallops.

This whole five-LP set—out of print but available on Discogs for as low as $7.00—affords valuable insights into the music they contain, the work of one of the greatest of all conductors and orchestras, and the possibilities and limitations of the technology at the time they were made (valuably informative booklet too).

Both recording and playing are thrillingly dynamic, and Gould offers his own kind of fine-grained romanticism.

Glenn Gould: *The Goldberg Variations* (Columbia/Sony)

One more and that's the last. If I had to name one recording from the first decade of the long-playing record as the most iconic—indeed, one of the few for which that overworked adjective surely applies—it would be this one, recorded over four spring days in June 1955, in Columbia's acoustically fabled 30th Street Studio, nicknamed "The Church" because it was converted from an abandoned church. Released in 1956, this recording introduced a young pianistic genius to the world, made the *Goldberg* variations a repertoire piece, almost a household word, and became the reference recording, a status it still holds today when you notice it's the rare review of any new *Goldberg* recording that doesn't at least mention Gould's. After him, every pianist, established or rising, had to have a go at it. It is reported it had sold 40,000 copies by 1960 and more than a 100,000 by the time he died in 1982. Not huge by the standards of popular music and rock, but pretty sizable for a classical work, let alone one of what was at the time of its initial release rather obscure repertoire by an as yet to be tried young pianist.

It also established the basic Glenn Gould sound. In this piece, as in most of his Bach, he banishes the sustain pedal, the sonority and attack are clean, precise, highly articulated, and percussive. I almost said "hard," except that is generally pejorative in audiophile lingo. A more pretentious word might be staccato (literally short) or detaché (literally detached or separated)—it is often said that Gould's piano suggests a harpsichord—and tempi that are brisk, swift, often fleet. That and his eschewal of all repeats make this by a good bit the shortest *Goldberg* set I know—around 38 minutes as opposed the usual 60 to 90. No matter, almost 70 years later it remains one of the most revelatory, not least because Gould makes it a young man's piece: virile, vigorous, bursting with joy and exuberance and exhilaration. His at times breathtaking speeds are allied to a technique so virtuosic it seems almost beyond human. Gould's notorious "bench," a creaky little chair with short legs—all too audible on many of his recordings—he favored because it allowed him to sit lower than the typical bench, the better to achieve the light, delicate touch and clear, airy textures that are the antithesis of, say, the heavier, weightier, more blended sonorities of the romantic school. That said, both recording and playing are thrillingly dynamic, and Gould offers his own kind of fine-grained romanticism in

the famous "Black Pearl" 25th variation (his performance here of which a much older Gould observed, with no little disdain, "There's a lot of piano playing going on there").

The sound here—I am referencing the remastered vinyl included in Sony's *Glenn Gould: The Goldberg Variations: The Complete Unreleased Recording Sessions, June 1955*—is superb of its kind. When I say, "of its kind," I mean that it isn't a particularly sonorous sound, full and resonant (e.g., Claudio Arrau on Philips, for a highly contrasted comparison). It is close up, fairly (albeit by no means completely) dry, bright, clean, and transparent. It is also lively and lifelike, the piano very sharply focused as played back by the Hana Mono. Switching to a stereo pickup reveals the same basic sound, but with fractionally less focus, a bit less force to the attacks, a tad less punch to the rhythms. Being a mono recording of its time, tape hiss is audible and from the sound of things no one at Sony tried to reduce it with fancy de-noising technology, for which three cheers. A too aggressive application of noise reduction often drains the life out of a recording, and there is certainly no evidence of that here. The usual Gould peccadillos are in plentiful evidence, paramountly his inability throughout his entire career to resist singing and humming as he plays. No matter, for both musical and sonic reasons, this is one of my favorite piano recordings and indisputably one of the greatest ever made, this latest remastering the finest in my experience (I own them all, even that bizarre Zenph computerized "re-performance" from 2007), including the compact disc version, which is stunningly clean without being in the least antiseptic.

Do You Really Need a Mono Pickup?

Or is it that you merely want one? It's a fair question. If you don't have many mono recordings, I expect your stereo/mono switch, assuming you have one, is all you'd need to get pretty close to a mono pickup, and with many mono recordings the differences are negligible. If you can't quickly swap pickups either with a tonearm that has a detachable headshell or a second arm or turntable/arm setup that you can dedicate to mono, then owing to the inconvenience of switching from your stereo pickup, you're liable to find yourself using the mono less than you thought you might. For myself, this review has been a learning experience. While I don't have that many mono recordings, those I do have I tend to listen to often, and most of them are musically magnificent and sonically very good or much better. And I routinely have at least two, frequently three record-playing setups at any given time, plus both arms on my Garrard 301 have universal headshells.

Which is to say that during the entire review period, I rarely listened to mono recordings except with the Hana. Add to the reasons already noted the particular tonal character of the Hana, which I happen to like a *lot* and which suits most of my favorite mono LPs, mostly vocal, traditional jazz, and some classical; its excellence in other areas; and the fact that it is so *very* attractively priced yet high performing—and you have as enthusiastic a recommendation as I can give, without the slightest second thought. **tas**

Groove Chewers

I'M OLD ENOUGH to remember when stereo recordings routinely included a box on the jacket warning against playing stereo LPs with a mono pickup, as it could damage the grooves. At one time this was true. Prior to 1970, mono LPs were typically cut to be played back with a 1-mil stylus; after that, with 0.7-mil styli, which, so far as I am aware, all contemporary mono pickups are equipped with and thus are perfectly safe with stereo LPs. Another, more serious issue is that many of the early mono pickups in the first decade or so of the LP had the requisite lateral compliance but little or no vertical compliance since there was no vertical information. Unfortunately, with the larger styli and the higher tracking forces, these pickups tended less to ride the vertical grooves than to plough through them, hence their nickname "groove chewers." As I say, there's no worry with modern pickups, but if you're a fan of vintage gear and are tempted by an early mono pickup, I'd make very sure it's used only on mono records pressed before 1970. (Speaking personally, however, I wouldn't let a vintage mono pickup near *any* LP in my collection, though it's perfectly all right to play vintage mono LPs with stereo styli, and many feel they are better reproduced when some of more sophisticated geometries available today are applied to the styli of mono pickups, the Hana SL Mono a case in point.)