

TURNTABLE TEST

Plinth of Darkness

**LUMLEY
STRATOSPHERE MK 2**
(£13,000)

The magic of magnets is put to work, creating a super-fi deck that aims to spook far costly rivals

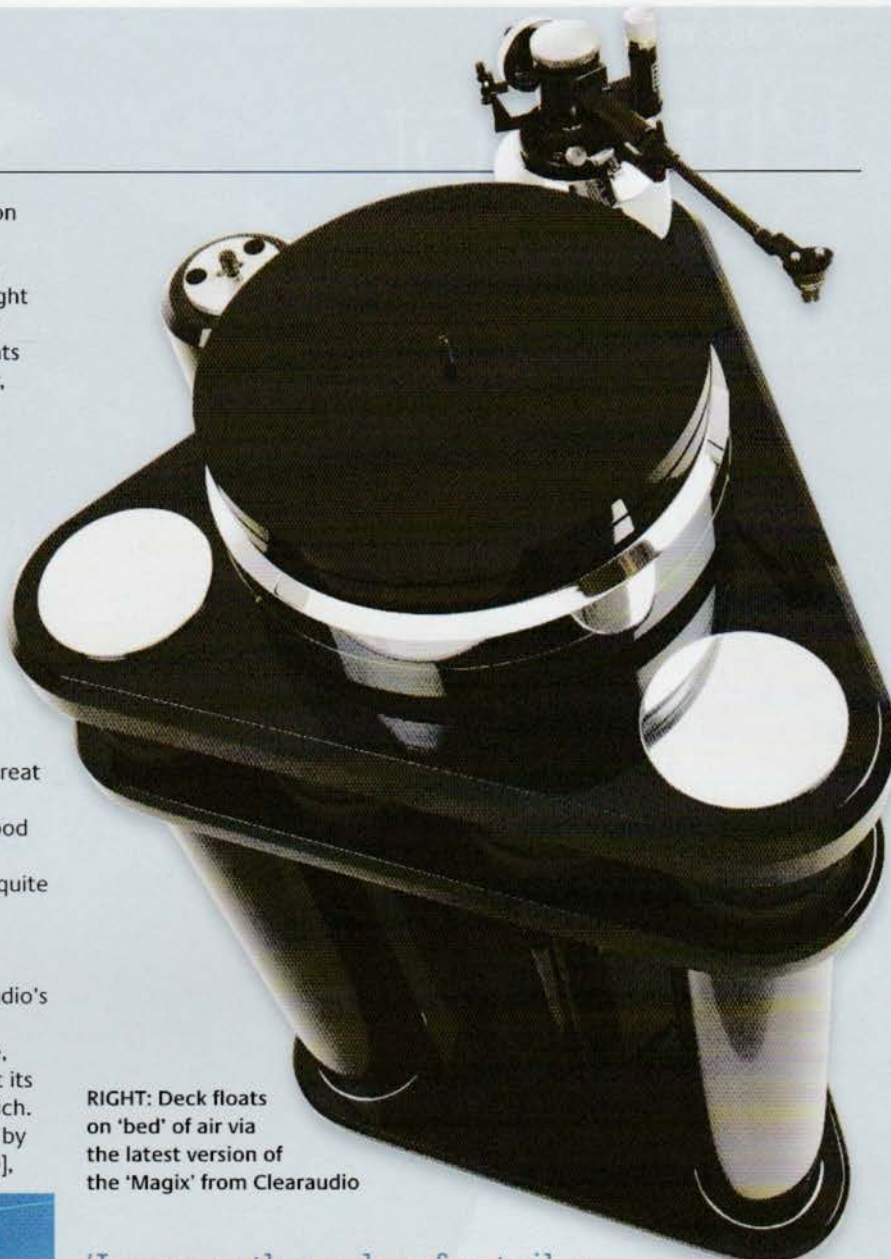
Hi-fi news
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As a living embodiment of vertical integration within the UK hi-fi industry, you'd be hard pressed to find a better example than John Jeffries. While Home Counties' readers might know him as the proprietor of Sounds of Music – an eight dem-room Aladdin's cave of audiophile delights – he also runs distributor Metropolis Music (Boulder, Hovland and BAT being just three of the brands represented). Finally, just in case the dual role of retailer and distributor leaves him with extra time on his hands, John produces a number of products under the Lumley brand name.

While Lumley also produces amplifiers and speakers, the Stratosphere turntable, here reviewed in its Mk 2 form, has by far the most interesting evolution, right from its archetypal hobbyist roots. The story starts with suspension units that John Jeffries cobbled together from sections of drainpipes containing two opposing magnets. While crude in execution, the concept of magnetic repulsion-based suspension clearly held great promise, and so the Airpod was born. The original Stratosphere was a ground-up design based on Airpod suspension. While offering excellent performance, engineering issues meant that the turntable never quite achieved its full potential.

PEARL OF WISDOM

Fast forward eight years to 2003, and Blue Pearl Audio's JEM arrived on the scene. Perhaps best viewed as a cost-no-object homage to the original Stratosphere, the JEM received rave reviews across the board, but its £48,000 price tag put it beyond all but the super-rich. By this time, the original Airpod had been replaced by Clearaudio's Magix [see 'Floating On Air' panel, p50],



RIGHT: Deck floats on 'bed' of air via the latest version of the 'Magix' from Clearaudio

'In case the role of retailer and distributor leaves him with extra time on his hands, John Jeffries produces products under the Lumley brand'

and John felt that, with much improved suspension provided by the Magix, along with the application of a number of engineering improvements, he could build a second generation Stratosphere with the performance to match the JEM at a substantially lower price. The result is the subject of this review, the Lumley Stratosphere Mk 2.

HOLLOW ZONES

Starting from the ground up, the Strat's optional stand (£1650) has beautifully finished, high quality MDF top and bottom plates, separated by spiked composite legs filled with a propriety damping compound. Plinth isolation is provided by a battery of eight Clearaudio Magix, which are held at their optimum compression level by the weight of the plinth, platter and armopod. The plinth itself is constructed of aluminium, finished to match the stand. The main platter is CNC machined from aircraft grade aluminium. Rather than being solid, it has hollow zones containing an unspecified damping material. The main bearing is more conventional than

FAR RIGHT:
Outboard power supply in sturdy metal casing offers 33 and 45 rpm speeds plus wide-ranging pitch control

the magnetic solution of the JEM, with a titanium nitrided steel spindle rotating via a pressure plate on a ceramic ball within a Nylatron sleeve.

The rubber-damped, synthetic two-piece secondary platter is isolated from the primary by six spikes, while the main spindle is surmounted by a Nylatron stub to further isolate the disc from any bearing noise. The high-quality DC motor stands on a dedicated leg of the optional stand, and provides drive at 33, 45 or 78 rpm via a nylon thread, while the large but elegant power supply is designed to sit in the main cavity of the stand.

The damped hollow aluminium arm pod can be drilled for a wide range of tonearms and, on the review sample, was free standing on the plinth. For installations where there is a chance of it being knocked, the pod can be bolted on, but listening tests have shown the free-standing option to be slightly sonically superior. A Graham Phantom arm and Transfiguration Temper W cartridge were used for the duration of the review.

LOW NOISE

In terms of performance, the first quality the Stratosphere Mk 2 demonstrated was astonishingly low

noise levels. Cueing up some clean, scratch-free vinyl, I was deafened by the silence of the run-in groove. When the music kicked in, a sound of such cleanliness and clarity emerged that I half felt I was listening to a top-flight digital source. The fatigue-free dynamics, natural tonality and huge sense of presence confirmed that this was a vinyl source, but one which was extracting an unbelievable level of information from every record I played.

My system is already fairly transparent so it tended to be extra ambient information that was revealed, with dimensionality being an almost universal beneficiary. Via the kW and Prodigy, the turntable consistently produced a rock-solid soundstage of cavernous proportions. Even seated way off-axis, images refused to hang off speakers, meaning that a 'walk-through' soundstage was available to listeners right across the width of the room, a situation I have never experienced before within any system. That said, it was the micro-imaging, rather than the macro, which impressed the most. Spin a peerless audiophile recording like Eric Bibb's 'Spirit And The Blues' [Opus 3], and the performers could be placed with millimetric precision, with individual drums within a kit having a distinct location, even in a natural recording, bereft of production-trickery.

The less polished production of Dexy's *Searching For The Young Soul Rebels* worried the Strat not a jot. Once again spatial presentation was sensational, with each member of the brass section again occupying an identifiably discrete position. More impressive still was the palpable nature of the sound; drawn out notes had the micro-variations of pitch that told of real lungs

forcing real air through real instruments. I have always valued the illusion of music being created in my room, rather than merely reproduced, and the Strat did not just provide images of performers, it all but gave them personalities.

SOLID AS A ROCK

Tonally, the Strat provided rock-solid, truly subterranean musical foundations, seemingly eking tighter, deeper bass than ever before from every well-known track I played. Midrange presence was similarly stunning; Thelma Houston's vocals on the title track from the Sheffield Lab's recording *I've Got The Music In Me* were truly shocking in their intensity. While the production of Norah Jones' *Come Away With Me* may be a little warmer, the vocals were no less arresting; gentle ballads they may be but, even here, the Strat clearly demonstrated the surprising dynamics of the human voice.

With a less capable source, such levels of resolution could become wearing with higher frequencies, but the Stratosphere had such unadulterated purity, that material which sounded bright via my, superficially more forgiving, SME/Sumiko Pearwood front-end, revealed unexpected levels of listenability. A case in point was Billy Bragg's 'Talking To The Taxman About Poetry'. There is something very, very wrong in listening to the Barking Bard's work via a mega-bucks system, and the disc's distinctly bright tonality often punishes highly capable systems.

In conflict with all expectation, the Strat revealed undreamed of tonal sweetness and purity, which brought a whole new level of audiophile enjoyment to Billy's inspired wordplay.

As John Jeffries values impact and scale very highly, it would have been rude not to try some large scale

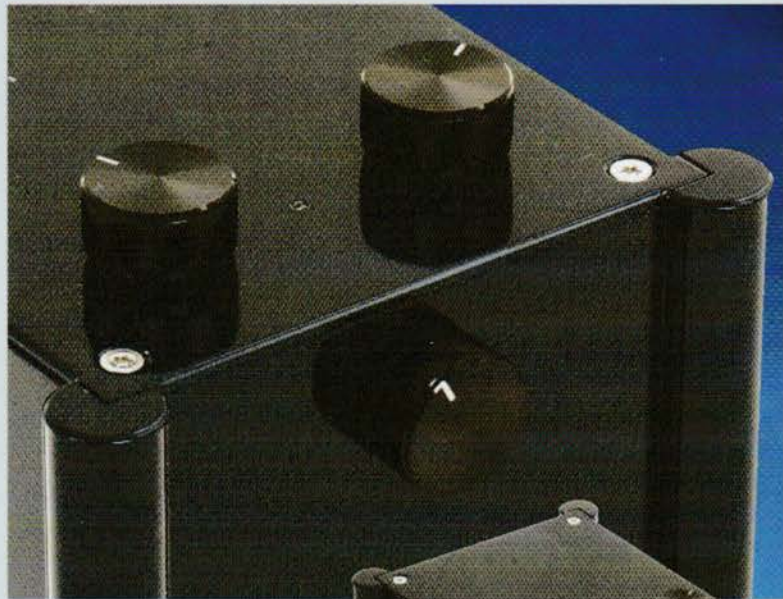
'The huge sense of presence confirmed this was vinyl, but one which was extracting an unbelievable level of information from every record I played'

FLOATING ON AIR

While the original Airpod provided a largely friction-free support, there were a couple of issues that detracted from its performance when used for turntable suspension. Firstly, a degree of lateral play meant that some contact between magnet and surround was inevitable. Secondly (and, perhaps, more importantly), the effect of the strong magnetic fields could travel through the plinth and subtly affect the workings of the cartridge. Since Clearaudio has taken over production (and the Airpod has duly morphed into the Clearaudio Magix), these issues have been eradicated through relentlessly accurate engineering.

Subject to a level load being applied, magnetic forces now resist radial as well as vertical movement, so the internal support member is effectively centralized with no contact with its surround. In terms of magnetic interference, when compressed by an optimum load, the Magix's magnetic forces are cancelled out. In fact, there's a nifty trick to demonstrate this: place a paper-clip on the side of an uncompressed Magix and it will stick; add an appropriate load, and the clip will fall off as the forces neutralize.





classical works. Unfortunately, when a system can pin you to your seat with the dynamics of a solo human voice, the impact it provides when a full orchestra kicks in has to be experienced, rather than merely described. With all due apologies for abdicating descriptive responsibility, suffice to say, the Stratosphere's vanishingly low noise levels and stunning resolution allows huge dynamic peaks while maintaining tonal purity and musical coherence. If your system and (no less importantly) your listening room allow reproduction of large scale music at life-like sound pressure levels, the Strat will provide an ear-bleedingly intense experience. Its true genius is that it will not obscure the beauty beneath the thunder and, critically in the real world, its utter background silence also allows you to enjoy tremendous dynamic range without permanently alienating the neighbours.

ULTIMATE SOLUTION

Anyone looking for an ultimate vinyl solution should seek an audition with this remarkable turntable. However, more than any other component I have heard, the Stratosphere will be whatever you want it to be, depending on your choice of partnering equipment.

FOR:
Uncovers the staggering potential of vinyl; stunningly capable

AGAINST: Insomniacs seeking audio sedation need not apply

This makes an audition within your own system a necessity rather than a luxury. In John Jeffries' own set-up, the Strat displayed stunning levels of dynamics and scale, along with deeply impressive spatial performance. In my listening room, the dynamics and scale were a little less pronounced (mainly due to the limitations of the room), but the imaging was little short of miraculous, and the lightness of touch was utterly spellbinding.

While John Jeffries freely admits the price of the Stratosphere reflects the high cost of low-run engineering, in the context of the unprecedented gains I experienced from my reference system, it can be considered something of a high-end bargain. ☺

A genre-neutral tour-de-force which extracts an incredible amount of information from all shades of vinyl, while remaining resolutely musical. Materially, a less extreme approach than the visually similar Blue Pearl Audio JEM, but capable of throwing its hat in the ring with the world's finest front-ends. Provides a wonderfully intense listening experience and, for this listener at least, raises the analogue bar way beyond any digital alternative.

FEATURES



SOUND QUALITY



BUILD QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



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OVERALL RATING

Review system breakdown

- SOURCE:** Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista SACD player
- AMPLIFIERS:** Musical Fidelity kW/kWP
- LOUDSPEAKERS:** Spondor S8e or Martin Logan Prodigy
- CABLES:** Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista interconnects
Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista speaker cables

Contact numbers

UK DISTRIBUTOR: Sounds of Music **TEL:** 01435 867438
WEB: www.sounds-of-music.co.uk

Manufacturer's specifications

Overall height with stand	980mm
Height of turntable	320mm
Depth with freestanding motor	630mm
Width	550mm
Weight without stand	25kg
Motor type	DC
Speeds	33/45 with pitch control

