

Enjoying The
Continuum
Criterion With a Little
Help From My Friends

By Jeff Dorgay

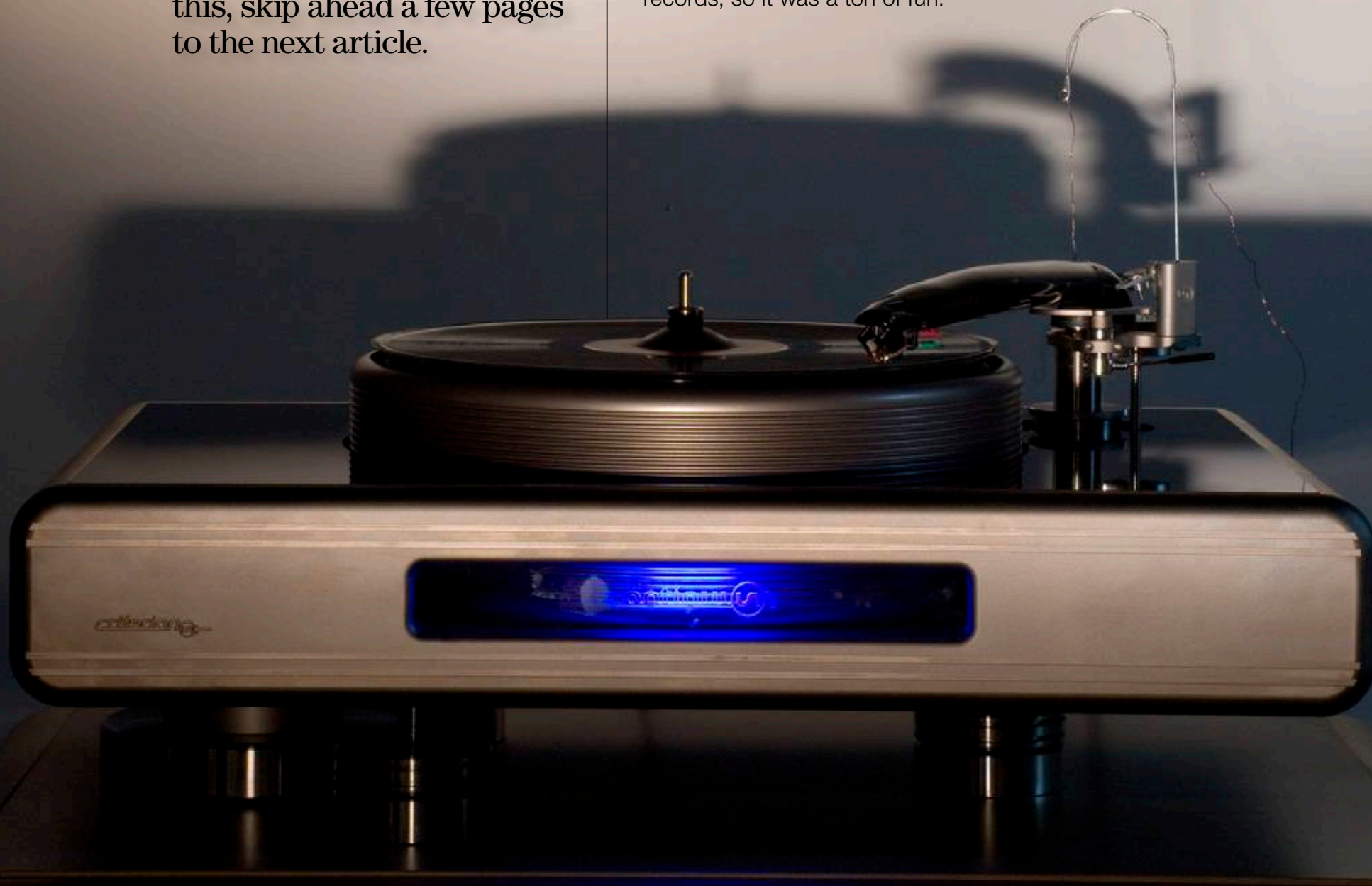


continuum

Honestly, who cares how the new “entry level” table from Continuum sounds? I can’t afford one and you probably can’t either. So if you are one of our readers spinning your vinyl on a more reasonably priced setup, and you think I’m a complete idiot for even entertaining something like this, skip ahead a few pages to the next article.

If you are in the next, albeit smaller group of audiophiles who has a stellar turntable in the 15-30 thousand dollar range that lies awake at night wondering if you should cash in some of your retirement money for this table, read on. But first roll over and give whomever you sleep with a hug. Go back to sleep with a smile on your face, because life is good.

Should you happen to be in that part of our readership that actually can afford this table, I’m talking specifically to you. No disrespect to our other readers, but it’s not worth the agony if you don’t have the scratch. It’s the same reason that when I got a chance to drive a Ferrari F50 a few years ago, I just threw the keys back. I didn’t want to have the experience knowing I could never afford one and I didn’t want to get a stone chip on the nose either! Fortunately, once the Criterion was set up, I didn’t have much to do but spin records, so it was a ton of fun.



In case you aren't familiar with Continuum Audio Labs, they set the turntable world on its ear a couple of years ago when their flagship table, the Caliburn, hit the market. With the dedicated Cobra arm, it was priced at a cool 100 thousand bucks. (The price has since risen to \$125,000) Vinyl maven/madman Michael Fremer purchased one of the first few units and has since made it his reference.

The next step for Continuum was to see how much of the Caliburn's performance could be recreated at a more "affordable" price point.

The following year, the Criterion was born. For a package price of \$55,595 you can have a Criterion with the new Copperhead tonearm of your very own. Should you want to fit your own arm, the Criterion can be yours for \$49,995.

A Fusion of Art and Engineering

Inside a crate that weighs almost 400 pounds, you get the turntable components, a control box and a vacuum pump/power supply. If you are hesitant to entertain a vacuum pump in your hifi system because of past experiences, I assure you the Continuum unit is perfectly silent. The power supply weighs more than some recent power amplifiers I've reviewed, and regenerates three phase power for the motor on the Criterion with a DSP controller that offers smoother power delivery than the single phase motors in most other turntables.

The speed controller offers 33, 45 and 78 rpm speeds, though I'm not sure you would want to play those old 78's on this table with your favorite cartridge. Those of you considering a second arm board, however, might really enjoy this option.

(continued)

The Criterion uses the latest computer modeling software and exotic materials to achieve its design goals. The base is made of magnesium and has a very intriguing warm glow to it that aluminum does not. Don't touch it with your bare hands, as this finish starts accumulating schmutz immediately. When you become a proud Continuum owner, I would highly suggest some kind of all enclosing dust cover when not in use and a stack of cotton gloves. Otherwise this baby will start looking like a used DeLorean sooner rather than later.

The base weighs about 100 pounds and the platter about another 70. If your current rack will not comfortably hold about 175 pounds, add a substantial rack to the list of goodies you need to integrate the Criterion into your system. Thanks to Allen Perkins at Immedia Sound, we were able to borrow a larger version of the Finite Elemente Pagode racks that we use here in the TONE studio to accommodate the Criterion for the review period.

On top of the Criterion is a solid plate of carbon fiber, with a cut out for the platter and the Copperhead tonearm, again a true work of art. Underneath that cutout is an armboard that is completely suspended by Kevlar cables on one side and magnets on the other side, counteracting the force. The motor also sits on the shelf alone, so the platter is truly decoupled from the table and arm, which is crafted from a composite that is unique to Continuum.

Setup and Adjustment

I must commend Continuum for putting together an excellent manual. As they are now getting dealer support, your dealer should be able to set it up for you in a couple of hours. I had the pleasure of having factory tech Rich O'Neill fly out to set our test table up. Using a combination of Wally Tools and Acoustic Sounds' new test record with a multimeter, it was a snap to optimize the table.

Anyone who's spent a bit of time around turntables could probably set this one up pretty quickly if they followed the instructions carefully. Once we had VTA, VTF, azimuth and tracking force dialed in, it was ready to start spinning records! By the time I returned from dropping Mr. O'Neill at the airport, staff writer Randy Wells had the VTA fine-tuned to perfection and we were ready to do some serious listening. *(continued)*

On top of the Criterion is a solid plate of carbon fiber, with a cut out for the platter and the Copperhead tonearm, again a true work of art.





Another bit of thanks here to Mike Pranka from Dynavector USA is in order. I've been using their excellent XV-1S cartridge for a few months now and Mike was kind enough to send us his personal XV-1S for a few weeks so that we could really compare the Criterion directly to a number of other table and arm combinations. With everything else the same, it made it a lot easier to get a quick read on what effect the Criterion really had in my system.

Which brings us to the first caveat with this table, or any other table at the far end of analog performance – careful attention to setup and optimization of parameters. With a device capable of such high resolution, setup is much more critical than it is listening to a lesser table. If you don't have the setup nailed, the magic is gone. I noticed this when switching from the XV-1S that Mr. O'Neill had set up, to my other reference, the MoFi 3.5C. Loosely set up, the sound of this great cartridge was somewhat underwhelming.

It took about an hour to get the cartridge set up properly and then another hour of fine-tuning VTA, VTF and anti-skate in very small increments to bring the excitement back.

After a bit more seat time with the Copperhead arm, it took a bit less time switching to the Shelter 9000, another one of my favorites. Again a bit of fine-tuning

was necessary to ensure great performance. All three cartridges worked extremely well with the Criterion and I felt that I was getting everything these cartridges were capable of delivering. But keep in mind, if you lack the finesse or patience to set whatever cartridge you choose correctly, the magic is gone. If you can't do it yourself, make sure you can afford to pay someone who can.

The same is true for your associated components. I really felt that my reference phono preamp, the ASR Basis Exclusive was not up to the task of fully letting everything the Criterion was capable of delivering through, and again a fair amount of the magic was gone. Fortunately, we have been working on a number of new analog reviews and we just happened to have the new phono preamplifiers from Nagra and Conrad-Johnson to compare.

Both the new Nagra VPS (\$7000) and the CJ TEA-1 (\$10K) had the necessary weight, airiness and detail to provide the rest of the experience. When I went back to my ASR, the magic was gone and the playback wasn't any more engaging (and sometimes less) than my reference Naim CD555. Unless you have one of the world's top phono stages, add one more thing to your shopping list so that you can hear all that the Criterion is capable of.

(continued)

Unless you have one of the world's top phono stages, add one more thing to your shopping list so that you can hear all that the Criterion is capable of.

Should you purchase the Continuum, here's a quick setup tip. From the beginning the table was plagued with a bit of extreme low frequency rumble that we all found pretty puzzling. Upon suggestion from Mr. O'Neill, we moved the vacuum pump to an adjacent rack and it was completely eliminated!

Continuum tip number two: Beware the tonearm cable! Coming out of the back of the Copperhead tonearm, you will notice a hole with a very fine braided wire that goes up and around a curved wire stand. Fortunately, I did not have any RF problems with this setup, but I am concerned that people in very dense urban areas may not be so lucky.

Either way, don't let anyone near the Copperhead because the slightest tug to this flailing cable will end your vinyl bliss.

I would guess that a tonearm rewire is pretty costly and time consuming. I find this part of the Criterion's design unacceptable for the real world. After reading their engineering notes, I understand the concept of sonic purity they were going for, and it does work, but one wrong move and this thing is toast. So let's get back to listening to records, shall we?

Hard Core Listening

Even at first listen, we knew we were on to something special. Because everything else in my system has been constant for a long time, it was very easy to hear the difference that a new component had on the presentation. We conked out with exhaustion at about 3a.m. with many records played. *(continued)*

Everyone went to sleep that night with big smiles on their faces, and we got right back to it the next morning. About 5p.m. the next day, Randy promised his wife he would stop listening to records and head home, so I think that's a pretty good indicator of the pull that the Criterion can exhibit in a good system.

The Criterion's ability to handle complex musical passages without clogging up was what hit me immediately. This is somewhat of a hot button for me, having been an SET guy for a while; I love detail and delicacy. Great hifi is full of tradeoffs, but often a system that can play the most minute details with finesse tend to flatten out when asked to play very dynamic music that has an equal mixture of loud and soft bits at the same time. I'm thinking Shostakovich (and Megadeth) but you probably have your own favorites.

As I have spent quite a few 8-12 hour listening sessions with the Criterion, I could go on and on about this passage on that record, etc. etc. But I won't. I'd really like to concentrate on what this table does extremely well and at that point, it's up to you to seek one out at a friend or dealer to audition yourself.

I would also like to point out something else that is critical to really enjoying the Criterion - software. Even with an amazing system and the table perfectly aligned, if you don't have awesome records, the magic is gone. My initial excitement for this table faded a bit after I went through that first batch of outstanding records. Again, Randy was a lifesaver, bringing over some amazing Beatles pressings and a bunch of first issue Pink Islands to add to my mix of audiophile delights.

What we all noticed when using great software was the Criterion's ability to produce a very big, organic sound that Randy and Marc (who joined us later) both commented on as being "more oval shaped". The lower registers had not only tremendous authority, but also a texture and resolution that I haven't heard elsewhere to this extent. (Though a well setup SME 20 or 30 is knocking on the door here...)

If I were to call out the one really defining feature of the Criterion sound, I would say it is clarity. All of the time and effort they put into the motor and motor controller really paid off. The hardest thing for analog to achieve, because of the mechanical nature of the playback chain is an elimination of wow and flutter. For me,

this is where digital really shines over analog; when you listen to a piano or a violin with a great digital recording, while it may lack a tiny bit of airiness that analog provides, there is a purity of tone that comes through.

A lack of wavering,
if you will.

(continued)

If I were to call out the one really defining feature of the Criterion sound, I would say it is clarity.



The Criterion does a better job here than anything else I've ever heard and this my friends is what you pay the big, big money for. If you want to get taken that last notch closer to the real thing, this is what the Criterion delivers. I can see why Michael Fremer likes his Continuum table so much.

This is the first component I've reviewed that I'm honestly not worthy of.

I own about 5000 records and even though they are all in pristine shape, only about 10-15% of my collection is made up of great remasters and hot stamper (or whatever silly thing you want to call them) originals. We did a lot of comparison listening between my Rega P9 with an XV-1S and the Continuum with the same cartridge to get a feel for the difference in sound that someone with a great but more reasonably priced deck would experience. The P9 with an XV-1S is just under \$10k, so it's not a budget table by any means.

The software makes as much if not more of a difference than the cartridges and setup.

When we were playing the primo records, the Continuum was definitely way out in front, offering up more music in every way; more dynamic slam, more pace, a bigger soundstage and more lifelike tonality.

But when we went back to average pressings, the gap was not enough that I would spring for the Continuum, even if I had a spare 56 large in my pocket. I'd be perfectly happy putting a world-class cartridge on my P9 and calling it a day.

(continued)

If Everything Lines Up, You will be in Heaven

Surprisingly enough, there is a pretty fair amount of competition for your dollar in the 30-60 thousand dollar range, so I would shop wisely. If you want something that will set you apart from all your buddies that have SME 30s, then by all means take the plunge.

Even though I own a six-figure reference system, it's still very hard to judge whether a table like the Criterion is "worth it." I feel that you are paying somewhat of a penalty for the low numbers that this table is produced, but you pay that same penalty for the privilege of owning a Ferrari 430. Sure, a Porsche GT3 is just as fast for half the price but it isn't a Ferrari.

If you don't grasp the logic of this statement, you will never understand the Continuum.

In the end, as great as this table is, if you don't have a killer record collection and a system to match, you will just be buying audio jewelry. And that's your privilege.

For this same reason, if you live in that rarified world where this kind of purchase is no big deal, you can rest assured that the Continuum delivers the goods if you value exclusivity as much as performance. Me, I bought a TK Raven table, a new Mini Cooper S and put twenty grand in my daughter's college fund. And I'm sleeping like a baby. ●

The Continuum Criterion
MSRP: \$55,595 with Copperhead tonearm

MANUFACTURER

Continuum Audio Labs P/L
33 Coventry St. Sth Melbourne
Victoria, Australia 3205
613-9207-8000

US DISTRIBUTION

Signals Super-Fi
www.continuumaudiolabs.com
www.signalssuperfi.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson
ACT2/Series 2

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson
Premier 350

Speakers: MartinLogan Summits, with
Descent i subwoofer

Phono Preamplifiers: ASR Basis Exclusive,
Conrad-Johnson TEA-1, Nagra VPS, Audio
Research PH7, ModWright 9.0 SE, JLTi,
Dynavector PV-1

Cartridges: Dynavector XV-1S, Shelter
9000, MoFi 3.5C, Grado Statement

Digital Source: Naim CD555

Additional Analog Sources: Oracle Delphi
V w/SME iV.vi arm, Rega P9 w/RB1000 arm

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference,
Shunyata Orion, Audience AU24. Audioquest
Sub-3 used for Subwoofer.

Speaker Cables: Shunyata Orion

Power: Running Springs Audio Jaco and
Danielle power conditioners, Essential Sound
Products The Essence "Reference", RSA
Mongoose, Audience PowerChord and
Shunyata Helix Alpha power cords

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode
Signature racks, Finite Elemente Master Refer-
ence rack (on Continuum), Cerapucs, Ceraballs

Room Treatments: GIK 242 panels,
GIK TRI-Traps and Sonex Classics

