

Analog Focus



AVM R5.3 Turntable High-End Analog Made Simple

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The AVM R5.3 is a really good turntable in many ways. It is unusually compact, easy to set up and use, and provides excellent sound quality with a wide range of cartridges. It is relatively insensitive to placement and vibration (though all turntables are affected by these factors to some degree), and is the kind of exercise in precision German engineering that seems likely to last as long as it is given even halfway-decent handling.

As such, the AVM R5.3 is easy to recommend. What are far harder to characterize are its sonic nuances compared to other really good designs. Here, cartridge choice, interaction with the tonearm and room, use of accessories, and phono cable and pre-amp preferences will produce different nuances in every installation. The inherent colorations in given records will also affect the sound. Equally importantly, the quality of cartridge setup and alignment will be absolutely critical in a turntable/tonearm combination this revealing.

So, keep these factors in mind as you read this review. You'll get really good results in almost any setup, but when it comes to the subtler nuances, you need to be aware that they will be shaped by every element of the phono front end, and not by the turntable and tonearm alone.

Features and Technology

The AVM R5.3 is a real-world "form follows function" design that any Bauhaus artist would have been proud of. It is an unusually efficient unit, and though it comes complete with a good transparent plastic turntable cover, it has few features other than a choice of 33 1/3 or 45rpm speeds and off/on, although you can turn on a light (dimnable) that gives the platter a soothing blue glow. The \$8999 R5.3 can also be ordered in

a beautiful chrome finish for a \$3000 price premium. The built-in tonearm is easy to adjust, and the cueing is smooth and precise. The AVM R5.3 is packaged in ways that make it easy to assemble, place, and install the cartridge. It seems unusually resistant to any form of hum and noise, sonic breakthrough, and room vibration.

If you are looking for a massive 100-pound-plus behemoth that will give you angst from delivery to every time you spin a record, this isn't your turntable. The R5.3 is actually fun to live with and easy to operate, and its size, design, set-up, and leveling features make it as easy to operate as any turntable I know of. The tonearm also comes with a range of weights, and the tonearm's mass and headshell design make it compat-

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ible with almost all modern cartridges.

What you can't see from the outside is the amount of effort that went into its design and features. AVM's Udo Besser explains some of the R5.3's design details in the accompanying sidebar.

Sound Quality: The Set-Up Issue

The fact that the AVM R5.3 comes with a built-in tonearm, is compact in size and weight, and has four adjustable, damped feet makes it easier to set up and adjust than most turntable/tonearms, but "easier" is not easy. As reviewers, we may have fallen down on our job in not warning audiophiles that no phono front end is any better than its setup, that cartridge setup is generally the most critical and difficult aspect, and that this is an art form that normally requires the help of either a professional or a very experienced dealer or friend.

For this review, I tried the R5.3 out with four different cartridges: An Ortofon A95, Soundsmith Sussurro Mark II, a Koetsu Rosewood, and a Shure M91E. They all worked very well in terms of cartridge weight, compliance, and the resultant resonances in the tonearm. However, the Ortofon and Soundsmith, my favorite cartridges, have relatively exotic stylus shapes, and

the body shapes varied sharply in all four cases.

The tonearm in the R5.3 does allow for relatively easy adjustment of tracking weight, overhang, azimuth, and stylus rake angle (SRA)—although I never received the overhang protractor that was supposed to come with the unit. (The review sample was forwarded from a show.) Both Ortofon and Soundsmith provide good on-line set-up instructions, and Soundsmith even provides two different set-up protractors that you can print out.

The problem is that you can go through all of the motions called for in these instructions and still fall far short of an optimal result. It takes a lot of practical experience to do things right, and a lot of listening experience as well, although test records and devices like a Fozzometer azimuth range meter can help. Moreover, far too many dealers who sell turntables either provide no real setup, or lack an experienced expert who knows all the practical tricks.

This is why I'd check out a dealer's methods, experience, and frequency of actual set-up work very carefully before buying. I'd also strongly consider hiring a set-up expert. (AVM provided me with the help of a professional, Michael Trei, for the Ortofon A95, and a close friend of mine who has made setup a hobby, and a bit too much of a crusade, walked me through the setup of the Sussurro Mark II.)

Do be aware that it may also be cheaper to pay for the services of a real expert, though proper setup is anything but inexpensive, and every set-up device tends to produce slightly different re-

Specs & Pricing

Nominal speed: 33/45rpm

Speed variance: 33rpm: ± < 0.12%, 45rpm: ± < 0.10%

Wow and flutter: 33rpm: ± < 0.10%, 45rpm: ± < 0.09%

Signal to noise: -72dB

Effective tonearm mass: 15g

Dimensions: 18.5" x 15.4" x 6.9"

Weight (without box):

26.5 lbs. (turntable), 12 lbs. (platter)

Price: \$8990 in silver or black finish, \$11,990 for Cellini Edition in chrome

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sults in practice. Most protractors do not have a mirror to show you the cartridge body alignment. There is no one right way to set overhang or SRA (where CBS labs concluded that reducing one form of distortion tends to increase another). And, every set-up aid you can buy presents some visual alignment problems and calls for slightly different adjustments. This lack of consistency applies to other aspects of phono setup. I have VPI and Audio-technics strobe discs that have about a 1% difference in measuring speed at 33 1/3rpm, and I have five different turntable levels that all produce slightly different results.

Someone who has done a lot of setups with a lot of different cartridges, with different shapes and specs, will have worked around such minor issues empirically. Doing it by the book for the first time or at rare intervals tends to produce very different results.

Sound Quality

Putting this differently, if the AVM R5.3 does not provide really excellent sound quality, it will almost certainly be because you didn't provide the high-quality setup that every really good phono front end demands, failed to clean your stylus properly, or didn't bother to properly clean your records. Any form of sonic excellence in playing records does require a fair amount of human interaction with both the turntable and the record.

I did a great deal of listening to a wide range of records in trying out the R5.3. Some of my favorite LPs are on the Accent label and date back to a time when I could sometimes hear live solo and chamber music performances by the recording artists. I was struck then at how lifelike these records could be on a good system, and the AVM R5.3 shows that the state of the art in turntables and cartridges has advanced a long way towards even greater realism.

The R5.3 got the most out of cartridges I was fully familiar with on a variety of Accent Bach, Haydn, and Telemann recordings, and if you have any interest in classical lute and can find a copy, I was deeply impressed with how well it reproduced Konrad Junghanel's *Merry Melancholy* recording of work by Johnson and Robinson (Accent 8121). This is scarcely a perfect record,

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but the R5.3 provided exceptional life, air, and soundstage detail without a hint of hardness or edge.

It did an equally good job in all three areas with a Solti/LSO recording of Mahler's First Symphony on a Decca "Supercut" demo record (Decca SXL 6113). I found this to be particularly striking because this is not a new LP using modern advances in material, electronics, and cutting methods—advances that the R5.3 does a very good job of re-

vealing. It dates back to 1964 and shows that LPs not only don't die, but the good performances they preserve don't even fade away.

The R5.3 measured very well in tempo and pitch without any hint of resonance-induced coloration. It is a relatively low-torque unit, and you do need to let it get up to full speed before lowering the tonearm, but it has a surprising amount of mass for a relatively compact design, and unlike some other relatively

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low-torque designs it can provide very good lower midrange and deep bass with a lot of clarity and detail. It is a bit "lighter" in overall timbre, musical dynamics, and deep bass than some larger, more massive designs, but not to the point where it can't handle rock, or do an excellent job with demanding direct-to-disc recordings. If you are lucky enough to have a copy of the Sheffield *Kodo: Heartbeat Drummers of Japan* LP, try Track 2: "O-Daiko."

As for other LPs that are outside my normal classical/jazz listening range, the R5.3 also did a good job reproducing the bass and dynamics in the Mobile Fidelity LP of Bob Marley and the Wailers' *Catch a Fire* (MFSL 1-236) and the Fantasy Stereo LP of Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Chronicle* (CCR-2). (Yes, I do listen to more modern recordings, but my main focus in analog recordings is really good performances from the past.)

I would give you two cautions about the sound quality of the R5.3. First, within its price range, the new Technics direct-drive units may offer *slightly* more speed stability and precision, although the specs for the R5.3 are so good that it is doubtful the differences would really be audible. Second, more massy turntables can sometimes provide more deep bass weight.

A good accessory record weight, however, will slightly increase the R5.3's bass energy at a minimal cost in upper-octave life. I tried a number of now-discontinued weights, and each altered the R5.3's sonic nuances in different ways. The weight that produced the best results to my ear, however, was the currently available VPI record weight.

Summary

The R5.3 is a really good design—simple to operate, easy to place, and a lot of fun to listen to. But really pay attention to every aspect of setup in putting the R5.3 (and every other turntable and tonearm combination) in your system.



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Inside the R5.3 with AVM's Udo Besser

I asked AVM's owner and GM Udo Besser for some technical details and he provided the following background: "I started to create my first turntables about five years ago as a private R&D project. My son wanted a turntable for his 18th birthday, and of course I could have just bought him one. But that was too easy and not really a personal gift. So I started to build one for him. What looked 'easy'—and 'ya, gimme a week and it's done'—turned out to be an endeavor of unforeseen complexity to a point when I had no intention of creating a product for the company, but was keeping my effort as a private playground for Udo-the-hobbyist-turntable-maker.

"Some three years ago, I re-addressed the whole issue when more and more customers, dealers, distributors, press, numerous friends, and my daughter too kept asking about a turntable: 'Udo, why doesn't AVM have a turntable? Vinyl is becoming such a hip thing...' The project then became really complex (and much more expensive in the R&D phase). I did not just want to go to an OEM supplier and have them put our label on an existing design. I wanted to create something with real AVM DNA. I also wanted to make sure the turntable did not become hyper-expensive, was not too esoteric in looks, and was really easy to use in daily operation.

"Though easily said, this started to be a difficult effort—one that raised local aspirin sales. The result, however, did make the R5.3 different in a number of ways that improve its sound:

- The belt drive design uses a DC motor with external power supply. The motor is positioned as far away from the path of the cartridge as possible, and the belt is wound around the precision subplatter. Opposite the subplatter, the belt is then wound around a pulley to eliminate the tilt moment in the bearing of the axle (visible thru the 5kg acrylic platter). I called it 'ellipsocentric belt drive' as the belt describes an almost elliptic path.
- The bearing is a high-precision steel axle in a brass funnel which rests on a ceramic plate. Little or almost no lubrication is needed, and the bearing/axle system is ultra-silent because of the ellipsocentric belt drive.
- The plinth (chassis) is made of high-density fiber (HDF), and this is made visible intentionally on both sides where the chassis is either painted silver or black. The aluminum top cover and front plate come from AVM's aluminum vendor in a neighboring village (11km away from us). The two aluminum parts are glued onto the plinth in ways that stabilize and dampen the chassis to a superb degree. (Just test the silent character of the plinth by knocking on the side where the painted HDF is visible.)
- The R5.3 has proprietary height-adjustable damping feet, which are specifically designed for the R5.3. One more detail for the intended customer: Four feet are used, although I'm aware that a tripod will be the ideal solution. I feel, however, that with only three feet it would be too easy to tip the table over when you press too strongly on one of the rear unsuspended corners.
- The 10" 'arm is a completely new design and it was key factor in leading me to create our own turntable. The AVM 'arm is mounted in a cardanic bearing with counterweight suspension. The moving mass is just 15 grams (aluminum tube).
- The AVM 'arm is fully adjustable, enabling it to carry all known cartridges. I have tried out many, many, many cartridges. Because there are so many different ones we do not dare supply a cartridge or even suggest one. The AVM 'arm always comes in a C3PO polished shiny aluminum finish and is only sold with the turntable.
- The adjustable-rotation anti-skating and silicone-damped tone-arm-lift is embodied in a cantilever armrest that is held in position by a tiny magnet.
- The dustcover is attached to the plinth but rests only on four little 'dimples' on the corners when closed.

"As for other design features, the platter illumination is blue and dimmable. This is a design gimmick that I liked and should not be taken too seriously. Blue is our CI color (and, BTW, the only color that gave a name to a style of music). The standard finishes are silver or black. The R5.3 Cellini is also the luxury version. It has a hand-polished chrome top cover and chrome front panel. Very cool, a bit more expensive and only built to order. The R2.3 is a less expensive spin-off with 9" 'arm, a widely similar look, and conventional belt drive for \$4990." **TAS**

