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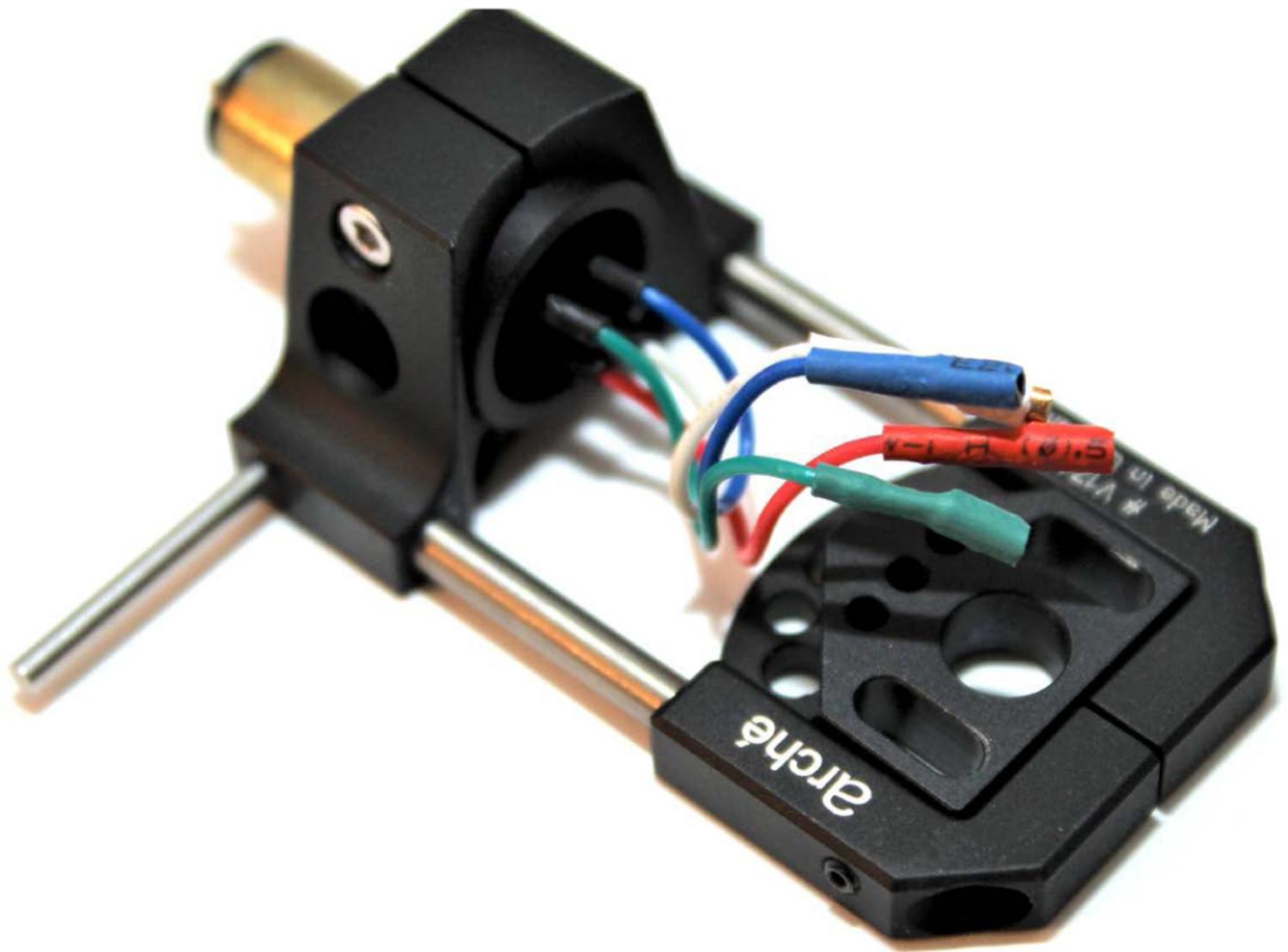
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VOLUME 6



ACOUSTICAL SYSTEMS

By Marc Phillips

ARCHÉ 5D HEADSHELL

What difference does a headshell make?

I tackled that question in my August 2019 Vinyl Anachronist column for *Perfect Sound Forever*, one titled “Headshell 101.” The truth is, I haven’t had to worry about headshells since nearly every one I’ve used in the last thirty years was integrated with the tonearm. But ever since I started using the Technics SL-1200G turntable and arm, I’ve gotten a crash course. I brought that turntable home with both the stock headshell and the famous “swing” headshell from Nasotec. My conclusion from this rather small sample size was that yes, headshells do make a difference. Since it’s part of the structure of an analog rig, that should be a no-brainer, right?

At AXPONA 2019, I ran into my old pal Norm Steinke from Rutherford Audio. He showed me the Acoustical Systems Arché 5D headshell after I told him I was using the Technics. I marveled at the sheer engineering that went into this little gem and he asked me a simple question: Do you want it in black or silver?

I chose the black and took it home.

A Headshell with a Difference

The Acoustical Systems Arché 5D headshell costs \$695. I’ve been an audiophile far too long to balk at this price—of course there’s a \$700 headshell out there. Sure, it cost more than an entry-level analog rig from the likes of Pro-Ject, Rega or Music Hall, but you wouldn’t put the Arché on any of those. Not if you’re sane, anyway.

But the Technics SL-1200G? You’d better believe it. I’ve been so smitten with the Technics ever since I reviewed it for the Summer Issue, I’ve been attaching it to some fairly lofty ancillaries. As I’ve mentioned in my review of the ZYX Bloom 3 in this issue, I’ve settled in with an incredibly satisfying analog set-up that includes the Technics, the Arché 5D, the ZYX and the Lab12 Melto2 phono stage. I’m deliriously happy. But what did the headshell bring to the table?

First of all, I had to wait a few weeks to compare it to the other two headshells I have. The mounting nuts for the ZYX are integrated into the body of the cartridge, and the Arché is quite thick. None of the screws I had in my loose hardware box were long enough to catch, so I bought an extra set. Once those arrived, I was ready to go.

There was one more issue to overcome. The Arché is rather heavy as well. When I mounted the longest screws in the hardware pack, I had to push the Technics’ counterweight almost to the very end. That gave me a tracking force of 2.25 grams, which is within the correct range of the ZYX, but not optimal. I realized that the screws were probably a little too long, so I went to the next shorter size and was able to get the tracking force to 2 grams, which is perfect. I’ve never had to adjust tracking force through mounting screws before, but there ya go. Everything was set.





“I’ve never had to adjust tracking force through mounting screws before, but there ya go.”

What makes the Acoustical Systems Arché 5D headshell so unique is that you can make most of the alignment parameters from the headshell—even if it’s already mounted on the arm. That makes everything much easier. You can adjust overhang, azimuth and most importantly, the stylus rake angle (SRA), which is adjusted through a removable plate in the center of the headshell. This allows for what Acoustical Systems claims in true SRA-alignment, which is one of the reasons for its improved sound quality.

Add to that the way the 5D is machined and engineered, to extremely close tolerances, and you have an idea of why this headshell makes a difference.

Sound

I had everything else in the analog chain fine-tuned and broken in—the AS was the last link in the system I added. That allowed me to compare the differences between headshells. I was not disappointed. Not only did the sporadic tracking issues I had up to that point completely disappear—I was driving myself a little crazy trying this and that and the other—but the sound of the rig was simply more secure and confident. While I’ve praised the Technics for its solid, trouble-free operation, the Arché simply made perfect alignment that much easier to achieve.

Think about it—all you have to do is get your cartridge mounted to this headshell, and the headshell mounted to the arm, and all the fine tuning can be achieved through adjusting the tiny hex screws (which, of course, are included). A tiny bubble level is also included so you can get the azimuth spot-on. On the back of the headshell, above the jack, there are tiny marks to help you. Just loosen another tiny screw and the jack rotates until perfect azimuth is achieved. It’s about as easy as it gets.

Conclusion

The Acoustical Systems Arché 5D headshell is pricey, sure. But once you use it, you’ll realize that it represents an incredible value. It takes much of the guesswork out of cartridge alignment, and its superb design extracts even more detail from the groove. Highly recommended!

—Photos in article by Marc Phillips