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Transfiguration Unchained!

I've lost track of how many Transfiguration cartridges I've reviewed over the years. In all that time I've never met their designer, Immutable Music's Seiji Yoshioka, but every year he sends me an exceptionally tasteful holiday greeting card. I've never reciprocated. The truth isn't always pretty.

The Transfiguration cartridges I've reviewed, too, have always conveyed a midrange musical truth that hasn't been flashy or pretty. But it's always been honest and convincing, particularly of the reality of voices. If you said that the Transfigurations lacked character, you wouldn't be wrong—unless you intended it as a criticism.

The original Transfiguration AF-1 had a ring magnet instead of the then-usual rectangular magnet.

Transfiguration cartridges have always been more about getting out of the way than about making a “beautiful sound” of one flavor or another. Despite the many Transfigurations I've auditioned, if you were to ask me for a description of any characteristic “house sound” they might share, I couldn't name one.

Of the Transfiguration cartridges I've reviewed, the more expensive the model, the further out of the way it got, but always beginning from a core of honest reproduction of the midrange. In February 2014, I reviewed the Transfiguration Phoenix (\$4250) on Analogplanet.com.¹

¹ See <http://tinyurl.com/m2momug>.



Among other compliments, I wrote that it was a very neutral cartridge, but that you'd know it wasn't a “top-shelf” model because of its less than fully expressed sustain and decay—qualities whose importance was first impressed on me by TARA Labs' Matthew Bond. Better could be had, I wrote, but only for a lot more money.

So here's Transfiguration's new top model, the Proteus (\$6000), costing

almost half again as much as the Phoenix. These days, \$6000 for a cartridge is expensive, but not stupidly so. For me, stupid-expensive cartridges start at \$10,000, though I know for a fact (I get the e-mails) that most buyers in that price range still end up thinking it was money smartly spent. Which is not to suggest that a cartridge priced \$4000 below stupid level can't possibly compete with \$10,000-and-up

models—because the Proteus does. That was obvious on first listen.

First, Some History

The original Transfiguration AF-1, produced in the early 1990s, had a ring magnet instead of the then-usual rectangular magnet above the coil structure, associated with a U-shaped yoke. Ring-magnet cartridges are now more commonplace, but back then, this was a breakthrough.

The AF-1 had a single, hollowed-out, disc-shaped magnet, in the center of which the coil assembly was painstakingly positioned. Ultraprecise assembly, always important in the making of ultra-high-performance cartridges, was even more important in building the AF-1, and its low output of 0.1mV limited its compatibility with phono preamplifiers. However, the proximity of coil to magnet and the coil's location at the center of the magnet produced unprecedented uniformity of magnetic flux field. This resulted in audible benefits, particularly a more linear frequency response and better spatial coherence.

Transfiguration followed up with its line of Temper models, which also had a single (but more powerful) ring magnet, and coils with more turns of wire, and was built to even tighter tolerances. The Temper was the first Transfiguration I reviewed, in the July 1996 issue; when properly loaded, among its immediately audible sonic qualities was its subjectively flat, smooth frequency response.

All Transfiguration cartridges made at that time had a single ring magnet, but assembling them proved so difficult that only one technician had what Bob Clarke—of Profundo, Immutable Music's US distributor—calls “the artistry.” At his productive peak, this unnamed craftsman, working on two cartridges at once, could produce only a pair of them every other day. Which is why producing less-expensive models proved impossible.

In February 2000 I'd reviewed the Transfiguration Temper Supreme (\$3800), another single-magnet design, but with silver coil windings and other mechanical refinements. I wrote: “The Temper Supreme is still the most neutral-sounding, ‘characterless’ MC cartridge I've yet encountered,” but compared to the original Temper, it produced greater dynamic authority, blacker backgrounds, and better image dimensionality.

Seiji Yoshioka then developed a

design in which the coil assembly was sandwiched between *two* ring magnets. This retained the earlier design's uniformity of flux field while being far easier to build and tune. This resulted in the Transfiguration Spirit (\$1500), which I reviewed in my May 2000 column. I described its top-end performance as “spirited” (ugh). It wasn't bright or etched, it just shone a spotlight on high frequencies, and loading it down didn't seem to help.

Whatever my high expectations, I wasn't prepared for what the Proteus delivered from the first record I played.

Two years later, the Spirit's Mk.3 iteration proved far more refined in my direct comparisons with the original. In my July 2002 review I wrote: “The Spirit Mk.3 retained the original's clarity, focus, dynamic authority, and superb tracking capabilities (at 2gm) while adding a higher level of frequency neutrality. . . . With its yokeless dual-ring magnet construction, boron cantilever, PA solid-diamond stylus, and body of milled aluminum with integral threaded mounting holes, the Spirit Mk.3 is a mighty attractive package for \$1500, and its ability to organize and present focused images in space is one of its strongest suits. If you prefer clarity, focus, and spatial ‘heatness,’ the Spirit Mk.3 should appeal to you.”

Later came the Orpheus, yet another single-magnet Transfiguration flagship cartridge—and then the Orpheus L, a lower-output version that further increased the resolution of fine detail. The Orpheus (\$6000) was then the pinnacle of Transfiguration designs. It combined the Temper Supreme's refined sound with new levels of “get out of the way” transparency, spaciousness, and dynamic slam.

Then, toward the end of 2010, while demand for it remained strong, the Orpheus was suddenly, almost mysteriously, discontinued. According to Bob Clarke this was because the lone technician capable of building Immutable's single-magnet cartridges “suffered a disabling medical event.”

Two years of R&D followed, during which time Yoshioka revisited double-

ring-magnet construction, this time using some “very special” materials he'd procured for use in the Orpheus L. The first model to result from this research appeared in 2012, and was the aforementioned Phoenix. This was *not* Transfiguration's original Phoenix I'd reviewed in *Stereophile* in June 2009. Adding to the confusion was the fact that, physically, it looked similar if not identical to the original Phoenix.

It certainly didn't sound like it. As I wrote last February on AnalogPlanet.com: “In 2012 the Phoenix was updated to include larger-gauge, pure-silver coil wire wound on the square Permalloy core used on the now discontinued top of the line Transfiguration Orpheus. The revised Phoenix also shares the Orpheus's damping system . . . and features a powerful neodymium ring in the rear and a samarium cobalt one in front while the older Temper and Orpheus models used but a single ring magnet.

“Were I Mr. Transfiguration (Seiji Yoshioka) I probably would call this new edition the Phoenix Mk.II or the Phoenix Signature or *something* to distinguish it from the original because while that one was very good, this one is *much* better and at \$4250, it costs considerably more than the original's \$2750.”

Proteus Particulars

The new and improved Phoenix, though *much* better than the older Phoenix, did not prepare me for what Seiji Yoshioka has achieved with his new flagship design, the Proteus. Taking it out of the box, I smelled retreat: It was the old shape outside, closely resembling the older Tempers than the squared-off Orpheus, and inside was the “dual-ring-magnet construction again. How good could it be?

Then I looked at the specs. The Proteus has a claimed internal impedance of 1 ohm! Not as low as the 0.4 ohm of Dr. Kubo's Haniwa HCTR01-6T, which is close to a short circuit, but otherwise as low as I've seen. Ultra-low impedance and inductance produce less phase shift, which improves transient performance, while the coil's lower mass should improve overall speed and mechanical responsiveness.

Low impedance is achieved by reducing the number of coil windings, and of course this decreases output. The Proteus is claimed to produce 0.2mV (3.54cm/s, 1kHz)—not much, but still twice that of the original AF-1. The front and rear ring magnets are of neodymium, while the square core is “Ultra

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grade 3S- μ metal,” with coils wound using “5N” (99.999% pure) silver wire.

The Proteus has a new, more rigid, nonresonant motor/body interface, and a new damper material said to produce greater clarity and less mechanical “smearing”—but the biggest improvements claimed are the 3S mu-metal core and the slightly thicker gauge of silver wire.

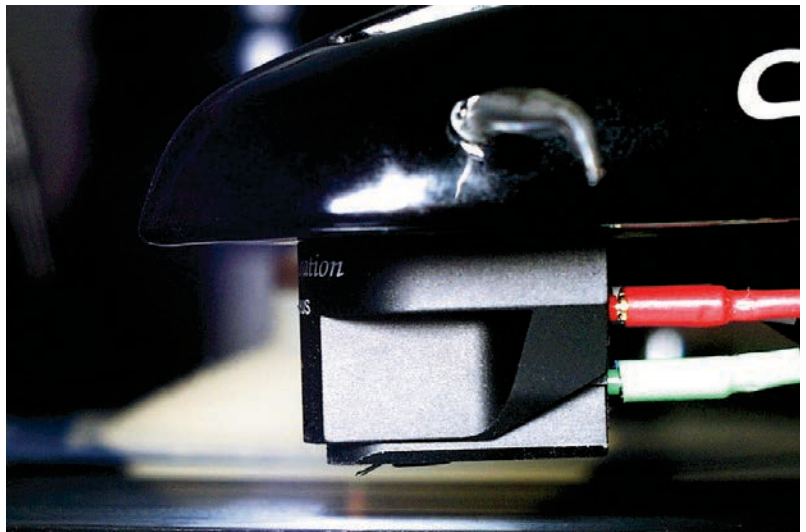
The cantilever is of 0.3mm-diameter solid boron, to which is affixed a PA (3x30 μ m) stylus of solid diamond. The claimed channel separation is better than 30dB (200Hz–1kHz), with a channel balance within 0.5dB at 1kHz. Compliance is moderate at 13 x 10⁻⁶cm/dync, and the recommended vertical tracking force (VTF) is 2.0gm. The recommended resistive load is greater than 10 ohms (or 10 times the internal impedance, which is a useful rule of thumb for the resistive loading of moving-coil cartridges). The body is of resonance-controlled aluminum. The cartridge weighs a moderate 7.8gm, meaning that between its mass and compliance, the Proteus is intended to be used in a tonearm of medium to high mass.

In short: When you buy a Proteus, you get the build quality and low-tolerance specifications you’re entitled to for \$6000.

Set-Up

Installing the Proteus in my Continuum Audio Labs Cobra tonearm was impeded only by the cantilever’s being tucked well under the body, which somewhat hampered the setting of overhang and zenith angle. The advantage is that it’s almost impossible to accidentally break the cantilever.

A stylus rake angle (SRA) of 92° was easily achieved with the tonearm close to parallel to the record surface. Using a digital oscilloscope, I got minimal crosstalk with the cantilever very close to perpendicular to the record surface.



The Proteus’s body obscures the cantilever, which hampered setting overhang and azimuth angle.



What’s more, separation was 30dB. On the advice of Ypsilon’s Demetris Baklavas, I connected a nude Vishay 15k ohm resistor in parallel with the secondary winding of my Ypsilon MC-16L step-up transformer, which resulted in the Proteus “seeing” a load of about 44.4 ohms. (If your step-up transformer doesn’t have loading plugs, you can still load the secondary by putting resistors in parallel with your transformer’s output cables.)

Unprepared for Proteus

Even before I’d heard a single note of music, just based on the set-up measurements, I was certain the Proteus would be a solid performer. Having recently reviewed the new Phoenix, I had certain expectations, one of which was that the Proteus might sound like the Phoenix, but with more precise and subtle attacks, more fleshed-out sustain, and a more generous decay. In addition, I expected better microdynamics and

textural “ripeness.” In other words, play a well-recorded piano LP and it should sound even more like a piano.

Whatever my high expectations, I wasn't prepared for what the Proteus, not yet broken in, delivered from the first record I played: a test pressing of a 45rpm reissue of Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble's *Couldn't Stand the Weather* (Epic/Legacy/Analogue Productions). I expected something like what I'd heard from Lyra's stunning Etna, which has a meaty midrange more closely resembling that of the Temper Supreme. Instead, I got Lyra Atlas-like dynamic explosiveness, high-frequency air and extension, and electrostatic-like transparency and texture and touch, all on an enormously wide, deep soundstage. Even before the Proteus had had a chance to fully break in and develop, what I was hearing put it up there with the best, most musically involving cartridges I've heard at any price.

If the Orpheus transformed the top of Transfiguration's model line from dependable four-door sedan to Lamborghini, the Proteus makes it a rocket sled—without sacrificing the line's tonal neutrality and overall linearity. This is not the sort of sound everyone wants—some prefer richer, warmer, softer—but from my listening chair, this is the sound that produces both musicality and an intensely vivid sense of space. It's got the rich, red velvet some prefer, while sacrificing none of the transient and spatial fireworks many consider essential in a state-of-the-art cartridge.

I could not fairly describe the Proteus's sound as being “analytical,” or so fast that it skipped over important musical landmarks to arrive at the next. The Proteus handled the intense sibilants of closely miked voices with clarity and ease, producing natural detail without softening or smearing, while allowing the full development of vocal textures and tonalities.

A 45rpm reissue of *Peter, Paul and Mary*, the trio's first album, sensation-ally recorded by Bill Schwartz (2 LPs, Warner Bros./ORG), spotlight the Proteus's prowess with voices—something Transfiguration has always done well to begin with, and now does only better. Its rendering of this album, mastered from the original analog tapes, took me right into the studio, within kissing distance of the lips of the young Mary Travers (or of Peter Yarrow or Paul Stookey, if you prefer).

After reviewing, for AnalogPlanet, the remastering of the Led Zeppelin catalog supervised by Jimmy Page, I had to pull out the version of “Babe, I'm Gonna Leave You” that first brought the song to the attention of Page and Robert Plant: Joan Baez's, from her *In Concert, Part One* (LP, Vanguard VSD 2122, black Stereolab label). The recording is stunning if variable (it was recorded at various venues), and young Baez, at the height of her vocal powers in 1961 and '62, mesmerizes.

The Proteus did a stunning job with this pure, natural recording (particularly on “Babe”), producing a rich, creamy, well-focused, but not overdelineated voice floating in three-dimensional space and surrounded by a large volume of air. The balance of her guitar's transient and resonant qualities was ideal, producing a vivid sensation of being present at these concerts. I listened transfixed through both sides.

The latest reissue from the Electric Recording Company arrived: a performance of Debussy's *Estampes* and *Préludes, Book 1*, recorded in stereo in 1961 by Henriette Faure (LP, EMI/Electric Recording Company ERC 006), a relatively obscure pianist who, from what little about her I could find online, was better known for performing the music of Ravel, with whom she studied. The original of this EMI recording, and of a French Decca recording of Faure performing Ravel, regularly go for \$1000 and up.

What sounds like a fairly closely miked recording with plenty of spatial cues features intense dynamic contrasts produced by some heavy pounding of chords up and down the keyboard. The Proteus tracked it all with seeming ease and not a single stumble, producing florid colors, rich textures, and a sensation of musical flow that I just don't hear from digital—although an eccentricity in the pressing of side 2 produced noticeable wow. That drives some listeners bonkers, but I can live with it.

I got a test pressing of an upcoming AAA release of percussion music that the producer said created “explosions” on their turntable with a few cartridges that will go unmentioned. The Proteus sailed through it without so much as a mistracking click or buzz while delivering high-level aural and musical excitement that sizzled without sizzling, if you know what I mean.

Rather than cite more examples that

demonstrate the Proteus's greatness with a laundry list of albums you might not have, let me just say that it excelled in every parameter I can think of, with no negatives I could find.

Despite its “rational exuberance” on top, the Proteus's tracing of the grooves produced sounds set against a deep, rich, velvety-black background. Its overall character was as nonmechanical as I've heard from a cartridge of full resolution and full frequency response that held back nothing—and I mean *nothing*.

Bright recordings sounded so, dark ones dark. The great ones sounded as great as I've heard them. Any audible character the Proteus may have had was closer to that of the Lyra Atlas or the Haniwa HCTR01-6T than of the Ortofon Anna, which is somewhat richer in the lower midbass and somewhat more polite on top.

The Proteus's sound was as effective with jazz as with hard rock as with classical as with folk. It upholds Transfiguration's well-deserved reputation for expertise and finesse in the reproduction of voices, while expanding the brand's reach into the deepest, darkest, brightest corners of every other conceivable cartridge performance parameter.

As is happening with loudspeakers, I think that with the latest generation of cartridges we're reaching a new high level of observationally linear cartridge performance in which the very best models sound more similar to than different from one another, and in which strong “tonal character” is more a deliberate choice than something unavoidable. In the case of the Transfiguration Proteus—a cartridge that gets so far out of the music's way that you might think it's out of reach—you can have it all for the reasonable, not at all stupid price of \$6000. ■

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MANUFACTURERS' COMMENTS

Transfiguration Proteus

Editor:

We would like to thank *Stereophile* and Mr. Michael Fremer for the very thoughtful and detailed review of the Transfiguration Proteus phono cartridge. Mr. Fremer has “gotten” the sound of the Proteus, which, as the primary design goal for Mr. Yoshioka, is no “sound” at all. Rather, Mr. Yoshioka has striven for decades to produce a cartridge that truly “gets so far out of the music’s way” or, disappears completely in the playback of LPs. In the Proteus, Mr. Yoshioka feels he has come closer than ever to this elusive goal. The challenges he has overcome, the necessity to truly research and innovate in the design of the double-ring-magnet cartridge, has finally borne fruit . . . or wings, perhaps.

Another primary design goal Mr. Yoshioka has always maintained is to create cartridges of great overall balance, so that no particular aspect of playback performance is highlighted, and the cartridge impose on

the recording as little as possible of its own character. While this doesn’t necessarily grab one’s attention in a brief audition, it is the key reason why the listener can forget the cartridge completely and focus on the musical performance. Over the long term, this lack of “character” allows one to simply enjoy the music, year in, year out. Mr. Fremer very carefully and accurately described how the Proteus does this better than any Transfiguration before it.

The primary design goal of the ring-magnet design—which Mr. Yoshioka has pioneered, researched, and optimized since the original AF-1—is to achieve an evenly focused magnetic field around the moving coil. This yields a coherence and phase linearity that are unachievable with more common yoked designs. This linearity explains the spatial correctness that has always been a hallmark of Transfiguration cartridges, and which has reached its apex in the Proteus. Mr. Fremer not only noticed this, but described it perfectly: “In-

stead, I got Lyra Atlas-like dynamic explosiveness, high-frequency air and extension, and electrostatic-like transparency and texture and touch, all on an enormously wide, deep soundstage. Even before the Proteus had had a chance to fully break in and develop, what I was hearing put it up there with the best, most musically involving cartridges I’ve heard at any price.” Mr. Yoshioka has noted that he feels the combination of all the developments that have made possible higher (musically relevant) resolution, dynamic abilities, transparency, and naturalness have also allowed the Proteus to express an entirely new spatial dimension of analog playback: the presentation of the recording space in front of the performers, and the projection of this out into the room, in front of the loudspeakers—those little details that key the brain to think: “Aha, yes, like in a real concert hall!”

Bob Clarke, Profundo

Seiji Yoshioka, Immutable Music