

Avid Altus V2 and Nexus V2 tonearms real life experience

Monday, February 24, 2025
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Without pick-up arms, where would we be? Unable to play and enjoy our favourite records. And without well-engineered and high quality pick-up arms we'd never be able to enjoy the huge amount of analogue information stored in those minute grooves. Inevitably, any looseness in the mechanical retrieval system will severely compromise the resulting signal which eventually finds its way to the loudspeakers. As they say in the computer world: rubbish in = rubbish out. Our vinyl collection is worth more than that.

Early pick-up arms were (by today's standards) pretty massive, tracking (playing) weights fairly heavy, and any compensation for bias pretty non-existent. We can be thankful for those innovators who decided that better is possible' and as time has gone on close-tolerance bearings, the introduction of bias by various means, better cartridges and lower playing weights coupled with improving recording techniques has all brought vinyl replay to where we are now.

Avid has been relatively slow to the market, having taken a long, hard and considered look at what makes a good tonearm. While they may look conventional at first glance, that is, in fact, far from the truth. The Nexus V2 employs a 'hyper-rigid' titanium arm, the bearing tolerances are described as 'micron tight' and each one is painstakingly hand-built.

Their ultimate goal is to support the cartridge rigidly while playing a record which is why Avid have pressed a hyper-strong (and relatively massive) titanium arm into use. However, there is nothing rigid about the musical presentation which using the Nexus V2 can bring.

There is one more important weapon in Avid's arm armoury though. Their research has shown that the bias (anti-skate) required varies over the sweep of the arm across the record surface. More is required at the outer and inner edges, with less in the middle. The amount of bias required also varies with stylus profile.

The eagle-eyed among you will have spotted that Avid has incorporated two bias adjustments into the base of the arm so that you can fine-tune your arm to suit every circumstance. And if you're an avid cartridge-swapper, the Altus V2 also has an integral VTA adjuster built-in, which you can adjust on the fly.

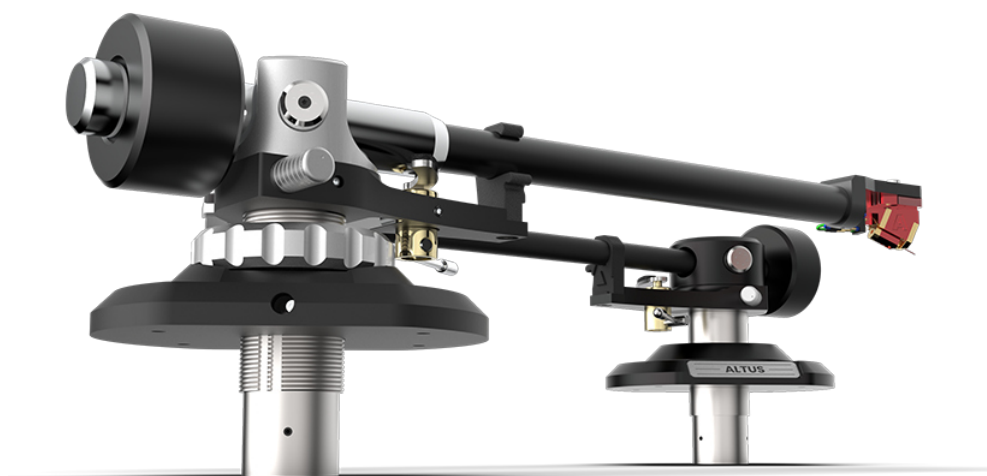
Arm two

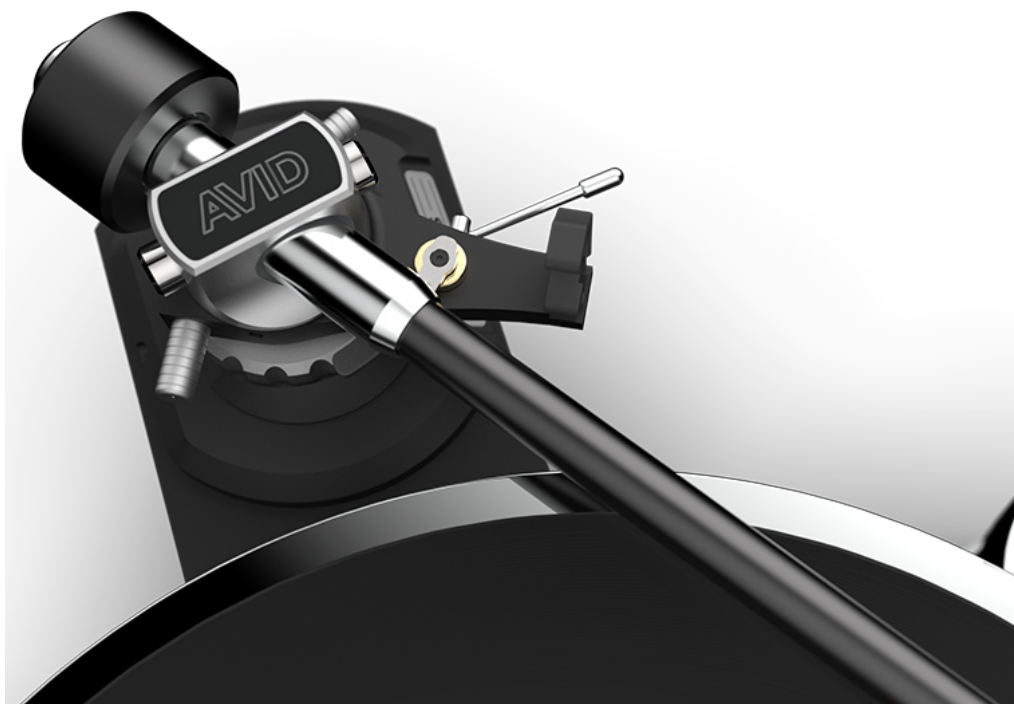
The second arm in this review is the slightly lesser' (in terms of price) Altus V2. Incorporating many of the features of the Nexus, it too sports the dual bias capability. The armtube here is thick-walled aluminium designed to be resonance-free, but held securely but freely with equally



smooth tight-tolerance bearings and is also hand-built. The other difference is that the Altus V2 comes without the VTA adjuster.

Setting up either arm is pretty straightforward. A number of mounting base options are available, so fitting to your chosen turntable should not be an issue. The effective length of both arms is 233mm and effective mass is around the 18-19g mark, so suits both MC and MM cartridges very well.





The sharp end

Both arms were used extensively in the context of my system, both with a wide range of cartridges and a wide range of programme material. What follows is a brief precis of my findings because to go through everything I did would result in a tome the size of War and Peace. My preferred material is essentially acoustic, naturally recorded stuff. As a lifelong musician, fidelity to an original live sound is important to me. A real acoustic life is my reference point, if my system conveys anything akin to what I hear in real life, then it has to be doing something right. The Altus V2 was mounted first, and given a bit of time to settle down, be tweaked to suit each cartridge and put through its paces with a wide variety of vinyl releases. I'll concentrate on a couple before heading off piste'.

The Dart recording of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* on L'Oiseau Lyre. An oldish (now) recording featuring Janet Baker in the title role of Dido. The dying aria is a well-known piece, and has been reworked into many other genres over the years. However, the yearning, the pathos and the loss Baker wrings from the score has to be heard to be believed. The Altus V2 delivered this in spades.

While the engineering goal with the Altus V2 was to make a 'rigid' arm, the music absolutely flowed. There was insight into the orchestral parts which were revelatory. The occasional break in Baker's voice clear to hear, and the image was rock-steady in between the speakers. The other aspect which was really noticeable was that the presentation was effortless. It was just happening in front of me.

Some jazz followed: Dudley Moore's Trio playing *The Millionaire* – how open and revealing could this get? While Dud's playing is very much in the foreground on the piano, the orchestra is clearly and transparently laid out behind him. The percussion is clear, precise and as if you were there. Even the woodwind, sometimes really difficult to capture and reproduce, is astonishingly open, bright but soft at the same time. All the schmaltzy nuances are revealed making the performance one of those where you really do feel like kicking off your shoes and settling back in the chair with a nice drink.

Moving to something a little different, Joni Mitchell's title track from *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*. Again the Altus V2 delivered clarity, openness and an utterly natural presentation that put me right in the recording venue with her. The brass/vocals in the background, coupled with the pared-back orchestration just supporting her voice enough, and the slightly strident harmonies revealed in all their colour and warmth.

An aspect common to the way that the Altus V2 delivered all these very different tracks was the degree to which small nuances, changes and dynamics, openness and clarity of colour, timbre, and (I hate the phrase, but it serves a purpose) pace, rhythm and timing all fall into place effortlessly.

Last to hit the turntable was a very old favourite: Decca's *Journey into Stereo Sound* from 1958. Opening with a train rushing through a station, I was astonished by just how realistic the

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Altus V2 made the whole thing sound. Bearing in mind when these recordings were made, the slam of the carriage doors and the sound of the station really made me jump, both with the dynamic stability of the aural image but also with the sheer energy the Altus V2 allowed the cartridge to extract from the grooves. Moving on to the Espana track, the entrance of the brass with all its golden timbre and attack – wow!

Now, as an aside, I also have a Tannoy Vari-Twin stereo cartridge from that very era. A behemoth of a beast, it's a heavyweight piece of kit and also puts a lot of energy into the arm.



Did it phase the Altus V2? Not one bit of it. This also proved to be one of the most dynamic cartridges I tried in the two Avid arms, which came as something of a surprise.

What didn't come as a surprise was that playing with the dual-bias meant that each cartridge needed a different setting in order to get the cleanest responses from the vinyl. I guess it's a bit like adjusting the bias on a tape deck for different formulations. None is bad, but some need different settings to really sing. I tried the Tannoy, definitely old-school, a Shure V15 III, an Audio Note Io and a Skyanalog P1-G. The differences, and the increase in performance produced by tweaking bias was noticeable, so this is a feature which is well worth setting with care.

Moving over to the Nexus, the simplest thing to say (which may look like a cop-out) is that whatever the Altus V2 did, there was more of it from the Nexus. Janet Baker wasn't singing her aria in front of me, she was dying, singing her last breaths at my feet. The anguish became decidedly more palpable, the orchestration and atmosphere even more strained, the deep hurt and anguish all the more laid bare. The Nexus V2 put me in the position where I could (metaphorically) scoop her up to make her last moments bearable.

The Nexus V2 made the Joni Mitchell so much more expressive, so fresh, so 'this is all about me' that I was really drawn into her world. Contrasts between tracks were far more easily discerned, and the changes of mood between in France they Kiss on Main Street and Don't Interrupt The Sorrow were dramatic. Some commentators have said that a piece of equipment is like opening the window on the concert hall. Putting the Nexus V2 in context, it's more like opening the window on a whole new world, where subtle changes, timbres and colours are readily available to enjoy and experience with ease.

And Dudley Moore? Well, the foot-tapping really didn't stop. Much of his music is so much fun, and the Nexus V2 managed to convey that with such naturalness you could almost see that twinkle in his eyes as he played. Always one to poke fun at the establishment, much of his jazz might be termed pastiche, but it's none the worse for that.

As a final comment, where there was very little to choose between the Altus V2 and Nexus V2 was in the area of dynamic contrasts and background noise. In my collection I have some LPs which could be quieter. Regardless of the music, I am often more aware of the background noise than perhaps I should be. Neither the Nexus V2 or the Altus V2 'lost' any musical information, but both managed to bring that background noise down a notch or two, probably due to the structural integrity of the arm(s) as a whole. As a contrast to that, the perceived

dynamic range of both arms was not something I'd come across before. Particularly on the carriage doors slamming which made me very aware of the energy of that sound; they were possibly the nearest to real life experience I'd had from my system.

Conclusion

Neither Avid arm is inexpensive but both are exceedingly good value for money. There is a difference between the two, and even on a modest system, if you audition one, and then the other you will notice it. The Altus V2 must be declared an all-time arm bargain because the performance it produces, the music it retrieves from the grooves, the engagement with the listener is, quite frankly, unbelievable at this price.

However, move up to the Nexus V2 and the rewards really are worth paying for. There really is more of everything. Both arms reveal what's tucked away in those tiny grooves. Both arms will give life-long listening pleasure (with bells on). But, if you can stretch to the Nexus V2 you really should. These must be possibly the most capable arms at their price points.

Specifications

Altus V2

Type: pivoting tonearm with progressive bias

Effective length: 233mm

Arm tube: 2mm thick aluminium

Effective mass: 15g

Offset angle: 23 degrees

Arm cable: 1.3m low capacitance with DIN connection

Weight: 680g

Nexus V2

Type: pivoting tonearm with progressive bias

Effective length: 233mm

Arm tube: titanium

Effective mass: 18g

Offset angle: 23 degrees

Arm cable: 1.3m low capacitance with DIN connection

Weight: 880g

