

## ANALOG FOCUS



# Basis Audio Superarm 9 Tonearm

Super, Indeed

Robert Harley

**A** music lover about to upgrade his or her system is faced with some difficult decisions. Would the upgrade budget be best spent on a new amplifier? Better speakers? Adding power conditioning? Higher-end cables?

There are as many right answers as there are systems. But there's one specific component swap that in my view delivers such a large increase in performance that it will likely dwarf any potential improvement in amplification, cables, and even many speakers. That upgrade is moving up from the Basis Vector IV tonearm to the recently introduced Basis Superarm 9. After happily living with a Vector for the past seven years, I was surprised by just how much better LPs could sound when played through the Superarm. I would liken the overall sound-quality improvement to switching from a mid-priced integrated amplifier to a reference-quality preamplifier and monoblock power amplifiers priced in the six figures.

Describing how much better the Superarm 9 is than the Vector is easy; doing so without denigrating the great accomplishment that the Vector represents is a challenge. In fact, the Vector tonearm is so good that I've waited several years to upgrade to the Superarm on the assumption that the Superarm couldn't be *that* much better. The Vector is a superlative piece of engineering that introduced a novel type of bearing that eliminates dynamic azimuth error. Indeed, the Vector was Basis Audio founder A.J. Conti's statement in tonearm design.

But Conti began to wonder, with regard to the 'arm tube, "How stiff is stiff enough?" And about the headshell, "How low in resonance is low enough?" To answer these questions for himself, he started with a group of Vector 'arms as test subjects and experimented with a specific design change on each 'arm. This approach isolated the sonic effects of that change to the 'arm under modification. The experiments took Conti in an unexpected direction; he discovered that increasing stiffness and reducing resonance to levels below those he had thought weren't significant improved the sound. Rather than ending up with a modified Vector, the research led him to a significantly revised design.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the two 'arms is the Superarm's much greater mass. You can see this just looking at the two 'arms side-by-side, particularly at the pivot point. Everything about the Superarm is heavy-duty, making it the antithesis of the featherweight approach to tonearm design. But Conti found that the combination of high mass and a new "progressive" damping technique lowered resonances and thus distortion. Basis doesn't publish an effective mass specification, but suggests that the

'arm will work well with a cartridge of any compliance. In addition to the greater mass, the 'arm tube, cup, and pivot assembly are made from a different material than that of the Vector, a dense metal called "superalloy."

The Superarm 9 also benefits from a novel wiring configuration, along with proprietary tonearm and lead-out wires. Comparing the Vector to the Superarm, the new 'arm's headshell is thicker and less prone to resonance. The bearing is identical in the two 'arms; Conti contends there's no better bearing.

The build quality and fit 'n' finish are superb. Every detail, down to the 'arm rest and its securing mechanism, appears thoughtfully considered. The Superarm 9 exudes a sense of precision and craftsmanship—as it should for the \$15,750 price.

### Listening

The Vector IV is a terrific tonearm, sounding wonderful even at the front end of what are arguably some of the world's best electronics and loudspeakers. It has never mistracked, navigating even the most challenging inner-groove passages with ease. The Vector has brought me untold musical pleasure over the past seven years on a Basis 2800 turntable, and more recently the superb Basis Inspiration.

But as great as the Vector is, the Superarm 9 plays in an entirely different league. The Superarm elevates the listening experience in so many ways that it's difficult to know where to begin. But perhaps the Superarm 9's most salient character is its relaxed ease and sophisticated refinement. The mid-range in general, and the upper-midrange in particular, seemed to take a step back in the musical presentation. This impression was a consequence of the Superarm 9's greater liquidity and freedom from stridency, hardness, and glare. It wasn't musical information in the midrange that took a step back; rather, it was the significant reduction of midrange grunge. Removing these distortions resulted in lush liquidity and a less forward and immediate rendering. The difference was very much like what I heard when listening to the Magico Q7 Mk II compared with the original Q7—not quite so "up-front," along with a sound that was simultaneously more relaxed and more detailed.

As a consequence of this reduced midrange grunge, instruments and voices had a bell-like clarity and purity that were reminiscent of analog mastertape. Concomitantly, instrumental tone color was richer, deeper, more saturated, and lifelike. The beautiful and unusual harmonies of the brass and woodwinds on the track "The Visitor" from the LP *Urban Ensemble: The Music of Roland Vazquez* were more fully revealed with the Superarm, each instrument's texture more vivid, and the combinations of these textures blending to reveal interesting and unusual harmonies. (The trace of glare with the Vector had masked some of the instruments' rich timbres and texture.)

These textural qualities alone had important musical benefits. The entire presentation took on an ease and inviting warmth. The sound was relaxed in the way that live music sounds relaxed, with a sense of grace and effortlessness. On some albums the Superarm's improvement over the Vector was startling. Early in the track "Diga, Diga, Diga" on the 10" EP by the Carolina Chocolate Drops with The Luminescent Orchestrii, Rhiannon Giddins makes an entrance above the other voices, both in register and in

## ANALOG FOCUS - Basis Audio Superarm 9 Tonearm

level. Her voice was piercing to the point that I would anticipate this passage and turn down the volume. But after switching to the Superarm, the stridency vanished. Her voice was still prominent, but it was so much cleaner and purer, lacking the glassy edge heard previously. The Superarm's liquidity was also readily apparent on piano, with less of the "shattering" sound on upper-register forte passages. Or take Harry James' famously amazing-sounding trumpet on the Sheffield direct-to-disc *The King James Version*. The Superarm conveyed all the life, brilliance, and upper-midrange energy of the instrument without crossing the line into stridency. That's quite a feat; smoothness and ease are often bought at the price of immediacy and detail. The Superarm gives you both simultaneously, rendering a full measure of verve without the harshness.

Concomitantly, the Superarm 9 is more resolving and detailed than the Vector. Low-level spatial cues were better revealed, and with them, the recorded acoustic's depth. Reverberation hung in space longer as the Superarm 9 retrieved more of this fine detail. The complex micro-structure of a cymbal shimmering was better portrayed, with greater realism and life. Transient detail had much more "pop" and dynamic life, making the whole system sound faster, tighter, and more rhythmically upbeat. The snare drum is a good example of all these quality working together; the initial transient had greater suddenness and impact; the treble component of the sound was cleaner; the sound of the snares beneath the drumhead had finer filigree.

Image focus was also improved, with greater separation of individual instruments in the ensemble. The whole soundstage took on a tighter and more precise quality. The Superarm's reproduction of the bass was phenomenal, with more body and texture, dynamic nuance, and pitch definition than the Vector. The bottom end was fuller and weightier, but at the same time better defined. There's usually a trade-off between weight and definition, but the Superarm 9 delivered both in equal measure.

All these qualities were abundantly obvious on the wonderful Analogue Productions 45rpm reissue of Phoebe Snow's 1974 self-titled album. On the hit from that record, "Poetry Man," the acoustic guitar cut through with its transient nature intact, but it was completely lacking in etch or hardness. The gentle maracas that add an almost hypnotic quality to the song didn't sound like an undifferentiated percussion instrument, but rather like actual beads moving within a wooden enclosure. Snow's voice had a liquidity and expressiveness that breathed new life into this well-worn track. Incidentally, Analogue Productions' painstaking remastering and pressing of this album are phenomenal.

### Conclusion

If you own a Basis turntable with a Vector 'arm, I can't imagine a greater sonic upgrade than switching to the Superarm. If you are thinking about buying a Basis and a Vector 'arm, you should seriously consider stepping down a level in the Basis' turntable line so that your budget can accommodate the Superarm. And if you're thinking about buying *any* turntable around this price, you must audition the Superarm regardless of which turntable you choose.

Spending money to upgrade a hi-fi system should result in a clear step forward in sound quality, not simply a lateral move that trades one set of colorations and compromises for another. The Superarm 9 delivers a real upgrade, significantly improving sound quality in just about every criterion, and with those improvements, offers greater musical engagement. Moreover,

## SPECS & PRICING

Effective length: 239mm

Pivot-to-spindle distance:

222mm

Total mass: 1200 grams

Furnished accessories: Integral

4' cable terminated in RCA

or XLR connectors, engraved

alignment gauge, cartridge-

mounting screws and washers,

and all necessary tools

Optional accessories: Mounting  
flange for non-Basis turntables

Price: \$15,750

**BASIS AUDIO**

25 Clinton Drive, #116

Hollis, NH 03049

(603) 889-4776

basisaudio.com

Comment on this article at [www.theabsolutesound.com](http://www.theabsolutesound.com)

removing a source of distortion at the very front of the playback chain will allow all your other components to sound their best. The Basis Superarm 9 is truly a reference-quality tonearm that has elevated my system's sound quality from superb to transcendental. **tas**

## A Novel Bearing

The Superarm 9 features a novel dual-bearing introduced in the Vector tonearm. This dual-bearing solves a fundamental problem of LP playback that occurs in unipivot arms: dynamic azimuth error, or the tendency of the 'arm to rotate around the 'arm tube's axis when the stylus encounters record warp. This phenomenon causes the azimuth (the perpendicularity between the stylus and record) to continuously change from the ideal 90 degrees. The solution in both the Vector and the Superarm is to asymmetrically weight the tonearm (via a cutout in the counterweight) so that it "leans" onto a second "stabilizer" bearing. The main bearing is similar to a conventional unipivot, and bears virtually all the 'arm's weight. The secondary bearing simply stabilizes the 'arm to prevent it from "rolling" in response to record warp, and also to eliminate bearing chatter. This design reportedly also reduces tracking error, a claim that I can verify; I've never heard a Vector or a Superarm 9 mistrack. Moreover, most tonearms produce a "chattering" sound when playing as they vibrate in response to stylus movement, but the Vector and the Superarm are completely silent. Adding the stabilizer bearing sounds like a simple and obvious solution, but before the Vector, no one had thought of it.

Posted with permission from NextScreen, LLC. All rights reserved. © 2017. Any unauthorized duplication of this article is strictly prohibited. For more information on use of this content, contact Wright's Media at 877-652-5295.

