

The even fuller Circle

It is now more than twenty five years since Wilson Benesch launched it's first product, the landmark ACT One Turntable.

That naturally called for a celebration, in the form of a celebratory version of their classic Circle turntable, just as naturally dubbed The Circle 25.

By Trond Torgnesskar

Since I actually use this player's spiritual grandfather as my long time reference, I was naturally eager to listen to the new Circle 25 in my own set-up over a period of time.

The standard WB Circle, insofar as such an iconic player can even be called «standard», is one of my all-time favorites in high end vinyl replay, and has even had its stint as player of choice in our magazine's reference setup.

It surfaced in the late nineties, but is now out of production, so the Wilson Benesch analog torch has been taken over by the Circle 25.

A very thorough revision of a classic of The Circle's magnitude naturally takes both time and effort, simply because one would not like to leave a stone unturned, I should think.

The classic design elements of the Circle are still very much the same, I am very glad to say... but the finish seem to have been taken further up a notch..

Arms and development

At first glance, there does not seem to be too many alterations done, actually.

But then you look closer, only to realize that in such a product, there are both beauty and upgrades that are more than skin deep.

The circular plinth itself is now made of a composite called POM, wich is much more dense, a full 3kgs heavier and has better anti-vibrational properties than the former mdf..That translates into an altogether better base, even better at withstanding resonant- and vibrational energies, simply put.

The carbon fibre rods that form the subchassis together with the ponton - like structures have also gained diameter, to better drain away vibration. The platter bearing is a even better version of the old phosphor bronze/steel one used in the original Circle, resulting in ultra low friction, noise and wear.

This means gains in dynamics, absolute silence and the blackness between the notes, so to speak.

The supplied ACT 25 arm is in fact a reworking of the old top-of-the-range ACT Two, and that says a lot about the ambitions of the C25-project. The old ACT Two is an arm of the utmost quality, capable of giving many of its «mega-buck-and then-some»-competitors a run for its money. It is my personal reference, and short of getting a Nanotube, I have never felt like upgrading. The fact that the 25 arm betters the old is nothing short of remarkable.

All the effort that has been put into the development of this arm are really easily appreciated.

With such total control of the vibrational energies created by the cartridge and sent via the arm-tube, not to mention the bearing noise and the resonances of vinyl replay, you as a listener will undoubtedly find the sound to be free of haze and distortion, cleaner, more alive, vibrant, detailed and very natural.

Like all Wilson Benesch pick up-arms, the 25 has a tapered carbon fibre armtube of ultra high rigidity, stiffness and anti-resonant properties.

Granted, there are other manufacturers also championing carbon fibre armtubes, but a mere glance at the 25 arm tells you that what you see here is of quite another class and character.

After all, Wilson Benesch started using and mastering carbon fibre long before the rest of the trade even knew how to even pronounce it.

Subtle? I think not.

We are not talking subtle changes here, in other words.

Another change is the fact that the Circle 25 comes without a cartridge, unlike its predecessor.

The Benz-sourced, but carbon-fibre-injected WB Ply of earlier days is no longer in production, so a prospective buyer must choose another supplier of «needlework».

Given the aforementioned qualities of the 25 arm, that should not be a difficult task.

The newcomer was placed on my Wilson Benesch Triptych turntable stand, and equipped with my Koetsu Urushi Signature cartridge, its signals being fed into the riaa- stage of my Hovland HP 100 i preamp.

For some weeks of the review period, the Circle 25 was also connected to a PS Audio P10 Power Plant.

The Circle 25 is made in such a way that it is easy to live with and relate to. The instruction manual is virtually impossible not to understand, and the player itself is as «set-and-forget» as it is possible to be.

Once you have set it up and found a place to put it, you do really not have to bother with springs, further adjustments or other things bugging you.

On the subject of placement, there is actually a Circle turntable stand that makes the whole setup look even more futuristic and simplistically elegant, but I did not have the chance to try it.

The material used for the plinth makes the C25 quite immune to vibration, and therefore not too critical when it comes to placement, but to make it perform its best and display what it can really do, care must be taken. There are differences!

A felt mat? Really??

Upon placing the C25 on my dedicated stand, I really had to think about the fact that the good guys of Falcon House really did not see the need to upgrade the felt mat.

What is it with our friends in the U.K and their persistence when it comes to using felt on a turntable?? Could anyone please tell me?

It does not seem to be an integral part of such a masterful design, but well, I will give it a chance, even though I have my thoughts. In my view, felt is ok used in slippers, Christmas decorations and on pool tables, but it has no place on a turntable, and certainly not on one of this calibre.

Wilson Benesch tells me that they are launching a series of upgrades to further enhance the inherit qualities of the Circle 25, the first one of these being a record clamp of matte black composite, with an aluminum tightener, complete with the company logo. Quite a beauty to behold, and in keeping with the players aesthetic qualities. Now, is a new and far better mat too much to wish for, Gentlemen? It makes a difference, you know!

Since it is supposed so screw down on the centre spindle, this needs to be grooved, but for some reason, the grooves do not run down long enough to allow the clamp to be used if the felt mat is taken off.

After having adjusted the setup, the first record to make this beautiful summer Saturday even better, was one that to me is quintessentially British. We are talking «Abbey Road», of course. And one of the finest songs of the last fifty years, George Harrison's «Here comes the sun» is first off.

Layers upon layers

There are many layers to be found in George Martin's beautifully crafted production, and the Circle 25 really displays such an open and uncluttered window into the music making of the Fab Four that i really felt transported to the world's most famous recording studio on those summer days of 1969.

I have had this recording since I was nine or so, but i still found details, rhythmic shifts and tone colours that I honestly can't say I have experienced before. The Circle 25 has such a tremendous grip on both rhythm and bass reproduction that it sounded like a layer of grit had been torn aside,

exposing McCartney's bass work and the fluid quality of his playing like no record deck I have ever used, apart from my own. That is really saying something!

The music just swings along, feet tapping, giving me, the lucky listener, first hand knowledge of the goings on in the studio during the recording of one of the best records of all time. . Or at least that was what it all felt like.

The music ebbs and flows, it feels so natural and right, giving goosebumps to all that came into the room. My girlfriend just stood there, totally amazed. This is one of her favorite records ever.

The Circle 25 gives such tremendous insight, it delivers such uncanny openness, but it does this without ever sounding dry. It strikes a fantastic balance between openness and palpability, tone colour, naturalness and sheer rhythmic heft. There is nothing anemic about the music coming off the Circle 25. It has an openness and an insight that stretches down to the deepest abyss, telling the listener just what is in the signal.

And what is not.

If you have been doing a fair bit of listening to recorded music, you probably know that getting this balance so right is one of the most difficult things a maker of stereo equipment can undertake, and one it seems that many do not fully master. That is why many components sound like hifi, and others, like the Circle 25, simply do not. They sound like music being played. That is quite another thing.

Here, Wilson Benesch's knowledge of how to deal with a fragile signal becomes very apparent, especially when it comes to seeing that no harm comes to it by not submitting it to vibration and resonances of all kinds.

But such insight would not really matter if it was not followed by just as deep a knowledge of the effects of interplay, timing, tonal shadings and instrumental qualities. In short, how making music on different instruments sounds like in real life.

There is a profound difference in giving you as a listener an utterly believable experience of a recording of a piano being played and the experience of the actual sound of the piano. That is the kind of quality I am talking about.

The sheer size of the «three-dimensionality» of sound that the C 25 gives the listener is really rather remarkable. An airy, palpable, colourful, breathing, realistic soundfield with gorgeous tone colours and a really deeply rooted, utterly solid, but still almost transparent bass quality.

This transparent way of going about the bass gives the C25 both a potentially thunderous, but also nimble quality not easily described. But trust me, it is there.

Furthermore, the Circle 25 has an insistent, eager quality to its music making that was not apparent in the more laid back older Circle. It has a faster way with its transient response, and seem to be on the altogether faster, snappier side. It also sounds larger and more generous, giving a more enveloping experience, like it is even easier to reach out and touch the players in the orchestra. I think that all translates into sounding a wee bit more «live».

The classic Circle really had a way with making records sound more «real», and the 25 has actually upped the ante here.

Musicians and their instruments are rendered with such generous helpings of both musical insight and sheer weight. Listening to the 25, you will not miss a single detail of what is on the recording, provided you are awake enough. But this tremendous amount of recorded detail is not hurled at you like fragments, but presented as a dynamic, natural and coercive whole, devoid of the signal break-up tendencies of lesser components, that often sound unnaturally detailed.

Here, you get fluidity, rhythm, control and musical realism.

The qualities of the abyss...and that of cardboard.

This player of jubilee pedigree has more momentum and drive, not only than its cousins in the Wilson Benesch stable, but more than most of its competition.

That quality, along with an ability to plunge into the deepest of signal-bearing abysses without losing sight of the music and said signal, makes this one hell of a player to enjoy, to cherish and to keep playing records on. The sheer impulsiveness of its deepest bass, the fluidity of its playing and

the amounts of information it transports back to the listener is nothing short of immense. When subjected to such colorful cascades of information, it is advised that you sit down, or else you might just fall over. Given that you have a system that can take it.

The force and impulsiveness, the sound of air set in motion, gives you bass that is full of information, not one that is more akin to the sound of a frustrated man kicking a wet cardboard box. If the latter is more to your taste, you are kindly asked to look elsewhere.

All this display of inherent qualities does of course demand a more than decent cartridge. You would be wise to look in the direction of Kiseki, Koetsu, Acoustical Systems, VdH or the upmarket Dynavectors. It really is that good.

It really insists that you listen to what is being played, and that was very apparent on Rickie Lee Jones' famous debut release of 1979, and on Bill Evans' and Monica Zetterlund's utterly wonderful «Waltz for Debby» of 1964. The Circle 25 played both these two releases like there was no tomorrow, energy, colour and drive by the spades. Especially the latter was rendered in a way that really told us what was being played in an old movie studio in Gothenburg three magical days in July fifty-two years ago.

The totally unforced shifts that the Circle 25 displays between laidback musings and full-force, commanding dynamism is really uncanny, and not easily found at any price. Furthermore, it really is the backbone of naturalness. The Circle 25 delivers it all without seemingly even breaking a sweat. That is what is really impressive!

And herein lies, at least in my humble opinion, the genius that is the WB Circle 25.

It carries the torch of former WB turntables and has all of the qualities of the earlier models, but it also has a more insistent way about it. A bit more torque, so to speak. It literally leans a bit more forward, not in the sense of sounding forward as such, but in sounding a bit more alert. A little bit bigger and an ounce more dynamic, with more generous amounts of information, especially in the depths that the music might plunge into. And it handles it all with guts.

On Robert Plants masterful desert-rock epic «Lullaby..and the ceaseless roar», a recording difficult enough to make sense of regardless of equipment, the insight, colorful naturalness and open, unforced qualities of the 25 comes to the rescue, delivering a sea of sounds, structures, rhythms and musicality that transforms into a intoxicating brew that you just want to play again and again. The 25 really cuts through layers of fog and distortion, giving a much more coherent picture of the musical events. It gives you the masterpiece this record really is. Oh, how slow and sirupy many other decks tend to sound in comparison !

The same thing happened when I played the track «Fifth of Firth» from my old Prog-rock heroes of Genesis. More speed, drive, complexity and timbre than I am accustomed to, making the record sounding faster, but with the same amount of weight.

The 25 really gives you the full picture, or circle, if you will. It lays bare the soul-wrenching heartache of Rickie Lee Jones' «Rainbow Sleeves», just as it exposes her intense joy for all to hear in «Under the boardwalk», not to mention every ounce of angst in David Bowies personal requiem, «Black Star»

I very much doubt you will miss anything with the Circle 25. You get the music of your records delivered to your sensory system with all the nerve, drive, timbre, emotion and colour there is. Some of it you probably knew about, but some will be a totally new experience.

Making this kind of a record player is quite an accomplishment, but it strikes me as an even greater one given the price.

And on the subject of the price, if you are considering the Circle 25, a word about the effect of the record clamp.

Apart from the fact that it really looks the business, it makes the bottom end seem a bit fuller (not that you, being of sound mind, will ever miss the fullness if you use the 25 nee clamp...) and the soundfields seem to stretch a bit further to the back. It adds a certain depth to the image, and imparts a certain calmness to the treble that might suit some types of music, but take the edge off others.

Since the Circle 25 has an acrylic platter, and acrylic probably is the chosen material due to its acoustical qualities being close to those of vinyl, some might want to use the 25 without the mat. I mentioned the fact that the spindle is not sufficiently grooved for the clamp to be used without mat to the good people at Wilson Benesch, and this is being looked into, and may well be sorted by the time you read this.

Like the Circle of yore, even the 25 responds to different tweaks in a way that makes it relatively easy, if not necessarily cheap, to customize the sound, or even make it an even better player. For example, I know of no other player that respond to such a degree by changing the power cord to a more upmarket one. By going for one from Transparent, PS or Wireworld, it sort of tidied up a bit, and made the sound even more dimensional, the contrasts becoming more vivid. It has such a wide open signature that you should be able to hear even quite small changes to the infrastructure. And when you use a player of this pedigree and caliber, why not go all the way?

We few and fortunate ones that call ourselves audiophiles, always searching for the lost chord, so to speak, are not known for listening with any sort of handbrake engaged. Our stereo setup tend to be the main piece of furniture, and it must be a revelation to be able to tweak or upgrade a turntable of immense quality in small increments, making it into a player that takes no prisoners at all.

So, with all this in mind, what happens when you throw away the felt mat, my personal gripe?

Well, I ended up using the mat that I use on my WB ACT One TT. that two-piece little number from FoQ Components of Japan. One thin, rubbery mat with large holes, one thicker, plain one to be put on top.

That resulted in a bass quality of even more resolution and detail, and slightly more open and fluid midrange. Definite steps upwards, if you ask me. And in a sense, you do, don't you? You simply hear even more of what is there, or at least, it becomes even more vivid.

With these small adjustments (or without them, by all means!) the Circle 25 is in my opinion impossible not to take into consideration if you are looking for a turntable the of utmost quality, without braking the bank and taking out yet another mortgage.

For what it actually is, the price of the C 25 is really a bargain. It, like its predecessors ACT One and Circle, really redefines the amount of quality available at a given price. This really is a piece of democratic high-end turntablery, no less.

I use the term «democratic» because this player enables the owner to enjoy qualities that stretch far beyond its price, and in a time when high end hifi are often priced in the extremes, this gives the C25 a certain «democratic» quality.

Taken my preferences into account, and the fact that I use the Circle 25's spiritual ancestor as a reference, albeit with a better power cord and cables, upgraded PSU, a large PS power Plant and better mat, of course...), I can honestly say that I struggle to come up with a competitor that even comes close to delivering this kind of quality at anything near this price.

The Circle 25 turned out to be even more of an accomplished giant-slayer than the Circle.

The one that will be put to it's paces to show if it can measure up, is of course the Rega P10. Time will tell what kind of resistance it can offer.

The Circle 25 is significant upgrade on what is one of Fidelity's all time favorite turntables. The 25 really is quite a lot better, and succeeds in showing even much more expensive competitors how it is done.

What a way to honor the Wilson Benesch turntable legacy. This will undoubtedly become a firm favorite for years to come.

Hats off to the good people of Falcon House, Sheffield.

You have really done me proud.

