

Callas Audio Platine Verdier Modification Kit

I. Introduction

Allow me an anecdote. It is May 27, 1784 in Vienna. Walking through its labyrinthine backstreets is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. He is ambling back home, when he stops in front of a pet store, startled. A bird – a starling – sings a tune that is eerily like the first version of the theme of the third movement from his Piano Concerto No. 17 in G. Mozart brings the starling home, obviously smitten, and calls the bird Herr Stahr. He teaches the bird how to sing this theme from the piano concerto, which the bird replicates beautifully, but with two small but significant errors: the starling inserts a fermata on the last note of the first bar, and sings G-sharp instead of G natural in the subsequent bar. So what does Mozart do? Does he go ballistic and scold Herr Stahr, train the damn bird into submission to sing correctly? No. Quite the opposite. He inscribes the bird's "errata" as they stand in his diary entry, and beneath the "corrected" notes, he writes: *Das war schön!* (That was fine!) This is a true story. Mozart's starling died three years later in 1787, and the composer buried the bird in his backyard. He was grieved enough to write a commemorative poem on the occasion of the bird's death.

What does this have to do with audio at all? At least for me, it points toward the laughable Puritanism of our hobby by way of irony. There is such an innocent openness and beauty in the way that Mozart received the starling's errant song with a joyous heart. He did not have an auteur's tantrum, did not treat the original melody of his invention as holy writ. He not only embraced the starling's alteration, but by doing so, made the bird's song *his*. Made it beautiful.

Now, compare this with how many audio hobbyists and experts guffaw and puff about what sounds best, how their gear or audio philosophy serves the music the best, and no other. What arrogance is this! SET devotees, solid state mega-watt amp aficionados... we all feel that our way is the high way. But this kind of arrogance seems most dogmatically endemic in the realms of turntables and vintage gear. God forbid if you don't use Baltic birchply or slate when constructing your plinth for the Garrard 301. You are using *modern* capacitors in that vintage Fairchild preamp?!? Please go hang yourself if you are not using a twelve-inch tonearm on your Commonwealth idler turntable. The clichéd adage – you better leave good enough alone – becomes a militantly Puritanical philosophy in audio. For certain purists, the concept of modification carries with it a stigma more damning than the mark of the devil. What would these people do if Mozart's starling flew in and wanted to alter what they heard, let alone composed? They would kill it, shred it up, chew it five hundred times, then vehemently spit it out the window.

II. La Platine Verdier

Mr. J.C. Verdier created La Platine Verdier more than thirty years ago. This is difficult to believe, as La Platine Verdier is still aesthetically stunning and does not date itself. Just as it is with the Garrard 301 or the Thorens 124, the visual appeal of La Platine Verdier is timeless. Even more revolutionary is the fact that the magnetic suspension espoused by Verdier is still the preferred technology utilized by some of the world's best-touted turntables, the statement instruments made by Clearaudio, Da Vinci Audio and Continuum, among many others (more on the Continuum Caliburn later). To me, La Platine Verdier is as lasting an icon as a Garrard, a Thorens, an EMT or a Linn.

As I have stated, there are the obvious aesthetic and technological innovations pioneered by La Platine Verdier which must be considered. Not only that, it played a significant part in audio history. La Platine Verdier cannot be separated from the efforts made in Europe by L'Audiophile and Jean Hiraga, Keith Aschenbrenner, and the like, back in the late 70s and early 80s, to counter the solid state hegemony and bring the Eastern sensibilities to the fore in the audio world – pure, low, single-ended tube watts, minimalistic simplification (which actually were the Western sensibilities originally, once upon a time). Keith Aschenbrenner of Auditorium 23, who is now one of audio's elder statesmen, still distributes J.C. Verdier turntables in Germany, and the Auditorium 23's version of La Nouvelle Platine has been much praised, and is in fact one of the turntables I covet to listen to for myself one day, as it is only sold in Germany.

None of this history or iconography would matter, of course, if the darn thing doesn't sound good. But it does. I have heard some of the best turntables in the world, set up by the true analog aficionados and professionals. Shindo Garrard 301. Continuum Caliburn. Impeccably set-up Technics SP-10s and Thorens and Lencos in slate plinths. Flagship turntables from Redpoint Audio, Clearaudio, et al. And still, my sentimental favorite is the Platine Verdier. Sure, there are turntables which trump the Platine in certain areas, even to my biased ears. For example, I still believe the most addictive midrange I heard from an LP came from the Shindo Garrard 301. The Technics SP-10 Mk II I heard at Oswalds Mill, housed in a beautifully substantial and substantive slate plinth, fairly trounces the Platine when it comes to the bass accuracy and impact, rhythmic pacing, and the overall stability of "the beat." The Continuum Caliburn was the only contemporary statement turntable with a lunatic price that inspired a torrent of

emotion out of me rather than a told-you-so cynicism. Yet, the Platine Verdier, to my ears, still has the best top-end purity and fluidity among all of these world class turntables. For a lieder addict like me, the Platine is a weapon sent down from the heaven by Schubert himself. Not only that, it follows the musical line with a kind of a graceful craze, the ineffable quality I seldom heard only in rare instances – in the Shindo 301 and the Caliburn again, and also in the Oswalds Mill Audio Lenco I heard briefly in their SoHo showroom.

This is not to say the Platine Verdier does not have flaws. Like all audio equipments, it does. The chief flaw that I saw in the Platine as a dedicated user was in the reproduction of the bass region. Don't get me wrong – the Platine is surprisingly stout in bass performance and can do ballast with the best of them. I say “surprisingly” because this is one of the known weaknesses in turntables with magnetic suspensions. Mr. Verdier had pioneered magnetic suspensions more than 30 years ago, but to this day, many of the finest statement turntables use magnetic suspensions. The logic behind this strategy is obvious. By levitating the platter via such means, the platter does not come to contact with the surface, and hence any noise caused by the friction with the bearing – however subtle it may be – will be canceled out. An analog lover's heaven, right?!? Not so fast. This lack of contact with bearing might be ideal for getting rid of the noise caused by bearing friction, but one disadvantage that comes with the complete magnetic suspension (or suspension via air pressure, etc.) comes in the instability in the bass region.

If one levitates a turntable's platter via magnetic suspension, the amount of bass can even increase (this is the case with the Platine Verdier), but in most cases, the structural integrity of the bass becomes diffuse and unfocused. This is because when a

cartridge reproduces bass notes from an LP, it absorbs a strong impact; so even if the platter is sufficiently heavy, as it is in the case with the Platine, it fluctuates or “bounces” up and down, however imperceptible it may seem to the eye, as the platter is not supported strongly by a bearing system.

This is the one gripe I had with my Platine, however much I loved it to death. The low end wasn't solid, and tended toward a kind of loosening. This problem manifests itself not in some bass-heavy music, like the most fearsome passages from Arvo Pärt's music or some drum-and-bass monstrosity, but in piano music. I gradually found out that I was not the only person among other Platine owners who kept inadvertently avoiding piano LPs, even though piano music comprises about fifty percent of my considerable classical music collection (I played piano and studied it for a time at the Peabody Conservatory of Music). With my Platine, with most of the piano LPs, there was an unsatisfactory delineation in the reproduction of the bass notes in the piano sound – the border between the actual core of the note being played and the sound of its trailing wake became blurred. And as many of you lovers of piano music know, that kind of instability affects the rest of the reproduced sound.

Mind you, I still loved my Platine despite this issue, because it excelled in the 99% of the parameters. But perhaps the definition of an audiophile can be sought in the obsession with that missing 1%. Which is why I began to seek ways to remedy this. I will have you know that I am born with ten thumbs and I couldn't solder if my life and my family name depended on it. And the aftermarket Platine solutions are not exactly a burgeoning industry.

Then one day, I stumbled onto an audio forum thread about Platine Verdier in which the forumites were discussing this problem I just mentioned with their Platines. And that is where I first saw the mention of a product called Callas Audio Platine Verdier Modification Kit.

III. Huh? Partial Magnetic Suspension?

In a gist, the installation of the Callas Platine Mod Kit allows every Platine users to precisely control exactly how much of the heavy platter's weight is carried by the Platine's spindle. In its stock form, this is impossible to gauge on the Platine Verdier with any precision. One can fine-tune the set-up of the Platine in the beginning, to how much of the platter rests on the spindle and the metallic ball which rests on the oil-infused cusp of the spindle. But there is no way to precisely know how much of the platter's weight should rest on the spindle, even, nor a means by which to keep this setting from deviating from the ideal position. This state of flux is the very cause of the less-than-ideal reproduction of bass notes by a Platine, especially with piano music. The Callas Platine Mod Kit allows the Platine user to constantly gauge this weight of the platter on the spindle via a micrometer. And with the adjustment arm installed, this weight can be finely adjusted – precisely to the desired setting.

Even before I heard any effects of the Callas Platine Mod Kit, I recognized the simple, *ingenious* solution which could potentially solve the Platine's problem. I knew this because I have heard a turntable that is much more expensive than the Platine, which in effect solves the problems caused by magnetic suspension via the same means afforded by the Callas Platine Mod Kit – the Continuum Caliburn.

As entertaining and fun it was to read various audio reviews of the uber-expensive Continuum Caliburn when it came out, no reviewer (including Michael Fremer if my memory serves correctly) really mentioned that the Caliburn in essence used magnetic suspension. I had a chance to listen to the Caliburn, and play with it, and I was surprised to learn that it was a magnetically floated turntable. But not completely like the Platine Verdier. When I first saw how Caliburn was set up, I'd mistakenly thought that it was a completely floated turntable because of the gap between the platter and the main body of the turntable. But if you lightly press on the platter, it doesn't bounce up and down like Platine's completely magnetically floated platter. A partial weight of the platter definitely rests on the Caliburn's spindle. At first glance, you wouldn't understand why one wouldn't float the platter completely, given such a huge, strong magnet. But as I mentioned, there are inherent problems that come with complete levitation of the platter. Heavy platters usually provide more stable rotation, but the inevitable contact with the spindle causes noise from the friction. Magnetic suspension gets rid of this problem, but loses the solidity in the bass region. The designer of Continuum Caliburn, Mark Doehmann, ingeniously solves this issue by floating most of the platter's weight, but resting the bare minimum of its weight on the spindle, as to not sacrifice the bass specificity and solidity. I later read in an Image HiFi review that of the 38 kg of the platter's weight, only 2 kg rests on the spindle. Doehmann's solution takes advantage of both the heavy platter and the magnetic suspension, without inheriting the latent problems in both. And one could hear it in the Caliburn – this, ladies and gents, is not snake oil, despite the exorbitant price.

Why this discursive rhapsody on the Caliburn's partial-magnetic suspension system? Because this in effect is what the Callas Audio Platine Verdier Mod Kit achieves with the Platine, but at tens of thousands of dollars less.

IV. Callas Audio Platine Verdier Modification Kit

Callas Audio is an audio dealer and enterprise located in Holland. Its proprietor is an indefatigable analog aficionado and enthusiast of uncommonly good taste. And an incorrigible Platine Verdier fanatic with a background in aviation mechanics and engineering. He has owned the Platine for the past 20 years, and the years worrying and thinking about certain problems concerning the Platine's magnetic suspension system led to the solutions provided for in the Callas Audio Platine Verdier Mod Kit, which are identical to that discovered by Continuum Audio's Mark Doehmann. I approached him because his Mod Kit seemed to address the very concern I had about Platine's performance in the bass, and the minute but unpredictable fluctuations in the tonal density in the sound, resulting from the issues I mentioned.

Each Callas Audio Platine Mod Kit is handmade by himself, and this is a blessing. He painstakingly turns out each Platine Mod Kit from his EMCO 8 lathe by hand. Obviously, he can produce only a small batch of Platine Mod Kits at a time. As the Platine Mod Kit is a handmade product, it doesn't come packaged in glitzy boxes. My review example arrived in a plastic carrying case lined by heavy foam protecting the myriad of fanatically machined parts. Did I tell you I have no DIY skills? Reader, I panicked. My vision of hell is the very interior aisles of any Home Depot.

It turns out I needn't have panicked, given the thorough and cogently written instructions that Callas-Audio provided which were simple to follow.

The Callas Audio Mod Kit retails for 1350 EUR, including tax, within Europe; outside Europe, it is 1,115 EUR. As I mentioned in the previous section, and verified by my listening experience, the Callas Audio Mod Kit effectively accomplishes with the stock Platine Verdier what the Continuum Caliburn does with its partial magnetic suspension system, for a lot less money. But at first glance, most consumers are likely going to wonder why this coterie of parts – however precisely machined – costs north of 1,000 EUR.

When I first saw the Callas Audio Mod Kit, I also had similar thoughts, as I'm naturally a cheapskate. I can't enumerate all the parts, but there is an anodised bearing assembly. A steel spindle, which is slightly thicker in diameter than the stock spindle. A ceramic ball which rests on the cusp of the spindle, which replaces the steel Verdier ball. An adjustment arm with an ebony knob, and the accompanying micrometer. Three pieces of ebony blocks to place underneath the Verdier plinth and a Van den Hul special bearing oil to use in place of the stock oil that Verdier provides. And various bolts and discs and tools to assemble the Mod Kit with.

Now, all this may be porn for DIY enthusiasts. But for this reviewer born with ten thumbs, it spells disaster or panic attacks. At the sight of all the parts and wrenches to affix those parts – to a costly object of beauty like the Platine Verdier, no less – I nearly stabbed my eyes with a pair of countersunk bolts that the kit comes with. But the big surprise: I needn't have fretted as much. With the carefully and logically laid out pictorial

step-by-step installation PDF that Callas Audio provided me, the installation was easier than changing a tire.

The installation may be slightly hairier if you own the customary stock black MDF plinth that the Platine comes with. If so, you need to enlarge the stock hole in the plinth with the provided 17 mm drill bit. Although the installation manual tells you that you don't have to be too meticulous in the drilling, as the hole will be largely covered, such a reassurance is bound to fall on deaf ears (forgive the pun) of audiophiles for whom every dust particle can seem to influence how the music sounds! Fortunately, I didn't have to suffer the indignity of my trembling hands hacking up Verdier's plinth – I have the original terrazzo plinth, of which stock hole is larger in diameter than the more recent Verdier plinths. And when I ordered OMA's gorgeous slate plinth for my Platine Verdier, I made certain that the stock hole was large enough to accommodate the Callas Audio Mod Kit.

The rest of the installation process was blissfully intuitive, aided by the Callas Audio's pictorial manual. In a gist – you remove the platters of the Platine, then assemble the new bearing and spindle assembly provided by the Callas Mod Kit. After installing the assembly, the micrometer and the adjustment arm become installed. That's it. Callas Audio includes ebony footers to install underneath the plinth for further sonic enhancement, but OMA's slate footers worked better with the slate plinth in my case.

The installation of the kit reflects the philosophy behind its creation: simplicity. It is so simple that one can't help but to smack one's own forehead. As I installed my kit, I couldn't believe that no Verdier owner – including myself – had thought of this to control the weight of the platter that touches the spindle, all the while grumbling about the

consequences. Using the Callas Audio Mod Kit, any Platine Verdier lover can easily check the micrometer reading, and by using the adjustment arm, fine-tune and customize how much of the weight the platter rests on the spindle with constant exactitude. You can control the moment the platter touches the spindle ball within 1/100th of a millimeter. In a single, elegant swoop, the Mod Kit solved the single reservation I'd had about the Platine Verdier.

V. The Music

And the results were startling. The Callas Audio Platine Mod Kit wasn't startling in a way that most modification solutions propose to "improve" the original – that you would get more-of-this, more-of-that. No. It was only startling because it allowed Platine Verdier to be its best, *all* the time. Previously, because of aforementioned issues concerning uncontrolled and variable way with which the magnetically suspended platter rested on the spindle ball, the results were at times erratic when it came to Platine's music reproduction. Records that sounded fantastic one night sounded muffled the next. Dinu Lipatti's mercurial passagework in *Alborada del Gracioso* from Ravel's *Miroirs* would sound its quicksilver best one morning, for example, then lose the tonal focus that humid afternoon with the change in ambient temperature. With the Callas Audio Mod Kit, Dinu Lipatti's glissandi in thirds scintillated *each* and *every* time via my Platine Verdier, and for me, that is a very big slice of musical heaven – when Lipatti sounds like Lipatti at his most incandescent, beautiful best.

The Callas Audio Platine Mod Kit finally brought the bass specificity back to the Platine's musical reproduction, but the effects were surprising. To be sure: with bass-

stupendous music, the results obviously impressed. The explosion of the gran cassa in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, and its thundering cacophony of the trombones' glissando, came alive with a visceral force.

Yet, what became even more endearing to me was that the silky, musical filigree of the Platine's upper register reproduction – the finest I know in the audio kingdom – seemed to gain *more* subtlety and filigree with the control gained in the bass region. Thom Yorke's falsetto soared above the stumbling chordal accompaniment of the piano in "Pyramid Song" of *Kid A* in a way that seemed implausibly divorced from anything material or mechanical. Jan de Gaetani's silver-flecked mezzo voice spun out Schumann and Ives into the night, and the Harmonia Mundi LP of Elly Ameling singing Brahms lieder sounded newly minted. Joao Gilberto meandered from A minor to E then back again in the live version of "Sem Compromisso" on *Live at the Montreux Jazz Festival* LP, and by the time the line kicked in - *Você me diz: Não, eu agora tenho par* - the words vacillating between the keys of C and E before landing on the regretful E minor on the final word *par*, I was less listening to the song as much as *inhabiting* it.

VI. Conclusion

To make a short work of my review, the Callas Audio Platine Mod Kit doesn't alter the Platine Verdier's fundamental sonic traits at all. You know that audio review cliché, that a piece of equipment just gets out of the way of music? This kit gets the *hell* out of the way. It allows the Verdier turntable – by now a classic – to sound its perpetual best, much in the same way as the Shindo Garrard 301 elevates the performance of the iconic 301.

In these perilous economic times, it is difficult to advise anyone to spend 1,350 EUR on what is – on the surface – an ancillary modification tool, much less a full-fledged audio equipment. But I've known analog manias to plunge into deals much more Faustian than this in order to achieve any trifling minor edge, and the advantage gained by Verdier aficionados from installing the Callas Audio Platine Mod Kit is game-changing. I can now count on my Platine to sound its songful best, every time, and can play my favorite piano recordings without *what-ifs* creeping into my consciousness as I lower the needle onto the first groove. I'd had no doubt in my mind that the Platine Verdier was one of the finest turntables in the world, but always with minor but significant caveats. Now, those caveats are gone. Completely.

The Callas Audio Platine Mod Kit is a niche product for a tiny niche of consumers in an already marginalized, niche audio industry. Hence, it is not surprising that the kit wasn't developed or marketed by a hi-fi capitalist conglomerate, but by a lifelong devotee of the Platine Verdier in Holland in small meticulously machined batches. Yet it *is* surprising that the solutions provided by the Callas Audio Platine Mod Kit should be so ingenious, albeit simple in design. Given the historical fact that the Platine Verdier was conceived decades ago by Mr. Verdier as a DIY project, it is not difficult to conceive that the Callas Audio Mod Kit is a natural and inevitable extension of the turntable's spirit and provenance, especially given the musical results. The Callas Audio Platine Mod Kit further enhances the legacy of the Platine Verdier and pays flourishing musical dividends – what better reason besides this to personally recommend it to all Platine owners as a necessary investment at some point in their future? Once installed, it will seem an indispensable part of the holistic Platine Verdier system, and

that is my honest appraisal of the Callas Audio Platine Mod Kit, and the highest compliment I can pay to its creator.

By Linden Pork N.Y.