

CONTINUUM

CALIBURN, COBRA & CASTELLON

Reassuringly expensive, raise a glass to the ultimate LP experience

PRICE £125,000 **CONTACT** Absolute Sounds ■ 020 8971 3909 ■ www.continuumaudiolabs.com

In search of turntable nirvana? Look no further, pilgrim. Continuum Audio Labs' Caliburn is the pinnacle of the form, one of the most solidly engineered and most elegant ever produced. Oh, and did we mention that price tag? Yes, at a staggering £125,000, the Caliburn is for the wealthiest only, but it is an undeniably incredible achievement for vinyl lovers.

While no one factor explains the Caliburn's superior performance, there are several significant design details. One of the most important is the motor – a battery-powered DC-type, developed to be free from the 'cogging' effects common to virtually all motors. The Caliburn's chassis is also made from solid magnesium alloy, chosen for its strength and low resonance, plus a magnetic suspension system was developed for the centre bearing and plinth suspension.

A great turntable deserves a special tonearm and the Cobra is quite different to most on the market. The arm shell is made from fibrous resin and is inherently self-damping. Many different types of bearing were considered, but eventually a kind of stabilised uni-pivot arrangement was chosen. This has the advantage of very low friction, high torsional stability and excellent rigidity.

Cartridge vta and azimuth can be precision-adjusted while the disc plays and the counterweight is placed below the tonearm's centre of gravity to improve stability and the tracking of warped LPs. Not that warped LPs would trouble this deck: the Caliburn incorporates a special vacuum mat with air pump that sucks the record flat to the platter. This virtually eliminates LP dishing and warpage, while dampening resonances that might occur within the vinyl LP itself.

Although the Caliburn is highly inert and very well isolated, the Castellon stand is an integral part of the package. It provides a solid, stable platform for the turntable, houses the motor power supply and pump and raises the deck to mid-chest height, making it easy to use.

SOUND QUALITY

So, what does the perfect turntable actually sound like? The Caliburn certainly equals CD on its home territory, giving an exceptionally solid, secure and stable musical presentation. It sounds absolutely unflappable – as though nothing short of an earthquake could upset it.

With instruments such as piano or acoustic guitar, there's no wobble or pitch waver. Most listeners would assume that a CD was being played – it's that stable. The Caliburn boasts another type of stability, too: voices and instruments stay put in the stereo soundstage and don't shift or wander as the music alters. Each individual strand maintains complete independence and individuality. Overall, the music sounds cohesive and coherent.

Playback is like listening to master tapes rather than LPs. Music has the kind of effortless ease and fine subtle detail you get from first-generation masters. Soundstaging is airy and holographic – very 'out of the speaker boxes' – and extremely dynamic and lively. The Caliburn offers an intriguing mix of opposites: exceptional tightness and control, allied to extremes of bandwidth, dynamic contrast and tone colour, topped off with effortless ease.

It's capable of the utmost subtlety and delicacy, with quiet passages possessing considerable refinement. Yet there's nothing fragile about the sound – it's always solid and full-bodied and the overall presentation has an impressive robustness. The deck is like the best CD you never heard, presenting the music with comparable security, but bringing extra finesse and broader dynamic extremes to the mix.

The Caliburn also has the ability to keep surprising you. One minute it sounds smooth and honey-rich, the next it's sharp and tactile. But, to be accurate, it's not the turntable surprising you; it's the music and the original recording. The Caliburn liberates your recordings – allows

them to be more like they really are, rather than constrained by limitations in the playback equipment. As a result, voices and instruments display a greater range of tonal colours.

When you play a vintage original LP, something

intangible happens: your listening experience changes. It's almost as if the living, breathing aura of the musicians permeates the LP sleeve and grooves, making the music sound and feel different. Fanciful, perhaps – but often, that's how it seems as the stylus touches down here...

The Caliburn/Cobra/Castellan is an exceptional combination, producing results far greater than the sum of its parts. It offers outstanding focus and solidity, allied to incredible detail and stunning dimensionality. Of course, it costs a bomb. But you definitely get what you pay for.

Value is a tricky subject. A product that offers class-leading standards of performance, a genuine pride of ownership, plus an exceptional finish and battleship build quality can be said to offer good value even if its price is very high. And how do you define 'expensive'? Aston Martin's One-77 sports car is a king's ransom, making the cost of a Caliburn look like comparative peanuts.

But, equipment like the Caliburn is worth celebrating: it sets real standards. It takes a certain dedication to the cause to push the theoretical performance limits of a format beyond typical price constraints. Will anybody else put this much effort into finding perfection ever again?

The Caliburn is for life. It's certainly not inexpensive, but how do you value a lifetime's pleasure and enjoyment? ■

Jimmy Hughes

See the June 2009 edition of *Hi-Fi Choice* for the original review of this product

"Astonishingly, vinyl playback is like listening to master tapes rather than LPs"

