

Transrotor Massimo Nero

For decades a gentleman's agreement between UK's Michell Engineering and Germany's Transrotor ensured they never exported to each other's country, until now...

Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Transrotor might be a new name to many, but the company has a long and illustrious history [see boxout, p51]. However, this is the first time that its range of turntables has been officially available on UK shores – and what a range it is! The £4400 Massimo Nero TMD is eight steps up the ladder of an 18-strong selection that starts with the £3000 Max and culminates in the magnificent Metropolis FMD, which will set you back a not inconsiderable £180,000.

The German brand also offers two tonearms, the TRA 9 and TRA Studio, both available in 9in and 12in versions, plus six turntable power supply options. Transrotor also manufactures three phono stages, two for MM or MC, and the third a fully balanced design for MCs only. There are also a number of cartridges available, from the £345 MM Uccello up to the £13,000 MC Tamino. Our photographs show the deck fitted with the £920 MC Merlo, made by Goldring and based on its Elite model.

FOUR SQUARE

The Massimo Nero is supplied with a single motor and armboard in its basic form, but a second motor can be added for £460. Up to four arms may be fitted thanks to mounting points on each corner of the plinth – additional armboards are £400 each. Said plinth is made from POM (polyoxymethylene), with steel feet – adjustable for levelling – and top covers.

This turntable is the most affordable in Transrotor's range to make

RIGHT: Seen from above, the Massimo Nero's ability to host up to four arms is clear. In this picture the deck is driven via two 'Konstant Eins' AC motor pods, a £460 upgrade. The LP weight slides over the spindle, flattening minor warps

use of one of the company's innovative magnetic bearing technologies. Its top-end turntables use 'FMD' (Free Magnetic Drive), where a lower platter is spun by the belt and drive is transferred magnetically to an upper platter that's completely separate, even having its own bearings.

For the Massimo Nero, however, the 'TMD' (Transrotor Magnet Drive) bearing is utilised. In this case, the turntable has a surprisingly large metal sub-platter, the load being magnetically lifted from the inverted bearing and driven via a continuous, round-section belt. The top platter, also machined from POM, sits atop the sub-platter and includes a heavy record weight. Transrotor says that this arrangement helps to reduce the transmission of motor

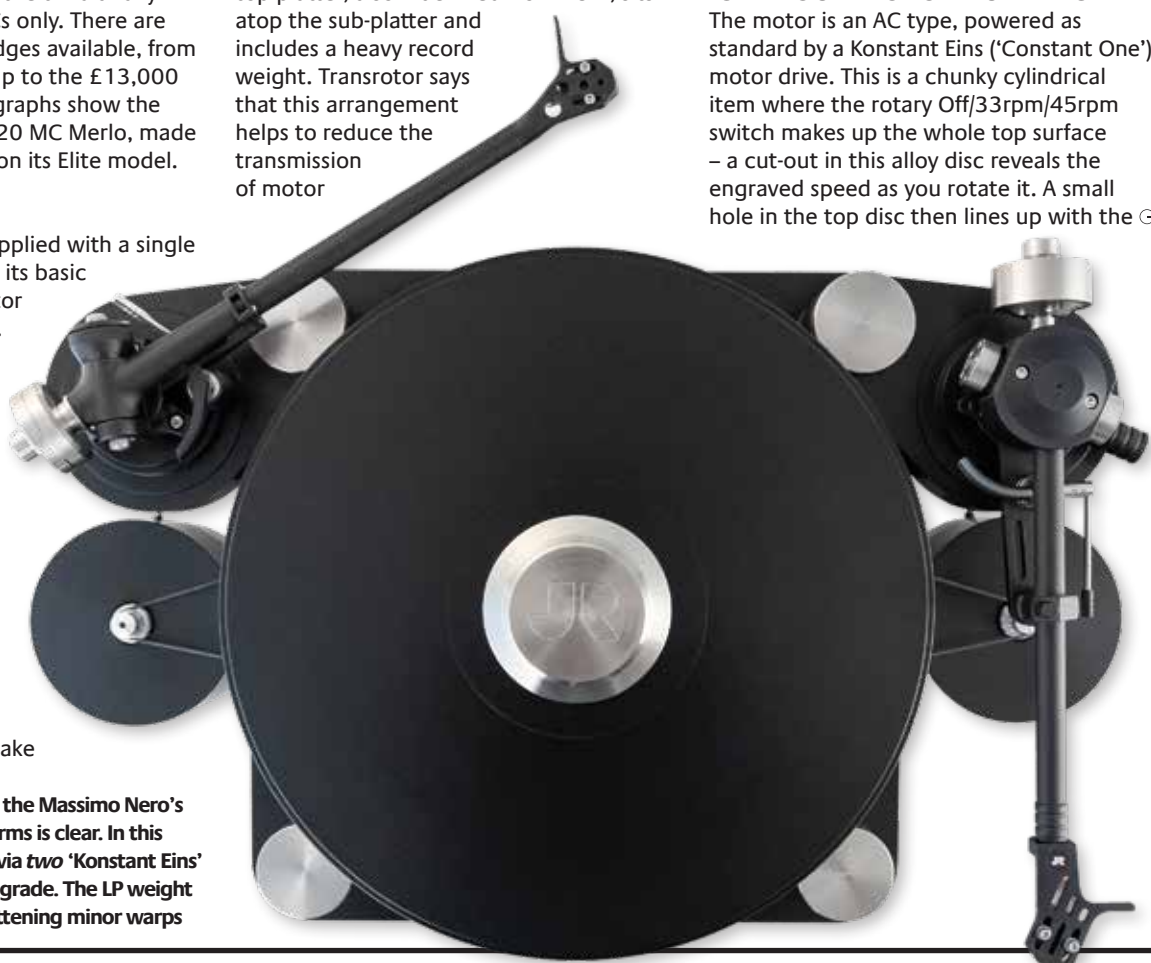
vibrations to the platter, as does the remote siting of the motor pod itself, while also realising lower levels of bearing noise.

The use of one or more remote motors is an expedient way of 'decoupling' them from the turntable plinth or subchassis, but this also opens up a deal of variability in the final motor position, and belt tension, depending on the diligence of the user! That said, Transrotor's manual does define the distance between the plinth and the motor pod, and a ruler is also provided to assist in this crucial operation.

'GET YOUR MOTOR RUNNING...'

The motor is an AC type, powered as standard by a Konstant Eins ('Constant One') motor drive. This is a chunky cylindrical item where the rotary Off/33rpm/45rpm switch makes up the whole top surface – a cut-out in this alloy disc reveals the engraved speed as you rotate it. A small hole in the top disc then lines up with the

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'The TRA-9S is a chunky design based around a gimbal with steel and ceramic bearings'



correct adjustment potentiometer for the chosen speed. However, these pots are very sensitive, so minor adjustments can cause (audible) shifts in speed/pitch.

STUDIO SET-UP

The arm supplied with our Massimo Nero TMD was the 9in version of the Transrotor TRA Studio – the TRA-9S – retailing for £3750. This is an elegantly chunky design based around a gimbal using a combination of steel and ceramic bearings.

Special adjustment screws are supplied for fine setting of VTA, and the headshell can be loosened and rotated to set azimuth. The company supplies a neat Perspex block that acts as a guide to help set both of these correctly. Stylus pressure is applied by the uncalibrated counterweight but a digital stylus balance is included. Bias is applied magnetically using a fine adjuster on the side of the arm.

While the arm has a neat magnetic catch in its rest, it can be further secured by a knurled screw. However, this has quite a sharp point on the end, so care should be taken (including unscrewing it fully) to avoid any scratching of the arm body. Fit and finish of turntable and tonearm is otherwise exceptional, everything going together with the precision that is the hallmark of an adept engineering company.

SOLID 'N' POLISHED

With the MC Merlo cartridge *in situ*, it soon became apparent that, yes, we poor Brits have been missing out for years. The combination of Massimo Nero turntable and TRA-9S tonearm offers a sound that is as solid and weighty as the hardware's appearance might suggest, but topped off by an

ABOVE: Pictured in standard guise with a single 'Konstant Eins' AC motor pod, the fine rubber belt drives a substantial chrome-plated sub-platter beneath the black POM main platter. LP weight slips over the spindle on Teflon bushes

equally similar degree of polish and style. However, the Massimo Nero TMD isn't a turntable that you'll want to have playing quietly in the background. It presents music with a forthrightness and authority that ensures your focus is captured and you're paying proper attention.

This performance isn't of a 'front row seat at the concert' nature, however, but rather a more widespread and largescale sense of atmosphere that pushes far into the distance. The Massimo Nero TMD's stereo imaging is very good, but the main soundstage is between

and behind the speakers. Again, this helps in making you sit and concentrate. Rather than throwing everything into your lap for you to pick through at your leisure, this Transrotor turntable transfers the onus onto the listener to, well... *listen*.

AN EVOLUTIONARY TALE

Transrotor's history begins in the early 1970s, when Jochen Räge set up a company to import British turntables into Germany. He chose Transcriptors' decks, including the iconic Hydraulic Reference model [HFN May '11] featured in the Stanley Kubrick film *A Clockwork Orange*. Räge maintained a close relationship with Transcriptors' David Gammon and this included him checking and modifying all imported decks and providing after-sales support. Even today, Transrotor is known for the repair and restoration of Transcriptors' turntables.

At the IFA exhibition in 1971, Räge was asked by the German actor Raimund Harmstorf to design him a turntable made from glass. Harmstorf was so delighted with his purchase that he introduced Räge to other members of the Munich elite, securing him more sales. This wider attention and flourishing order book prompted Räge to set up his own brand in 1973. The name 'Transrotor' was chosen to acknowledge the inspiration provided by the Transcriptors models that the company had sold originally.

The initial decks were built to Räge's requirements in England by Michell Engineering and the first model was the Transrotor AC of 1976. Production gradually transferred to Germany, although still using many parts made by Michell. Full independence came in 1986 with the Transrotor Connoisseur [pictured] – the first fully German-built model.



BIG COUNTRY

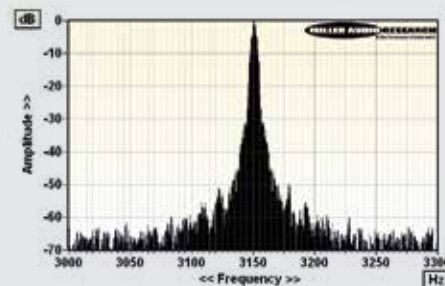
Once you get accustomed to this style of presentation, the Massimo Nero TMD/TRA-9S pairing turns out to be a highly rewarding listen. Carly Pearce's country and western vocals on 'Oklahoma', from her 2024 album *Hummingbird* [Big Machine Records 00843930108152], rang out softly yet authoritatively from between my loudspeakers, while her backing instruments were neatly arranged around her. The Massimo Nero TMD stretched the soundstage both wide and deep, offering a scale that is quite rare at the price. ➞

LAB REPORT

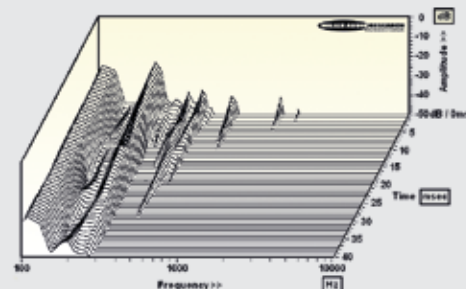
TRANSROTOR MASSIMO NERO

Driven via a single 'Konstant Eins' AC motor pod, Transrotor's Massimo Nero TMD achieves stable speed within six seconds. As supplied, our sample was running +1.6% fast but with (very) careful adjustment of the controller's hidden screwhead – see instructions! – it was possible to pull the absolute speed down to $\pm 0.03\%$. With great care taken over motor positioning and belt tension, the Massimo Nero can achieve a very low peak-wtd wow of just 0.025% [see Graph 1, below] while the 0.04% flutter includes sidebands at $\pm 32\text{Hz}$ that also appear as a peak on the unwtd, through-bearing rumble spectrum [not shown here]. Otherwise, the magnetically-assisted 'TMD' bearing achieves a low -69.8dB noise (DIN-B wtd, re. 5cm/sec). Transmission of mechanical noise up through the POM (polyoxymethylene – an engineering thermoplastic) main platter looks to be well damped, the Massimo Nero TMD achieving an excellent -73.0dB through-groove noise (this increases to -71.3dB if the supplied record weight is used to better couple the vinyl to the platter).

The partnering TRA-9S (Studio) tonearm is a solidly-built design with a gimbal bearing, straight black-anodised alloy tonearm offering a 9in effective length and, in part because of the chunky detachable alloy headshell, an above-average 18g effective mass. The main bearing housing shows some slight play although friction remains low at <15mg (vertical). Otherwise, the high-ish effective mass suggests the TRA-9S is best suited for use with medium/low-compliance MC pick-ups as does the generally well-damped behaviour of the arm as a whole [see CSD waterfall, Graph 2]. The rigid main beam has its primary bending mode deferred to 110Hz with a torsional or harmonic mode at 240Hz and minor modes at 400Hz, 480Hz and 760Hz. PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted $\pm 150\text{Hz}$, 5Hz per minor division)



ABOVE: Cumulative resonant decay spectrum for the TRA-9S tonearm, illustrating various structural support and tube vibration modes (100Hz-10kHz over 40msec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.34rpm (+0.03%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5-6sec (single motor)
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.025% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-73.0dB (-71.3dB with clamp)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-69.8dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-61.3dB
Power Consumption	6-7W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	520x180x340mm / 20kg



ABOVE: Studio arm's VdH D 502 wiring exits directly beneath the alloy armboard / outrigger. There's no suspension but the four alloy feet may be adjusted for levelling

The turntable's high-frequency handling is also impressively assured. Initially, it's possible to convince yourself that its presentation might be lacking in fine-touch resolution, but actually all the musical detail you could ever ask for is there – it's just that both the Massimo Nero and TRA-9S arm have an unerring knack of rounding off any 'nasties', seemingly without affecting the flavour of the music in any way.

Smoke's 'Lay Back In The Arms Of Someone', from the band's 1976 *Greatest Hits* compilation [RAK Records SRAK 526], benefitted hugely from this. I've been familiar with this track since childhood – my sister was a big fan – and here it was as enjoyable as I've ever heard it. The Transrotor set-up took what's a less than stellar recording and made it that little bit more clean and open, with superb instrument definition.

Notes from Terry Uttley's bass guitar were well paced and easy to follow, with excellent form and separation.

STEADY AS SHE GOES

Back in the 1990s, when big idler drive turntables like the Garrard 301 experienced a resurgence, it was common to read of listeners getting up to check they weren't 'running fast', such was their dynamic delivery. The magnetic/belt-drive Massimo Nero has the opposite effect. There's no faulting its pitch stability [see PM's Lab Report, right], but its delivery can sometimes feel a little sedate. Jah Wobble's bassline on 'The Sun Does Rise', from the EP of the same name [Island Records 42285 40371], had all the clarity, eyeball-rattling depth and impact I could have hoped for, but seemed to be picking its way carefully and thoughtfully in rhythmic terms, rather than romping along joyously.

Equally, the synthesised bassline and drums on the 'Club' remix of Fragma's 'Toca Me' single [Positiva 12TIV-120] were deep-reaching, tight and impactful, but had my feet twitching, if not fully committed to tapping. Of course, if bangin' club tunes are not 'your thing' then this is unlikely to be a problem! So, unless you're a flat-earth 1980s audiophile who still values the notion of 'Pace, Rhythm and Timing' to the utter exclusion of all else, I would wager that for you, like me, it will be merely a passing observation.

GETTING THE FEELING

It's also easy to overlook because the Massimo Nero TMD and TRA-9S

are so good at everything else. After five minutes in the company of Harriet performing her cover version of Barry Manilow's 'Mandy' [Trying To Get The Feeling

Again; Bright Star Records 060955 402323], I was ready to forgive this Transrotor combination anything. The rich warmth of her vocals, and the exquisite tonality of the backing piano, were divine. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Transrotor's Massimo Nero TMD turntable and TRA Studio tonearm make a fine vinyl pairing – both are smartly engineered, have a good range of upgrade options for those who like to tweak, and together give a balanced yet captivating musical performance. Regular UK visitors to Transrotor's demo room at the annual Munich High End Show will be delighted to finally see this German brand available in the UK.

Sound Quality: 86%

