

Harmonix RF-11 / RF-1100: Added Pleasure Made Easy

The ability to use simple means to dramatically improve both sound and images is something desired by anyone who has ever been infected with the quality-home-entertainment virus. However, the handling and effectiveness of some of these “panaceas” often become quite sobering experiences once you bring the devices into your home. Nevertheless, those audiophiles and videophiles who do not categorically reject accessories exalt the many tuning components from Harmonix as true refinements to their high-end systems. *AV-Magazin* did some experimenting with the RF-11 and RF-1100 tuning sheets designed for Blu-ray Discs, DVDs and CDs.

Different tuning products – most notably those for the audio sector – are as plentiful as grains of sand on the shore, and it is getting harder and harder for consumers to stay on top of all those tuning sheets, discs, feet and lamps. Identifying the ones that really do anything is also no easy task, especially since neither you nor anyone else, save for the reticent manufacturer, can explain exactly how the things work. Add to that the fact that nobody is immune from the psychological effects and the role they play when evaluating the tonal effects produced by what can very often be exotic products, and it is easy to understand the traditional divides within the church of the disciples of quality. On the one side of the aisle rage the unbelievers, while opposite them evangelize the all too euphoric converted. Fortunately the more moderate assembly of appreciative, yet discriminating, parishioners is growing steadily.

Listener experience is a real advantage, particularly for reliably gauging the sonic results, just as certainly as practice and methodology can't hurt when assessing visual characteristics. It would not be easy for a person sampling a truly fine wine for the very first time to identify its domain and vintage. And they would surely have difficulty describing and articulating its rich diversity of attributes. With that in mind, a perfectly valid approach would be to use an expert manual when testing the tuning of music systems and image-reproduction components; always keeping in mind, however, that a proper level of confidence in your own judgment and in the person making the demonstration are the alpha and omega.

I have included these introductory remarks in order to put that often ridiculed subject of tuning and the Harmonix products introduced here into the proper light. After all, a thorough and

unprejudiced analysis of select tuning tools can well turn out to be a highly rewarding experience. For years, Harmonix brand footers, bases, room tuning components, speaker stands, record stabilizer clamps, LP record mattes and cables have enjoyed the reputation of unfolding an almost unbelievably profound and yet unmistakably positive sonic effect, and one that you can appreciate immediately without having to delve too deeply into the detailed attributes of sound reproduction.

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Aerodynamics

Unimpressive as the two tuning sheets may appear, they certainly have an astounding impact: Images and sounds seem much less artificially reproduced.

The Japanese manufacturer Combak, whose products also include CD players and amplifiers under the Reimyo name that are considered audiophile price tips, is justifiably silent about exactly how the Harmonix components work. The only thing for certain is that the RF-11 and RF-1100 disc tuning sheets likewise involve some form of resonance tuning. Any silver disc will spin rapidly about the main spindle of the drive regardless of the fixed or variable rpms a specific format or reading process may require. This mechanical process causes vibrations to a greater or lesser extent, which makes it harder for the laser unit to read the disc. Despite decoupled drives and data buffers, the most miniscule wobbling or vibration of the disc, along with the resonances induced by the compact disc drive mechanism, have a significant impact on the sound. It is also said that currents of air caused by the rapidly spinning disc also play an important role. As the disc displaces volumes of air within a relatively small and mostly enclosed space, this highly compressed air will exert a force on the disc which in turn causes slight vertical movements along its edge.

In this respect, the thought behind Harmonix tuning sheets is easy to understand and founded on generally recognized facts. After all, many high-end players have different design features, one of which, for example, are recesses in the transport mechanism beneath the platter that help properly direct the flow of air. The question then remains as to how the Harmonix tuning sheets will master this situation. Unfortunately, no additional information is available about this. However, keeping in mind the limited number of conceivable possibilities suggests that the resistance created by the sheet's cut-out structures generates a specific form of air movement, which in turn compensates for, or in a manner of speaking "breaks up," undesired air

compressions and flows.

In practical terms, all those various measures designed to improve the stability of the disc will affect the quality of the reproduction in what is more often than not a clearly beneficial way. The sonic and visual improvements so achieved will be either explicit or subtle depending on the player and the stabilizers used.

As always, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, or in this case actually trying out the devices. The RF-11s are relatively easy to use: The first thing you do is to place the centering guide (which comes with the sheets) onto the hub of the CD case. Then peel the tuning sheet off its backing. Carefully place the tuning sheet with the self-adhesive side up on the middle of the centering guide. Then place the disc with the label side down onto the centering guide and tuning sheet and press it firmly downward. A few tiny air bubbles will usually appear between the disc and the sheet. You can smooth out these bubbles using the centering guide or any other smooth object.

Despite the age of the original recording (July 1964), the re-master (LIM XR24 018 - XRCD24) of the Verdi Choruses (DECCA SXL 6139) sounds marvelous. The Harmonix RF-1100 especially enhances the bass range of the choral voices.

Even an only so-so pop production in terms of sound, such as Madonna's "Confessions," will acquire an audible gain in clarity and tonal differentiation.

Diana Krall's outstanding recording of her tribute to the Nat King Cole Trio captivates with a great deal of session character in the studio. Here as well, the RF-11 accentuates the vocal articulation and the atmospheric details.

***Baraka* – a film you've just got to see. The emotion-laden messages conveyed by the documentary footage are supported by unrivaled picture quality. The Harmonix RF-1100 enhances the impression of depth and puts the crowning touch on the images making them appear spectacularly realistic.**

Good Vibrations

Again let me point out that the RF-11 and RF-1100 tuning sheets can be used for any kind of disc. And so logically, the promise to reduce resonance during the read-out process applies to the reproduction quality of all varieties of discs used to store images or sound, whether it's an SACD, CD, Blu-ray Disc or DVD. Having said that, we put the gaming console aside and focused our test on music and films. Debuting at our cinematic session was popular movie that has since become a classic in the company of contemporary productions, at least among test editors, *Casino Royale*. For direct comparison we used two DVDs and two Blu-rays, alternating between one of each pair with and without a Harmonix tuning sheet. Will you really be able to see a difference by attaching a sheet to a DVD? Sir James Bond remains cool and collected – after all he's used to the kind of remarkable gadgetry that "Q" creates for him. And indeed, the equipment that this clever mind invents on her majesty's secret service has never failed him and always accomplishes what it promises to do – just like the Harmonix RF-11s, even if not of blue-blooded pedigree. The picture revealed increased sharpness and, most notably, gave the impression of having greater depth of field and enhanced plasticity. What's more, the colors looked more natural with gradients that were more homogenous and finely hued. As noncommittal as it may sound, "more natural" not only best describes the perception you get, but is the most fitting description of the picture quality exhibited by the DVD and Blu-ray with the Harmonix RF-11. In fact, the DVD with the RF-11 even approached Blu-ray quality when it came to delivering a consistent and pleasing visual impression. And when you use the RF-1100, the character of the picture undergoes practically the same sort of change, only much more intensively.

We were really curious to see how these would work on what is presently the undisputed best Blu-ray, namely *Baraka*. This documentary film by director Ron Fricke is light years away from the tediousness so typical for this genre, and presents nature, man and animals in situations that speak for themselves. The film, which enchants with what is almost meditative radiance, shows the primal beauty of nature and some of modern life's cultural "achievements" which contrast as banal and often counterproductive. *Baraka's* picture quality is truly impressive. The movie, which was filmed in twenty-four countries using a computerized TODD/AO 70mm camera, was rescanned from its 70mm original at 8K, i.e. with a resolution of 7,680 x 4,320 pixels (ultra HD) – the result of which is nothing less than spectacular. The German edition's tagline "A World Beyond Words" could well serve as the trademark for the quality of the images that it contains. It may seem incredible in view of the impressive pictures in the original Blu-ray, but here too the Harmonix sheets made the images appear even more lifelike. The RF-1100 is especially remarkable in its ability to enhance the illusion of image three-

dimensionality.

The overall impression can be summed up similarly in the case of music. The sound presentation has greater delineation, while the instrumentation of large orchestras and the dimensions of the recording venue are presented more naturally and with better acoustical transparency. No special kind of music is needed to hear a significant difference between the CDs and SACDs with and without tuning sheets, and even between those with the RF-11 and the RF-1100. And apart from the bass, even sonically less sophisticated pop productions bred for loudness, such as Madonna's "Confessions," actually benefit a great deal from the RF-11 and RF-1100: The reproduction is more fluid, richer in energy and unconstrained.

Exceptionally good recordings with acoustic instrumentation like Diana Krall's album "All For You – A dedication to the Nat King Cole Trio" will astound you the same way superb Blu-rays do. Although untreated discs listened to on the finest high-end equipment leave you with the impression of sounding as live and natural as possible, this is exactly when the Harmonix RF-1100 not only goes one better in terms of clarity, transparency and ambience, but gives the sound stage the aura of being conveyed in a less technical fashion. The bass extends much deeper and sounds more resonant and tighter at the same time; the presentation virtually exudes suppleness and shimmering acoustic colors. The lack of detailed information calls for prudence when discussing the "how," while the "what" can only be described metaphorically. Still, one thing can definitely be said: You should try out the Harmonix RF-11 and RF-1100 and experience their impact for yourself.

The procedure is simple: First place the centering guide that comes with the sheets onto the hub of the CD/DVD case.

Remove the tuning sheet from its backing.

Carefully place the sheet onto the centering device with the self-adhesive side up.

Place the disc with the label side down onto the tuning sheet.

Press down firmly and evenly. Then smooth out any bubbles that might appear between the sheet and the disc and you're done.

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Test Results

Features

Tuning sheets for SACDs / CDs / Blu-ray Discs / DVDs, self-adhesive, easily removable, leaves no residue, includes centering guide, compatible with all players.

Bottom Line

Added pleasure made easy – that’s what all tuning products promise, and the Harmonix RF-11 and RF-1100 indeed keep their word. Costs can be kept manageable as long as you don’t maintain a vast library of discs with tuning sheets attached to each one. With a little bit of practice and care it is easy to affix the sheets without any bubbles forming. No risk is involved since the sheets can be easily removed and leave no residue whatsoever. If you really want to amaze your eyes and ears then you should indulge in the Harmonix RF-11 and the Harmonix RF-1100. The lack of detailed information calls for prudence when discussing the “how,” whereas the “what” can only be described metaphorically. Still, one thing is for sure: You should try out the Harmonix RF-11 and RF-1100 and experience their impact for yourself. Just when untreated discs give the impression of sounding as live and natural as possible, the Harmonix RF-1100 in particular goes one better in terms of clarity, transparency and ambience, and makes the sound stage seem less technologically conveyed. The same applies in like manner for the visual impression the sheets make.

Harmonix RF-11 / RF-1100

Warren Quality Systems, Wallertheim, Germany

0 67 32 / 93 69 61

www.wqs-online.de

**Weighting: Effectiveness 60%,
Practicality 20%, Compatibility 20%**

Effectiveness

Very Good

Practicality
Compatibility
Price RF-11
Price RF-1100

Good
Very Good
€30 (8 sheets)
€69 (8 sheets)

Class

No info

av-magazin.de

Value

Harmonix RF-11 / RF-1100

Good

Very Good