

*Absolute*

# FIDELITY

YOUR EQUIPMENT. YOUR MUSIC

## Manger

Read the paper on the moon  
(Be there when fleas sneeze)

## Ikon Akustik

A name like the echo of thunder  
(In quarters for connoisseurs)

## Clearaudio

Drawn right from the source  
(The unseen revolution)



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**FIDELITY**  
YOUR EQUIPMENT. YOUR MUSIC.

Harmonix: Checkmate!

**Subtle magic:** Components from Harmonix cast an everlasting spell



# Checkmate!

HARMONIX RSB-1 • 5900 EUROS • TEXT: CAI.BROCKMANN@FIDELITY-MAGAZIN.DE, PHOTOS: IS



“Boards that mean the world?” When the surroundings (and the match) are all in tune, then why not!

# A

Alright, so the whole thing seems rather ridiculous (and I do apologize to Schiller for appropriating his figure of speech for the stage of a theatre). Here I have this lacquered board in front of me that “does” nothing other than hold a HiFi component, which for its sake is already sitting on something somewhere. This is sort of like putting grandmother’s slipcover on a brand new sofa. Or – put more aptly and in a similar price category – like a custom suspension for a super sports car: The base model already runs superbly, yet adding this piece of optional equipment will surely make it run superbly-er. And so, the maven goes to the tuning shop to get his super-duper suspension, and slaps down a sum of money for which he could have gotten a really good used car someplace else.

Putt putt, beep beep! C’mon. Who drives like that? These days everybody’s got to have personal driver coaching with Walter Röhr. In their own vehicles. On the Nürburgring. Around the Nordschleife! And it gets even better: I didn’t receive just one of these “boards” (stages) but three! Together with three sets of matching “pucks” (feet) for optimally coupling my equipment with the them. You don’t get these kinds of things for nothing, you know.

## Acute stress reaction

Welcome to Harmonix Land, where it’s like living amidst the fjords of Norway: breathtaking, pleasing in an auditory sense, and rather expensive. The price Harmonix charges for three “boards” and a dozen “pucks” can easily trigger an acute stress reaction similar to that of a deer caught in the headlights. After all, for about – gulp! – 20,000 euros you can easily assemble a complete high-end system; no trick to it.

But that's not the point. There's more to it than that. Here we're dealing with that certain and essential "wee bit more" that turns a superb audiophile system (that reproduces music superbly) into a musically captivating system (that "understands" music and transports this understanding as well). Something for the expert and sentient among us. Nothing for beginners. And certainly not for number crunchers, who need everything proven scientifically before they'll believe their own ears and senses.

Certain kinds of questions always expose the unknowing and the doubters. For example: What's with that? Or: Why is it so damn expensive? Both questions can be answered fairly easily under the right circumstances. I put this theory to the test myself with two very different audio systems and a listening audience of half a dozen guests.

Here's how it works: Don't let on how much Harmonix gear costs. Be cool and just play music. Play your guests' favorite titles on the system you've tuned as best as possible, and then repeat their favorite track several times to allow the audience to get settled in and comfortable. And then, when they're feeling all warm and cozy, remove the "boards" and "pucks." Make sure you change nothing else, especially not the volume settings. Keep in mind that unless you do this, no one will believe what happens next. Now play the same track again – this time without the Harmonix tuning devices ...

### Tuning fork lift

Suddenly, and in most cases, the question of what this is all about answers itself loud and clear: less music, less energy, more blur. You can really drive this point home by taking the Harmonix tuning devices you removed and placing them back where they belong. All of a sudden everything is in perfect order again, the music sounds more open, voices and instruments acquire greater contour, format and assertiveness; the entire sound stage becomes more harmonious.

This finally brings us to the all-important point, namely harmonization that far outclasses really good high fidelity. As the Harmonix name and the tuning fork inside the logo suggest, the intent is to deliver



the ultimate harmonious musical experience of "perfectly tuned resonance." About that tuning fork: As if poking them in the eye, it will certainly attract the attention of skeptical calibration freaks and ultra-orthodox audiophiles – possibly even sending them into fits of rage. Calm down and relax! The man behind and leading Harmonix hails from the music business. A specialist for stringed instruments of the highest quality, Kazuo Kiuchi also investigated the most intimate details of how resonance behaves within them and, according to Harmonix distributor Jan Sieveking, "indisputably understands it." From this knowledge, and starting in 1990, Kiuchi-san began steadily applying his artistic mastery to both the sound studio and the world of high fidelity in order to achieve superior sound through resonance optimization.

Hold on a minute! Resonance and high fidelity? For many, this combination alone is the devil's handiwork and reason enough to be rejected outright. But not for me. I believe it is perfectly legitimate to



**The underside:**  
Height-adjustable  
Harmonix feet  
ensure the base  
doesn't wobble

render audible assistance to technical equipment designed to transport something as sensuous as music. What I mean by this is neither an intentional sugar coating of euphony, nor those insipid, ice-cold analytics that attempt to replace charm with “details.” Then again, I can find nothing objectionable about the term “harmony.” Harmony? I think it’s good. And if it’s something raucous I’m looking for then I’ll just pick the appropriate piece from my large collection of rowdy rock.

### Artists and their just rewards

Kazuo Kiuchi never ceases to earn my utmost respect. How perfectly this man has mastered the pure art of audio fine tuning! And the captivating quality of the sound he reproduces even when confined to one of those unspeakable containers at the High End show! He has this natural and exquisite feel for coaxing peak performance from capable systems, even in acoustically challenging locations. I have experienced Kiuchi’s tuning techniques so well and so often that I trust him unconditionally – and am willing to accept his artist’s fee.

**Variety:** TU-series feet couple the components with the platform



Naturally, the blend of superb materials and consummate workmanship alone are not the source of such fascination. Above all else, proper tribute must be paid to the prodigious expertise that Kiuchisan acquired over so many decades. That too is perfectly legitimate. After all, no one *has* to buy anything.

### Beyond HiFi

But now back to the Harmonix RSB-1 (Royal Stage Board). All too clear is the audible, or rather perceptible, improvement to the sound as these tuning boards unleash their magic when placed under D/A converters (Audio Note, Audio Research), preamps (Audio Research, Shindo – you read right: Shindo!) and amps (EternalArt OTL Monos). Even those little gems from McIntosh and ModWright that “just happened” to be present were not exempt from being harmonized during these weeks of testing. And the results in terms of sound were categorically and always positive. This, even

though the question must be allowed as to whether the device on top should not cost a few yen more than the platform on which it rests. The answer: Yes. Yield to the desire of owning an RSB-1 only when you, with your meticulously assembled audiophile-grade system, believe you have booked yourself the finest seat in the concert hall. For this is when the RSB-1 will pamper you with perfect, all-around service that includes uncluttering the stage, inviting each of the vocalists to sing in your direction, letting the big band groove, and replacing the concert hall’s flip-up seat with your favorite easy chair ... The latter in particular – figuratively speaking – is truly worth the while!

My best-loved recording of *Die Fledermaus* (Carlos Kleiber, Bayerisches Staatsorchester, DG), for example, gains significantly in power and resilience in its fundamentals, not to mention enhanced speech intelligibility, realistic spatial impression and a more natural acoustic clarity.



Frank Sinatra in *Nice 'n' Easy* cuts a confident, more full-bodied and up-standing (!) figure before the big orchestra playing in ping-pong stereo mode. The easygoing finger-snapping is more conspicuously separated from his voice; the brass section has a cleaner edge and is less muddled, while Ol' Blue Eyes' sibilant vocals are better integrated. In short, everything flows better, becomes more harmonious (sic), and makes it much easier for listeners to fully immerse themselves in the music.

Should you once again impatiently (have to) ask about the price, then perhaps you should continue investing heavily in electronics and acoustics. But please remember that there are only two worlds of sound experience beyond HiFi: live concerts and high-end audio systems that don't sound like electronics at all, but only like music. Funny how often Harmonix components are involved in the latter. And perhaps that is precisely where you will find that these kinds of (royal stage) boards really do mean a *new world*. ■

## Harmonix RSB-1

### Tuning Board

#### Style:

Base surface finished in black semi-gloss lacquer, adjustable feet made of wood and chrome-plated metal

#### Options:

Coupling using Harmonix bases (TU series) is recommended

#### Weight limit:

max. 150 kg

#### Dimensions (W/H/D):

56 / 7.1 / 45 cm

#### Warranty:

5 years

#### Price:

€5900

**Sieveking Sound, Jan Sieveking**

**Plantage 20**

**28215 Bremen**

**Germany**

**Telephone +49 (0)421 3784984**

**[www.sieveking-sound.de](http://www.sieveking-sound.de)**