

Step Change

Sound Hi Fi are offering a brand new Technics SL1200 deck, heavily modified with bearing, feet, mat and power supply tweaks, plus a fitted SME 309 tonearm and Audio Technica MC cartridge. Rafael Todes tries this 'turnkey' turntable package'...

Regular readers will know the story – a once universally derided 'disco deck' is found to have hidden depths. Not very well hidden, actually, as the Technics SL1200 is a superb turntable made a bit less so by its tonearm, turntable mat and feet. Replace these with aftermarket items, and even tweak the power supply (worthwhile but not essential) and you're cooking on gas; the humble '1200 will slay giants...

Trouble is, you can get far too into this. There are umpteen different tweaks, and just as many alternatives using different products which may or may not work better; a thesis could be written on the aftermarket platter mats alone! So what to do if you're one of those naive innocents who just actually wants to, ermm, to listen to music? Contrary to the writings of some people on internet forums, it's actually even more fun to listen to music via the Technics than it is to align every screw in the deck (and that's a lot) so it faces west, or to twiddle with the power supply wiring until the next millennium.

Timestep have the answer; it's an off-the-shelf package of mods which effectively give you a 'plug and play' SL1200, no questions asked. This is the brainchild of Dave Cawley, who runs Sound Hi-Fi; he comes from high end electrical engineering background, having previously worked for Philips in a senior engineering capacity. The Evo, as it's called, is a brand new deck for £3,695, said to provide a 'turnkey' solution for those who don't want to spend the rest of their natural lives twiddling with the innards of an SL1200! There's the option of an Audio Technica

AT33EV moving coil cartridge for an additional £449, and a STB-MS clamp/weight for £225. If you want your own deck modded to full Evo spec (including SME 309), then it's £2,895 plus the aforementioned options. Of course, the Technics SL1200 has now been discontinued, but Dave bought a good quantity of the very last box-fresh ones, so if you do go for the whole package, rest assured you're getting a brand new deck.

The major turntable mod is to bypass the stock power supply and rectifier circuit; Dave removes the transformer and redundant PCB and fits his own power supply. There's also a motor modification to reduce the phase comparator loop filter gain and move the turnover point, thereby eliminating the low frequency instability. Next, he fits a bespoke bearing to replace the standard one, with twice the diameter and twice the surface area of the standard bearing. It runs on a silicon nitride ball on a replaceable PTFE thrust pad. The bearing feels physically more solid than the standard one, and it feels substantial to spin around with the fingers as if surrounded by a more viscous type of oil.

The feet chosen to replace the standard Technics fare are Sorbothane; they're like sticky black logs and are jammed in to the

sockets tightly.

They are squidgy when grabbed; when the turntable was located on my sideboard, these feet seemed amongst the best at insulating exogenous vibrations. This of course may mean little in terms of how the feet help to absorb the energy from the arm and cartridge, but nevertheless it is a good start. The arm selected is an SME 309, a chip off the old V block. Looking physically like its older brother, it performs a fair percentage of its tricks for a lot less money. Currently the list price of the arm is £995. The cartridge supplied on this deck is an Audio Technica AT33EV, a moving coil which costs £449; this cartridge is a particular favourite of editor DP.

SOUND QUALITY

I fired up the deck and listened first to 'Also Sprach Zarathustra', the Richard Strauss' Tone Poem used in the film '2001: A Space Odyssey'. It starts with a very low, earth shaking note on the organ, lasting around twenty seconds – 16Hz according to my iPhone app, which on the this Technics, is rock steady, and provides the platform for the famous brass triad that builds up. There follows a rhythmic figure on the Kettle drums, which the Timestep Technics does to the point where you can feel the instrument in the room. It's a striking sound, only possible from a turntable of superlative speed stability; it gives the music an incredible 'hewn from granite' sense of utter unflappability





and poise. I honestly can't think of another sub-£4,000 deck (including arm) that even comes close.

Listening to 'Loose Tubes' on the Technics, as compared to my Fletcher Audio Omega 0.5 reference, and there seemed to be more impact from the sticks hitting the drums than with the belt drive deck, the percussion sounded more immediate and faster. I felt almost bruised listening to it! The soundstage was large now, and I wasn't aware of the bass problems that were present with the unmodified deck; indeed the mods seem to let the original stock deck out of its cage, so it can run around and make mayhem!

A favourite piece of music of mine is the Mozart 'Concertante for winds', and here the deck showed an ideal blend of grippy detail and warmth of tone which conveyed

the effortless charm of the performance. The pulsating double basses had real clarity, and the tone of the woodwind soloists was really beautiful. There was both body to the sound and finesse to boot; it felt like listening to a reel-to-reel with the master tape.

The first movement of Kurt Weill's second symphony contains a combination of angry and swashbuckling moments. What the deck does so well is communicate

the orchestra was less pronounced compared to my reference Fletcher Audio deck; although this package

better it in so many ways, it does lack a little stage depth across the midband. The section seemed a bit depleted; this is a minor whinge for what is otherwise is a very sweet and smooth sounding cartridge, I found.

On Mozart's 'Symphony No.39', using the same combination I got a huge sounding orchestra, full

"powerful yet stable, commanding and invigorating, scintillating yet subtle, this is a brilliant sounding turntable package..."

the snappy interchanges between instruments, handing over to each other – the timing of the deck really makes this sound exciting. One thing I noticed with this combination (including the optional Audio Technica AT33EV moving coil cartridge), is that the violin section's relative weight in

bodied and lush. I have seldom heard better on this recording. The bass was the tightest I've heard between either deck, and there was a decent soundstage. The tone of the upper strings was warm and well rounded. It let the music breathe in rhythmic terms, something that only top





turntables with brilliant speed stability can manage, in my experience.

So does the Timestep solve the classic problem of the Technics, which is its slightly bright and hard upper midband? *Absolutely*; there's almost no sense of that slightly clanky and metallic tonality anymore, the Evo just sounding clean, clean, clean. Still, you could never call this a tonally fulsome or opulent sounding deck; whilst it has sledgehammer bass (and so in no way sounds a lightweight), it doesn't give that rich, romantic sound that lovers of high end belt drives will doubtless cherish. That's why I think the Audio Technica AT33EV is a particularly synergistic match; readers might be surprised to hear me say this, but of all Audio Technicas the '33 is their sweetest and most delicate, sounding in some ways like a miniature Koetsu. As such it makes a great synergistic match to a deck and an arm known better for their forensic detail recovery.

As an aside, for the sake of completeness I also ran a test of another Technics deck with a Timestep power supply, with no bearing or motor modifications. I found there was a noticeable decrease in the tightness of the bass, the almost Garrard-like sound of the modified bearing being lost. On the more advanced deck, I could easily separate the different rhythmic elements, while on the more basic one, it was less discernible, so the aforementioned mods are well worthwhile.

Whilst the Evo's a lovely package, there's still room to upgrade it should you so wish, by specifying an SME Series V tonearm as opposed to the 309 which comes as standard in the Evo package. The 309 is a fine arm, but the V is a great one; the soundstage opens up dramatically, and there is better front to back depth, a far greater sense of a real orchestral experience, which allows the party to get into full swing. The V has a greater dynamism to it, and is able to maximise the potential of these skilful modifications. With this in mind, I opted to continue with the

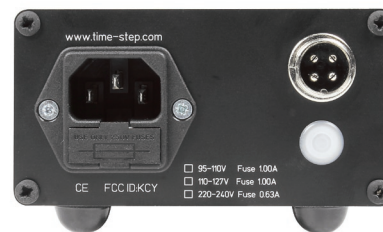
Continuing with the SME V, and the Audio Technica, I turned to some great jazz, 'Monks's Music', on Riverside. The first track is an arrangement for three saxophones and trumpet of 'Abide with Me', the acoustic is dry, and the detail that the deck extracts is fabulous. You are painfully aware of these great musicians' different sounds, vibratos, note lengths, yet it seems to enhance the realism of the sound. When the jazz really gets going in the next track, there is a lovely punch and energy to the track. The double bass sound is tight and rhythmic, the percussion crystal clear, the piano is the most wow-free I've heard, and you feel as if you are privileged to be present at the private music-making session of some jazz giants.

So how does the Timestep SL1200 Evo compare with the Origin Live mods package tested a few months back? Well, with the two decks back to back, I found that the Timestep had better bass control, and very probably due to a more sophisticated cartridge (the Audio Technica compared to the Soundsmith Aladdin) a sweeter, more rounded sound. Yet there was something about the arm on the Origin Live deck, the Encounter Mk3c that was more fun than the SME 309. It didn't limit the soundstage as much as the 309, and it allowed the dynamics of a brass section to let rip which was really engaging to listen to. So as ever with vinyl, it's swings and roundabouts...

top SME for a while, just to get the measure of the actual Timestep mods.

CONCLUSION

The Timestep SL1200 Evo is a one-step solution to your Technics upgrade travails, giving you the full package of mods in one go, and what fine music it makes. Powerful yet stable, commanding and invigorating, scintillating yet subtle, this is a brilliant sounding turntable package and comes wholeheartedly recommended for £3,695. Of course it can be even better still, with the addition of an SME Series V tonearm, whereupon its performance joins the stellar league of top, world class decks. But there you go; that's your upgrade path for you when you tire of the Evo, which frankly is a hard thing to do!



REFERENCE SYSTEM

Technics SL1210/2/Timestep PSU/SME V turntable
Ortofon Kontrapunkt A cartridge
Fletcher Audio 0.5/Cartridge Man Conductor tonearm
Nottingham Analogue Wave Mechanic
Icon Audio PS3 Signature phono stage
Audio Research SP9 mk2 preamplifier
VAC Auricle Musicbloccs power amplifier
B&W 802D loudspeakers

HI-FI WORLD

VERDICT

This is an outstanding high end 'turnkey' turntable system with almost peerless precision, power and grip.

TIMESTEP EVO TECHNICS
SL1200 £3,695
Sound Hi-Fi
+44(0) 1803 833366
www.soundHiFi.com

FOR

- 'plug and play' package
- superlative speed stability
- incredible precision
- enormous power

AGAINST

- slightly constrained soundstaging

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Timestep Technics has an improved power supply that reduces high frequency cogging components and, comparing our analysis to that of an unmodified deck showed that above 6Hz unwanted products were reduced in level. The larger peaks at left in our analysis, below 5Hz, are harmonics of the basic rotational period of 0.55Hz that arise because of slight test disc eccentricity, even though the DIN 45 452 test disc was centred using its locked outside groove; they are not produced by the Technics. Our measuring levels are very, very low in this analysis, lower than would be used for a belt drive, hence the visibility of these products. Overall unweighted wow and flutter together measured just 0.065%. This compares to a common figure of 0.1% or thereabouts for a good deck.

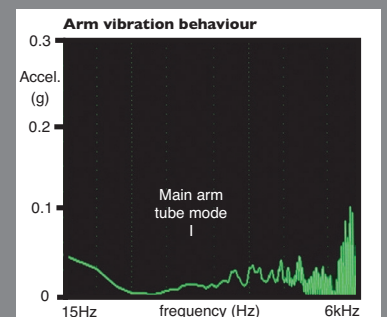
The SME309 arm was unusually well behaved too and this was likely helped by the large, solid body of the Audio Technica AT33EV attached to it, as an Ortofon 2M Black produced a slightly worse result.

As a combination the Audio Technica AT33EV cartridge, SME309 arm and modified Technics SL1200 put up an exemplary performance

measurement shows, one not bettered elsewhere. NK

Speed accuracy no error
Wow & flutter 0.065%
Wow & flutter (JIS weighted) 0.04%

ARM VIBRATION



WOW & FLUTTER

