



THORENS TD-309

Don't count on us to discuss Thorens' long, long experience, dating back to when it began making music boxes in the 19th Century. *That* company closed years ago, and the brand was bought by a new company. By and large we prefer the new Thorens to the old one, though we think it's offering too many models, without much unity in its philosophy.

But we're hoping that this new turntable is an indication of a new direction. It grabbed our attention from the start. For one thing it's eye-catching, whether you get it in red, like this one, or in piano black. The 309 has a fully suspended sub-chassis, a DC motor, and a glass platter, resting on an aluminum subplatter. The bearing under the platter — well-known to be a key aspect of a turntable with high-end claims — is from Japan. There is of course a drive belt, and its tension is user-adjustable. That adjustment is, obviously, useful as the belt wears and stretches, though the user is invited to find the tension that will give the best sound.

Oddly, Thorens claims that changing belt tension requires adjustment of the turntable speed, and it's not obvious to us why this should be. There is, for that reason, a speed adjustment. We are not keen on this sort of adjustment, because

we consider that it is the role of the designer to get the platter to turn at the right speed, not the purchaser. Still, there was no sign of speed instability during the period we had the turntable.

If you somehow get a 309 without its instruction manual (which, fortunately, is available on line), you may miss some essential steps that are less than obvious, such as removing the transit screws that protect the suspension. Once they are removed (and kept in a safe place, because they aren't captive) the suspension can be checked visually. The inner cylinder of each foot should show a 2 mm gap. If it needs adjustment, either because of wear or because you're using a heavy accessory, such as a record clamp, you can tighten or loosen the springs from the top. Ours came correctly adjusted once we had played a record on the platter... and we wish we could say the same for all the other adjustments. More on that in a moment.

You may be wondering about that big steel cylinder on the left front corner of the turntable. At first glance it looks as though it could be a record clamp, but it is in fact a vital component in the suspension system. It's not fastened down, but simply placed over the adjustment hole of one of the pillars (it has a felt bottom to protect the plinth finish). It can be moved slightly to tune the suspension,

though we noted no difference over its limited adjustment range.

Like several other Thorens tables, the 309 has a DC wall wart as a power supply. Next to the power inlet are a pair of output jacks. We were pleased to see that Thorens lets you choose your own cables. Yes, a cable pair is included in the box, but changing them may be a worthwhile upgrade.

We reviewed the 309 using a pair of Atlas Navigator All-Cu single-crystal cables.

The tone arm, which fits in a round hole in the plinth and can be changed, is Thorens' own, and it is both the 309's strength and its weakness.

It is a strength because Thorens got a lot of the concept right, and has clearly spent money where it counted most. It is a weakness because it has a prototype feel to it, and the 309 would be accessible to far more (non-technical) people if it came correctly adjusted out of the box. To be fair, our 309 was an early production model, and it had been displayed at a show.

Let's take a closer look at the tone arm, which you can also see in greater detail on the next page. It is simple in concept, as befits its presence in a \$2000 turntable, but some judicious choices have been made. The arm tube is made from rolled aluminum, with randomly-placed inner dampers, to absorb vibration over a broad band of frequencies. Its functional length is easily adjustable, because the top screw on the pivot assembly can be loosened, and the tube can then be moved forward or back. About halfway down the tube is a ring that looks like a stylus pressure adjustment, though it is in fact another vibration damper, not meant to be moved. The double-isolated counterweight mounts on a threaded rod that is below the arm tube, so that its centre of gravity is on the same plane as the stylus. This is a refinement that is ignored by some major makers of tone arms.

Then we come to the front of the arm, and there we were less happy.

The cartridge mount is held onto the arm tube by a single screw. Though this screw can be — and *should* be — kept extremely tight, it can allow the cartridge to rotate slightly under stress. On



the other hand it makes lateral cartridge adjustment easy.

And that's a good thing, because we ran into two problems we can only hope were fixed in later production. First, the attractive alignment gauge supplied with the 309 is almost, but not quite, accurate. We have found the same problem with some other Thorens tables, and Thorens is not alone in this sin. The correct alignment points for optimum playback have been well known for many years, and improvisation is not welcome. The factory-supplied Audio-Technica AT-95B cartridge was correctly aligned...according to the Thorens gauge, which means it was wrong. But there was a second problem, which you can see in the photo above.

As you move the counterweight toward the front to increase stylus pressure, it eventually bumps up against the arm tube and it can't advance anymore. For that reason we could get no more than 1.6 g of pressure, greatly inadequate even by Thorens' optimistic rating. Even some experienced turntable people will not be sure what to do next. Was the arm tube too long?

The solution was to loosen that top screw and move the arm tube forward to give the counterweight more clearance. That of course threw the cartridge alignment wildly out, and we were glad

we had our own alignment gauge to set it right again.

The anti-skating control is magnetic, and is therefore less messy than the common string-and-pulley system. As usual, its optimum setting was somewhat lower than the recommended setting.

We ran the TD-309 through our unforgiving *Hi-Fi Essentials* test album and we weren't surprised to find that the \$59 included cartridge set no record for tracking ability. After some experimentation we set the stylus pressure to 2.1 g, slightly over spec, for the best performance compromise, and found that there was some sign of mistracking even on the 50 μ band. On the 90 μ band the cantilever began "singing." On the top 100 μ band, which few cartridges can track, the Audio-Technica jumped right out of the groove. This is not terrific performance for a moving magnet cartridge, but it was in line with our expectations. The AT-95 is a pretty good starter cartridge, but you may want to put money aside for an eventual upgrade.

Tone arm/cartridge resonance was a little high, centred around 12 to 14 Hz, relatively undamped. The fault of the cartridge again. On the other hand, the combination did a surprisingly good job of tracking our organ recording, *The Power and the Glory*, with solid lows (though not down to the 16 Hz

fundamental note), and a minimum of vibrato.

And then we were off to do some serious listening.

We began with one of the original Reference Recordings blockbusters, *Trittico* (RR-52). We could hear right away that the Audio-Technica needed about 2 dB more gain to equal our London Reference cartridge. With that adjustment done, the impact returned, and this wind band recording has plenty of it! Both Albert and Gerard were impressed by the dynamics and the range of instrumental details. Even the bass drum was rather good. "The piece seemed short," said Albert, "and that's always a good sign."

Of course, that's not to say that the differences weren't huge. The complex passages were somewhat confused, and the music had much less of the refinement we heard with our own turntable. Steve, on this first recording, was even more displeased. "There's poor dynamic contrast and the brass is thin," he said. "The tone and the timbres are grainy."

He was, however, more impressed by the second selection, the *Lacrymosa* from the Mozart *Requiem*, conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt on Telefunken 6.42756. He praised the full body of the chorus and the clarity of the instruments. Both he and Gerard noted that the violins were a little shriller, as we would expect with the low-cost cartridge. The vast space was somewhat reduced, though. That LP, from a direct-metal master, is not without problems even on the best turntables.

Not so our next LP: *Going Home* (East Wind 10004), a direct-to-disc album by the famed jazz group, The LA Four. The grooves are highly modulated, which might have caused grief for the cartridge's limited tracking ability, but we noted no special problems. Laurindo Almeida's guitar in the introduction had superb presence, and plenty of articulation (perhaps a little too much, thought Gerard). Bud Shanks' flute had a lovely texture. So did the percussion, with Shelly Mann's soft brushing of the cymbal startlingly realistic. "My impression has risen," said Steve. So had Albert's, and he had given up making a comparison at all.

You might think that this superb recording, because it *is* superb, would be especially tough to reproduce for what is, after all, an economy turntable (and especially an economy cartridge). There actually were some notable artefacts in the highs — for instance, when Ray Brown's bass was played with the bow — but the recording's essential goodness dominated. How can that be? You'll recall us saying, again and again, that the source is the most important part of the recording chain? The ultimate source is not the turntable, but the record.

We pulled out another premium-grade LP, the newly-restored version of Jennifer Warnes' *Famous Blue Raincoat* from the late Cisco (CLP7060-45). Warnes' warm and expressive voice took on a different color, not surprisingly, but the emotion of this Leonard Cohen song came through undiminished. Her voice had very good articulation, with the lyrics coming through even more clearly (yes, we know that's actually due to a flaw, but it didn't call attention to itself). The sound hardened up a little in louder passages, probably due to the AT-95's limited tracking ability. We barely cared, truth to tell, because we loved the result.

We ended the session with a song we hadn't heard in years, Loudon Wainwright III's *Hard Day on the Planet* (Demon FIEND79). Wainwright is well

known in his own right, though he was also the husband of late Montreal singer Kate McGarrigle and the father of musicians Rufus and Martha Wainwright. The song, a sour look at our planet's modern troubles, is riotous good fun, despite its dystopian theme. And it sounds great.

As with the Jennifer Warnes song, the lyrics were slightly clearer than with our reference, for the wrong reasons of course, but there was little to take away our enjoyment. If there was added hardness in the top end, it wasn't extreme enough to trigger comments. The strong rhythm came through well, as it had with the other recordings. That's something some turntables get consistently wrong. "If I were just getting started in vinyl," said Steve (who owns two high-end turntables), "I would go for this."

We were more than pleased with the

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Thorens TD-309

Price: C\$2000

Size (WDH): 47 x 43 x 13 cm

Most liked: Serious value, serious sound

Least liked: Inaccurate gauge, not well set up out of the box

Verdict: Price for the cautious, performance for the carefree

performance of this turntable. You might want to consider a better cartridge, not because the AT-95 is a bad choice — on the contrary, it's a judicious one — but because what weaknesses we could hear, were in fact limitations in the cartridge. Of course, upgrading to a new cartridge supposes either that you know how to do it and set it up properly, or that you are on warm terms with someone who does.

Even if you use it the way it comes in the box, you may need aid to get the results we heard, at least if we judge from this early production sample. Suspended turntables are notorious for requiring expert tweaking, and ironically Thorens has made this aspect as close to plug-and-play as can be. It's the tone arm that's the problem, and the not-quite-accurate alignment gauge packed with the turntable doesn't help.

Still, there aren't many plug-and-play turntables made, beyond the Rega. In any case, this attractive table can benefit from a cartridge upgrade, and that requires either expert knowledge or expert help.

That said, we enjoyed our time with the TD-309 tremendously. With even simple turntables costing more and more money, Thorens has delivered a huge dose of technical sophistication at a price that will worry many a competitor.

And it will delight the audiophile who puts music above all else.



CROSSTALK

I had no expectations, but I had noticed the refinement that went into its design, and I waited patiently to hear how that would translate into music, and how I would transmute my impressions into words. "What can I tell you..." Jennifer Warnes' smooth voice still rings in my ears...

Well, this turntable cherishes music. It cares for it and protects it. After a few minutes I stopped waiting for the small differences to appear and started to notice how close it actually was to the reference. No small feat on its part.

I wrote abundantly, exclamation marks flying. Listening became easy, the music predictably and consistently fine and each piece seemed shorter than usual.

Now, what does that tell you?

—Albert Simon

Look, I'm in a privileged position. I've worked on a lot of esoteric turntables and arms in my day, and the difficulties in setting up this one wouldn't worry me at all. It also might not worry your dealer's turntable specialist. If there *is* one.

A lot has been done right in this table, and it can sound as terrific as it looks. Add a few refinements, and the TD-309 becomes everyman's first high end table. And perhaps *last* high end table. It's good enough to be worth a couple of eventual upgrades: cartridge and cables.

I would recommend the TD-309 to

almost anyone. I would just want to know who was going to unpack it.

—Gerard Rejskind

I like its look, I like its sound, and I like its price.

It has no glaring weaknesses and many real assets. Its sound is steady and entirely non-digital, and its shape is sexy geometry. The arm, cartridge and table are a unified whole. Together they prove the real dollar value of this package.

So if you are thinking about jumping into the deep end of vinyl music without any risk of drowning, check this table out. Guaranteed, no worries.

—Steve Bourke