Thorens TD-295

There's something odd about the box that the TD-295 came in. It's smaller than those of the lower-priced Thorens tables, yet it's a good deal heavier. More quality, less quantity?

More quantity, in fact, but it's packed differently, and it was only half out of its box before we could see that it was more turntable than the other two, and it has more of a tone arm too.

Indeed, the arm that comes with the TD-295 looks like some standalone arms that cost about what this whole unit sells for, just north of a thousand dollars. And it comes with a cartridge, an Audio-Technica AT95E. That model is not in the Audio-Technica catalog, but a number of famous-name cartridges have been built around it, including the Linn Basik, K5 and K9. Though there has been a version with a Shibata line-contact stylus, this one has a more common elliptical stylus.

The power supply of the TD-295 is still a wall wart, which adapts without being asked to pretty much any current worldwide. However the motor is an AC synchronous type, electronically controlled. This Thorens has two speeds, not three.

There is no suspended subchassis, but the very substantial plinth sits on massive rubber feet which insulate it very well from footfalls, even if you don't have a wall stand for it. The platter is a massive chunk of non-magnetic alloy, which has been balanced by drilling out sections of its bottom. The sub-platter is fiberglass, and the table is of course belt-driven. The mat is felt, and it is much softer than the ones on its brandmates, much like the one supplied with our Linn LP12.

Though the TD-295 is billed as "automatic," the only automatic feature is auto-shutoff of the motor at the end of the disc, as an arm lever crosses a laser beam. That's all there is, and it's perfectly fine with us.

The other two Thorens tables we evaluated came with the cheapest possible audio cables, which were of course captive. The TD-295 actually has a pair of output jacks at the rear, so you can use the supplied cable (which looks better than most), or the cable you prefer. We used an Atlas Navigator All-Cu.

The counterweight is a little finicky to set up, because it fits on a rubber bushing. This serves to decouple it from the arm tube, and it is actually a good thing. When we set the pressure for 1.75 g, which seemed like a reasonable setting, it actually tracked just over 2 g. We reset it for correct pressure.

At least we *thought* it was correct pressure, but our *Vinyl Essentials* test disc told us otherwise. We determined that an actual 2 g pressure would get the best we could expect to get from this economy pickup.

A paper pickup alignment gauge was included with the instruction manual, and we were pleased to see that, unlike the gauge with the TD-170, it uses two calibration points and not just one. But it was still wrong, and unfortunately the alignment of the cartridge was wrong too. We used our own gauge to realign it correctly.

With that done, we proceeded to the first disc in our series, a selection from Reference Recordings' *Fennell Favorites* (RR-43).

This is not an easy album to do justice to, but it was evident that the Thorens was doing very well with it. There wasn't the huge impact we got with our reference turntable, to be sure, but the bottom end was solid. The snare drum was pleasingly realistic, and the articulation of the woodwinds was magical. So was the brass, which sparkled pleasantly.

The depth and image were very good too, though on louder passages we could hear the image flattening out, and the orchestral texture hardening. We suspected the inexpensive pickup was having difficulty following these highly-modulated grooves.

We noticed the surface noise, which was more obtrusive than with our own turntable.

We ran into some of the same problems on the *Swan Lake* ballet suite. Though once again the softer passages were nothing less than superb, orchestral tuttis were a little more chaotic. The lower strings (cellos and double basses) were very good, but we couldn't say the same thing for the violins, which sounded nothing like actual instruments.

We should perhaps take a moment to explain why this should be. Most phono cartridges are either moving coil or moving magnet. Whichever of the two elements needs to move will have to be kept small, and so the other will be larger to compensate. In the typical moving magnet cartridge, the coil will be so large that it actually acts like a filter, taking out the highs. To maintain the illusion of extended frequency response, the cantilever structure is designed to resonate at high frequency, and makes the response look normal on instrument tests. The cantilever is in fact merely storing information, and re-releasing it later. This works fine with sine wave tests, but with music it messes up the higher-pitched instruments.

We should add that, to be fair, very powerful magnets have made it possible for better MM cartridges to have smaller coils, which don't depend on resonances for their highs.

We continued with Barbra Streisand's magnificent version of *Send in the Clowns*, from her *Broadway Album*. This song has neither powerful passages nor extreme highs, and it sounded truly excellent. The oboe introduction was very good, and it revealed a space that was broad and deep. Barbra's voice was gorgeous, with fine articulation, the song touching. The bittersweet message hit home.

The same was true of *Master's Plan*, Doug McLeod's sly Blues song from his *Come to Find* album (Audioquest AQ1027). The accompanying guitar was very good, with no flaws to attract our attention, and McLeod's voice was clear and attractive. The one reservation we had concerned surface noise, which was higher than we are used to hearing with our own cartridges, which have line-contact stylii.

We expected the inexpensive Audio-Technica would be unable to track the nearly impossible direct-cut recording of *The Bells of St. Anne de Beaupré* (from *The Power and the Glory*, M&K RT-114). We were wrong.

The organ tone was very good, even during the massive *plein-jeu* passage, but the real challenge is another passage in which a sustained *ostinato* by the organ's biggest pipe adds a 16 Hz undercurrent that usually makes the melody unlistenable. The cartridge reproduced it just fine, adding a little more vibrato than we would have heard live, but without the seasickness-inducing effects we have often heard.

Moving magnet cartridges can usually track highly-modulated grooves better than even expensive MC cartridges, but not this one. Even with a 2 g pressure, the Audio-Technica showed sign of distress on the 70µ test band. By the time we got to the 90µ band, the cartridge jumped the groove all the way into the 100µ band, where, predictably, it did no better.

The combined tone arm of the cartridge and arm was around 12 Hz. That's a little high, but it was very well damped, and we really couldn't complain.

We were about to give this turntable a really good mark and pack it up again, but we got to wondering…

Thorens had selected this inexpensive cartridge for good reason, and as noted such companies as Linn have been known to make the same choice. At the same time, it seemed evident that this turntable, and especially this tone arm, could handle more. How well would it do with a *really* good cartridge?

You're going to accuse us of exaggerating, because we mounted a Goldring Excel on it, a twin to the cartridge that is on our Audiomeca table, and one that — when Goldring discontinued it — cost nearly three times as much as the whole Thorens turntable, arm and cartridge. As they say in car ads, don't try this at home.

But oh, we were glad we had!

We played the difficult *Fennell Favorites* LP once again, and the difference was evident. The large wind band appeared to be full-sized, as it should be with a well-crafted LP like this. The fascinating dissonance of the brass, which had been somewhat eclipsed by a certain confusion, now added interest to Prokofiev's music. The woodwinds were even better, and the illusion of great space was convincing.

Oh yes…the surface noise on this much-used copy had receded considerably.

The *Swan Lake* ballet also gained in coherence: that is to say, the musical structure made more sense. However, the most dramatic difference was in the sound of the violins. They had been a somewhat shrill and indeterminate mass before, but now they sounded the way violins actually sound when you hear them live. The overall orchestral sound gained in energy too.

Barbra Streisand's *Send in the Clowns* had been very good even with the AT95 cartridge, but now it was bewitching. The oboe introduction was downright magical, and when Barbra began singing, she was *there*. A number of elements became clearer, more manifest, including the subtle voice inflections Barbra uses to drive home the song's message. Once again, the high frequencies were more natural.

Master's Plan also gained from the change of cartridge. The solo acoustic guitar had gained an attractive "woody" sound, and Doug McLeod too seemed to be actually present in the room.

We expected trouble from the *Bells of St. Anne de Beaupré* organ piece, but it survived surprisingly well. The distant bells were very good, and the organ itself rich, with gorgeous deep bass. The passage with the sustained 16 Hz pedal was much better than expected, without excessive vibrato. Only at the end did we hear what sounded like the stylus tip bouncing off the groove wall, though only for an instant.

On the *Vinyl Essentials* tracking test, the Goldring did quite well, managing to play all the tracks. There was, however, some deterioration of performance on the third (60µ) track, which got progressively worse, but never did the stylus actually derail. This is pretty good for a moving coil cartridge.

Resonance was a little lower than with the AT95, around 11 Hz, and well damped.

Before calling it a day we sampled once again some of our test recordings on our Audiomeca J-1 table, with the same cartridge mounted in the SL-5 arm. Was it better? Well, of *course* it was, and we seemed to have been moved *into* the music, with lower frequencies that seemed all-enveloping.

As you may have gathered, we were pleased with the performance of the TD-295. We did have a wish list, to be sure. The non-removable headshell on the arm is plastic, though it has a metal insert plate. The counterweight could use a redesign. We also wish arm height were adjustable. Still, the price tag normally doesn't buy even a proper tone arm. In this case you get a complete record player, ready to plug in and listen to. When you do, you'll be glad vinyl is still around.