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Coming Around Again... Thorens TD160HD Turntable

by Roy Gregory

“I know nothing stays the same...” at least, so sang Carly. But in hi-fi, as in life, there are touchstones, ever-presents, whose constancy both reassures and marks our passage: they may develop or evolve, fade from our affections only to re-emerge later, often reminding us along the way of a reality we’d perhaps chosen to forget. And let’s be honest, wanton disregard for the facts is pretty much a prerequisite for audiophilia nervosa. Which tends to make products that are just downright sensible, that deliver simple, honest performance, sadly unglamorous. But how often do we come back to them, rediscovering the solid qualities that somehow escaped our notice (or didn’t seem quite so important) when we were busy selecting our last flight of sonic fancy?

Thorens supplied my first ever, suspended sub-chassis turntable (at a time when suspended sub-chassis construction was de rigeur if you didn’t want the staff in your local audio store sniggering at you behind your back). That TD160S, complete with an SME 3009 served me well, whilst encouraging a (probably unhealthy) interest in the history of the deck’s development. As a result I also acquired a TD160BC, various TD150s and a couple of AR XAs, all for peanuts on the secondhand market. It was an interesting voyage of discovery, along the path of which I learnt that appearances can be deceptive and newer doesn’t necessarily mean better. But it also taught me considerable respect for Thorens’ engineering and

their place in the hi-fi firmament, importers to Europe from its roots in the US, of the structural approach that was to sweep to prominence in the audio equivalent of jihad.

Ironic then, that just as the suspended deck seems finally to have had its day, the latest TD160 incarnation should arrive. But just as Thorens themselves have been through a major transformation, changing ownership and revisiting the electronics market with some really rather impressive power amplifiers,



the TD160 you see before you today, whilst sharing a basic concept with its various ancestors, employs materials, engineering and execution that have changed out of all recognition. Look a little closer and you find a deck that whilst superficially similar is technologically far more impressive. But the best bit of all: it’s simpler, even more sensible, but the performance now needs no apologies. Add that to all the techy stuff you can wax lyrical about and the dear old TD160 has become downright sexy.

So what have we got? Outwardly the TD160HD employs similar, compact

plinth dimensions and the same moulded lid as the original. That’s where the material similarities cease. The lid no longer even comes with hinges – removing the lid whilst playing being one of the standard tweaks in ages past. The sub-chassis is now constructed from RDC material, and suspended on sophisticated polymer grommets that provide exceptional isolation coupled to good mechanical stability, meaning speed stability is also improved. Drive is from a slow-speed synchronous motor, fitted with a large diameter, crowned profile nylon pulley and fed from an external, plug-top supply. This uses the standard Thorens flat belt to drive a one-piece acrylic platter, possibly the biggest single change from the original design with its two-part aluminium platter. You even get a nifty

little device that enables you to position the belt correctly. The platter sits directly on the new, larger-diameter bearing shaft, supported by a large cir-clip. The top of the platter surface is recessed to accept a two-piece, course cork mat, similar in design to the Loricraft ones, the large cut-out in the top layer forming the label recess. A large switch on the front corner of the plinth allows electronic selection of 33 and 45 (although personally I’d have loved to see the old, almond-shaped knob retained, perhaps in acrylic to match the platter.

The deck comes supplied with a Thorens-badged Rega RB250 mounted on its now circular armboard. This is ►

▶ moulded from RDC and incorporates a locking collar to allow arm-height adjustment. The arm cable is terminated in a pair of phono sockets mounted in the rear of the plinth, although no earth terminal is provided. One final change that's definitely for the better; the deck stands on three RDC cone feet, which sound better than the old rubber ones as well as allowing precise levelling. The factory-set suspension and clear instructions make set-up as simple as any solid-plinth design and the biggest dilemma will be choice of cartridge and mounting surface. Although the Thorens is less affected by its support than some suspended designs, it will still benefit from some care in this regard and I got excellent results from Cambre Core and finite-elemente racks as well as the (completely overkill but I just had to try it) Grand Prix Audio wall shelf. The Rega arm will be at home with anything from budget moving-magnets up to sub-£1K coils from Lyra, Ortofon or Dynavector. Again, I got great results using a DV-20X but the player really deserves (and rewards the use of) a better cartridge, and I employed the Lyra Argo for much of my listening – although I've a sneaky suspicion that the DV-17D3 could work really well too.

The complete package (without a cartridge but including a basic interconnect for the tonearm, a small spirit level and a really excellent instruction manual) will set you back £1395, which I have to judge a

considerable bargain. Incidentally, you can also buy the TD160HD as a BC (or basic chassis) model, fitted with a Rega, SME M2, SME oval or blank armboard at a price of £1250. Other factory fitted combinations include the RB300 at £1470, the SME M2/9 at £2500 or the SME 309 at £2800.

In serious analogue terms the price of the TD160HD with the RB250 represents one step up from entry level, the bottom rung on the high-end ladder. However, that doesn't mean that you can take its performance for granted. Care and attention to meticulous set-up pays dividends, and whilst this is mainly a case of doing it properly and checking that you have (rather than any arcane black arts), time spent getting the deck perfectly



level, aligning the cartridge – ideally more accurately than the provided Rega single-point protractor allows – and getting cabling and a nice clean mains feed is readily audible in the musical end result. In particular, pay attention to tracking force. Set it initially (preferably using an electronic balance) but then

take the trouble to listen to the effect of tiny adjustments up and down. Do it by ear, simply turning the weight a mil or so each time. You'll soon hit a sweet spot that combines pace and a solid sense of purpose to the music. Over do it and things will start to slow and get stodgy. It makes all the difference between a performance that's nice, and one that really grabs and holds your attention – and it's free. Which in many respects sums up the Thorens as far as set up goes. Plug and play it straight from the box and you'll get a performance that's perfectly respectable, especially at the price. Do the job properly and you'll elevate that performance significantly, adding transparency, dynamic range, solidity and a natural sense of musical flow to proceedings.

Running the TD160HD with the Argo mounted and a Crystal arm cable (chosen to match the rest of the cabling in the system rather than the deck specifically) the performance delivered was frankly astonishing for the money. Like its principal competitor, VPI's Scout, the TD160 completely redefines

your expectations as to just how much music you can get from a basic analogue set-up. Compared to the more affordable offerings from Rega and Project this is definitely the real deal. The dynamic envelope, bandwidth, transparency and range of expression available puts many a high-end CD player to shame – and quite a few wannabe turntables too. There's an attractive pace and momentum to music that demands it, a more relaxed ease and expansive fluidity to more introspective material. So KT Tunstall's 'Black Horse And The Cherry Tree' has an infectious bounce and drive that picks up effortlessly from the more ▶

What on earth is RDC?

For all of you who've been asleep at the back, RDC is a resin-based material developed by a German company Clearlight Audio, containing grains of different sizes and materials that bonded together create a chaotic and thus non-resonant structure. Readily moulded into different, complex shapes and also easily machined, the nature of the substance's mechanical behaviour can be further tuned according to the precise mix of materials incorporated. It has enjoyed considerable success in the accessories markets as well as delivering impressive results in Clearlight's own products. The Thorens TD160HD was developed with considerable input from Clearlight's Kurt Olbert, and is the first mass-market product to really exploit the material.



▶ reflective, stretched-out tempo of 'Under The Weather'. Rock solid drums propel the track, easily bridging the hesitations and breaks that keep things interesting across the length of this perfectly shaped mini-pop statement. Yet the music slips just as effortlessly into the tactile, almost reggae bass line of 'Miniature Disasters' with its deep, deep thuddy bass drum. Too many decks roll the rhythms of these successive tracks together, making them sound same-y when in reality they're far from it. It's this chameleon quality that underpins the stellar musical contribution of the Thorens, that allows it to put the music so firmly first. It has an innate, almost preternatural grasp of music's rhythm and tempo, and an ability to match its pace – and shifts in pace – that allows it to live and breathe. This should come as no surprise to anybody who has heard the Clearlight turntables – but here, combined with the cost benefits of (relatively) large-scale production we discover the benefits at a previously undreamt of price-point. And there's more: couple the deck's plug-top power supply into something more sophisticated like a mains regenerator feeding the rest of the system, and its temporal grasp becomes absolutely front-rank, matching any 'table I've heard in this important respect – making for a compellingly enjoyable listening experience.

You'll also notice that thus far, the only record I've referred to is a bog-standard commercial pressing

of a far from great recording. The best thing about the TD160's inherent honesty, its reluctance to step forward

in the process, is

that it allows records to speak for themselves rather than standing over them, pointing out their shortcomings. Likewise, as wonderful as the Argo sounded, the DV-20X, at almost a quarter of the price, was allowed to strut its stuff, sounding well-balanced, grainless and sweetly solid. With the Dynavector installed the 'table took on a smaller, slightly politer and more constrained quality. It didn't sound sat-on or shut-in, it sounded complete and satisfying. Reverting to the Argo, the benefits were hard to miss, it's just that they made much more sense, were far more apparent going up the scale than down – which is another way of saying that the Thorens will generally deliver as much as it can. So the catchy energy of 'Suddenly I See' has a propulsive integrity with the DV-20X that pushes things along, a coherent flow. With the Argo the carefully woven strands and



textures, the overdubs and changes in density are teased out, more apparent, adding interest and subtlety to the song. But this isn't just about the cartridges; it's about the deck allowing them to do their job.

This evenhandedness is a mark

of the deck's inherent, almost studied neutrality. It imposes so little of itself on the process that its partnering equipment and the recorded content dominate proceedings. Again it's a case of the RDC hallmark, with a naturally effortless separation of instruments and overall clarity that sets out a convincing soundscape without paring away the instruments to etched outlines of their solid selves. That is in turn down to the tonal and textural distinction the deck brings to individual instruments and notes, its harmonic patterns underpinned by micro-dynamic integrity and the even nature of its energy spectrum. There are no bands of unwanted colour to clog proceedings, no excess weight wobbling embarrassingly free where it's least expected. Instead, the picture presented is clean and unadulterated, what sins there are being subtractive in nature. These are apparent in a subtle greying of the tonal palette, although not one that diminishes instrumental separation or identity. Instead it serves to mute the more vivid aspects of their tonal character. This and the limits on absolute low-frequency resolution and transparency (a lack of acoustic boundaries and the air below bass instruments, only apparent when compared to far more costly 'tables) and some congestion or lack of poise on the most complex and energetic material are I suspect, more a product

of the tonearm than the deck. Of

course, a better arm alters the cost and value balance, but the inherent dynamic, bandwidth and tonal limitations of

the Rega beg the question as to just how good a platform the TD160HD provides? Hopefully, it's a question we can investigate further via the BC model, but for now, it's the Thorens/Rega pairing that concerns us, and at the asking price the failings are frankly trivial. ▶

▶ Playing better recordings simply plays to the deck's strengths. The *Carmen Fantasia* on Decca? Space, air, focus, a calm assurance and mid-band transparency combine with the delicate precision of Ricci's playing to captivate the listener. Dynamic contrasts may fall short of the TNT 6 carrying the Titan i, but only by dint of extreme familiarity or direct comparison, while the subtle shifts in tempo and beautiful phrasing of soloist and strings are given full rein. The confident swagger in Ricci's bowing never runs away, transforming itself into hauteur or vivid drama at the demand of conductor and score. This ability to embrace the emotional compass of a performance is exactly why you should invest in analogue in the first place. The Thorens delivers a more immediate return on your investment than any other deck I've tried near the price.

Nor does it favour one genre at

power, there's a sense of contained energy waiting to respond or explode as required. Think of the poise and effortless acceleration of Seb Coe in his prime, all that potential performance contained in such a slight frame, yet combined with the vivacious life and graceful bounce of a ballet dancer. That's the surefooted musical response you get from the Thorens; and some of Coe's World Records still stand today!

Just how good is the TD160HD's motor unit? I've yet to discover, but I've also yet to push it beyond its limits. Even a combination of Connoisseur phono and line stages driving the VAS amps and Wilson's Duetto/WATCH Dog combination failed to disturb its balanced enthusiasm or calm restraint, simply extracting more and more performance from the player. Likewise, the way it responds to external upgrades, be they a cartridge, a power supply or a support, further suggests the mechanical integrity of the essentially simple but beautifully executed design. And all at a price that is distinctly Real World. I'm pondering where to go in

terms of a matching arm: the Naim ARO is an obvious contender, as is the

Kuzma Stogi

Reference, whilst VPI's

JMW 9.0 also appeals. Then there's the Brinkmann 10" if that would fit.

Choices, choices...

But let's try and put the Thorens into some sort of context. As appealing as it should be to anybody looking for a high value record player, just consider the special fascination it will hold for all those who owned, once aspired to own, or still own a Linn. Just think; you could buy a Keel sub-chassis upgrade for an LP12 or, for around half the price, a whole new deck to mount an existing or new arm on – leaving you around a \$1000 to spend on peripherals, and we

know how this deck responds to those! Am I really suggesting that the 160 is a viable alternative to a fully loaded Linn? I don't know, not having heard the latest LP12, but I'm confident that the Thorens will give any of the previous Linn incarnations a run for their money. Yes, the TD160HD really is that good. In fact, this Thorens has to represent one of the biggest analogue bargains of all time. Given the dedicated following that still clings to the Linn and the stratospheric price rises on that product, let alone all the analogue newbies and born-again, the TD160HD could (and should) be the most significant analogue product launched in the UK this year. Suddenly, being sensible seems almost... sensible!



the expense of others. Listening to the likes of KT Tunstall or The Cure you could be forgiven for concluding that its pace and drive make it a rock or pop orientated product. But nothing could be further from the truth. The restrained tempo of Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen*, the elongation of the phrases, is never hurried or clipped. Music, all music is allowed to breathe; yet that that should be breathless is breathless indeed. It's a little like watching a great middle-distance runner going through his paces. A perfect blend of balance, grace and honed, athletic

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Record player with suspended sub-chassis and integral Rega tonearm (other arms available – see text)
Motor:	AC synchronous
Drive:	Belt
Speeds:	33 and 45
Platter:	One-piece acrylic
Platter Weight:	2kg
Tonearm:	Rega RB250
Effective Length:	223mm
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 175 x 340mm
Weight:	8kg
Finish:	Black/Grey
Guarantee:	2 years
Number Of UK Dealers:	30
Price:	£1395 (including RB250 tonearm)

UK Distributor:

UKD
Tel. (44)(0)1753 652669
Net. www.ukd.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Thorens Export Co. Ltd.
Net. www.thorens.com