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The Thorens TD-160 HD Turntable

By Marc Phillips

THORENS



For many years, I had a bit of a bias against Thorens turntables. I was aware of the meticulous German craftsmanship and robust durability of these machines, but I always felt the sound quality stopped just short of simpler and more affordable designs coming out of the UK. A few months ago, however, I heard a vintage TD160 paired with an extremely modest Shure cartridge, and I found myself utterly surprised at the overall sound quality. I realized that after years of recommending old Duals and AR-XAs for my vinyl-loving but cash-challenged brethren, I should have been steering them toward Thorens instead.

The new Thorens TD160 HD, however, is a much more ambitious design than its legendary namesake. Thorens borrowed the TD160 moniker to reflect the fact that this new model has similar dimensions to the first model, which was first introduced in 1972. That model sold for a substantial amount of money even in those days, at least compared to those aforementioned ARs and Duals (remember that the LP-12 arrived a year later for a whopping \$360). This new model will set you back close to \$5000 with an SME-sourced arm attached to the plinth. A lower cost version with an OEM Rega RB 250 arm is priced at \$3500. *(continued)*

That same feeling of compactness permeates the new TD-160 HD, when you pick it up. At a shade over 17 lbs., this Thorens is surprisingly light and mobile. The majority of 'tables in this price range can be downright unwieldy, with separate motor housings, power supplies and lead or acrylic platters that weigh more than a bowling ball.

Thorens was able to make the HD so svelte by employing innovative new materials in its construction. The base plate, tonearm platform and feet are all made from Resonance Damping Compound (RDC), a granular "non-homogeneous material of high mechanical stability" that reduces waves of resonance throughout the chassis. RDC also contributes to the light overall weight of the HD.

Technology at Work

According to the literature, the HD uses a progressively damped conical suspension and a flexible plastic subchassis to provide the same vibration

control as high-mass designs. Thorens also keeps the outer dimensions of the TD-160 HD compact by placing the motor and electronic speed control inside the plinth...you know, like they used to do in the old days. Even the belt and pulley is completely hidden within the acrylic polymer platter. That's right, I said acrylic platter and Thorens in the same sentence. This new platter is relatively thin and light as well, and is designed to produce an optimum balance between mass and inertia. You also get two cork mats of differing thicknesses to help with those nagging VTA urges. I found this very handy when switching between standard 140g pressings and 180g audiophile pressings.

Since the belt and the pulley are obscured once the platter is in place, Thorens includes a small mounting jig that allows you to pull the belt into place. *(continued)*



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You slip the belt into the interior of the platter, fit the platter carefully onto the spindle, and then slip the jig under the platter and pull the belt out to the drive pulley. It's a fairly quick and painless procedure. When I first assembled the HD, I had actually misplaced the jig but was still able to get the belt and platter in place on the first try. I'm not sure if I could do it again, though. I guess it all depends upon whether you feel lucky. Well, do you?

The M2 arm that was supplied with the HD is sourced from SME, and closely resembles the M1 arm that was fitted on that short-lived Musical Fidelity turntable a few years ago. I found the arm to be a bit fiddly for my tastes, and surprisingly less substantial than my reference SME V. That may not be an entirely fair comparison, considering that the V retails for nearly as much as the HD and the M2 combined. But the M2 will remind you more of old 3009s and 3012s than the newer SME arms. If I could change one thing about the M2, however, it would be the arm clamp, which contains an additional, tiny release lever for your protection. It reminds me of those automobiles where you have to depress the extra button near the ignition to pull your key out. Some people may need this. I don't.

The key feature here is the removable headshell that is identical to the ones used with the current SME 309 arm. Should you have more than one cartridge, this will make it very easy to switch between them.

To Clamp or Not to Clamp, That is the Question

I used the Thorens TD-160 HD over several months, and with a variety of analog equipment. My reference Koetsu Rosewood Standard cartridge shared duties with the stunningly well-balanced yet affordable Dynavector 17D3. And while I used the Thorens to evaluate three or four phono preamps in the \$1000 range (PS Audio, Dynavector, Lehmann, Sutherland), the HD also had a chance to strut its stuff with the much more expensive Audio Research PH-7.

I have to admit that it took me a while to warm up to the Thorens' charms. Out of the box, I felt that the HD offered a truly big and detailed soundstage, but sacrificed a bit of heft at the low end. I suspected that the HD's low-mass construction may have contributed to this lightweight character, but decided to let everything play for a few weeks before making any hasty conclusions.

While staring at the spinning platter on the HD, I felt something else was missing. I finally realized

that this was the first time in many years that I was using a high-quality analog rig without a record clamp. I tried using the clamp from my Michell Orbe SE on the HD, but it's intended for use with threaded spindles, so it just plopped loosely on top of the LP. Surprisingly, a bit more deep bass emerged. I then borrowed a SOTA clamp, which has a bit more mass than the Michell clamp and was able to grab onto the Thorens with more authority.

That confirmed some suspicions I had about the AC synchronous motor, which is definitely of the low-torque variety (dragging a dry cleaning brush across an LP actually brought the platter to a complete stop more than once). As it turned out, the use of a really heavy clamp such as the SOTA was too much of a strain on the drive system, affecting the speed. I was surprised that this would occur with the electronic speed control, but it did. Sorry, but I don't think there's an audiophile in the world who would sacrifice speed accuracy, especially when it's so obvious, for that last bit of deep bass.

With such a low mass design, it's no surprise that I found the overall character of the HD to be a little on the lean, exciting side. More than one industry professional has told me that some of the newer Thorens 'table designs are reminiscent of Linn, but the sound of the HD was much more P9 than LP-12. LP after LP, I found the Thorens to add the same bit of excitement and slightly forward presentation that the folks in Southend-on-Sea have been offering for decades. That's far from a bad thing, but once again you have to define your sonic priorities before you lay down this kind of money.

Master of Information Retrieval

With the astonishingly neutral Dynavector 17D3 mounted on the end of the M2, the presentation was a tad too forward on certain recordings, with the sides of the soundstage wrapping around laterally in a slight unrealistic manner. That's more a function of my room than anything else, but I found it curious that I'd never experienced this effect before while using other turntables. Another reservation with this combination was that it was so revealing that I felt that surface noise was accentuated to an uncomfortable degree. The sound of the needle on dead wax was much more audible than I'm used to. Switching back to my Koetsu seemed to remedy most of these annoyances and relegate the soundstage into a more relaxed and natural context. In other words, the Thorens prefers a slightly warm cartridge, unless you're a fan of ultra-detailed and forward sound.

One respect in which the Thorens absolutely shines is its ability to resolve that last bit of information from the groove and arrange it in an organized and meaningful fashion. If a productive listening session means that you've heard new details in familiar recordings, then the Thorens may be the right 'table for you. On my Sundazed pressing of Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, for example, I heard a few guitar riffs that I'd never noticed before, particularly on "I Am Trying to Break Your Heart." Lesser analog rigs tend to become confused and murky during complex passages. The Thorens, in comparison, is a master logician.

An Up to Date Classic

Now that it's time to pack up the TD-160 HD and send it back to Two Channel Distribution, I have to acknowledge a new and solemn respect for Thorens. I've been following Art Dudley's adventures in restoring and fine-tuning a vintage TD-124 mk. II, and I'm intrigued with his comments about the end result. I've toyed with the idea with restoring a Garrard 301 for many years, but my experience with the HD and my recent with that old TD160 has whetted my appetite for more things Thorens.

I'm sorry I've ignored this legendary company for so long. The Thorens TD-160 HD is a light, compact and easy-to-use premium turntable that doesn't ask too much of its owner. While not quite plug and play, it is startlingly close.

While I prefer the warmer, weightier balance that I get from my Michell Orbe SE, I still believe that the HD is a solid performer in its price class, and will make more than a few Thorens fans giddy with excitement.

The Thorens TD 160HD

MSRP:

\$4899 with SME M-2 tonearm

\$2899 with RB250 tonearm

US Distribution

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Second opinion — Jeff Dorgay

Perusing Marc's copy and looking back at what Michael Fremer had to say about the M2 arm, I was intrigued to try a bit warmer cartridge than the 17D3 and observe the results. I tried a pair of Grados, the \$500 Sonata and the \$2500 Statement. While the Statement was a little overkill for this table, the Sonata was a nice match and I suspect that moving up a notch or two in the Grado line, or perhaps going to the Clearaudio Maestro Wood would be the perfect match.

One really needs to look at their analog setup as a complete system that needs to work together to provide the sound that you are after. Due to its mechanical construction and choice of materials, a turntable and tonearm combination will have a given sound, but this can be fine tuned somewhat by choice of cartridge and phono preamplifier. Where Marc played it straight, staying on the neutral side, I wanted to see how much romance could be injected into this combination.

Quite a lot, actually, so if your system and/or tastes run toward the lush side of musical reproduction, consider a Grado or other cartridge with a known warm tonal balance for the TD160. It's like going from a BMW to a Lexus, still plenty of performance, just a bit comfier ride. The Grado Statement was a particularly good match with the ModWright 9.0SWP providing plenty of dynamics but a little bit more air to the presentation.

If you are looking for a great turntable and would like an alternative to the Regas and VPIs that your buddies have, the TD 160HD is a real contender. If it were me, I'd restore a vintage one to sit next to the new one on my rack, but I'm obsessed! ●

