

Disarming

After many months of experimentation, David Price has finally turbocharged his Technics SL1200 turntable to within an inch of its life...

Thanks to the fact that it has been the staple deck for DJs since the nineteen seventies, the Technics SL1200 has been the object of much derision in UK hi-fi circles for many years. Anyone who's dared to say it sounds good has been mocked by golden eared hi-fi types who simply can't accept that it could even be a rival for their stripped down, minimalist belt drives, let alone better...

I too was of this view for a good long while, but coming into closer contact with the deck several years back, when I had the chance to review the gold-plated anniversary edition, got me curious. Actually, it didn't sound very good at all, but it was the way it didn't sound good that intrigued me. Put simply, it didn't sound good in a totally different manner to how other 'cheap' turntables don't sound good!

Most impressive was the deck's bass and dynamics, the SL1200 seeming to do something with kick drums that I'd never heard before on a deck at anywhere near its price. It also seemed very tight, lively and dynamic up to a point, whereupon it would go to pieces on heavily modulated music. By comparison, similarly priced belt drives would sound far looser and softer and more imprecise, but have a nicer, smoother tone. This got me thinking.

The next moment in the story was a phone call from Stewart Wennen, some five years ago, who mooted the idea of scrapping the SL1200's factory fitted tonearm. Would I be interested if he tried it, he asked? You bet I would be, and soon after I was at this house listening to the result. He had fabricated a bespoke armboard for the venerable Technics turntable, enabling a Rega arm to be fitted.

As a long term user of the SL1200 (thanks to his DJ activities), SW very accurately diagnosed the reason for the deck's mediocre sound to be its very mediocre tonearm – as he pointed out, it's effectively a cheap-as-chips Japanese OEM design, very probably costing pence rather

than pounds. S-shaped tonearms certainly look good, but in my experience, only Alphason ever did a decent sounding one. (The venerable Acos Lustre, now mysteriously selling for quite substantial sums on online auction sites, may be nicely made, but it doesn't sound much cop.)

Basically, what Stewart's armboard had done was to restore the option of buying the long, lost Technics SL120. Lest we forget, the original nineteen seventies Technics SL series nomenclature was such that decks with bundled tonearms got an extra '0' on the end of their model number (to wit, the SL1200 is actually an SL120 with an arm fitted). The SL120 was a popular mid-seventies deck, and found itself partnered with the inevitable SME 3009S2 and Shure M75ED cartridge – it would have sounded nice, but again wouldn't have exactly realised the motor unit's full potential.

So, fitting an Origin Live SL1200 armboard to the Technics is basically restoring the SL120 to its humble beginnings, and fitting a decent Rega-based arm shows just how good the deck can sound – and boy, does it sound good! This feature is basically a follow up to SW's original, although we've not only done an arm transplant, but also addressed what I perceive to be the SL1200's other weaknesses...

THE MODS

When you disassemble the SL1200, you find yourself marvelling at how it can retail in the UK for £400 (and in Japan it's nearer half that). Compared to your average British deck at twice the price, it seems amazingly thoroughly built. Essentially, it has an upper section and a lower section – the latter base is made of dense rubber with a cast resin damping block. The upper section is beautifully cast aluminium alloy, and there's a lot of circuitry inside, for what is surely one of the most successful drive systems ever - Matsushita's quartz referenced direct drive motor. This is a more impressive sight than the inevitable Impex motor and rubber band used by most audiophile

turntables from Europe...

This core is what (as we shall see) makes the deck so great. However, everything goes downhill from then on. As previously mentioned, the tonearm is simply not of the same quality to the motor unit, costing a fraction of the price to make and not worthy of fitment as far as serious users are concerned. Then there's the platter, which is a light and bell-like affair; this is understandable as the *raison d'être* of the SL1200 (in its later incarnations, at least) has been DJ work which requires ultra fast start-up. Then there are the feet, which are cheap off-the-shelf designs that frankly should be better considering that the SL1200 is not independently sprung. Technics should have paid more attention here, as they're relying on its heavy internal construction to damp vibrations.

Well, the answers are easy. The SoundDeadSteel Isoplatmat was designed with Japanese DD platters in mind, the idea being to make a polymer sandwich from two steel discs (one of which is 1.6 times thicker than the other). It isn't too heavy (it was found that this impaired sound on the Pioneer PL-L1000 development mule), but adding a modest amount of mass really did help speed stability. The performance of the SDS Isoplatmat is very much on a 'case by case' basis, but generally it seems to very effectively take the 'zing' out of bell-like alloy platters – making for a smoother and more finessed sound – as well as add that

