Supercharging the Sondek

AFTER SOME YEARS DURING WHICH THE SONDEK LP12 SEEMED TO TAKE A BACK SEAT, LINN HAS INTRODUCED SOME MAJOR SE ENHANCEMENTS, INCLUDING THE ALLOY KEEL SUBCHASSIS AND THE RADIKAL DC MOTOR. MARTIN COLLOMS GETS TANGLED UP WITH THE OPTIONS

Undeniably famous, with more than 100,000 built, Linn's *Sondek LP12* turntable has attracted plenty of publicity, from fawning admiration to respect and acknowledgment, and perhaps inevitably a measure of derision. Like so many motor car platforms today, the *Sondek* can be regarded as a foundation on which a number of variations may be specified, resulting in distinctly different versions with prices and performance to match.

An underpinning consisting of the familiar stainless steel top plate, plinth, main bearing, platter and flat belt drive remains essentially constant. Significant variations over time have included suspension components (*Nirvana* 1981); quartz locked inboard power (*Valhalla* 1984), isolating sub-base and external quartz power (*Trampolin* and *Lingo* 1991), and a main bearing upgrade (*Cirkus*, a standard fitment on all *LP12*s since 1993).

For a number of years thereafter Linn focused its attention on upgrading tonearms and cartridges, but 2007 saw a major upgrade to the turntable subchassis called the *Keel* (£2,350), a one-piece subchassis with integral arm 'board', machined from a solid aluminium alloy billet. It was initially launched simultaneously with and designed to partner Linn's *Ekos SE* tonearm, but a version was subsequently developed to work with the Naim *Aro* tonearm, and that version is the main subject of this review.

However, while we were planning this review of the *Aro*/*Keel*, Linn announced another major LP12 upgrade, this time concerning the motor, specifically a new *Radikal* DC motor and outboard power supply. A matching on-board *Urika* phono pre-amp equaliser (not tested) works off the same supply. (In fact there are two versions of the *Radikal*'s power supply unit: the £2,500 *Akurate* and the £4,500 *Klimax* variation with luxury casework to match the other *Klimax* components.)

Linn organises its hi-fi electronics into a three level hierarchy: entry-level *Majik*; mid-price *Akurate*; and upmarket *Klimax*. The venerable LP12 with its unusually flexible upgradeability doesn't fit neatly into this structure. A *Majik LP12* (£2,250) is specified – a mains driven model fitted with a Pro-Ject *9cc* arm and an *Adikt* moving magnet cartridge. Starting from the basic £1,750 *Sondek LP12* motor unit, various equivalent *Akurate* and *Klimax* record players can be permed from the long list of options available, the top model combining the latest *SE* turntable enhancements reviewed here, together with the *Ekos SE* tonearm, *Akiva* moving-coil cartridge and *Urika* phono stage.

Deep Background

My own current *LP12* dates from late 1988, when I reviewed it for *Hi-Fi News*, and for some years I used it with a Mission *774* tonearm with interchangeable wands. More recently I've been using it with a Naim *Aro* unipivot tonearm, which again has the replaceable arms tubes that are so convenient when a reviewer has to change cartridges frequently.

However, my very first *LP12* experience was for a review in *Hi Fi For Pleasure* (under my then pseudonym F.M. Hughes) way back in July 1974. It was fitted with an SME *3009-II*, at a total cost of £110.76. A few months later I reviewed the very similar Ariston *RD11*, priced at £93.45 with the same tonearm. I do not take sides concerning the early gestation of the *LP12* and *RD11*, but when I reviewed them back then the *LP12* was actually a clear winner on both performance and build quality.

To quote from my 1974 *LP12* review:
"The heart of any precision turntable is the main bearing which supports the large rotating platter mass. As the reproducing cartridge stylus is in direct contact with the platter via the record, any noise in the bearing is immediately transmitted to the cartridge….the essential feature of the *LP12* bearing is the single point contact. The large conical tip of the hardened tool steel spindle is ground to a conical profile with a small spherical radius at the point with extreme care taken over concentricity. It bears on hardened and mirror finished lapped thrust plate, at over 2 ½ thousands tons per square inch, but because the point contact has a very small radius the angular velocity is very small and the wear and noise resulting is very low.

"A low friction bearing liner is used, separated into upper and lower sections to reduce rocking and precession to a minimum. The bearing is oil filled and will last the life of the player despite the heavy 10lb, two piece die-cast and precision machined platter employed."

These facts are unchanged as is the tapered coil spring, rubber isolated, three-point inertially balanced, suspended subchassis. As Linn's founder Ivor Tiefenbrun was at pains to point out, it