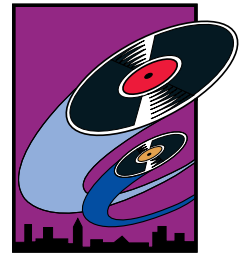


Analog Corner

Michael Framer



“**W**hat’s this? The new Thorens turntable? It doesn’t look like a Thorens turntable.”

That’s what I thought as I unboxed the new Thorens 850—part of the new 800 line from the rejuvenated company. Sure, I’d seen mockups at trade shows, but until I get the finished product in my hands, I really don’t pay careful attention.

I knew the 850 would have a Rega-sourced “TP300” arm. Gee, I wonder which arm in the Rega line that corresponds to? I’d bet that was more a Rega OEM marketing decision than Thorens’ choice, but why bother? Everyone knows the answer to that question.

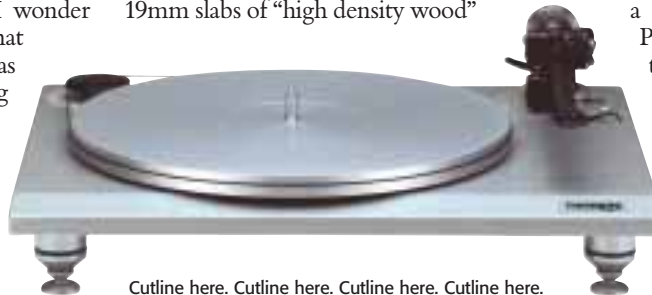
The more I examined this new 46-lb ’table, the less it looked like your dad’s Thorens and the more it looked like the Acoustic Signature Final Tool (\$2000) I reviewed in the September 2001 issue—especially the damped 8.8-lb aluminum platter and bearing assembly. Well, if you’re going to copy, I figured, copy from a company that’s building a great product at a ridiculously reasonable price. The 850 costs \$1995 with tonearm, \$1599 without. Triam Electronics—(608) 850-3600—Thorens’ US distributor, can supply a variety of pre-cut armboards.

Setting up the **Thorens 850 was a snap**: the arm comes mounted, contained within a VTA adjuster with locking collet system—totally un-kosher in the Rega world, where both VTA and dirt have no effect on vinyl playback. I don’t mean to mock Rega—I really do love their stuff—just the Rega-Linn orthodoxy about VTA and groove dirt. Mount the platter, slip the surface protectors under each of the three adjustable, polymer-damped feet, level the ’table, connect the motor cable to the electronic motor controller, put the square belt around the motor pulley, plug it in, and—aside from mounting your favorite cartridge and placing the counterweight on its shaft—you’re done.

The Thorens 850 features an AC-

synchronous motor set into a cutout on the plinth. An outboard power supply synthesizes a 60Hz sinewave, so the turntable motor is totally independent of power-line fluctuations. An inboard potentiometer allows for precise speed adjustments within $\pm 8\%$, but my review sample ran at *precisely* 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ and 45rpm. Hallelujah! The speed is chosen via a switch on the controller’s front panel.

The plinth features a 15mm steel plate sandwiched between two 19mm slabs of “high density wood”



Cutline here. Cutline here. Cutline here. Cutline here.



Linn ADIKT MM cartridge

(I suspect they mean high-density fiberboard). “Steel? Are they crazy?” I hear you. The plate has a laser-cut groove along the stylus path, so there’s no magnetic interference with the cartridge. The bearing system features two sintered bushings and a polished, stainless-steel shaft fitted with a tungsten ball riding on a self-lubricating thrust plate.

A terminal box with gold-plated RCA jacks is affixed to the back of the plinth, and the ’table comes with a decent set of low-capacitance, RCA-terminated cables. All in all, the Thorens 850 is a very neat, compact design that would appear to have great mechanical integrity and sonic potential. And why should it not? It copies so much from the proven Acoustic Signature line.

After removing the 850’s felt mat (feh!) and replacing it with a Ringmat, I began my listening with Linn’s latest moving-magnet cartridge, the appropriately named **Adikt** (\$349). It’s designed for Linn tonearms, so I had to chop off a few plastic protruding posts, which was a pain but no big deal. I wanted to hear what an unknown cartridge sounded like first, and use it to check a few things.

I put a test record on and checked the speed accuracy with a hertz-reading voltmeter. Perfect. Then I listened through a stethoscope and found the 850’s plinth to be absolutely free of motor-induced noise and vibrations. Finally, a finger-tap test revealed this plinth design to be among the most effectively damped I’ve come across. I could turn up the volume very high, tap the plinth, and hear very little coming through the speakers. What did get through was a brief, innocuous, high-pitched *pop*—none of the *thunk* you get from many other designs. Bottom line: The 850 runs at the right speed, with no motor-noise leakage in a one-piece design, and ultra-effective damping. Impressive.

Although I wasn’t familiar with the Linn Adikt, I knew from listening that the Thorens 850 had good rhythmic authority. The bass on some of my usual-suspect LPs was clean, tight, and free of overhang. Extension and texture were only so-so, and the extension was not first-rate, but that could have been the Adikt. I let the cartridge break in for a few days and I decided that the basic sound of the Adikt **was clean, crisp, fast, reasonably** detailed, and a bit cool. It did a nice, clean job with fast, high-frequency transients, such as cymbal smacks and female vocal sibilants. Fitted with a removable Gyger II stylus, it proved an excellent tracker at 1.75gm, quietly coursing through the grooves. Naturally, it lacked the subtle harmonic and dynamic gradations of far more expensive cartridges, and it was less than super-transparent, but it costs only \$349. If you want a warmer, more laid-

back MM, don't forget Shure's V 15VxMR, which is still excellent after all these years.

Being in a playful mood, I switched to a cartridge that's been gathering dust on the shelf after having being used only once. I hadn't been impressed with the [Garrott Brothers' P-88](#), a venerable low-output (0.36mV) moving-coil, but *this* time I was. What a sweetheart. Of course, it changed the "sound" of the Thorens 850 completely — once you get past the fundamental level of turntable design, which the Thorens clearly did, the transducer reigns supreme in terms of affecting sound quality. With the Garrott P-88, the sound was richer, bigger, more dynamic, and yet more immediate. (Garrott cartridges are available from Jerry Raskin's Needle Doctor, www.needledoctor.com.)

Playing Peter Gabriel's "Shock the Monkey," I compared this combo with my Simon Yorke Series 7 turntable, Immedia RPM-2 tonearm, and Lyra Titan MC cartridge. Of course, this reference rig sounded better, but the Thorens-Garrott pairing wasn't *that* far behind in reproducing subtle musical gradations that the Adikt skimmed over. The Thorens-Garrott combo was damned involving, thanks to its really impressive bass extension and articulation. In fact, the P-88 more closely resembled the musical take of the Titan than of some older Lyras, which sounded a bit less rich. When I played Acoustic Sounds' 45rpm version of Count Basie's *88 Basie Street*, the Thorens-Garrott beat any CD player I've heard.

I was inspired by the improvement wrought by the substitution of the Garrott for the Linn to set the Thorens on the Relaxa 3+ [magnetic](#) levitation platform (\$795, made in Italy and imported by SAP Audio, www.sapaudio.com). The Relaxa 3+ uses pairs of opposed magnets in each of its four feet. These are stabilized using an ingenious bearing-shaft mechanism. The force between the magnets of each pair is said to be within a few grams with loads of up to 57 lbs, and higher with an optional fifth foot.

I was sent a report, by the physics department of the Politecnico di Milano, that stated that the resonant frequency of an unloaded Relaxa 3+ was 2Hz, and that the resonance appeared to be



MICHAEL FREEMER

Garrott Brothers P-88 MC cartridge

virtually independent of the load. The measured results showed that "attenuation is exceptionally good if compared to the best, state of the art, air suspended optical table," according to the report. Of course, this is in the vertical dimension only. Air-suspension platforms like the Sounds of Silence Vibraplano are equally effective vertically *and* horizontally, and cost far more.

The Thorens 850 is a hell of a turntable for \$1995.

The Thorens 850's sonic charms only improved with the better isolation provided by the Relaxa 3+. Image focus, and the subtlety and clarity of musical transients, seemed to be rendered more cleanly. Backgrounds were already "black," so I couldn't hear that that aspect was improved dramatically, but the 850's sound as a whole was more subtle, nuanced, and — I hate to say it — *relaxed*. The Relaxa 3+ may not beat an expensive Vibraplano, but it was extremely effective, and it's affordable. I don't know if the Relaxa comes with a money-back guarantee, but if it does, you ought to try one under your



SAP Relaxa magnetic levitation stand

unsuspended turntable. I think I'll try it under the Manley Steelhead and ASR Basis Exclusive phono sections...

One of the problems with this job is that I don't have competing products here for comparison, so I can't tell you how the 850 compares. What I can tell you is that the Thorens 850 is a solid piece of work, and a hell of a [turntable for \\$1995](#). It's smartly designed, well-built, and has the dynamic "pop," musical grip, image focus, and *excitement* I crave from vinyl. If you want more lush presentations, some suspended designs will deliver that.

Right now I'm now listening to Cisco's reissue of Ian and Sylvia's *Northern Journey*, with the Transfiguration Temper W affixed to the Thorens 850. The cartridge costs far more than the 'table, so it's not a real-world choice — I just wanted to hear it, and the TP300 arm was easily up to giving the Temper W a credible ride. I really like what I'm hearing.

Down a Notch in the Thorens Line

One step down the Thorens line from the 850 is the 800 (\$1299), which uses the same feet, bearing, and motor drive. The plinth is the top section of the 850, less the steel plate and lower section. The 800's platter is a lighter (6 lbs), thinner version of the 850's, and the arm is the Thorens TP250. That brings the weight down to a dietetic 17.6 lbs from the 800's 46 lbs. Now, considering that some Rega connoisseurs think the RB250 arm sounds better than the RB300 because it doesn't use a coil spring to set stylus pressure and doesn't have a O-ring-suspended counterweight, this \$1299 turntable is looking mighty competitive with its \$1995 big brother — and, of course, with Rega's P25. Although \$1150 the P25 comes with the excellent RB600 arm, the Thorens 800 includes electronic speed control — its platter is able to run at [precisely 33 1/3rpm](#). That counts for *something*.¹

I repeated all of the listening I'd done with the 850, with the same

¹ Wally Malewicz, of Wally Tools, was kind enough to procure a Leader LFM-39A wow and flutter meter for me. Soon, my turntable reviews will include those measurements, but I still have a few questions about using the meter, and until John Atkinson visits and clarifies them, I don't feel comfortable telling you what I found measuring the Thorens 850 and 800 — not that the results were bad.

cartridges, and the biggest difference was that the 800 sounded lighter. But in some ways it was a tradeoff: Yes, the bottom end lost much of its weight and grip, and dynamics were somewhat muted, but the mids and highs sounded more airy and easy. I don't think that's necessarily better, but some listeners prefer a more "relaxed fit." The Thorens 800 delivered it.

After finishing my listening, I called Brian Anderson at Trian Electronics, Thorens' US importer, to get some details. The only new thing I found out was that the turntables are available in either black or silver. I asked Anderson how business was, and he told me that the day the announcement that an American importer had been named to import the Thorens line hit the Web, the phone starting ringing of the hook. He had to hire someone just to take the calls.

"We started hearing from old-time



XDucer 2.1

Thorens dealers who hadn't carried analog in years. They wanted to get back in because they see what's going on with analog and don't want to lose the business." When I asked him how well the line has been received, Anderson told me that Thorens turntable sales were five times what he'd optimistically projected when he decided to carry the line. (He also told me he worked with Butch Vig at the recording studio where Nirvana cut *Nevermind*, but that's another story...)

Anderson told me to expect a call from the designer of the new Thorens 'tables in a few days. Sure enough, the call came from Germany. The first thing I said was something like, "With all due respect, it seems to me you've taken much of this design from the Acoustic Signature line."

The caller replied, "Michael, it's Gunther Frohnhoefer from Acoustic Signature! I thought you *knew* I designed these 'tables."

I hadn't. According to Frohnhoefer, he was approached by the new owners of Thorens to design a line of self-contained turntables for them that would be simple to set up. The assignment resulted in a new manufacturing business venture held jointly by Frohnhoefer and Thorens and separate from Acoustic Signature. Frohnhoefer confirmed the worldwide success of the new line, adding that the Thorens name still has magic. He also told me it was somewhat frustrating to see the immediate acceptance of a design of his with the Thorens name on it, when he's had to fight so hard to build his own Acoustic Signature line. Welcome to Amar Bose Land, Gunther Frohnhoefer.

Khifi Xducer 2.1

Ever since I covered the tiny but fantastic Acoustic Energy AEGO2 in the March 2001 "Analog Corner," I've gotten offers to review small satellite-subwoofer speaker systems for computers. I've turned most of them down, but bit on this one because it intrigued me: Designed by Doug Goldberg (Camelot Technology, PS Audio Power Plants, etc.), the Khifi Xducer 2.1 (\$795) looks cool.

In fact, I wrote a computer speaker piece for the *New York Times*' "Circuits" section back in 1998 that you can access on the Web: www.nytimes.com/library/tech/98/07/circuits/downtime/30speak.html. See if you can guess why,

despite being told by the editor how much he liked the piece, how well-written it was, how well I understood their style, how little editing it needed, and how much more work I'd get from the *Times*, I never heard from them again.

Like Camelot Technology), Khifi (www.khifi.com) is a Mel and Howard Schilling company (Camelot. What they've done with the Xducer 2.1 is to take a beautiful-looking JVC sat-sub system featuring a ribbon tweeter in each organ-pipe-like satellite, and a hefty powered subwoofer that looks like something Sonus Faber's Franco Serblin put together on his day off, and given it to Goldberg to modify the hell out of. Goldberg uses JVC's built-in amp to drive the sub, but substitutes his own high-quality crossover for the satellites, driving them with a digital amplifier he designed for this project. Thanks to the dual-amplification, there are both master and subwoofer level controls.

Because the satellites—designed specifically for nearfield listening—use ribbons, and ribbons are usually vertically challenged, you might think you can use this system successfully only if you put the speakers on your desk and listen at ear level. But when I stood up, I found the satellites surprisingly forgiving. On-axis, the response is said to be really smooth and extended out to 50kHz. I received a white paper written by the tweeter's designer that demonstrated that an incredible amount of careful thought, and measurements galore, had gone into the creation of the driver.

I ran the USB output of my Macintosh G4 into Onkyo's SE-U55 A/D-D/A converter (a neat compo-

In Heavy Rotation

- 1) The Rolling Stones, *The Rolling Stones*, ABKCO 180gm DSD/DMM TPs LP
- 2) My Bloody Valentine, *Loveless*, Plain Recordings 180gm LP
- 3) Charles Mingus, *Mingus, Mingus, Mingus, Mingus, Impulse!*/Speakers Corner 180gm LP
- 4) The Strokes, *Room on Fire*, RCA 120gm LP
- 5) The Shins, *Chutes Too Narrow*, Sub Pop 150gm LP
- 6) The Who, *Tommy: Special Edition*, Geffen/Chronicles SACD/CDs (2)
- 7) Bob Dylan, *John Wesley Harding*, Columbia/Sundazed 180gm mono LP
- 8) The Beatles, *Let It Be...Naked*, Apple/Capitol 180gm LP, 7" EP
- 9) Granddaddy, *Sumday*, V2 150gm LPs (2)
- 10) The Jimi Hendrix Experience, *Live at Berkeley*, Experience Hendrix/MCA 180gm LPs (2)

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ment that I don't think ever found a market niche), and the analog outputs from that into the Xducer. I've had the Xducer in my computer system for many months because I haven't had time to write about it until now. When I first replaced the AEGO2 with the Xducer 2.1, I felt the Xducer was somewhat brittle on top, and the subwoofer seemed to be a bit "thumpy" compared to the AEGO2. I also had more difficulty blending the satellites with the sub, but I worked at it and got it as good as I know how.

I played a bunch of CDs—I'll spare you the titles—that demonstrate a variety of sonic qualities, then reinstalled the AEGO2, which had lain dormant for many months. The AEGO2's bass was still better, as was its sat-sub integration, thanks in part to the better mid-band performance of the AEGO2 satellite. But the comparison pointed up the AEGO2's tipped-up top end, and the Xducer 2.1's satellites **seemed to resolve** more detail.

Still, overall, I preferred the sound of the Acoustic Energy AEGO2. It doesn't look nearly as cool as the Xducer system, but it costs only \$399. I suppose if I was sitting at a heavily trafficked cor-

porate desk, and the \$400 and the slightly less attractive sound didn't mean that much to me, I might go for the cool looks of the Xhifi Xducer 2.1.

The Xducer 2.1's satellites seemed to resolve more detail than the AEGO2.

Julian Hirsch

Julian Hirsch passed away the other day at the age of 81 [see "Update" elsewhere in this issue.—Ed.]. Despite my misgivings about some of what Julian did, he was a true audio legend who probably did more to help create this industry than any other writer. He also did more to confuse, demoralize, and tear it down, in my opinion, by relying too heavily on what was measurable and ignoring what could be heard. It then fell to J. Gordon Holt and Harry Pearson to build it back up, which they did. (Thanks, guys.)

I was an avid Hirsch reader as a teen, and relied on his reviews for guidance.

Thanks to what I read in *Stereo Review*, I chucked my tubed Dynaco PAS-3X preamp in favor of Dynaco's new, solid-state PAT-4, which sounded dreadful. Unfortunately, as I remember, it measured better than the PAS-3X, and it got a glowing review in *Stereo Review*. (So did the "no highs, no lows" Bose 901 loudspeaker, as I recall, but that I got to hear for myself. I didn't buy them.)

I remember calling Dynaco to ask if perhaps there was something wrong with my PAT-4, it sounded so dead and harmonically demoralized. I was told that it would take time for my ears to adjust to the "lack of distortion" compared to tubes. I'll never forget that conversation, and I never forgot my disappointment at being misled.

The good that came out of that experience was that, when the compact disc was introduced, I proceeded with caution. Sure enough, the same sorry story unfolded in the mainstream audio press, but I was prepared. Now, every time I write something, I think of myself as a teenager, and of *Stereophile's* young readers, and try to make sure I don't steer them wrong, the way I was. Judging by most of the e-mail I get, so far, so good. ☒