

SPIN DOCTOR

Tired of hearing background noise produced when you play your favourite LPs? Rafael Todes introduces a turntable with an ingenious solution



Townshend's ingenious Rock 7 turntable

I first saw Townshend's Rock 7 turntable in one of its earlier incarnations at a Hi-Fi show around thirty years ago, and was beguiled by it. It's a most unusual turntable, which looks like any other well-built deck, except for an arc-shaped trough suspended over the record from its outer groove to the centre. Inside the trough, a viscous silicon fluid supports a floating paddle attached to the arm, thereby damping a lot of the destructive vibrations from the arm and cartridge.

This simple but ingenious idea has a major impact on the sound produced by the deck. Most of the surface noise disappears into what becomes an inky-black silence. It is almost eerie, just how quiet a record can sound with this contraption fitted. The second startling area of improvement is the bass: there is a dramatic increase in the structure of the lower band of frequencies. Double basses sound taut and punchy, and it produces some of the best bass I have heard from any turntable, including the Garrard 401 reviewed last year.

The Rock 7 is a product of research done at Cranfield Institute of Technology in Bedfordshire. The idea of

a floating arm was picked up by engineer and audio guru Max Townshend, who has re-invented many audio wheels, focusing particularly on the role of isolation. He produces a Hi-Fi stand using springs, which eliminates nearly any vibration over 4Hz. The Rock turntable sits on three feet, built into a sprung bellow, so any excess vibration from the record is converted into heat harmlessly by the bellow/spring combination.

The basic Rock 7 deck can be fitted with any arm of choice. For this review, I used the Townshend Excalibur 3, a heavily modified Rega arm. The paddle screws onto the head shell, which floats in the trough of silicon. Adjustment is slightly more complicated than with other decks, but affords the user a far greater degree of accuracy of alignment. The distance from the spindle to the pivot may be adjusted by tiny amounts, to obtain the optimum geometry for the record, as can the Vertical Tracking Angle (VTA).

Each time you play a record, the normal procedure is slightly lengthened as you have to screw-clamp a puck to the centre spindle, which holds the record in place,

as well as swinging the trough into position.

There is a classic 1963 recording of my string quartet (the Allegri Quartet) in its original guise, under the baton of Barbirolli, playing Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. On most turntables, the opening bass pizzicati sound like soup, as does the rest of the quiet introduction. The recording was quite sparsely miked, and it is hard to get a sense of who's playing what, and where!

The Rock 7 scythes through the orchestral fog to create remarkable clarity. The recording no longer sounds like a victim of over-simplified recording technology, but comes to life as a cradle of supreme musicianship, beautifully captured. It picks up the subtlety of the leader Eli Goren's tone quality and phrasing, and Barbirolli's conception of the piece. This is what happens if you remove the excess, destructive vibrations present in the cartridge/tonerarm.

Listening to Solti's *Eugene Onegin*, on a 1974 Decca recording made at Kingsway Hall, the Letter Scene reveals the richness and detail of Tchaikovsky's orchestral

scoring. The voice of Teresa Kubiak as Tatiana has incredible bell-like clarity, almost as if a veil has been lifted when compared with my current reference turntable. There is also a distinct lack of the grunge that can plague vinyl: the surface noise of the stylus in the groove is much quieter thanks to the damping, and without excessive bass bloating, you are left with a refreshing clarity that resembles the master tape. There is real detail in the voices, and texture in the strings that make it a pleasure to listen to.

Priced at £1,700, the Rock 7 is something of a rare audiophile bargain! It exceeds aspects of other decks reviewed by me for *Hi-Fi World Magazine* that cost upwards of £5,000, and even fitted with a basic Rega RB251 Tonerarm at £142, this is a high-end proposition for under £2,000. It needs careful setting up, preferably by an experienced, knowledgeable dealer.

The extra effort of playing a record may put off some, but for those who persevere, the end result will be well worth the hassle.

For more details visit www.townshendaudio.com