

Tiger Goods

Here's one of the most interesting upgrade packages in recent years, for the ubiquitous Linn Sondek turntable. Tony Bolton gets his claws into the Tiger-Paw Khan Linn LP12...



Like most of you I'm sure, I am very protective of my hi-fi equipment. I am quite happy to try 'hot-rodding' things as long as whatever is done can be undone without leaving a mark if it doesn't work. So when editor DP approached me to do this review, which involved the stripping down, replacement of the top plate studs and crossbrace, and reassembly of my Linn Sondek, I must admit that I approached it with some degree of trepidation...

Regular readers will be aware that my Sondek is not standard, in that I use a Hadcock 242 Cryo unipivot tonearm on it, and it is powered by an Origin Live Ultra DC motor. Both of these changes, I feel, have been extremely beneficial to the sound, and have the advantage for me of enabling the deck to spin at higher speeds than just 33 and 45. The interchangeability of the Hadcock arms allows me to have three; one for LP, one for 78 and the other for

visiting cartridges, also making it a convenient tool for this job.

Having been reassured that the Khan modifications could be undone if required, I duly got the kettle brewing and awaited the visit from Mark Digman and Derek Jenkins, two of the three partners that make up the rather abstractly named company, Tiger-Paw. Based in Coulsdon in Surrey and formed in the early part of this year, they offer a range of modifications to the LP12 ranging from replacement hinges through to the Khan mod under review here.

Whilst various companies have focused their attention on the LP12's subchassis, armboards and power supplies over the years, very few have looked at the effects of the stainless steel top plate upon the sound. After experimenting with several versions, this final design is a piece of bead-blasted and anodised aluminium which is cut from a solid billet. The top has a curved design on it, whilst the underside has a straight

pattern cut in, along with tappings for the studs. These shapes are claimed to dissipate resonances making for a more inert mounting for the subchassis and motor.

The original top plate is slightly curved to make it a stressed fit into the plinth. This one weighs about



Dismantling the Sondek, prior to surgery...



New and old – the two top plates compared...

the same amount but is machined to close tolerances to allow it to just drop into place. The bolts which go right through the original top plate are replaced with high quality bespoke steel studs. Completing the ensemble is a replacement crossbrace, again in aluminium with more 'standing wave reduction grooving' which replaces the original pressed steel example. This is where the electronics for the Valhalla board or Lingo control board live, so any improvement in the mounting should benefit the sound.

After their arrival, and suitable time being allowed for tea drinking and a listen through a selection of my records ranging from Shpongles to a 1933 copy of Lew Stone's 'White Jazz', the Sondek was carried from the front room into the kitchen and placed on a Linn jig, ready for

Years ago a good friend who used to work for Linn introduced me to the black art of setting up Sondek suspension, and I have, on occasion, lost whole evenings tweaking the bounce of both LP12s and various Thorens decks, so I was very impressed to watch Derek get it bouncing perfectly in under five minutes. After final checks for arm and cartridge alignment, and balance, the Sondek went back to the wall rack in the front room and was fired up.

SOUND QUALITY

This is one of those rare occasions when it took a matter *seconds* of listening before I turned to Derek and Mark, commenting on the hugely increased scale and detail of the soundstage. They laughed and informed me that I was conforming

"for the performance improvement on offer, I feel the Tiger Paw Khan is exceptionally good value for money. Quality is second to none..."

surgery. The Linn jig is a stand which holds the deck both steady and level while allowing complete access to all parts of it. Over the next hour Derek, who has over thirty years of experience in working on Sondeks, removed the original bits until there was just a plinth sitting there. Then the new top plate was installed, followed by replacement springs and mounting grommets onto which was put the original subchassis. The bearing was thoroughly examined and pronounced to be in excellent health (pleasing news considering that this player was built on the 19th April 1982, and in my hands for the last eight years, has covered quite a high mileage) before being reassembled. Next was the crossbrace, armboard and motor unit...

to what they had begun to call the "three second rule"!

Starting with Shpongles' 'Are You Shponged?', we worked our way back through the same selection of records and I sat there mesmerised by the transformation of the sound. I have mentioned the scale differences – the music seemed to be coming from a far bigger area in front of me, with increases to all dimensions of the sound, without it acquiring a grandiose, overblown manner. The other thing that was obvious with the Shpongles pieces was the increase in detail and depth to the bass. It seemed to gain a better shape and a more defined position within the music, but lost a certain euphonic colouration that, to my ears, slows and clouds the sound somewhat.

Moving onto Lew Stone's 'White

Jazz' was an ear opener. This cover of the Casa Loma Orchestra's hit is well recorded with the band on top form, and this copy is in good condition; I now found the surface noise had taken a big step further into the background, and the beat of this rather crackingly paced foxtrot had more snap and precision. The trumpet pyrotechnics of Nat Gonella stood out with a sharper attack to the notes and the decay being better described. It was hot jazz that had just had the temperature turned up.

After Mark and Derek had left for the long drive back to the Southeast, I settled down for a very late evening of record playing. After a lot more 78s I moved back to microgroove recordings and played Acker Bilk's second LP, revelling in the latinesque beat of 'Creole Jazz'



The new top plate in situ.



The new crossbrace.



Finished and ready to go; the bubble wrap provides an element of sound deadening for the DC motor...

with Bilk's wailing clarinet almost sending tingles up my spine. I usually reach for the mono switch with this record. It bears a few minor scars from its fifty years of existence, but I now found it playing in an acceptable manner with the phono stage still in stereo mode. The background crackles were sufficiently muted so as to not be intrusive.

The same applied to a 1964 Roy Orbison LP that had obviously attended a few parties in its youth. Played on the rejuvenated Sondek,

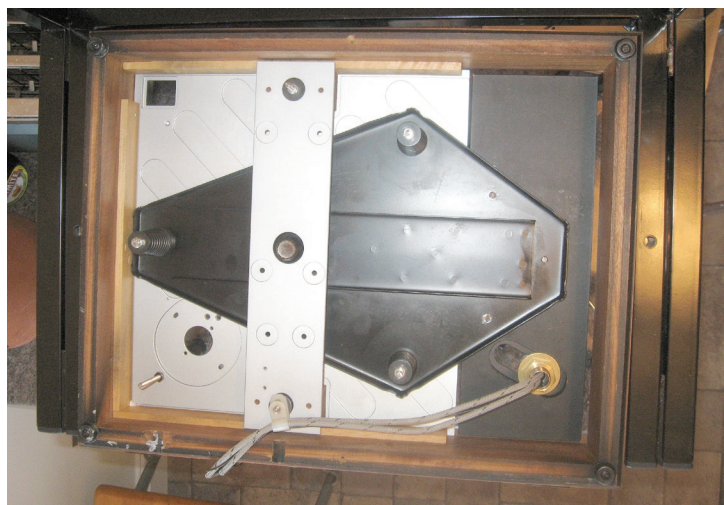
the final track on side one, a cover of Jerry Lee Lewis's 'Mean Woman Blues', played with minimal disturbance but displayed a more incisive guitar sound than I am used to hearing from it.

While I was putting together my notes for this article I played through Kalman's operetta 'Gräfin Mariza'. First performed in 1924 it is typical of the period with swinging Viennese waltzes and lush sounding choruses, complimenting rather sprightly two steps such as 'Komm

mit nach Varasdin' sung by the two leads. This recording, originally done by Electrola (HMV) in Germany in 1972, has most of the spoken bits in between the songs so comes with performers walking into and out of the stage area, along with some basic sound effects such as doors opening and differing acoustics for indoor and outdoor scenes.

I felt that the level of detail retrieval had vastly improved since last playing these discs and even though I know them well, I kept hearing odd little things in both the music and effects that I hadn't previously been conscious of. It was musically coherent, and thoroughly delightful to listen to.

As I write this I've been trying to think of any drawbacks to this modification to the LP12, and the only one that I can come up with is that if you have been relying on the bass colouration of a standard Sondek to enrich up the sound of your system then you may find this a little different. There is plenty of bass there, but it seemed to be more evenly weighted across the



The full Khan kit now fitted, with the crossbrace visible...



The Sondek back upstairs, awaiting fitment of the outer platter.



The finished deck back in the listening room, singing away to the strains of Acker Bilk!

REVIEW SYSTEM:

Cartridgeman MusicMaker III cartridge
Clearaudio Concept cartridge
Leema Agena phono stage
Leema Tucana II amplifier
Chario Ursa Major loudspeakers

frequencies and possessed of greater agility. If the bass sound was human then I would say that it had lost a couple of stone of flab and gained a leaner and more toned musculature!

CONCLUSION

For the performance improvement on offer I feel that £795 for the Tiger Paw Khan mods package is exceptionally good value for money. The quality of the components, the enthusiasm for music and the technical knowledge of both Mark and Derek was second to none. I think that the Khan works very well, but should it not be to your taste, it can be removed as easily as it went in, of course. Based on my experience, you won't want to though, unless it was the obvious coloration (and other flaws) the stock LP12 exhibits that first attracted you to it. As such, I think this is a positive step forward sonically, which retains the positive characteristics of the turntable, while eliminating some areas of sonic confusion, and I totally and unequivocally recommend it.

VERDICT

A beautifully crafted modifications package for the evergreen Linn LP12, bringing very substantial sonic improvements.

TIGER PAW KHAN £795

Tiger-Paw

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FOR

- noticeably lower noise floor
- more expansive soundstage
- improved timing precision
- retains LP12's charm!

AGAINST

- nothing