



Sole partner

A subchassis and arm board upgrade for the Linn Sondek LP12 is reviewed by Tony Bolton.

As regular readers know, my Linn Sondek has been a test bed for various replacement motors and currently runs with an Origin Live Ultra kit using the optional upgrade transformer, and is armed with a Hadcock 242 Cryo. In the November 2011 issue of this magazine I discussed the very beneficial effects of fitting the Khan top plate and cross brace from Tiger Paw. I was so impressed that this upgrade has remained in situ.

I have recently come across the Sole Subchassis from a company called Analogue Innovation who are based in Wales. This subchassis is currently in Mark VI configuration and consists of a layer of MDF sandwiched between two layers of structural grade aluminium which are anodised in black. The anodising process serves two purposes: it protects the surface from oxidation and also stiffens the aluminium. The Company also offer a replacement armboard made of the same combination of materials so I elected to try both.

When they arrived I was immediately impressed with the quality of the construction and finish of these products. They were very obviously made by someone who not only took a pride in their

manufacture but also had access to very high quality engineering facilities.

Having examined the Sole, the first thing I did was to dismantle the Sondek and remove all of the Tiger Paw fitments (the cross brace and top plate) and return the LP12 to standard form so that I could assess the effects of the Sole on its own. Having done a couple of hours listening I then took it apart again and installed the Sole and the armboard, which was supplied already attached to the Sole. Care had been taken to ensure that the Sole weighed the same as the steel subchassis so when correctly set up, the suspension springs were under the same loading as they were designed to take. Therefore rebalancing the deck and getting the bounce from the suspension just right proved to be quite straightforward.

For those who wish to try the Sole and are not used to dismantling Sondes I am pleased to report that John Ruggles (owner and founder of Analogue Innovation) had included very comprehensive, step by step instructions on how to dismantle and install his product, along with notes on how to service the deck as you go. A practically minded novice should have little trouble in doing this, although if you are not confident

in this then the Company offer to do the job for a quite reasonable fee.

Having returned the newly fitted out deck to the listening room I started off by playing Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Sheherezade'. This record is one of the first of the RCA Living Stereo recordings and very ably demonstrates the spacial imaging capabilities of the then new format.

Compared to the standard Sondek I found the Sole produced a wider and deeper soundstage that extended both further forward of the speakers and further back behind them. I felt that I was more aware of the size of the venue in which the recording was done and the presentation had a certain degree of effortlessness that made it seem more alive and natural than when listening with the conventional steel subchassis in place.

The tonality also displayed a few differences, especially in the bass regions where the familiar richness of the Sondek bass was reduced and cleaned up somewhat to be a cooler, drier sound that seemed to allow the midrange to be rather more expansive and expressive. This in turn seemed to let the high frequency detail be a little more prominent, all of which helped portray the image of an orchestra actually playing in front of me, rather than me listening to a

well produced recording.

I moved onto an old favourite of mine - 'The Benny Goodman Trio Plays For The Fletcher Henderson Fund'. This 1952 disc, recorded off air from the New York based radio station WNEW's "Make Believe Ballroom" series showed the band in fine form. This copy is not in the first flush of youth, but I was impressed with the way that any surface noise was reduced and displayed merely as a brief passing aberration, rather than as an intrinsic part of the recording.

At the same time I felt that there was more detail within the background audience noise, which helped me get involved in the event taking place in front of me. The penultimate track 'I've Found A New Baby' features some sizzling pyrotechnics by drummer Gene Krupa, interspersed with Goodman's clarinet fills before ending with Krupa reversing the beat for the last few bars. With the steel chassis in place this can degenerate into a slightly muddled beat but the Sole subchassis/armboard combination seemed to ground it nicely, making sense of the rhythm and further enhancing the impression of a real live performance.

After such sizzling noises I put on something rather calmer, Otis Redding singing various ballads.

This is a modern reissue of a 1965 Stax recording and features the top ten hit 'Mr. Pitiful'. This song was apparently written in response to a comment by radio DJ Moohah Williams who described Redding as 'Mr. Pitiful' because of the heartfelt way that he sang ballads. Legend has it that having heard the comment on the radio while in the shower, the song was written on the drive to the studios that morning and recorded in just a couple of takes. Whether this is true or not, the song ends the LP with Redding's inimitable voice in excellent form, backed with a beat that owes more to funk than balladic soul. Again I felt that the sense of calm projection of the sounds into the room, the more refined tonal balance, and the greater spacial sensations around the music left me feeling more in contact with the

emotion of the performance.

Having successfully negotiated the requirements of conventional music I turned to a 2001 recording by Quantic. This is one of the several guises of musician, DJ and record producer Will Holland. His music draws on various Latin themes and the LP 'The Fifth Exotic'

features vocals from British soul singer Alice Russell alongside Holland's playing of guitars, bass, double bass, piano, organ, saxophone and percussion. There is also a flavour of trip-hop with homage paid to modern genres of electronica. Again I found myself more absorbed in the atmosphere created by the

sounds. Quite complex rhythmic forms were opened out for analysis and the whole presentation

was so absorbing that I ended up playing all four sides, not just the one that I intended to listen to.

I think the Sole subchassis should come with a warning: once fitted you will find that you lose hours of your life rediscovering your record collection and enjoying the less euphonic presentation of your music. The Sole seemed to have a similar effect to the Khan, in that it took away some of the bass vulgarity of the stock LP12, enhanced its rhythmic abilities and made it present music in a totally entrancing manner. It was as though the performers

on whichever record that I played were on particularly sparkling form and seemed better rehearsed. There was a sense of greater polish to the presentation and more sophistication to the sonic image in front of me.

I also took the deck apart again just to try the Sole in conjunction with the Khan top plate and cross brace. Each seemed to build on the other's strengths, creating a very grounded and detailed sound. Anyone who enjoys the deck's plus points; its sense of timing and innate musicality, but finds the sound a bit too rich and fruity, will thoroughly appreciate what either of these modifications can do individually. Combined they made the deck sound considerably more modern and less coloured. Individually they each improve on aspects of the performance that needed tidying up. The Khan removes a lot of the bass bloom, the Sole also does this but provides a coolness to the sound that many would feel the deck needed.

If you still run your Sondek in standard form then I would definitely recommend auditioning the Sole. Analogue Innovations offer a 60 day money back guarantee should you not be satisfied with the results. I think it unlikely that this will happen, but since the deck can easily be returned to stock issue, it is an experiment that I would advise making. The standard of finish and the precision of the manufacturing are excellent and I felt the resulting sonic enhancement of the deck was well worth the money. Analogue Innovations also offer the Sole without an armboard but I personally would spend the extra few pounds and get their armboard as well.

Overall a well thought out and well made alternative to Linn's own Keel subchassis/ armboard combination (but at considerably lower cost) that, I feel, works extremely well, and as such, I recommend that you try it. I think it is great.

MUSIC USED:

Rimsky-Korsakov 'Sheherezade' Pierre Monteux conducting the London Symphony Orchestra RCA Records SB - 2003 1958

Benny Goodman Trio 'Benny Goodman Plays for the Fletcher Henderson Fund' Columbia Records 33SX1020 1952

Otis Redding 'The Great Otis Redding Sings Soul Ballads' 4 Men With Beards 4M105 2001

Quantic 'The Fifth Exotic' Tru Thoughts Records TRULP 016 2001



SYSTEM USED:

Linn LP12/ Origin Live DC motor/ Hadcock 242 Cryo arm/ Clearaudio Concept MC. Luxman E200 phono stage. Bent Audio TAP-X passive pre-amp. 2 x Quad 303 power amps. Kelly KT3 loudspeakers.

VERDICT High quality replacement subchassis and armboard for the LP12 turntable.

SOLE SUBCHASSIS (WITH ANALOGUE INNOVATION ARMBOARD) £625.00
Analogue Innovation
☎ +44 (0)1554 890414
www.analogueinnovation.com

- FOR**
- same weight as standard
 - LP12 subchassis
 - lower noise floor
 - better timing
 - more expressive and expansive sound

AGAINST

- nothing I've found so far