
# THORENS 190-2

What can you get from Thorens for just a little more money than the price of the TD-170? Quite a lot, as we shall see.

This turntable is structurally more sophisticated. It has a suspended subchassis, for one thing, with a locking tab to keep it from moving around during shipping. And it also has a fiberglass subplatter, much like that of a number of more expensive turntables. As with the TD-170, it has a three-speed (33-45-78) electronically-controlled motor. The power comes from a wall wart, making it easy to run the table in any country in the world that has mains power.

The other big difference is in the arm, which looks more like a "real" tone arm…and, it would turn out, *sounds* like one too. The bearing assembly is more elaborate. The mass is higher, which — up to a point at least — is a good thing. You need only a cursory examination to see that the machining is of a higher order.

The counterweight, notably, is a nice piece of machined alloy, rather nicer in fact than the one in the booklet illustration. Setting the stylus pressure is easy enough. There's a rotary pressure indicator on the arm. Set it to zero, adjust the counterweight so the arm just floats, then increase the pressure to your target weight. As noted in our review of the TD-170, the suggested pressure for the supplied Ortofon OM-10 pickup, anywhere from 1.4 to 1.8 grams, results in wretched performance. Appropriately, we increased it, as before, to 2.25 g. That may seem like a lot, but mistracking will do a lot more damage than a little more pressure will.

However we weren't happy with the results, and when we tried the tracking bands on our *Vinyl Essentials* test disc, we could see why. Although moving magnet pickups usually do well on tracking tests — better than the much more expensive moving coil pickups, truth to tell — this one began mistracking after the first three bands. What was going on?

We checked the pressure with our electronic strain gauge, and it confirmed that the built-in gauge is way off. Our 2.25 g indicated setting was yielding barely 2 grams, and that wasn't enough. Increasing it to 2.5 grams on the Thorens gauge gave us an actual 2.25 g pressure.

That incident made us suspicious of the other preset adjustment, the pickup's lateral alignment. The booklet contains a little alignment gauge which you can cut out and use, but it uses only a single checkpoint, and it is wrong. We were hoping that the OM-10 hadn't been aligned with this crude gauge…but you know what? Right.

With those adjustments the way we wanted them, we pulled out our sample recordings and proceeded to do some serious listening. From here on, the surprises were pretty well all pleasant ones.

We began with the very difficult *Fennell Favorites* LP (Reference Recordings RR-43), and played two extracts from Prokofiev's *Love for Three Oranges.* It didn't sound the way it did with our Audiomeca J-1 turntable, but we knew right away that this turntable and arm were doing a lot of things right.

What we noted first off was the vast feeling of space, unlike what you would expect from an economy turntable. The depth, one of many qualities that characterize this excellent recording, was convincing.

So were the lower frequencies. The TD-170 had seemed to swallow up the sound of the bass drum, but we could *feel* it as well as hear it with the TD-190, and we could see the considerable displacement of the woofer cones of our Living Voice speakers. Instrumental timbres were mostly pretty good, though the brass was rather harsh. We were wondering what this table would sound like with a cartridge better suited to it.

We should add that we were pleased by the excellent speed stability, and the absence of any sign of speed variation. Anything less would of course have been a dealbreaker.

We continued with a full-sized symphony orchestra, the Concertgebouw, playing an excerpt from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* ballet. Once again we were pleased with the spacious sound and the very good depth. Most instrumental timbres were quite realistic. That was notably the case for the woodwinds, the percussion, and the cellos and double basses. The sound of plucked strings was quick, starting fast and stopping just as fast. The massed brass had a rather artificial "hi-fi" zippiness we blamed on the underperforming Ortofon cartridge. And the violins…well, cartridges in that quality range don't understand violins. Never have, never will.

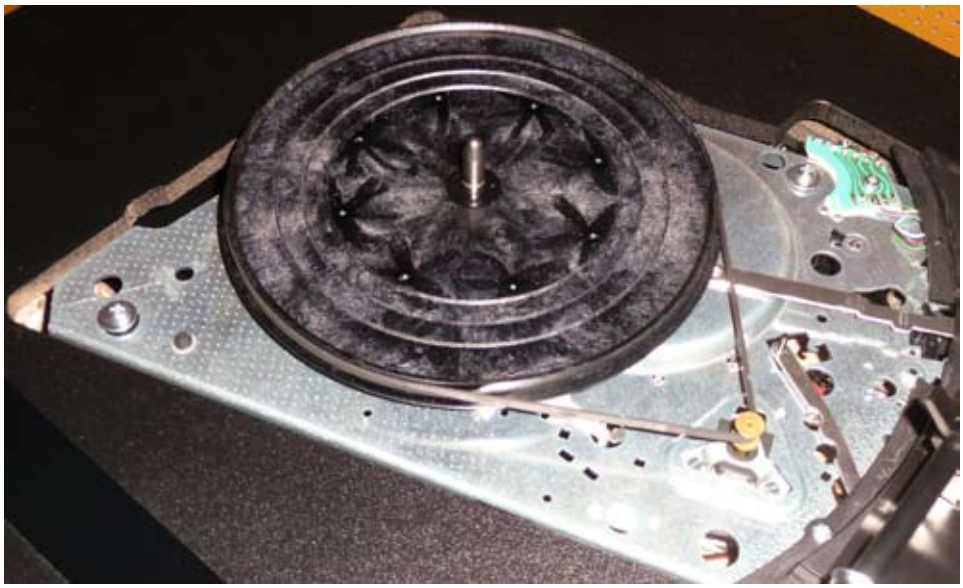
How would the Thorens do on a female voice? We played *Send in the Clowns* from Barbra Streisand's *Broadway Album.*

But for the somewhat elevated surface noise (the Ortofon has an elliptical stylus, not a line contact stylus), it pleased us in pretty much every way. The oboe opening was appealing, and once again we were impressed with the spacious sound we were hearing. Barbra's voice had a slight asperity on higher notes (the Ortofon again) but on most passages she sounded just as she should. What was most important was that the emotional impact of this wonderfully-sung bittersweet song was intact. Nice!

On *Master's Plan* from Doug McLeod's album *Come to Find* (Audioquest AQ1027) the voice was very good, but for our same little reservation about the higher frequencies. McLeod's solo guitar was startlingly realistic, with audible but understated fingerwork. The acoustic image was projected in satisfying fashion.

We wondered how well the Ortofon cartridge could track our organ recording *The Bells of St. Anne de Beaupré* from the direct-cut M&K LP *The Power and the Glory* (RT-114). During the first part of the piece it sounded wonderfully rich, with superb spaciousness, and warm tone of the *plein-jeu* passages. Of course, once the large pipe came in with its infrasonic 16 Hz continuo, there was an audible vibrato, as there always is. Still, the result was surprising.

We returned to our *Vinyl Essentials* test LP, and checked the combined resonance of the cartridge and arm. With the TD-170 and the same cartridge, it had been a much too high 16 Hz, explaining the poor performance in percussion and other lower frequency instruments. This time it was somewhere between 9 and 10 Hz, which is nearly perfect.



We then played the tracking bands again. With a mere 2 g of stylus pressure the results had been wretched, with the arm actually leaving the groove on the 90µ band. With the 2.25 g pressure it did much better, managing to track even the brutal 100µ band. However it actually did less well than it had with the TD-170, showing alarming signs of mistracking from the 60µ band onward. Indeed, we could hear the rattling of the cartridge's innards. That got worse as we advanced to the more highly-modulated bands.

*Why* was it worse than it had been with the less sophisticated arm? We blame sample-to-sample variations. The OM-10 is made to a price, and that price isn't very high. Quality control is in line with the cost.

It seems clear that this arm is good enough to benefit from a better cartridge. Installing it is not difficult, because the arm has a detachable headshell. This feature is not without drawbacks, because it adds mass where you don't want it, and it also adds extra plug contacts that can't possibly be a good thing. But an installer can't help being happy it's there.

Like the TD-170, this one is a semi-automatic model: push the "start" lever, and the arm will find the first groove all by itself, and then shut off when the record is done. We have little patience for that, and fortunately it's optional. Just lift the arm and the platter will spin. Position the stylus, push the stylus-down lever, and you're good to go. The automatic lift at the end of the record will still work.

One thing this session illustrated is that, although the best turntables may be dizzyingly expensive, in the lower price range a very few dollars can make a big difference. The improvements over the TD-190-2's economy brandmate are not mere details.

This turntable, despite what we think of as an affordable price, can make vinyl sound like what it is: a terrific delivery system for great music.