

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Thorens TD-907 turntable

by Alan Sircom



Thorens has a history of turntable manufacture that runs unbroken back to the first days of turntables. OK, so the company ownership has changed hands, it now concentrates solely on turntables, and the products today are no longer manufactured in St Croix in Switzerland, but the Thorens name has been associated with turntable replay for the last 114 years. Many look to the classic Thorens turntables of the 1950s and 1960s as a Golden Age (and products like

the TD-124 command very high prices even today). Thorens 900 series is designed to continue in that tradition, and the TD-907 is the very top of that 900 series tree.

The 900 series extends the suspended sub-chassis further into the main Thorens line. This suspended design has long been available in the chrome TD-550 and the long-standing TD-350, but these models are both long in the tooth and cater for very specific audiences. The 900 models are designed to tick the heritage box, without sacrificing sound. ▶



► Where the other models in the 900 series feature acrylic platters, the top of the tree uses a three-part aluminium platter, albeit with an acrylic insert that acts as a damping pad for the record itself. This looks more elegant than the usual felt mat, and in theory combines the advantages of both felt and acrylic.

The sub-chassis itself is made of triCom, an aluminium/POM (polyoxometallate) composite, which is claimed to deliver excellent damping properties and high stiffness. Its weight has been further optimised for high performance. To reduce vibrations, the synchronous AC motor is mounted directly onto the damped sub-chassis, with a separate external power supply connecting to the motor and on-deck speed control via a locking four-pin plug. The motor drives the sub-platter via a machined precision belt, and there are fine-tune pots built into the rear of the chassis for adjustment of 33 and 45 rpm.

This sub-chassis is suspended by means of three conical springs, which can be adjusted from above in order to achieve uniform tension. Those who have spent time under a turntable clamped in a jig trying to level the design appreciate the relative ease of this kind of adjustment. Meanwhile, the bearing is made of sintered bronze with a Teflon thrust pad, which is optimised for smooth running. The supporting steel axle is claimed to provide a very low, constant friction in order to present a uniform load to the motor. Two of the turntable's three feet can be levelled from above, which also facilitates ease of setup.

The key feature of the TD-907 is its ten-step adjustable pneumatic damping architecture. This features a conical polypropylene membrane under the platter bearing, which is decoupled from the triCom base via a visco/propylene layer. The air chamber formed under the membrane vents into ten apertures in the base plate that can be opened or closed with a slide mounted to the rear of the turntable. Strangely, the manual for the 900 series (in all other aspects very comprehensive) is completely silent on the damping system. We'll discuss its effects later.

It's possible for a listener to start with the basic TD-903 and upgrade it to the 905 and thence to the 907, but we'd recommend just going for the big guns right out of the starting gates.

The TP-92 tonearm comes as standard with the Thorens TD-907. This was designed from scratch as Thorens flagship design, in 9", 10", and 12" versions. It is a cardanic design that follows the Loefgren geometry, developed a few years ago in parallel with the TD-309 turntable. The horizontal bearing is a high-precision Japanese ball bearing and is located underneath the tonearm tube at the same level as the stylus. The counterweight, decoupled by two rubber rings, is also exactly level with the stylus. The TP-92's armtube is manufactured from cold-forged aluminium. The headshell is also made from aluminium and tightly coupled to the tube ►

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► for increased stability. Overhang can be adjusted either by sliding the headshell into the desired position on the tube or by adjusting the entire tube in the bearing block. The tube can also be rotated on its axis in order to adjust azimuth. The headshell’s shape is designed so that the cartridge’s centre of gravity is always directly underneath the tonearm tube, which is claimed to prevent torsional vibrations.

VTA can be adjusted by loosening the arm collar lock nut and raising or lowering the entire tonearm. The anti-skating force is provided by two ferrite magnets with an adjustment screw. The arm that comes on the 907 features handmade wiring, and connects to the outside world with a choice of phono and XLR cables. It’s worth pointing out that the choice of phono cable should reflect its low-level signal task, but there are dedicated cables made specifically for tonearm cable duties. I pushed the boat out a lot here and used Nordost Odin 2 (which is worth more than the turntable and arm), but it does have the advantage of being dedicated to the task!

Set-up is relatively easy, aided by an extremely well thought through manual. The deck has transit bolts, requires levelling on its own light and rigid shelf, followed by arm and cartridge alignment, and the suspension needs to be set, but if an Ikea wardrobe doesn’t trouble you and you are prepared to take your time and apply yourself, it’s a few hours from slitting the box to playing music. I would choose a few more thorough tools (like a better alignment protractor, stylus gauge, and maybe an azimuth adjustment system) because at this level even the small things can make a big difference, but you are good to go relatively quickly.

Normal turntable set-up service is temporarily suspended when it comes to the damping system. The underside of the turntable sub-chassis has an adjustable conical membrane that applies variable damping to the suspension system. While this can’t ‘cure’ extremes of installation or cartridge compliance, this does add a degree of variation to the sound of the turntable, best considered as adding or subtracting ‘authority’ to best suit the environment and – to a lesser extent – the tastes of the listener. This might make the TD-907 slightly harder to describe in review terms (it’s like auditioning several turntables at once), but it does make for an easy ‘one size fits all’ recommendation, because the damping is a valid attempt to let one size fit all systems.

The trick here is to approach the damping slowly and methodically. Set the deck at half-way and listen, then move the damping level two points in one direction, listen, then two in the other direction and listen. Make notes at each point until you find the optimum damping position. We’re on *terra incognita* here, so experimentation is good!

Once damping is applied to the correct amount for room, cartridge, and system, it’s hard not to be impressed by the TD-907. And if you read that back, it means the damping system dials out many of the idiosyncrasies involved in turntable system building, as well as giving the listener a bit of scope for their own tweaking. This doesn’t mean it’s the chameleon turntable, capable of suiting your every whim, but it does make the turntable far more flexible in terms of how you like your turntable to sound. Open all the vents and you have something a bit more Pink Triangle like, shut them all down and you have a sound closer to a Kuzma Stabi Reference. Between the two, you have something like a Linn LP12 or a Roksan Xerxes, or even something close to a VPI. Through all of this, you still have the basic sound of a Thorens turntable.

This is a sound that is extremely tonally accurate from top to toe. I played *Sea Change* by Beck [Mobile Fidelity], which is essentially an album of textures, and any obvious limitations here are disturbing. The TD-907 was extremely tonally spot on and highly detailed. It’s extremely even-handed, too, with Beck’s plaintive voice front and centre with a subtly-textured band in the background. This makes the turntable excellent with classical and jazz recordings, as it helps both bring out the spatial properties of the mix and plays musical instruments with a timbral accuracy that is normally the preserve of more expensive and ‘fiddly’ designs.

The Thorens combination is also extremely good with presenting a wide and deep soundstage. The LSO/D’Oyly Carte version of the overture Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Pirates of Penzance* [Decca] is a perfect example of how adept the TD-907 is at creating a soundstage. The Thorens presents a sound forward, wide, and deep of the loudspeakers, and even presents some stage height. Given the quality of the recording, this is a vital aspect of performance.

Nevertheless, the ability to adjust the damping does have an effect on that basic Thorens sound. The timbral accuracy remains a constant, but you can use the damping to dial out ►



- ▶ some of the top-end brightness inherent to modern systems, or give a tighter, leaner sound for smaller speakers. OK, this should be considered a system adjustment rather than a tone control, and its effect can be relatively subtle, but the performance snaps into focus in the way few turntables can, and this can transform the sound in a system.

Traditionally, Thorens turntables have either been rhythmically spot on (the TD-350, for example) or sometimes underplaying this vital aspect of a musical performance for the sake of detail and tonal accuracy. The adjustable damping, however, seems to be the clue to resolving this issue. By careful listening and adjustment, I managed to dial in 'rhythm' (or more accurately, dial out the slight 'off' timing in a system). I tried this on the 45rpm 12" single of Frankie Goes To Hollywood's *Two Tribes* (Annihilation Mix), [ZTT]. This complex, masterful mix can either sound threatening and up-beat or just a wash of sound overawing the pace of the music. On the TD-907 properly damped, everything just snaps into place.

This is a tale of two turntables, one with and one without the arm. The TD-907 complete with arm is a very good design indeed, but the TD-907 deserves a very fine arm, and while the TP-92 certainly lives up to that mark (especially for the money), the look of the turntable makes it an irresistible platform for those wanting some old-school Thorens appeal with state-of-the-art performance. I'd love to see this with an SME III or a Brinkmann 9.5 or 10.5 arm in place of the TP-92; not simply for the looks (although it would look very fine), but the performance – on paper, at least – should make the combination sing, and still leave change for a good cartridge.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Turntable, with tonearm
Drive system: Belt drive, using flat precision belt
Motor: Servo-controlled AC synchronous
Speeds: 33.33, 45rpm
Speed control: Electronic
Platter: 300mm diameter, 6.5kg, non-magnetic
Arm supplied: Thorens TP-92/10" (optional)
Anti-skate mechanism: Automatic
Automatic: No
Automatic stop: No
Cable capacitance: 140pF
Power Supply: 115/230V, 50/60Hz
Available in: gloss black, gloss white, zebrano
Dimensions (WxHxD): 47 × 38 × 19cm
Weight: 12kg
Price: £10,999 (£10,199 without arm)

Manufactured by: Thorens
URL: thorens.com

Distributed in the UK by: UKD
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I don't want to damn the complete TD-907 with faint praise though. The whole caboodle is excellent in and of itself. The 907's suspension system is both easy to set-up (with the aforementioned caveat), stays set when fixed, and provides adjustable damping to make deck, arm, and cartridge work together in the widest range of settings. And the whole package looks super cool, especially in zebrano finish. Thorens top of the 900 series deserves to be taken really seriously, whatever arm or cartridge used.

Thorens has made a turntable that is more than just a retro special. The TD-907 is a fine design in and of itself, more than worthy of standing alongside many of the company's classics. There's often little 'new' in turntable design, but the variable damping system is an innovative solution to matching the turntable to the system, and it works well. The fact it looks retro-cool too is perhaps icing on the cake, but it's a damn good icing! Recommended, both as a complete system, and as a turntable platform for a classic arm. +