

# Thorens System Review

**TD 550 Turntable, TEP 302 Phono Amplifier, TEP 3800 Preamplifier, TEM 3200 Power Amplifiers**

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## TD 550 Turntable

Our test sample of the TD 550 was equipped with a twelve-inch Ortofon tonearm. The wide plinth is well-suited to a range of long arms such as the Ortofon or SME models. The sub-chassis is decoupled by damped springs and remarkably easy to adjust. It is made of carbon fiber (which is meant to ensure maximum rigidity, minimum resonance and a low mass) and can be leveled by means of three knobs on the top plate. Thorens discovered that sub-chassis are more effective – and sound better – the closer their center of gravity is to the spindle. This is one of the reasons that Thorens decided to make the platter very heavy (6.5 kg), an added bonus of which is improved speed stability. Bitumen damping is used to reduce resonance.

The design of the TD 550 is based on that of the TD 350. But while the 350 sounds somewhat laid-back, its big brother is very nimble-footed. It portrays even the smallest variations in tempo and can turn on a dime when its dynamic capabilities are called upon.

With its tidy and expansive soundscape, the TD 550 even gave Linn's LP12 SE, another sub-chassis deck, a run for its money. Granted, the Scottish deck, one of our top references, had a tad more authority and snap, but the Thorens was just as fun to listen to.

With the long tonearm mounted on its plinth, the TD 550 looks brilliant and offers the performance of a true high-end source component, making you want to listen to album after album.

## TEP 302 Phono Amplifier

The case with its chrome front plate and engraved top plate houses a well-thought-out, simple phono circuit. However, Thorens put a lot of effort into the grounding arrangement, a critical element of phono amp design because of the low signal levels output by phono cartridges. A number of different PCB layouts were tested before the designers were satisfied. With the help of DIP switches on the bottom of the case, the TEP 302 can not only be set to MM or MC, but fine-tuned to suite practically any cartridge.

We were struck by the TEP 302's remarkably high signal-to-noise ratio. Even with the volume turned all the way up and no music playing, the noise level was very low and hum was barely audible. The sonic signature of the phono amp complements the Thorens range: there's ample slam and drive, but audiophile virtues are evident as well.

In terms of imaging, resolution and authority, the TEP 302 still falls some way short of our top-rated products by Einstein and Nagra, but those also cost a good deal more. The Thorens's lively presentation certainly sets it apart from other good mid-level products such as Audiolab's 8000 PPA.

## TEP 3800 Preamplifier

One thing that we consider absolutely essential for a reference product is soundstage performance. And indeed, the TEP 3800 presents a stage that seems to extend beyond the speakers, with lifelike depth and, on orchestra material, even vertical layering.

The soundstage of the TEP 3800 is complemented by a brilliance and liveliness of the kind we seldom encounter, and there is not a hint of artificiality. This an unbelievably powerful preamp, highly agile and faithful to the original performance, building the sound from the bottom registers up.

We were also struck by the wonderfully delicate, sweet treble imaging. The wind section on "Rocky Point Holiday" off the Tutti! sampler, which can sound edgy even with reference-level products, is full-bodied and bouncy instead of harsh and anemic.

It soon became clear to us that the TEP 3800 was in the same league as our best amps, for example the Audio Research Reference 3, which is also a tube preamp. The Reference 3 was ever so slightly more detailed and open, while the Thorens was better at conveying the music as a whole. Perhaps this is what made the latter more musically and emotionally satisfying than the US-made preamp.

## TEM 3200 Mono Power Amplifiers

The Thorens mono blocks were unfazed by whatever challenge we presented them. No

matter how heavily we pushed them to drive the large bass units of Wilson Audio's Maxx 2 speakers, for example, they remained cool, calm and collected. On Monty Alexander's "Moanin", low-level sounds in the background seemed unaffected by the tumult of dynamic swings and transients.

It is quite remarkable how sure-footed and effortless the TEM 3200s were when it came to making sense of dense arrangements at practically any volume level, and they never sounded in any way analytical. On the contrary: tonally we observed a very slight rounding off, with a sense of drive that allowed even more of the preamp's agility to shine through. Perhaps it was the absence of even minute distortion that resulted in a silky-smooth treble range? Whatever it was, we instantly fell in love with the way these amps manage to reproduce strings without a hint of scratchiness. We have hardly ever heard better vocals, which the TEM 3200s render very evenly and with great precision. The bass is quite substantial, powerful and very controlled.

Based on these impressions, we felt quite confident pitting the Thorens mono blocks against our top reference, the 710 stereo power amplifier by Soulution. The 710 was a bit leaner and even tighter in the bass. Combined with a slightly more compact soundstage, the Soulution amp sounded a bit tidier in its presentation, but the TEM 3200s were more vibrant tonally and at times more expressive and riveting.

It was pure joy being able to put on one after the other of our favorite LPs and CDs, switching between the Thorens products and our references to assess their relative merits. Despite the phono amp lacking the kind of qualities that would put it in the highest class, we were simply overwhelmed by the sound quality of the Thorens system as a whole. The TD 550 is without doubt an excellent turntable, and the pre/power combination is up there with the world's best.