

TECNO, POP



Want to play vinyl but can't afford a top turntable? Michell's affordable new TecnoDec could just be the answer. David Price reviews a budget eye-catcher.

Back in the mid nineties, Linn Products discontinued its Axis and Basik turntables, citing the reason as lack of demand. Then Michell's Mycro and Synchro also went the way of the Dodo, with a similar explanation. Analogue, it seemed, had become the province of the high-end, with the likes of the evergreen LPI2 and GyroDec being the minimum that vinyl junkies would possibly contemplate spinning their black plastic with.

How times change. Nearly a decade later, there's a perceived need for something affordable but decent for people to play records on. Rather than going back to LP for nostalgic reasons, like the oldsters, lots of younger buyers raised on CDs seem desperate for a 'bit on the side'. The result is that decks from Rega and Pro-ject have stepped into fill the

void, and folk have happily bought them. They now have an alternative.

Michell's new TecnoDec is essentially a latest-spec GyroDec with the expensive bits stripped off. To wit, it has no suspension to speak of, and lacks its bigger brother's beautiful suspended weights, in all their gold-plated splendour. Frankly though, if I was going to strip bits off the Gyro to slash cash, these are precisely what I'd bin. The advent of the new DC motor (its source still a well kept secret!) has made the new TecnoDec even more speed-stable than the old, QC-aspired AC Orbe complete with that massive mass-loaded acrylic platter. In the new DC powered world, weighty platters would appear less essential.

Suspension is of course important, but aside from some natty rubber-tipped aluminium feet, the TecnoDec hasn't got any - so you have to make do. To be fair though,

most of its price rivals are similarly unsuspected. This means you have to be fastidious over how and where you place the deck.

For me, an Audiophile Furniture Base SP01 gave great results, but ideally the likes of Townshend's Seismic Sink should be used. However, spend this much on a support and you might as well pay the extra and buy a GyroDec SE, anyway. The cheap way, readers, is to put a partially inflated bicycle inner tube between two slices of MDF - I kid you not.

So, suitably assembled (like all Michells, the TecnoDec is sold as a kit of parts - Ikea style - which you bolt together with the supplied Allen key) and placed on a level, well isolated surface as far away from the speakers as possible, I set about auditioning this deck.

It was soon obvious that the bearing (inverted, complete with its

own little oil pump), platter (minus gold weights), belt, legs and motor come direct from the Gyro. The only bespoke bits are the Acrylic subchassis, feet and arm mounting plate. While it doesn't look a million dollars like its bigger brothers, the quality of the build and finish is superb. Not even on Rega's Planar 25 will you find such beautifully machined and/or polished bits. The price puts its rivals from Project and AudioNote to shame in this respect.

The TecnoDec also comes with the interesting option of a Michell-modded Rega RB300. It boasts a redesigned counterweight, albeit with no changes to the rear end stub (a la Origin Live) and wiring (reputed to be with Cardas cable). The result is a subtly upgraded tonearm which can be sold as a 'package' for those unwilling or unable to get the spanner out and do it themselves. To put the cart before the horses, so to speak, this is a nice option but not - in my opinion - a serious rival to Origin Live's RB250 with 'structural modification'. It sounds appreciably better than the standard Rega arm, but still nowhere near the OL. It's a nice option to have though, so why ever not? Additional goodies available at extra cost include Michell's record clamp (which is superb and well worth having) and the recently launched Uncover.

LISTENING

Hooked up to a Linn Adikt MM cartridge and Origin Live modded Rega RB250, driving a World Audio valve pre-power and my Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers, the TecnoDec proved an extremely impressive vinyl spinner. Considering that the deck I had on hand to compare it with was my own reference Michell Orbe/OL Illustrious/ Ortofon Kontrapunkt B, it worked wonders. Of course, it's a league or three below the Orbe set-up, but the fact that it still proved an extremely fulfilling listen, immediately after laying ears on its big brother, was a fine sign.

Essentially, the TecnoDec has a very open and neutral sound. So clean and clear is it that it doesn't suffer from any discernible budget turntable nasties at all. To wit, it is speed-stable, rhythmically coherent and secure, dynamically

uncompressed and tonally neutral. As soon as you cue up a track, you find yourself getting into the groove of the music, rather than worrying about curtailed frequency extremes, spongy bass or rocky imaging that plagues turntables at this price.

In the same way that the Rega P3 succeeds by not doing anything obviously wrong, so the TecnoDec offers a clean and unassuming insight into the proceedings without distraction. But it's a whole step up from the Rega, of course.

I kicked off the listening with The Crusaders' 'Street Life'. Hearing Randy Crawford's to-die-for vocals running up and down the scale with unfettered power and poise was a surprise at this price. Rather like the GyroDec, it sets up a wide and tightly defined acoustic, into which every strand of the mix is placed accurately and with conviction. The result is that whatever happened with lead vocals, the backing musicians stayed solidly in place and always clearly distinguishable, even on dynamic peaks.

It is this broad, open, deep, transparent and even midband that defines the TecnoDec's essential character. Of course, switching to a Gyro or Orbe will bring substantial gains in depth perspective and an even more solid, unflappable sound. But that the TecnoDec can get close is a brilliant achievement at the price - by comparison, its price rivals sound wobbly and vague. In a sense, this predisposes the new Michell to the aforementioned 'CD generation', who'll find the looseness of some of its rivals a big turn off.

Moving to The Human League's 'Love Action', and the deck proved tonally faithful too. Its bass is obviously lighter and less extended than the Orbe, but is no less fast - making for a very tight and bouncy sound. It's impressively even and not lumpy in the least, unlike some far more expensive designs such as the Linn Sondek.

Moving up to the midband showcases its brilliant textural resolution. You can really get a feel for the 'grain' and 'patina' of an instrument, be it electronic or acoustic. This is where good vinyl blows similarly priced CD players into the weeds - the digital brigade would be amazed to hear the late 1970s synthesisers on this track

sound so rich, vibrant and full of harmonics (well, they were analogue, I guess!). Phil Oakey's vocals sounded similarly lifelike, whereas CD generally renders them as cold and grey as a wet winter Wednesday afternoon.

The TecnoDec's treble is no less enthralling. Whereas its rivals smear and soften, this player worked wonders on the prog rock histrionics of Rush's 'Subdivisions'. Drummer Neil Peart's propensity for squeezing in twice as many hi-hat cymbal licks as is healthy were no worry for this disc spinner. Brilliantly secure and impressively good at rhythmic nuances, phrasing and accents, it allowed vinyl's superb bandwidth to be heard in its full glory. All the Orbe could offer up was a fraction more definition and upper treble extension; considering the all-too-variable quality of many LPs, this wasn't always a good thing though.

The great thing about the TecnoDec is its open, neutral and forgiving nature. Unlike top dollar decks, it doesn't get too forensic, too analytical, too tongue tied. It doesn't attempt what it can't pull off, preferring rather to give everything it plays a lively, musical and engaging sound. Go up to a super-deck and as often as not the results will be no more enjoyable, as it starts to tell you how bad the disc pressing, studio recording or mastering, or partnering ancillaries are. Properly sited and set up, this product draws a brilliantly judged line in the sand about what and what not to do.

The result is a brilliant argument for analogue - open, warm and musical but with all the grip and analysis the digital generation demands, it delivers a resounding kick in the teeth to similarly priced Compact Disc. Kitted out with an OL RB250 (or Michell's own modded Rega) and Dynavector DVI0X4 and you've got a product that will paste all its rivals, digital or analogue - DVD-Audio or not. Can't say fairer than that! Hate to say it (as I'm going to have to repeat myself), but this is another cracker from John Michell.

Michell TechnoDec

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