

Linn Majik LP12 turntable system

by Alan Sircom

Writing about the Linn Sondek LP12 turntable in any of its guises runs the risk of going over old ground, because there is a lot of ground to cover in the turntable's fortysomething years on the planet. With 100,000 LP12s sold in that time, it represents one of the most important fixtures in the high-end audio firmament. And, although many enthusiasts have moved on from the LP12, those figures command respect.

In fact, such is the respect the LP12 commands that even the derogatory term used by some of its former users – 'the old fruit box' – seems a little more gentle (and a lot less swearsy) than it could be.

Part of the reason for its continued success is philosophical, but not in the way you might imagine; it is a perfect example of what has become known as the 'Trigger's Broom' Paradox (in the popular BBC sit-com *Only Fools and Horses*, the street-cleaner Trigger wins an award for using the same broom for 20 years, although it had 17 new heads and 14 new handles during that time). People may have bought an LP12 in the 1980s and never changed it, despite changing every component in that turntable over the years. It is at once changeless and changing, which is a part of the fascination.

But, let's be honest here – the turntable wouldn't have stayed in production since 1972 if it weren't built to a high standard from the outset. It harks back to a time before pithy mission statements like, 'by enthusiasts, for enthusiasts', when people who bought turntables were normal human beings who liked music and didn't want to buy a turntable that needs a check-list in order to turn it on the right way, and who didn't want an alien invasion or an oil-rig in their living room. The Majik LP12 connects with that 'no fuss turntable' concept well, possibly even better than more nuanced Linn LP12s further up the hierarchy.

Back in 1972 when the LP12 first appeared, the deck was a simple thing with a big switch to turn it on. It sat in a wooden plinth, the platter and arm bounced on a suspension, and it all sat on simple rubber feet. An external power supply would have been something exotic, fancy, and superfluous. Fast forward to 2015, and that ably describes the Majik LP12, too. An ABS rocker switch has replaced the big glowing red push-button, and the Grace arm and Supex cartridge oft spied

on early LP12s have been swapped out for a carbon-fibre Pro-Ject 9CC arm and a Linn Adikt moving magnet cartridge. And, of course, virtually every part has been subtly improved over the years, as electronics, engineering tolerances, and materials science developed. But the LP12 is still recognisably a child of the 1970s.

The original LP12 was a kit of parts, but this quickly became a dealer-based set-up procedure. The importance of the dealer set-up has become so fixed in the Linn ethos that even fitting a new cartridge typically involves a professional re-set. Dealers are trained in the ways of the LP12 set-up jig (that's a frame designed for easy access, not a 'Tune Dem' dance), P-clips, and springs and grommets. End users talk of some set-up engineers in hushed, reverent tones: trusty, sensible types with down-to-earth names like Derek or Peter. In fact, the quality of set-up comes down to familiarity, repetition, not cutting corners, a sense of unflinching devotion to getting the right bounce to the suspension, and nice red uniforms. Seriously though, there is no magic to the LP12 set-up, just an ability to apply good engineering practice to the process. Consistently.

"Virtually every part has been subtly improved over the years as electronics, engineering tolerances, and materials science developed."

And if you want to be spoken of in similarly hushed tones, just apply that good practice to a few thousand LP12s first!

This dealer set-up has become a sticking point for some, who feel regular service intervals are unnecessary. However, my take on this is simple; having seen and heard what can pass for DIY installation of even the most basic turntables over the years, an occasional service by a trained engineer is a good thing, and from Linn's perspective, it establishes a degree of consistency across the customer base. It is like herd immunity from poor set-up, if you like. In theory, at least: the reality is all set-ups are equal, but some are more equal than others.

But, how does the Majik LP12 sound? Extremely good, in a kind of no-fuss, maximum fun kind of way. It's the kind of sound that makes you forget about the typical criteria we discuss in audio magazines, and instead focus on the musical performance behind the 'quicksilver transient response' and the 'limpid pools of pellucidity'. I guess this is a function of the Linn 'Tune Dem' concept, where demonstrations revolve around listening to the tune rather than audio or musical elements, and the LP12 is so good at achieving this, one

wonders whether the LP12 has been shaped by that focus on the Tune Dem, whether the Tune Dem came out of the performance of the LP12, or there was a meeting in the middle somewhere...

Tune Dem or not, the LP12 makes a lot of high-end exotica seem somewhat 'po-faced' by comparison. And the Majik continues that line of listening. Other turntables are more detailed, have better soundstaging properties, more of those tiny 'microdynamic' nuances in the presentation that obsess many listeners. The Majik LP12 simply side-steps all those filigree parts of the audiophile experience and cuts to the musical quick.

'Side-steps' is probably the wrong term. That implies these subtle cues are not present, where in fact the Majik LP12 simply appears to put those more nuanced aspects of performance in their place, instead of front and centre. The LP12 still has a lot of insight into the mix, but it's more than that. Or less, depending on your view.

Those usual 'record X did Y to the sound' comments about products become superfluous twaddle with the Majik LP12. You put on a piece of music because you like





“Music played here just hangs together beautifully, adroitly moving from musical theme to theme.”

► it, then you do the same again and again. That’s it. From a reviewer’s perspective, you wonder how you are going to turn this listening session into bite-size descriptive properties. Ultimately, though, except for these four pages, that doesn’t matter. You aren’t drawn to the hi-hat or focus on the bass guitar, any more than you might be in real life. You do get drawn into the general timbre of music playing, and if the recording accents the hi-hat or the bass guitar, then that will also be the case on the LP12.

This is coherence and consistency at work. Music played here just hangs together beautifully, adroitly moving from musical theme to theme with a distinct sense of warmth, energy, and fun to the performance. Wholly accurate? No, but when you listen to the LP12 in its Majik garb, accuracy seems not to matter so much.

You can hear some of what our American counterparts point to as ‘The British Sound’ in terms of frequency extension. The Majik LP12 bass has a gentle bloom and a slight roll-off next to more traditional ‘high-end’ sounding decks, but that actually gives the Linn a delightful ‘bounce’ to the sound. Similarly, the treble lacks that high-end ‘shimmer’, but this gives a feel of ‘space around the notes’ to the LP12 presentation in a musical rather than dimensional feel.

Perhaps the best way of describing this fundamental difference between what the Majik LP12 does and more ‘po-faced’ turntables is if you imagine going to that ultimate gig you wished you’d seen: Hendrix at Monterey, for example. The LP12 is like going to that gig with a similarly Hendrix-loving friend, while some of the more detail oriented turntables are like going with an ‘on message’ guitar tech. The former will be gushing with enthusiasm; the latter will be discussing how difficult it is to maintain intonation with the Fender Stratocaster’s whammy bar (which he will undoubtedly call a vibrato arm). The LP12’s warm-toned enthusiasm wins over on so many records, it’s hard not to smile when playing LPs.

The Majik LP12 is also a great leveller of LPs. Those carefully massaged 180g virgin vinyl albums sound good, but so do the bin-end charity store discount specials. The difference between worst and best album in your collection is made less immediately noticeable. That being said, good vinyl still sounds very good on the Majik LP12, but lacks that absolute ‘warts ‘n’ all’ function of über-turntables to extract all there is to extract from the vinyl. At least, at the Majik level: what the LP12 extracts at this point is the musical marrow, but there is more to extract. In part, this is what the Upgrade Path is about. ►

“It’s been almost a quarter of a century since I last spent time listening to an unmodified LP12, but it proved to be something of a homecoming.”

▶ No discussion of the LP12 is complete without discussing the Upgrade Path; a hierarchical move through good, better, and best turntable parts taking the Majik LP12 (or, notionally, any LP12 from the last 42 years) and building it up to the Akurate LP12, the full-bore Klimax LP12, or some intermediary step. This runs through two upgraded sub-chassis (the Kore, then the Keel), two upgraded and external power supplies (the Lingo, then the move to a DC motor with the Radikal), two upgrades to the arm (Linn’s Akito and Ekos SE), and two moving coil cartridges (the Klyde and the Kandid). The Klimax also brings the Urika phono stage into the turntable itself, and there is an optional Trampolin baseboard for greater isolation.

Starting with the Majik, and upgrading a piece at a time, Linn recommends the Kore, followed by the Lingo, the Akito, and the Klyde, to bring the turntable to Akurate level. Linn then follows the same round of upgrades a second time in the same order (Kore to Keel, Lingo to Radikal, Akito to Ekos SE, Klyde to Kandid, and ending in the Urika), bringing the deck to, er, Klimax. The company is less comfy with out-of-sequence upgrades, such as upgrading the Lingo before the Kore, or upgrading an otherwise all-Majik turntable with a Keel sub-chassis. Not everyone goes along with this strict pecking order, however.

Moreover, with an inherently modifiable design and tens of thousands of LP12s still in daily use, a small army of aftermarket options are available. Power supplies, replacement sub-chassis, top plates, arm boards, arms, cartridges, mats, and plinths are available from third-party suppliers. And, like any hot-rod community, there will be those who swear by, and those who swear at, any such modifications. The best are like Brabus to Linn’s Mercedes Benz; the worst are like spinners. Linn remains aloof on such things, now.

OK, so the lid is an optional extra now, and if you play 45s, you need an adaptor for the pulley. But 40+ years on from those first decks, the Linn LP12 remains one of the true stalwarts of the high-end. It’s been almost a quarter of a century since I last spent time listening to an unmodified LP12, but it proved to be something of a homecoming. If you spend some time with the Majik – regardless of whether you plan to upgrade the turntable in the future – you’ll find it sparks something fundamentally musical in the way few other audio products can. Very highly recommended! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Complete turntable, arm, and MM cartridge replay system

Linn LP12

Type: Belt-drive turntable with three-point suspension

Platter: Two-piece Mazak 8, felt mat

Bearing: one-point bearing

Motor: 24-pole synchronous AC motor

Belt: Neoprene flat belt

Speeds: 33.33rpm (45rpm with optional pulley, or upgraded PSU)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 44.5x14x35.6

Weight: 10kg

Plinth finish options: Black Ash, American Cherry, Rosenuit, Maple, Walnut

Pro-Ject 9cc

Type: carbon-fibre gimballed tonearm

Effective length: 230mm

Effective mass: 8.5g

Overhang: 18mm

Weight: 250g (excl counterweight)

Linn Adikt

Type: Moving magnet cartridge

Cantilever: Aluminium

Stylus: Gyger II

Tracking force: 1.5-2g (1.75g nominal)

Load resistance: 47kOhms

Load capacitance: 150-200pF

Output (5cm/s, 1kHz): 6.5mV ±1.5dB

Separation: 25dB @ 1kHz

Weight: 7g

Price (as complete package): £2,700

Manufactured by: Linn Products

URL: www.linn.co.uk

Tel (UK only): 0500 888909

Tel: +44(0)141 307 7777