

The **10** Most Significant Turntables of All Time

For our special analog-focus issue, I asked our staff and senior writers to name and rank the ten turntables that have had the greatest impact on high-end audio. This isn't a list of the best-sounding turntables, but those that introduced new techniques, influenced other designs, achieved wide commercial success, or represented a performance breakthrough at the time. I then tallied the votes from each writer to arrive at the final list and ranking of the Ten Most Significant Turntables of All Time. Each contributor's own list appears at the end of this article. Let the controversy begin! -Robert Harley



Walker Black Diamond Mk III (1991-2012)

10 Like its three predecessors, the latest and greatest version of the Walker 'table, the Black Diamond III, is in many ways the summation of a lot of brilliant thinking on the part of previous turntable and tonearm designers. Its air-bearing, viscous-damped, diamond-hard, straight-line-tracking ceramic tonearm, its massive air-bearing platter (which effectively isolates the platter from airborne and structure-borne resonance), and its air-bearing feet borrow bits and pieces from the 'tables and arms of SLT pioneers like Mapleknull, ET, and Forsell. But the Walker isn't a mere grab bag of other people's great ideas; it is a beautifully engineered playback system in which each element has been rigorously tested to work superlatively well as *part of* that system. The apotheosis of the long line of tangential-tracking record players that preceded it -Jonathan Valin

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WELL-TEMPERED TURNTABLE (1979)

Photo Courtesy of Audiocircle.com

William Firebaugh's stroke of genius wasn't so much the ingenious "four-point" bearing used in this belt-driven turntable as it was the extraordinary arm that came with it. Firebaugh's Well-Tempered Tonearm managed to solve the universal problem of bearings "chattering" in their races (and thereby feeding vibration back down the armtube to the stylus) by simply eliminating the bearings. The arm (an aluminum or carbon-fiber tube filled with sand and suspended, via monofilament rigging, on a mount whose disc-like foot was submerged in a cup of viscous silicone) is one of the truly original ideas in latter-day high-end design. Half swingset, half trapeze, the Well-Tempered worked purely by means of torsion and damping. There had been nothing like it before, and, frankly, there has been nothing like it since. *A sui generis masterpiece.* –Jonathan Valin



PANASONIC SP-10 (1970)

Photo Courtesy of audioKlassiks.com

Newbies may not know this but there was once a battle between proponents of turntables with belt-driven platters and proponents of turntables with directly-driven platters. For the most part, belt-drive 'tables won out (although there are to this day notable exceptions), but when the issue was still very much in doubt, this massive, beautifully made turntable from Panasonic (one or two of which could be found in just about every radio station and recording studio in the country) was the very model of direct-drive excellence. Its durability, imperturbability, precise speed accuracy, deep bass response, and low wow and flutter put many of the flimsier belt-drives to shame—and it came with a tunable arm that was itself novel and not-bad-sounding. The best of the many other direct-drives that preceded and followed it and the great-grandfather of some of today's remaining handful of direct-drive 'tables (like the Grand Prix Audio Monaco). –Jonathan Valin



ORACLE DELPHI (1979)

"As I saw it," said the Oracle's designer Marcel Riendeau back in 1979, "the key [to vinyl playback] was not for the stylus to play the record; it was for the stylus to play the groove!" To accomplish this, Riendeau had to find a way to keep the stylus *in* the groove. Thus, anything that might disturb its composure as it traveled down that long and winding road to end-of-side silence was engineered (beautifully) out of the Delphi. While a few items have been improved on the latest Mk VI version of this still-in-production classic, Riendeau's core philosophy of "groove isolation" and the core mechanisms he used to implement this philosophy remain the same. These include the use of three, tunable, bell-shaped springs to suspend the subchassis, platter, and arm, and an acrylic platter and plinth that are still eye-catchers (as well as resonance-stoppers). –Jonathan Valin

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GARRARD 301 (1954)



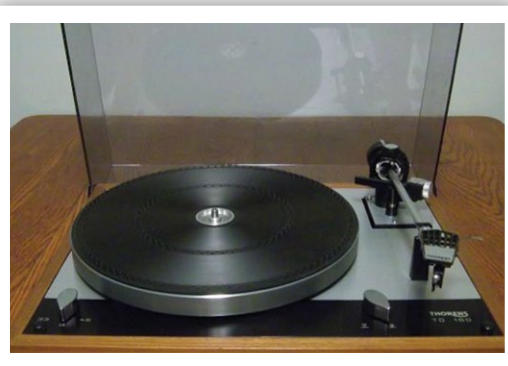
Dating back to 1721 when appointed jewelers charged with care and maintenance of the crown jewels, including the royal crown itself, Garrard and Company manufactured precision range-finders for the British army in the First World War. Changing its name to Garrard Engineering and Manufacturing Limited, it developed a spring motor widely used by major gramophone companies. In 1954 Garrard introduced the 301 turntable for the serious high-fidelity market, the first British turntable to support all three commercial LP formats (78, 45, and 33). It used a rim drive and came with plinth, platter, and motor only, the consumer supplying base, arm, and pickup. The 301 eventually became a classic, commanding very high prices on the used market, where Loricraft has made a cottage industry out of restoring it to a cadre of extremely happy owners. —Paul Seydor

GOLDMUND STUDIO (1985)



In its reign, from circa 1985 through the next decade, this no-holds-barred design showed what could be done in the way of a 'table that had none of the audible flaws of various preceding products. Indeed, it was clean in its sound, in its freedom from audible artifacts (and, lest we forget, it was a direct-drive unit, perhaps the only one ever to have the sonic advantages of a belt and none of the colorations of virtually every other direct drive). Ironically, it reached deeper into the bottom octave, and with more definition, purity, and "slam" than its competitors, even with the direct drive. With this 'table, and its superior freedom from sonic anomalies, you could (and we did) hear more deeply into what was going on in an LP, and thus in the recording. In many respects, its performance was not surpassed until the advent of magnetic-drive designs in the past five-or-so years. It was a revelation. —Harry Pearson

THORENS TD-124/TD-160 (1957)



Introduced just three years after Garrard's 301, the TD 124—"TD" from "*tourney-disque*," French for turntable—was regarded by most serious audiophiles and reviewers as the best turntable in the world during its decade-long run, especially when paired with an SME 3009 arm. It trumped the Garrard in specifications, features (adding 16 rpm to the then standard three), and design sophistication (a novel touch: the belt that isolated motor vibrations from the idler wheel and thus the platter). Like the 301, the 124 required the end user supply base, arm, and pickup (though Thorens offered drilled boards for some popular arms), and it is also highly prized on the second-hand market. For many, Thorens' popularly priced TD-160 replaced the AR XA as an upscale alternative for an integrated (owing to its superior arm). —Paul Seydor

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SOTA STAR SAPPHIRE (1981)

David Fletcher's design used a combination of traditional methods and some important innovations to reframe and address the core problems of vinyl replay better than anyone else. Like AR and Linn, the SOTA employed a tuned suspension, only it was an inherently more stable hanging suspension from four points rather than the usual three, and it incorporated some damping of the springs (in all this it heavily influenced the SME turntables). Fletcher also devised a novel method that made it possible for the home user to install any tonearm without altering the very low tuning frequency (2.55Hz). Fletcher is also the first designer to address the crucial issue of warps by making vacuum hold-down a safe, viable, and reliable way to play records (in the view of many of us, the preferred way, all else being equal). Despite two changes of ownership since its inception in 1981, SOTA remains a strong presence in the turntable market, the original designer, Fletcher himself, still a consultant to the company. —Paul Seydor



ACOUSTIC RESEARCH XA (1961)

Photo Courtesy of vinylnirvana.com

The headwaters of the Nile of turntables that flooded the high end in the 70s and 80s, the modest AR XA—with its two-part aluminum platter, tripod spring-suspended subchassis, belt drive, and low-vibration AC synchronous motor—set the stage for the Linn Sondek, the Oracle Delphi, and just about every other “new and improved” suspended-subchassis, belt-driven turntable that came to market. While its afterthought of a tonearm was never anything to write home about (and was often replaced with Rabco's SL-8E, albeit with a great deal of effort and wildly varying degrees of success, by those seeking the highest-fidelity playback), this solid, foolproof design was not only the benchmark against which new contenders were judged, it was also (like the Dyna Stereo 70) an epitome of value-for-dollar engineering in an audiophile component. A genuine high-end classic whose numerous progeny are still very much with us. —Jonathan Valin



LINN SONDEK LP12 (1972)

More than any other turntable on this list, the LP12 established the importance of the turntable in music playback—and of sources in general. At its introduction in 1972, turntables were largely considered to have no influence on the sound—a misperception that the LP12's creator, Ivor Tiefenbrun, fought long and zealously to correct. As a young man working in his father's machine shop in Linn, Scotland, Tiefenbrun took inspiration from the AR's three-point tuned suspension and belt drive to create a much better engineered and executed table. Its single-point bearing, vibration isolation, and speed stability were state-of-the-art in the day. The Linn Sondek LP12 was an enormous commercial success, inspiring an almost cult-like devotion among many of its owners. Despite the abundance of high-end turntables in the market created by the LP12, Linn chose to offer a series of upgrades to the basic platform rather than offer a complete re-design. It is possible to buy a new LP12 today that isn't fundamentally different from 1972's groundbreaking model. It's impossible to imagine the high-end industry without the LP12. —Robert Harley

Individual Writer's Choices

NEIL GADER

- 10 Versa Dynamics 2.0
- 9 Rockport Sirius
- 8 Thorens TD125
- 7 Oracle Delphi
- 6 Panasonic SP-10
- 5 Garrard 301
- 4 Linn Sondek LP12
- 3 Goldmund Reference/Studio
- 2 SOTA Star Sapphire
- 1 Acoustic Research XA

WAYNE GARCIA

- 10 Walker Proscenium
- 9 Clearaudio Solution
- 8 Well Tempered
- 7 Rega Planar 3
- 6 SOTA Star Sapphire
- 5 Goldmund Studio
- 4 Panasonic SP-10
- 3 Thorens TD-160
- 2 Linn Sondek LP12
- 1 Acoustic Research XA

ROBERT E. GREENE

- 10 Bang & Olufsen 4000
- 9 La Platine Verdier
- 8 Dual 1229
- 7 Townshend Rock Reference
- 6 Nakamichi TX1000
- 5 Garrard 301
- 4 Thorens TD-124
- 3 SOTA Star Sapphire
- 2 Linn Sondek LP12
- 1 Acoustic Research XA

JIM HANNON

- 10 Rega Planar 3
- 9 Micro-Seiki RX-1500
- 8 Versa Dynamics 2.0
- 7 Coloney AB-1/Mapleknoll
- 6 Panasonic SP-10
- 5 SOTA Star Sapphire
- 4 Garrard 301
- 3 Goldmund Studio
- 2 Linn Sondek LP12
- 1 Acoustic Research XA

ROBERT HARLEY

- 10 Basis Debut
- 9 Rega Planar 3
- 8 Rockport Sirius
- 7 Well-Tempered Turntable
- 6 Thorens TD-124
- 5 Goldmund Studio
- 4 Oracle Delphi
- 3 SOTA Star Sapphire
- 2 Linn Sondek LP12
- 1 Acoustic Research XA

CHRIS MARTENS

- 10 Walker Black Diamond
- 9 SME 30/12
- 8 Panasonic SP-10
- 7 Well-Tempered Turntable
- 6 VPI TNT/HR-X
- 5 Transcriptors Hydraulic Reference
- 4 Goldmund Studio
- 3 SOTA Star Sapphire
- 2 Linn Sondek LP12
- 1 Acoustic Research XA

DICK OLSHER

- 10 Bang & Olufsen 8000
- 9 Micro Seiki 1500/3000
- 8 Well Tempered Turntable
- 7 Kuzma Reference
- 6 Townshend Rock
- 5 Thorens TD-124 MK2
- 4 Garrard 301
- 3 ELP Laser turntable
- 2 Linn Sondek LP12
- 1 Acoustic Research XA

PAUL SEYDOR

- 10 Goldmund Reference
- 9 Thorens TD-124
- 8 Garrard 301
- 7 Townshend Rock Reference
- 6 Nakamichi TX-1000
- 5 SOTA Star Sapphire
- 4 Panasonic SP-10
- 3 Dual 1229 (and others)
- 2 Linn Sondek LP12
- 1 Acoustic Research XA

STEVEN STONE

- 10 VPI TNT
- 9 SOTA Star Sapphire
- 8 VPI HW-17
- 7 Goldmund Studio
- 6 Marantz SLT-12
- 5 Thorens TD-124
- 4 Oracle Delphi
- 3 Rabco SL-8
- 2 Linn Sondek LP12
- 1 Acoustic Research XA

JONATHAN VALIN

- 10 Walker Black Diamond III
- 9 Versa Dynamics 2.0
- 8 Goldmund Reference
- 7 La Platine Verdier/AAS Gabriel-Da Vinci
- 6 Marantz SLT-12
- 5 Panasonic SP-10
- 4 SOTA Star Sapphire
- 3 Oracle Delphi
- 2 Linn Sondek LP12
- 1 Acoustic Research XA

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A Bonus Pick

Though it only got two votes on our writers' lists—one from me and one from Robert E. Greene (reflecting, I believe, its relatively low profile among analog-o-philes)—La Platine Verdier developed by French audio-designer J.C. Verdier in the early 1980s (and the AAS Gabriel turntable—now the Da Vinci—from Hans-Peter Gabriel, which followed not too long thereafter) deserves attention paid. In fact, it could be argued that the Verdier is one of the most influential turntables since the AR XA, as it was the first, to my knowledge, to float the platter more or less frictionlessly in a magnetic field. Today, magnetic suspension of turntable platters (and lately of tonearms) is much more common. It was the Platine Verdier that first showed how it could be done. —Jonathan Valin