

# THE RETURN OF THE KING

BRETT GIDEON ATTENDS A GATHERING OF TURNTABLE FETISHISTS AND FINDS OUT WHAT ALL THE FUSS IS ABOUT



**A**fter 35 years, Linn has finally released a series of upgrades to the legendary Sondek turntable. It's an overused word, but in this case the use of "legendary" is quite appropriate: the Sondek has had a huge reputation since it was first released in 1972 and for decades it's been regarded as a superb turntable. Of course, technology has subsequently moved on and there are all sorts of weird and wonderful turntable designs out there, built with exotic space-age materials that wouldn't be out of place in a Ridley Scott movie. There are massive platters, immensely heavy plinths and platforms, vacuum systems and tangential tracking arms, to name but a few of the developments.

“Like the Porsche 911, Linn's Sondek turntable is an iconic design that has had any potential issues engineered into oblivion.”



When I heard about the new Sondek, I assumed it would be quite different to the original. After all, Linn definitely isn't afraid of innovation – switch mode power supplies in audiophile kit, anyone?

I was quite shocked when I finally saw the first image of the new LP12SE. In fact, I assumed that someone had slipped up and sent me the wrong picture, because it looked so much like the old model. Fortunately, I had a chance to get the real story straight from the horse's mouth when I was invited to a LP12SE demo evening at The Listening Post in Hamilton, courtesy of the ever hospitable Romesh with John Ellingham and Dean Harnish, the New Zealand Linn gurus in attendance.

John and Dean have more than 40 years of experience

with Linn systems between them and they were chock full of useful information. My first question for the experts was why on earth hadn't Linn been more daring and gone with a total redesign? The simple answer is that the company just didn't need to rush off into the unknown – why come up with outlandish solutions to what are basically engineering issues when you can implement good engineering practices?

The fundamental goals of vinyl playback are to place a stylus in a tiny groove on the record with absolutely no unnecessary movement and to control any and all vibration, noise and resonance. If you can manufacture a turntable to tight enough tolerances with a design that's been refined to virtual perfection over the years, then any problems will practically disappear. Think of the LP12SE as the Porsche 911 of the audio world and you've got the idea. Both are iconic designs that have evolved to the point of answering every question that's ever been asked about them, and any potential design issues have been engineered into oblivion.

## THE UPGRADES

If there aren't any revolutionary new design elements, then the LP12SE is basically a Sondek with many of the components replaced by evolutionary upgrades. These upgrades consist of the Ekos SE tone arm, Keel sub-chassis (plus armboard and collar) and the Trampolin suspension. What I found quite amazing is that the upgrades can be ►

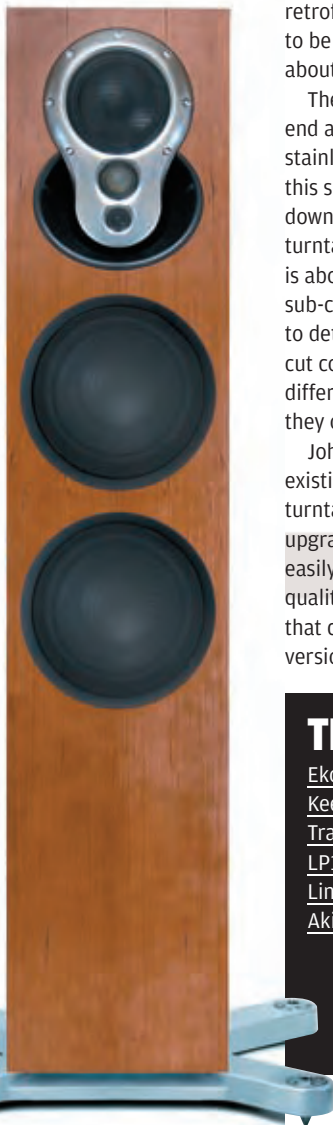
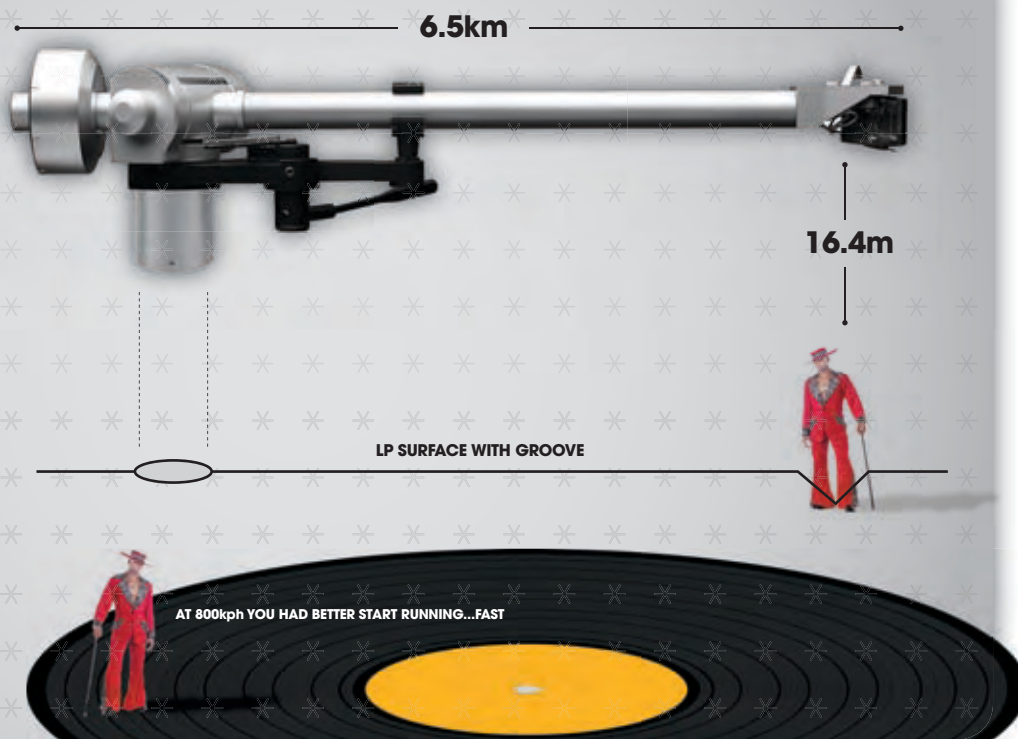


Playing vinyl seems like a simple process but it's actually a fiendishly complicated thing to get right. Linn has a unique approach to explaining the complexities and scale of vinyl playback.

Imagine you are the diamond at the end of the stylus. You're standing on the surface of the record looking around and you notice that the groove on the LP comes half way up your shins. The body of the cartridge is almost 20 metres above you and the arm bearing is a distant six and a half kilometres away.

The LP is now spinning at 33rpm and a deep organ note translates into a four metre swing in the groove but a high violin note requires only a one centimetre swing. To make things even more fun, the LP is moving beneath you at a scale speed of 800 kilometres per hour.

Puts things in perspective, doesn't it?



retrofitted to any Sondek, regardless of age, and that has to be a huge comfort for existing Sondek owners. Talk about a considered approach to design.

The Ekos SE tone arm is a gorgeous piece of high end audio engineering, constructed from titanium and stainless steel and built to tolerances that seem insane this side of NASA. When you consider that Linn can get down to one micron or one-millionth of an inch on a turntable bearing, you see how obsessed the company is about getting it right. Even the beautifully cast Keel sub-chassis is a work of art, again made with attention to detail that's the sign of a company that just won't cut corners. Each of the upgrade components makes a difference to the sound of the unit, but when combined, they offer far more than the mere sum of their parts.

John was running a Linn clinic on the night, where existing Linn owners had the chance to bring their turntables in for professional setup, servicing, or upgrading, and some fairly ancient looking units were easily restored to 'as new' status, reflecting the great build quality and the clever design. There seems to be no part that can't be exchanged for a new one or an upgraded version, which should ensure a lifetime of service.

## THE PRICE OF GLORY

Ekos SE Arm	\$9995
Keel Upgrade	\$6750
Trampolin2 Upgrade	\$525
LP12 Mechanics (deck and plinth without keel)	\$4995
Lingo Power Supply	\$3295
Akiva MC Cartridge	\$6495

### Contact

www.linn.co.nz  
www.listening.co.nz

## LISTENING TO THE LP12SE

The setup on the night had a standard LP12 placed right beside a fully kitted out LP12SE and I had the opportunity to listen to the same tracks on both turntables. Even old vinyl sounded quite lovely on the standard unit, being played through a bi-amped LINN system with the Akurate 242 floorstanding speakers (pictured left). Both turntables were driven by the latest Lingo power supply, were fitted with the same cartridges and there were no switching devices used; the cables were swapped around as appropriate. Listening to Simply Red's 1985 album *Picture Book* [Yuck! - Music Aesthetics Ed] on the standard unit proved an immensely satisfying experience. Mick Hucknall was in fine form back in those days, and on the night everything I love about vinyl was there in spades, with a sense of the music being almost live. It was easy to close my eyes, relax and listen to the music, with no concern about midrange, bass, treble, imaging, soundstages or anything else. I was completely happy with the sound of the system and why wouldn't I be? The audio qualities of a well set up turntable have always been magical.

Then the LP12SE was plugged in. I was expecting a subtle but noticeable difference, but this was absolutely ridiculous. Never mind being in the same ballpark, this was a different game entirely. The sound was more life-like, with even more speed and impact, plus there was a heap of previously unheard detail with the vocals and instruments being even easier to follow. It was effectively far more musical, and you'd have to be using an ear trumpet not to notice the difference. There's one major problem with the LP12SE, and that's the fact that I'd have to go and live under Grafton bridge to be able to afford one. It might even be worth it but the dust would play havoc with my vinyl, so I'll just have to keep bothering John and Dean or Romesh for my regular fix. Why didn't I listen to my dear old Mum and go to law school? ■