



HANNS ACOUSTIC T30 TURNTABLE

\$5,700 (no arm)

Review by

JOHN FRITZ

“The joy of discovery is certainly the liveliest that the mind of man can ever feel” (Claude Bernard, 1813-78).

So it was when, at the tender age of eight, my father taught me to sing Schiller’s lyrics to Beethoven’s Ode to Joy in German (Freude schöner Gotterfunken etc). The joy I experienced was not the discovery of another language, but the beauty of the music as played through an RCA monophonic console sitting atop four skinny legs. The experience made a lasting impression and started me on my life long passion for music. And it was that primitive table in that console that was the catalyst. Since then, turntables and LPs have been my travel mates in my pursuit of the absolute sound and musical satisfaction. To be sure, I have been tempted away from this seemingly archaic purveyor of recorded music - first it was the compact disc (“perfect sound forever”), followed by DVD Audio and SACD, and more recently computer audio and hi rez downloads. But for all the many advantages of digitally based playback systems (convenience being at the top of the list), I continue to prefer analog playback for soul satisfying musical pleasure.

I am a happy camper these days. In case you haven’t noticed, analog playback has enjoyed a renaissance that began in the mid 1990’s and continues unabated to this day. In fact, it has picked up steam of late with more and more turntables hitting the market, from the affordable to the six-figure giants. Record pressings are up (northward of 30,000,000 in 2013 according to Analog Planet’s sources). The quality of pressings has improved, in some cases dramatically, thanks to the companies like Quality Record Pressings and RTI. Not only that, analog tape decks, yes open reel tape decks, are making a comeback, and they are being restored to beyond their original glory by a small but vocal cadre of believers; count me one of them. There is an organic, fundamental

rightness to analog that to my ears is missing from even the best of digital playback. Even entry level tables are capable of analog magic, as more and more listeners are discovering or re-discovering in increasing numbers.



The analog renaissance has spurred ongoing improvements in turntable technology, such that the best tables are now capable of approximating the sound of the master tape, given a high quality pressing (and arm/cartridge, of course). Steady state speed is no longer an issue with the best tables. The use of speed controllers, high quality motors, and precision bearings and shafts, have practically eliminated wow and flutter

from our vocabulary. Designers have focused their attention more on vibration control, exploring materials or combinations of materials for their non-resonant qualities. Platters, plinths, and arm boards are made of aluminum, acrylic, delrin, various woods, and even copper, with the goal of keeping acoustic feedback from reaching your stylus and sullyng your precious music (will we soon see a 3D printed table?) Then there is the matter of isolating your table from rack-borne or surface vibrations. Some designs continue to use springs to isolate the plinth and arm-board. Some are unsprung, relying upon a rigid and non-resonant plinth for isolation. My VPI Classic 2 is such a table. In recent years, designers have turned to a magnetically suspended plinth and bearing to isolate a table from acoustic feedback.

Hanns Acoustics, a Danish company with parts and manufacturing ties to China, Germany and the Czech Republic, has joined the analog renaissance with a line of turntables at various price points, starting with the entry level T-10 (\$1,299 - review upcoming) and climbing the table ladder up to the massive T-90 (\$50,000). As expected, as you move up the line, you gain a speed controller, more

mass, more plinths, and more isolation. The T-30 under review (\$5,700) was supplied by on-line retailer Carl James at USAHIFI and is an intermediate model that offers a number of features that are unusual for its price.



Starting from the bottom and working up, The T-30 has three large, adjustable feet containing opposing magnets that provide spring-like isolation. This was my first encounter with a magnetically suspended table, and I was anxious to see if the T-30 could improve upon the excellent performance of my unsuspended VPI. The T-30's plinth is a massive, 2 ½ inch thick affair, with brushed aluminum plates forming a sandwich over two black acrylic plates. The aluminum plates are said to be slow-baked to increase structural rigidity. The plinth supports two tone-arm mounts, drilled standard for SME and Rega arms. The Rega mount features "slow pitch VTA adjustability, which I was unable to test because the table shipped sans that mount. A mount for just about any arm out there is available by special order.

The 2 7/8 inch thick, 20lb platter is made of aluminum with a black anodized hard-coat. Though impressively massive, I was surprised by the audible ping made by the platter when struck by my finger. It reminds me of the annoying sound of the Ping putter that found its way into the hands of golfers many years ago. A carbon mat is provided, and with or without the mat, the platter's "ping" was inaudible during playback. I preferred the T-30 with the mat; it produced a relaxed yet detailed sound compared to the naked platter, which was airier and brighter.

The Germany sourced bearing is a magnetically suspended design, although not totally so; the ceramic spindle is allowed to slightly contact the stainless steel thrust ball for mechanical grounding.

Flanking the table are two standalone, AC synchronous motors, custom made in the Czech Republic. The motors are connected to the platter by three silicon belts on each side; one motor is shorter than the other in order to accommodate placement of the six belts. In operation, the motors were dead silent, and the belts, once properly installed, isolated the platter from the motors to a fare the well. A record weight is supplied that stabilizes the disc, although I prefer a record clamp like the one used on the VPI, which is better at clamping down warped records.

The T-30 features the SC-30 speed controller - its first appearance in the Hanss' line of tables. In addition to providing non-fluctuating power to the motors, the speed controller allows accurate adjustment of speed at 33 1/3 rpm and 45rpm; 78 rpm is not provided. Hanss calls this the GRS system (Generate, Rotate, Synchronize). The platter's speed is optically read from a reflective tape underneath the platter, and speed is indicated on a small meter on top of the plinth which is powered by a 9v battery inserted into a well underneath the plinth. The meter is activated by

pressing a 1/4 inch button, and it turns off after a few minutes in order to save battery life. Speed adjustment is made at the controller box by inserting a small screwdriver (provided) into tiny openings, one each for 33 1/3 rpm and 45rpm. In addition to the speed controller, Hanns provides a stroboscope disc to set speed. I am not sure why - the GRS system provides greater accuracy, and unlike the disc, you won't get disco dizzy adjusting the speed! Once the speed was set, it remained impressively stable, fluctuating only at the level of a hundredth of an r.p.m.!

The review sample was shipped with a Jelco SA-750DB tonearm, courtesy of Peter Scharman of Canadian PSE Audio Products. Although this is not a review of the Jelco, I can say that it performed well beyond its most reasonable price of \$530.00, and it is as easy as pie to install. By arrangement, a pre-drilled arm board was provided for my Graham 1.5T arm. I ended up preferring the Graham for its greater detail retrieval, and most of my comments pertain to that combination. Cartridges used were the Benz Micro SM medium output MC, and the venerable Grado Reference MI (low output).

At this price point, aesthetics are important to me. I prefer visually attractive audio equipment, and that includes tables (I was permanently spoiled by an Oracle Delphi that I owned decades ago). The T-30's brushed aluminum/black acrylic plinth and black platter are quite handsome, and its overall size inspires confidence. Fit and finish are excellent, bespeaking of quality manufacture. Face on, the T-30 loosely resembles an off-shore oil rig (happily there were no feedback induced oil spills). It may not win my audio beauty contest, or yours, but it certainly won't make an early exit in the competition like some hapless hasbeen in Dancing with the Stars.

Setting the Table.

Unpacking the T-30, you are immediately impressed with the thought that went into the layers of precisely cut compartments that hold and protect all of its component parts. You are also impressed with the quality of those parts, as well as the inclusion of all of the accessories you need to set up the table, right down to a bubble level and gloves to keep your dirty fingerprints off its gorgeous brushed aluminum finish. On the other hand, the terse owner's manual is not befitting of a product of this caliber. Although common sense and experimentation (or a call to the dealer) can supply the missing elements, it would be nice to have the guess work and bother taken out the equation.

Before you even begin to set up the T-30, you need to consider whether your rack can accommodate its oversized dimensions. With a standalone motor on either side, the T-30 requires a sturdy rack of at least 28 inches wide and 16 inches deep. Having no such rack, I had to straddle the T-30 between two smaller racks to accommodate its width. You will also have to deal with the two large power cords running from the motors to the controller, making cable dressing a bigger chore.



Assembly and set up of the T-30 and arm took about one hour. After inserting the bearing into its housing on the plinth, placing the platter over the spindle, and leveling the deck by turning the adjustable feet, the next step is a real treat – attaching the six silicon belts. The manual offers little help, and you will have to apply common sense and patience. First, you need to make sure that the motors are level, because if they are not, the belts will

do a quivering dance, become intertwined, and then one or more will fall off underneath the platter,

causing Ella to suddenly sound like James Earl Jones in slow motion. The same result awaits you if the belts do not have proper tensioning. Oh, and make sure the belts are clear of the tone-arm bases, from which there is less than one inch of clearance to the platter. Here, the manual could have helped by recommending a set distance between the motor and the plinth. Too little belt tension and off they go; too much tension and the belts will be fighting the motor. I found the sweet spot by experimentation, locating the motors about 3 inches from the middle side of the plinth to the top of motor housing, with the front of motor's bottom located at the middle of the front bearing. If the belts cease wiggling, and the platter comes up to speed in about three seconds, you are ready to give the T-30 a whirl.

Well not quite - there is one more thing you need to know before you get started! When I pressed the 45 rpm selector button on the speed controller and then the start button, time stood still - nothing happened. I discovered that if you want to play a 45 rpm record, you will need to cycle through the 33 rpm speed and then press the 45 rpm selector on the speed controller. Carl James of USAHIFI explained that this was not a malfunction; the T-30 is designed to work that way. It seems that the motors have difficulty generating enough torque to spin the massive platter from a stop to 45 rpm; they need an assist from the 33 1/3rpm start-up. Of course, this is not mentioned in the manual. As you move up to the T-60, you gain more torque and the ability to go directly to 45 rpm.

Mass is More!

It has been said that the symphony orchestra is the perfect instrument. I couldn't agree more. I have long been fascinated with the infinite range of color, textures, dynamics, and sheer power offered by large orchestral works. If you consider the forces involved in a large orchestra, along with the usual close proximity of microphones, you can well imagine the power and weight that a well recorded orchestra can convey over a capable system (you would also know this if you have ever attended a symphony concert close up). Accurately reproducing orchestral weight and color in all of its facets presents a daunting challenge to any system. Many cry "uncle" when asked to reproduce the "big" works; Prokofiev's Scythian Suite and Mahler's Symphony of a Thousand come readily to mind.

The ability to capture the impact of a large orchestra is not solely the provenance of large speakers and gargantuan amplification. Your upstream components are players, and they must be up to the task, and that includes your turntable. Before the needle dropped, I imagined that the T-30's considerable mass would result in a weighty orchestral performance, and I was right. It was not just low bass extension, which the T-30 has in spades, but also a fullness in the mid to upper bass range that effectively captures the foundation of the orchestra, right down to massed celli, double-bass, and the 60 inch concert bass drum. I knew I was in for a treat with the T-30.

There is no better recording to demonstrate the power of the orchestra than, you guessed it, the Power of the Orchestra (Chesky RC-30), recorded by Kenneth Wilkinson in Walthamstow Hall, London. Listen to "Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle" from Pictures at an Exhibition, and you will get a good idea of the T-30's ability to reproduce the foundational underpinning of massed strings. You can almost feel the air being moved by the conglomeration of string players. Towards the conclusion of A Night on Bald Mountain, there is a bass drum roll that presages a resounding climax. The T-30's rendering of the bass drum was spot on – taut yet full, with its skin texture intact. The heady conclusion, with its soaring strings, peppered trumpet blasts, shimmering cymbals, and crashing gong, held together with a Tiger like focus and tenacity.

Since the T-30 was imagined, if not manufactured, in Denmark, it was apropos that I visited that country through the music of Denmark's "National" composer, Carl Nielsen, in this case, his Fourth Symphony ("The Inextinguishable"- Bernstein, NYPO). Composed during World War I, this idiomatic work is the composer's passionate statement of conflict and the triumph of the will of life. The

concluding movement pits two tympani players against the rest of the orchestra, as if they were doing battle. Fiercely punctuated tympani strokes disrupt the escalating and de-escalating flow of massed strings. The T-30 admirably conveys this struggle with no hint of strain or congestion,



suggesting that it has won its own war - against acoustic feedback.

My system is situated on a concrete floor covered by carpeting, so footfall isolation is not a problem.

On the other hand, the realistic sound pressure levels emanating from my highly efficient Wilson MAXX II speakers in my large listening room can unnerve a poorly isolated component. Regardless of the music being played, the T-30 proved itself to be a stable platform, supporting the arm and cartridge with unwavering speed stability and supremely effective isolation. The T-30 sailed through power house rock and orchestral climaxes with nary a hint of perturbation from the sound engulfing it. It passed with aplomb, that ultimate torture test and slayer of lesser tables - Mickey Hart's Dafos on Reference Recordings, with its *mélange* of exotic percussion and the famous earthquake inducing crash of suspended drums dropping to the floor in the "Gates of Dafos".

Your cartridge will love the T-30. Its immunity to acoustic feedback allows your cartridge to strut its stuff against a backdrop devoid of electro-mechanical noise. Indeed, noise levels have been reduced to the point that tape hiss defines the noise floor. Ironically, given a quality pressing, you swear you are listening to a CD during silent passages. Once the music starts, however, you know you are not (happily) listening to a CD. What you get, instead, is a richly rewarding combination of detail retrieval, sonic purity, tonal density, and inviting sense of ease and relaxation. The T-30's way with detail retrieval contributes to its easy going character. All of the details are there, but they are not hyped or shoved in your face. You lean into the performance, but you do not have to strain to enjoy

the wealth of detail in your recordings.

With a deck this quiet you are better able to appreciate the integral role that silence plays in our enjoyment of music. I know what you are thinking - silence is not music – if there is no sound, there is no music. To the contrary, silence provides structure in order to distinguish musical passages, or create interludes during which the listener is allowed to reflect on what was just heard. Silence can lend greater impact to dynamics, melodies, and rhythms. Silence can be an attention grabber - the anticipation of “what next” that follows an abrupt pause to the music can be very effective in engaging the listener, while at the same time revealing the ability of your system to capture the decay of instruments and the acoustic of the performance as the sound trails off. Interstitial silence, or the space between successive notes, is also important as it relates to the shaping and articulation of notes. Even subtle noise artifacts lurking in your system can vitiate the contribution of silence to music making.

The opening fanfare motif of the first movement of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony is a good example of how silence contributes to the music, aided by the T-30's ultra silent background. Here, the brass startle by slamming on the brakes, followed by acoustic skidding that the T-30 will allow you to measure with precision. There was no trailing muddiness that lesser tables are prone to when stressed by acoustic feedback. An even better example can be found at the beginning of the Festival in Baghdad in that old warhorse, Scheherazade, this time with the entire CSO slamming the brakes under the willful baton of Fritz Reiner. Truly one of the great moments in the history of recorded music, this passage is a stunning simulacrum of an orchestra. The T-30 captures perfectly the air above the orchestra escaping and decaying into silence within defined side and back walls of the pre-renovation Orchestral Hall.

I found the T-30 to be a top notch performer in revealing the spaces between notes. In this instance I turned to recordings with transient heavy material. First up is Music for Bang, Barroom, and Ballroom, featuring percussion only, conducted by Dick Schory. I know, an all percussion recording of chintzy 50's kitsch may not be your musical cup of tea, but played back on a capable system, the reality factor of this recording is off the chart. I first heard this recording at a show demo conducted by Dave Wilson of an early version of his WATT Puppy. Played through Spectral electronics (I can't remember the deck that he used), I was floored –it was like I was eavesdropping on the actual performance taking place in Orchestral Hall. The T-30 brought back memories of that demo in a big way. Hall sound, crisp but not etched transients, the multitude of percussion instruments sounding natural and clearly defined within a wide open soundspace- it was all there like I remembered from the demo.

Moving on from orchestral music, I intuitively speculated that the T-30's stately way with the orchestra would somehow translate into compromised performance with jazz and rock recordings, where timing and speed are critical. My reference table, the VPI Classic 2, excels at timing, and is my benchmark in this regard.

The T-30 does quite well with pace and timing. I give a slight edge here to the Classic 2. Playing Hot Tuna's eponymous album (RCA AYL1-3864) through both decks, the performance was a bit more insistent through the Classic 2. Not that Jack Casady's bass lagged behind Jorma Kaukonen's acoustic guitar through the T-30, but their instruments seemed to coalesce better with the Classic 2, and the music had a bit more snap. When Sinatra wows the audience at the Sands, backed by Count Basie and his orchestra, the T-30 swings, but the toe tapping is bit more fervent when listening to the Classic 2. I suspect that in achieving a certain fullness in the mid-bass, which works wonders with large scale classical recordings, the T-30 subjectively trades off just a bit of the music's timing. To be fair, the Classic has its own dedicated arm and was designed to function as an



integrated unit, making me believe that arm selection may very well be the difference in the timing abilities of the two decks.

Although I found the T-30 to be mostly even-handed in its spectral balance, the slight exuberance in the lower midrange and upper bass that gelled with orchestral blockbusters imparted a dark hue to its sound, at least compared to the VPI. It was not that the T-30 sounded rolled off in the high frequencies, only that the VPI seemed brighter overall. I tried the T-30 sans the mat, and the T-30 edged closer to the VPI's spectral balance, but the VPI still remained brighter. The difference may lie in the magnetically suspended platter and plinth of the T-30, which seemed to offer the "ease" of a good analog master tape. The T-30 sounded relaxed and inviting, with body and sustain. The VPI, in comparison, is fast, lean, and forward leaning. The T-30 was tube-like while the VPI was solid state in its leanings.

Solo piano recordings highlighted the differences between the two decks. A recording that I turn to often features David Bar-illan performing works of Weber and List, exquisitely recorded by Peter McGrath on a 30 ips analog recorder for the Audiofon label. Both decks excelled in capturing the power and timbral qualities of the Bar-illan's grand piano throughout its range. The T-30 conjured up more weight in the piano's lower registers, such that I felt more of its physical presence, often to dramatic effect. In fact, it was the T-30, coupled with Merrill Audio's remarkable Veritas amplifiers, that so delighted me with a stunningly realistic reproduction of a grand piano, as I noted in my review of the Veritas. The VPI captured the impact of hard struck keys in the upper registers a tad better than the T-30, and individual keys were more distinctly rendered in passage work. Let me be clear that the differences here are subtle, and I did not feel short changed by either deck.

Vocals benefited from the T-30s rock solid pitch stability and lack of background noise. Whether it was Norah Jone's subtle vibrato, Mighty Sam's plaintiff growl, Neil Young's twang, or Dusty Springfield's caress, the T-30 nailed their distinctive calling cards, producing nuances and textures that were mesmerizing in their tactile reality. I have never heard Radka Toneff's fragile voice reproduced with such sensitivity, her melancholy so evident. In some ways, I am reminded of my long gone (and much lamented) Oracle Delphi, which had the uncanny ability to render vocals with a focus and balance of throat and chest that was simply captivating.

Although imaging and sound-staging are artifacts of the recording process, visualizing a performance can be fun and down right realistic with some recordings. The T-30's imaging and sound-staging is fun – big fun- vivid, and with life-sized images. The T-30 draws the curtain wide open to reveal fully fleshed out instruments, such that you are fooled at times into thinking that performance is taking place in your room, especially with jazz and folk recordings. Art Pepper's alto hangs before you in space in Art Pepper Meets the Rhythm Section, fully life-size and dimensional, the contour of its bell apparent. In the delightful Tin Tin Deo, Philly Joe Jones' executes a tasteful drum solo that you can visualize as he moves around a dimensional kit. The sensation of the performance taking place in your listening room was stunningly conveyed in the close up recording of Scott LaFaro's bass and Paul Motian's kit in Walt for Debby. With the best pressings (I traversed my growing collection of QRP pressings) I turned off the lights and was magically in the company of the performers.

Although I have not had any exposure to the other decks in the Hanns line, I suspect that the T-30 represents the sweet spot. No doubt there are some small gains to be had from pricier decks by Hanns and others, but those gains will be lost on all but the most sophisticated of systems. The T-30's stellar performance and tons of features will leave you doubting that you need more. StereoMojo is always on the lookout for high performing gear that represents true value, and the T-30 easily fits the bill.



The T-30 makes a bold statement as to the performance and features than can be had in a middle priced table (\$5,700). It has plenty of competitors seeking to push the envelope of vinyl playback without resorting to heroic and costly efforts in order to wring out that last scintilla of performance.

The T-30 boasts an intelligent design, not the least of which is its superbly effective magnetic suspension. When you also consider its quality construction, impeccable speed control, and two arm capability, the T-30 becomes a best buy in its class and deserving of your serious consideration. Those looking to upgrade to a table that can take advantage of the full range and authority of a big system will be duly impressed and won over by the T-30s weighty and near master tape performance. I can only conclude that, with the T-30, Hanns has a winner on its "Handss"!

System:

VPI Classic 2 turntable; Benz Micro SM and Grado Reference cartridges; Denon DVD 2910 SACD/CD Player; Anedio D1 DAC; Alexis ML 9600 Masterlink High Resolution Recorder; Audio Research LS 25 Mk II Linestage Preamplifier; Audio Research PH3 SE Phono Preamplifier; Wilson Audio MAXX speakers; Cabling - Nordost and

Transparent.

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