



Stack Audio Serene LP12 upgrade

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When I first met Theo Stack of Stack Audio at the Bristol HiFi Show in 2018, he discussed his ideas for building after-market parts for Linn LP12 owners who wanted to upgrade their turntables. In the year that followed he has worked hard to deliver on that plan. For the past two weeks my listening room has hosted two LP12s, both built and fitted by Peter Budd for Gulliford Audio in Exeter. My own LP 12 was built there so I can attest to Paul's craftsmanship. He may not have the quasi-rock star status of some LP12 gurus, but he builds great record players.

Theo himself brought the pair of turntables to my home, which is only a few miles from his Exeter development studio. He also brought examples of the pieces which were deployed in one of the machines. My first impression was that they are of extremely high build quality. Designed in Exeter and fabricated in a specialist UK workshop, they are made of aluminium and something called Solid Surface, which is an amalgam of aluminium, acrylic polymer and mineral. The honeycomb construction is totally inert but lighter than solid metal. The arm board is polished to a high gloss black finish, with no logo. The arm board is currently available to suit SME, Linn or Rega tone arms. I recommend a visit to the Stack Audio website to read more about the technical details.

The design objective behind the Stack Audio Serene parts is the removal of unwanted vibration within the player, which given that a turntable is only supposed to read the small vibrations in a vinyl groove, detracts from the accuracy of playback and ultimately musical enjoyment. I was intrigued to hear if this has been achieved.

Both LP12s started out as relatively entry level machines with similar components. Both were fitted with the Project arm that until recently was Linn's choice for the Majik LP12. Both arms were fitted with an Ortofon 2M Bronze moving magnet cartridge. Each player was powered by a Valhalla PSU and the bearing in both was pre-Cirkus. Both were cased in wooden plinths. So far, so regular Linn LP12. However one player has been rebuilt using Serene components from Stack Audio, namely the arm board, top plate, subchassis and baseboard. These components, dubbed Serene Full Set cost £575 plus installation which with most dealers costs about £120. There is also a Serene Ultimate Full Set (£841) where the stainless top board is replaced by a machined aluminium plate and the baseboard is made of Solid Surface material rather than two layers of aluminium. All of the Stack Serene components are available separately should you wish to upgrade just one element of an LP12.

I reconfigured my Trilogy 907 phono stage to its moving magnet setting, checked that the tracking weight for each arm was within a gnat's whisker of the recommended 1.5g, and thus started a very interesting few days of comparative listening.



Sound quality

It is a long while since I heard an entry level LP12, so I started by playing a few favourite albums on the standard version. Pink Floyd, Neil Young, JJ Cale, Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, Colosseum, Santana, the Allman Brothers Band, George Ezra (Mrs K's favourite current artist), Bruce Springsteen and various classical music artists all had a spin. This was fun sound, bouncy, lively, engaging, as I would expect of a well fettled LP12.

In due course I swapped the players and went through the same pile of albums. Within a few short minutes I felt that I had moved into a much more grown up world of sound. The bare LP12 had acquitted itself well, but the Serene-equipped one had a much more solid, three dimensional sound signature. Crucially it drew me into the music far more than the standard one, and I found three hours had elapsed in my first listening session with no sense of fatigue on my part. It was surprisingly close to the performance of my own much more expensively equipped LP12.



Thereafter I swapped back and forth between the two “entry level” players regularly and each time I had the same reaction. The Stack machine was doing something rather special. The Ortofon 2M Bronze deserves an honourable mention here - it is an extremely musical device, and I enjoyed it a great deal. Musical, even handed across the frequency range and tracking well on every record I played. Given that my own moving coil device costs almost 10 times the purchase price of the 2M Bronze I think the latter is great value for money and a fine cartridge choice for anyone who wants to stay with a moving magnet design. It proves that if you get the turntable right you don't need an exotic cartridge to get a good result.

Those of us who love our LP12s know that there are many ways to upgrade this turntable, with both Linn and third party products. I am a Johnny-Come-Lately to the party, having



only purchased my first ever Linn in 2018, with a lot of guidance and support from a committed 'Linnie'. It is a daunting world to enter as a novice, a minefield of jargon and opinion, so I do recommend getting the guidance of an expert. However, whether you buy new or second-hand, at some point I am willing to wager that you will start to think of ways to make it even better. Power supplies, bearing, tone arms and cartridges will all come under consideration. At the risk of being accused of adding to the confusion, I earnestly urge you to consider the Stack Audio Serene components early in your upgrade plans. Anything you add thereafter will give you its full potential, and the relatively modest price of the Stack Serene family makes it very easy to recommend.

So has Theo Stack delivered what he promised last year and has he met his design goals for these pieces that carry his name? Absolutely, and then some. British designed, British made and sonically excellent, the Stack Serene family is a magnificent addition to the upgrade options available to the owner of any Linn Sondek LP12, the most venerable of British hi-fi components.

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