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- ▶ AMG GIRO MK II  
MUSIC TIME MACHINE
- ▼ TECHNICS SL-1200G  
FAULTLESS SONICS

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ALEX HALBERSTADT

# Technics SL-1200G

## TURNTABLE

People tend to believe that things are what they appear to be. This turned out to be the case in 2016, when Panasonic introduced the limited-edition Technics SL-1200GAE turntable. It appeared almost identical to an SL-1200—arguably the best-selling and most loved record player series of all time, discontinued in 2010 after more than 30 years—but it cost a whopping \$4000. The similar model designation didn't help stem the griping that Panasonic had made a "fancy" version of their legendary DJ turntable at six times the price of the original. By the time the regular-production SL-1200G was released later in 2016—it was almost identical to the SL-1200GAE and cost the same—most people had realized that this was an entirely new design created for audiophiles, not a new version of the old 'table that had come to be used mainly by DJs. But similitude is a powerful thing; while auditioning the SL-1200G, with its familiar pitch slider, strobe light, and hinged dust cover, I couldn't *not* think about the SL-1200MK4 I had lived with and thoroughly enjoyed when I was in my 20s.



**Hall's Gibson ES-175 archtop hollow-body electric came across with all of its woodiness and dense harmonic overtones intact...**

## SPECIFICATIONS

**Description** Direct-drive turntable with three-layer, 8lb platter; four-layer plinth for vibration damping; coreless motor running at 33 1/3, 45, 78rpm; and tonearm. Speed adjustment range: ±8%, ±16%; starting torque: 3.3kg-cm (2.8 lb-in), adjustable; build-up characteristics: 0.7s from standstill to 33 1/3 rpm; wow and flutter: 0.025%; rumble: -78dB (IEC 98A weighted). Platter: Brass and aluminum, diecast. Diameter: 13 5/64" (332mm). Weight: 7.9lb (3.6kg).

Tonearm: Universal Static Balance type. Effective length: 230mm (9 1/16"); overhang: 15mm (19/32"); tracking error: within 2°32' at the outer groove of a 12" record, within 0°32' at the inner groove; offset angle: 22°; arm-height adjustment range: 0-6mm; VTF adjustment range: 0-4gm; headshell weight: approx. 7.6gm; cartridge weight range without auxiliary weight: 5.6-12.0gm; with small auxiliary weight: 10.0-16.4gm; with large auxiliary weight: 14.3-19.8gm; power supply:

120V, 60Hz; power consumption: 14W in use, approx. 0.2W standby. Included in the box: turntable, tonearm, mat, dust cover, EP adapter, balance weight, small and large auxiliary weights, headshell.

**Dimensions** 17 27/32" (452mm) W × 6 13/16" (173mm) H × 14 21/32" (372mm) D. Weight: 39.7lb (18kg).

**Finish** Silver and black or solid black.

**Serial number of unit reviewed** GM1KA001049. Designed in Japan, manufactured in Malaysia.

**Price** \$3999. Number of US dealers: "A total of 32 storefronts." Warranty: 3 years, parts & labor, original owner only.

**Manufacturer** Panasonic Corporation, Shiodome Bld. 1-5-1 Higashi Shinbashi, Minato-ku, Tokyo 105-8301. Web: technics.com, na.panasonic.com. Imported by Panasonic Corporation of North America, Two Riverfront Plaza, Newark, NJ 07102. Tel: (201) 348-7000. Web: us.technics.com.



That deck had belonged to my friend M, who had lent it to me for what turned out to be almost a year. In late-1990s New York City, seemingly every coffee shop, hair salon, and picnic featured someone with two SL-1200s, a mixer, and a crate of records (a predicament immortalized by a DJ spinning graveside at a funeral in *Zoolander*). A member of the homegrown DJ brigade, M was taking a break from his gear for reasons I no longer recall. I had been playing LPs on a Rega Planar 3. One of the most recommendable turntables I can think of, the Rega imbued music with an excellent sense of rhythm, a decent amount of detail, and gobs of excitement and drama. The direct-drive Technics, though, went places the belt-drive Rega could not reach: Instead of the lighter table's dancing way with rhythm, the Technics produced an iron-fisted sense of drive and deeper, more physical bass. Powering thousands of dance floors worldwide, the seemingly unbreakable SL-1200 made music sound locked in and effortlessly propulsive, providing a different sort of drama from the lightweight Rega. But compared to the Rega, it sounded wooly and vague, and after a while I missed the British deck's better-defined, more-refined presentation. When the time came, I returned the Technics to M without a pang of regret.

When I lifted the SL-1200G from its box this spring, the twinge in my upper arms told me this was not the DJ turntable of the Clinton years. Everything about this tanklike 39.7lb device feels different. Too much has already been written about the SL-1200G to require a full treatise on its construction, but some aspects are worth mentioning. The nearly 8lb platter is a sandwich of brass, aluminum, and rubber; it feels more precise, luxurious, and stable than any I've handled. (The balance of each deck is said to be adjusted at Technics's factory in Malaysia, on equipment used to evaluate bullet-train wheels.) The coreless motor eliminates cogging, speed anomalies resulting from the interaction between rotor magnets and stator slots on standard electric motors. According to the RPM Pro app on my iPhone, the Technics spun at precisely  $33\frac{1}{3}$  rpm and produced an impressive 0.014% wow/flutter measurement. The SL-1200's lamentable tonearm—easily the chintziest thing about that turntable—has been reimaged. The new arm-tube is made of cold-drawn magnesium, and the gimbal bearings reveal zero wiggle or twist. The back of the SL-1200G offers two RCA jacks, a ground lug, and an IEC connector. (The substantial weight of the Technics enabled me to use the relatively thick and

heavy AudioQuest Thunder power cable without affecting the turntable's balance.) Finally, to my delight, the SL-1200G is able to spin at 78rpm, which extends its utility as a music playback device by about a half-century.

In use, the Technics makes most audiophile turntables seem a bit kludgy and crude. For one thing, it retains the high torque and nearly instant starts (spec'd at 0.7s) and stops that everyone loved about the original SL-1200 models. The precise-feeling cueing lever, large antiskate dial, lovely, polished-aluminum 45 insert (with its cutout housing on the chassis), and strobe light (changed from red to blue) appear perfectly machined and delight both the eye and hand. Even the action of the hinges in the dust cover is buttery smooth.

My favorite convenience, though, is the large, knurled disk under the tonearm base for setting VTA. Its grippiness and easy-to-read markings make dialing in tonearm height a pleasure and make the sliding pillar and grub-screw system on my Schick 12" arm seem rather medieval. Everything about the Technics feels considered, rational, and well-executed, with that Japanese consideration of tactility and knack for visual harmony. I bet an unglazed Bizen vase holding a single flower would look nice beside it.

#### Dialing it in

I leveled the Technics on top of my Box Furniture Co. equipment stand by rotating its adjustable feet, then installed the Dynavec-tor Te Kaitora Rua cartridge in its detachable headshell (using the heavier of the two supplied counterweights) and gave it a listen. In stock form, it sounded solid, agile, and impressively neutral, but also noticeably smaller, grayer, and more mechanical—with shorter note decay—than my Garrard 301/Schick/Box Furniture Co. record player. But as it happens—and as the internet will tell you at impressive length—the Technics is a tweaker's dream. In fact, modifications are mandatory to unlock its formidable performance; fortunately, they also happen to be easy and noninvasive.

First, I replaced the thick rubber mat. Of the aftermarket mats I had on hand, the most fortuitous pairing turned out to be the admittedly odd-looking Trans-Fi Reso-Mat, which has tiny cones with rounded ends distributed across the record surface (£30 plus shipping). I'm always surprised by the vast sonic difference turntable mats can impart, but since resonance is essentially what a cartridge measures, I suppose I shouldn't be. This swap was

particularly eye-opening: With the Reso-Mat in place, the Technics produced a far larger soundfield, with obviously greater resolution and instrument separation and less apparent noise. This substitution produced the largest sonic improvement, though not the largest musical one.

Replacing the stock headshell<sup>1</sup> with either the gunmetal-gray duralumin HE-001 from DS Audio or the Schick graphite headshell, both of which are heavier than the stock unit, improved tracking with the Dynavector and other low-compliance moving coil cartridges and lent the music more solidity and color.

For kicks, I substituted the stock power cord with the aforementioned AudioQuest Thunder, not expecting to hear much difference. Though I'm not sure why, I did hear a difference, and it was consistent with the improvements I hear these fat, braided cords impart to amplifiers and digital source components. The Technics sounded richer and quieter, with a more solid and prominent bass response. The difference wasn't vast but was nonetheless easily audible and consistent. If this paragraph is making you mutter "confirmation bias" while angrily adjusting the BICs in the pocket of your poly-blend shirt, you go right ahead.

Next, I shone an LED flashlight through a hole in the platter to locate the torque control. After setting the switch from automatic to manual, I reduced the torque by about a third of a revolution. The resulting change floored me. The turntable *sounded* mostly the same, but its somewhat mechanical, uptight character was nearly gone; now the music flowed and shimmied more convincingly. I also heard improved sustain and decay. Taking RPM Pro for another spin revealed a slightly inferior set of measurements. I suppose the utility of this control depends on whether you believe a turntable's job is to make recorded music meaningful and exciting or to exhibit near-perfect technical performance. For me, this adjustment proved essential and made listening to the SL-1200G considerably more enjoyable and engaging.



#### Listening

With these relatively simple adjustments made, I sat back to appreciate what the Technics was capable of. In addition to the Te Kaitora Rua, I used the Ortofon Cadenza Bronze, Ortofon SPU Classic G, and Hana Umami Red cartridges.

A track that helps me to figure out how a component handles rhythm is "Samba de Orly" from Chico Buarque's *Construção* (Philips 6349017), a landmark Brazilian pop record composed in 1971, while Buarque was in exile from Brazil, which was in the throes of a right-wing military dictatorship. The tension between the brightness of samba and the melancholy yearning of the lyric—Orly is the Paris airport where planes from Rio touched down, loaded in those days with Brazilians fleeing the regime—gives the song its emotional charge. The interplay of the rhythm guitar, bass, cuica, and percussion at the track's beginning can sound chaotic and disjointed on some systems. The Technics sorted the passage better than just about any source I've heard, playing it with uncommon coherence, order, and drive. My idler-drive Garrard excels at drive, but the SL-1200G was better yet, (re)creating the unflappable, locked-in grooves of its famous predecessor.

<sup>1</sup> Like its Technics predecessors, the S-shaped SL-1200G tonearm has a detachable headshell.



That's where the family resemblance ends. The SL-1200G threw an enveloping soundstage and populated it with images that were more palpable, stable, and better-defined than the venerable DJ 'table was ever capable of. On "God Bless the Child," from the first stereo pressing of Sonny Rollins's *The Bridge* (RCA LSP-2527), both Rollins's tenor saxophone in the right channel and Jim Hall's guitar in the left exhibited outstanding weight, texture, and presence, sounding reach-out realistic. Hall's Gibson ES-175 archtop hollow-body electric came across with all of its woodiness and dense harmonic overtones intact, while the satisfying wallop and tunefulness of Bob Cranshaw's acoustic bass showed off the Technics's impressive way with dynamics.

Best of all, in contrast to that old SL-1200, nothing about the SL-1200G's sound can be described as wooly. Its detail retrieval leaves little to the imagination: On "Hammond Song" from the Roches' self-titled 1979 debut (Warner Bros. BSK 3298), the Technics rendered Maggie, Terre, and Suzzy Roche's voices thrillingly distinct from each other and from producer Robert Fripp's otherworldly electric guitar. It did this by presenting the unusual timbres of the singers' voices, their positions in the soundstage, and their close harmonies with exemplary transparency and fidelity.

My vintage Garrard 301 turntable<sup>2</sup> with the Thomas Schick<sup>3</sup> tonearm sounded slightly more refined and colorful, revealing a bit of thickness in the midrange of the SL-1200G, whereas the Japanese 'table slightly bettered the Garrard in rhythmic authority, coherence, and drive. In other words, I found little to criticize about the Technics's sound.

Musically, however, the differences between the two record players proved more distinct. Listening to the Technics, I remained aware of a mechanical quality that I could never entirely ameliorate. Music wasn't quite as sultry or free flowing as it is when it's reproduced with the Garrard, and I wasn't able to forget myself and become emotionally engrossed in my records as reliably.

Then again, I can think of few turntables that offer as much

## ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

**Analog sources** Garrard 301 turntable in a Box Furniture Co. plinth; Thomas Schick 12" tonearm and headshell. Dynavector Te Kaitora Rua cartridge; Hana Umami Red cartridge; Ortofon Cadenza Bronze cartridge; Ortofon SPU Classic G cartridge; Zu/Denon 103 cartridge.

**Preamplification** Shindo Aurieges preamplifier; Sutherland Little Loco phono preamplifier; Lejonklou Entity phono preamplifier; Parasound Halo JC 3+ phono preamplifier.

**Amplification** Line Magnetic LM-845IA (used as a power amplifier); Pass Labs INT-60; Ayre AX-5 Twenty; SET amplifier with triode-wired 307A output tubes built by Oliver Sayes.

**Loudspeakers** Altec Valencia 846A.

**Cables** Interconnect: Auditorium 23; Linn Silver; AudioQuest Firebird and Thunderbird; Speaker: AudioQuest Thunderbird Zero; AC: AudioQuest Thunder and Hurricane; Triode Wire Labs Digital American. USB: AudioQuest Diamond; Ethernet: AudioQuest Diamond.

**Accessories** Box Furniture Co. Heritage stand; Box Furniture Co. amplifier stand; AudioQuest Niagara 3000 power conditioner; Sonore opticalModule; Sonore Audiophile Linear Power Supply, DJM Electronics GigaFOILv4-INLINE Ethernet filter; Vinnie Rossi MINI PURE-DC-4EVR 9V DC Power Supply; IsoAcoustics OREA Bordeaux isolation footers; Ayre/Cardas Myrtlewood blocks; Feickert Next Generation Universal Protractor, AudioQuest Anti-Static Record Brush; Last Stylus Cleaner; VPI Industries HW-16.5 record cleaning machine. —Alex Halberstadt

value as the SL-1200G. The quality of its engineering and execution makes typical audiophile products look slightly homemade, and I'm willing to bet that it will remain as bulletproof as the legendary DJ deck on which it's based. Speaking of which, the similarity between the two is largely cosmetic: The SL-1200G offers performance that the SL-1200 could only dream of. Whether it's the turntable for you depends on your sonic and musical priorities. The Technics isn't for romantics: It will not make you smell the cigarette smoke at the Baobab Club in Dakar or feel the worn wood of the pews in Nashville's Ryman Auditorium. What it *will* do is reproduce the music on your records with faultless sonics and probably last into the next century. If this sounds appealing, try to audition one. ■

2 The original Garrard, of course, is long out of production. SME sells a *very* authentic "reproduction" that uses some original Garrard parts and makes the rest to original specifications; see the late Art Dudley's review at [stereophile.com/content/listening-204-new-garrard-301-page-2](http://stereophile.com/content/listening-204-new-garrard-301-page-2). Just under \$20,000 when reviewed, one dealer website currently has it listed at \$25,662. Vintage models in good shape are rare, available, and expensive—though not *that* expensive.

3 The design of the original Schick tonearm has undergone some minor revisions, but it's functionally pretty much the same as the version Art Dudley reviewed way back in 2010. See [stereophile.com/artdudleylistening/listening\\_87/index.html](http://stereophile.com/artdudleylistening/listening_87/index.html).

