It’s an ongoing delight to see the resurgence of vinyl spawning new turntable designs, and here we have a new deck designed in Germany by Thorens as what it calls a “new reference for the entry level”. Available in black, white and the red that Thorens is making something of a trademark, the TD 203 boasts a unipivot arm, unusual at this price, as is the luxury of electronic speed change rather than having to manually move the belt. Best of all, this turntable offers a level of sound significantly above its price range.

**EQUIPMENT**

The TD 203 is a belt-driven turntable, with a flat belt around the sub-platter hidden within, rather than wrapped around the platter itself. The speed change is electronic, with a switch front left to move between 33⅓ and 45rpm, where some other decks require you to rip off the whole platter or at least don white gloves to shift the belt from one pulley to another. Electronic speed change seems such a simple thing, but it’s a luxury at this price level, and a most welcome one.

Also high on its list of attractions is that unipivot bearing for the tonearm, instead of the more common gimballed bearings used at this price level. Where gimballed bearings keep an arm locked in two dimensions, this tonearm’s unipivot bearing has a carbide tip resting in an arrangement of five tiny bearing balls. This gives it the freedom to wobble in all manner of worrying directions until stabilised by the anti-skate weight (see below), but has the advantage of performing more independently of its support. Sonically most consider this freedom of movement to allow unipivots to achieve higher levels of detail, while this type of bearing also typically enjoys less wear and reduces the possibility of arm resonances. The arm tube itself is made from rolled aluminium.

Signal connections, including earth, are under the plinth at the back of the tonearm, while the mains connection goes to the box of electronics tucked front left, so the cable sticks out from the left side under the power and speed switches. The plastic lid is a bit odd, since it can only be used when the turntable is not in use, and only covers the platter, not the plinth. So whenever playing your lovely vinyl you have to put this big lump of plastic down somewhere, when it would be far more useful protecting against dust and reducing acoustic feedback from your speakers. Nor is a mat included — a cork mat is optional at $69 or rubber at $79. We didn’t like the idea of not using any mat, though this is apparently possible; we substituted a felt one from another brand.

**SETTING UP**

Setting up a new turntable can vary from fairly easy to alarmingly complex, but as befitting a relatively entry-level vinyl spinner Thorens has kept things towards the simple end of that sliding scale, assisted by a good printed manual, with pictures. (It’s even better viewed online, where the pictures are colour and you can zoom in.)

First you remove a transport lock (and store it somewhere safely). Next you loop the drive belt around the sub-platter and the motor pulley (on our sample, apparently fresh from its packing — this had already been done, which is most unusual on a new unit).

There are two weights to slide onto the back of the tonearm. The larger of the two is the main counterweight, the position of which will determine the tracking force of the cartridge on your records, while the second is an smaller weight with its hole drilled off-centre — eccentrically, as they say. This smaller weight pushes up the tonearm close to the main weight (see image overleaf), and with both weights in place you can use the provided plastic tracking gauge to balance things up at the suggested weight, which for the combination of TP 82 tonearm and TAS 257 moving-magnet cartridge is quoted at 2.3 grams (23mN); this proved easy to achieve.
That eccentric weight can then be skewed, if desired, to adjust the azimuth to keep the cartridge exactly perpendicular to the platter surface; on our unit this was already the case.

Thorens’s website confidently predicts that the TD 203 “takes no more than five minutes from opening the box to playing music from a vinyl record.” That may well be true for adepts, but we were delayed significantly by the very final stage — hanging that little bias weight to provide the required anti-skating force. The tiny weight hangs on a near-invisible thread which ends in a loop, and the loop has to be passed through a teeny-tiny eye-hole before being looped onto one of the central grooves of the bias shaft. Even in bright light and with a watchmaker’s eye-glass this was no easy task, and at some point the weight fell off the other end of the thread, shedding the tiny PVC sheath that held it in place. It’s not safe to proceed without a sheath, as any well-educated teenager will tell you, and we contacted the distributor QualiFi to beg a replacement bias weight.

**PERFORMANCE**

So three days, rather than five minutes, elapsed before we could enjoy vinyl on the TD 203. Happily it proved worth the wait for the weight.

This turntable’s precision and ability to pull detail from vinyl grooves was immediately apparent from the first disc — a near-pristine copy of Steely Dan’s ‘The Royal Scam’. The high production values of the Dan catalogue combined with the tightness of the Thorens’ presentation to deliver the stop-on-a-sixpencebaseline of ‘Sign On Stranger’, its percussive piano solo impeccably rendered. We tried this album again later when our speakers had switched from JBL 4429 Studio Monitors to the KEF Reference Ones reviewed elsewhere in this issue, and these characteristics were further enhanced, not so far as to be called clinical, but certainly a highly precise delivery with excellent imaging, tom-tom runs popping across the soundstage.

Bass was solid if not deep on this recording, so we were about to switch to a modern production, but plattered up The Beatles’ ‘Hey Jude’ LP on the way, and couldn’t have requested a more massive bass response than the Thorens (with the KEFs) delivered for ‘The Ballad of John and Yoko’ — an awesome delivery, especially given the lower effective resolution of the innermost vinyl track.

‘Hey Jude’ itself, in stereo, has become a cliché through over-exposure, but the portrayal here gave it new life — Ringo’s rolling entry right and real, his rhythm cymbal bright and alive, McCartney crooning dead centre flanked by twin guitars, and here the bass went low and melodic, just as it should. It simply doesn’t sound this analogue-rich when played from our digital collection, even the remasters. Long live vinyl. As for detail, try the way the bass resonance rattles the snare wires at the start of ‘Don’t Let Me Down’, and the delivery of McCartney’s off-mike wails at the close.

We should mention that the TD 203’s drive-belt tension can be adjusted, and the speed can also be fine-tuned, though since this involves tiny screw holes on the bottom of the turntable, it’s not something you’ll be wanting to do regularly! Cartridge overhang is also adjustable, but as supplied and with the cartridge already fitted, shouldn’t be needed for those setting up from new.

Praise also for the headshell fingerlift — there is a side lift control for the safest playing of your precious vinyl, but for those who like to needledrop, the headshell lift is thin but long, and contrasts well for visibility against the white cartridge used here. So no painful noises likely.

Also on the plus side, we gather the standard two-year warranty can be extended by a year through registration with the distributor QualiFi.

**CONCLUSION**

With resolution, airiness and solidity beyond its price bracket, Thorens has delivered a superb turntable here for the money, and one that requires very little set-up out of the box — just enough to make it feel worthwhile. Highly recommended.

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**Thorens TD 203 turntable**

- Fine sound at the price
- Unipivot arm
- Electronic speed control
- No mat included
- Large plastic lid must be removed during play and kept somewhere

**Price:** $1490 including arm and cartridge

**Drive:** belt-drive (flat belt around sub-platter)

**Motor:** servo-controlled DC

**Speeds:** 33⅓, 45 rpm

**Speed change:** electronic

**Tonearm:** unipivot TP 82

**Cartridge:** TAS 257 moving magnet

**Dimensions (whd):** 400 x 93 x 320mm

**Warranty:** Two years (one more on registration), one year on belt, cartridge and stylus

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