

Thales TTT-Compact II Turntable System

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The Swiss know how to make high-quality, compact machines. They own the high-end automatic watch market, right? Every year, a Swiss manufacturer like Audemars Piguet brings out a new *complication*—movement—that contains even more parts, does more crazy computations, that never needs resetting for leap years, the orbit of Neptune, Easter, all that stuff. I own an Omega Speedmaster watch, and it doesn't do any real tricks. It's a NASA-approved chronograph, so I can time my steaks superbly to ensure they're medium rare every time, but other than that, all it does is tell the time with great accuracy. I have seen this watch with the back cover removed, and there's a whole world in there—gears, levers, springs—all manufactured with insane precision. Switzerland is the land of miniaturization.



This penchant for precision carries over to the country's high-end audio manufacturers. The Thales TTT-Compact II turntable system is one of those rare products that gets more interesting the closer you look at it.

In the US, the TTT-Compact II turntable is sold as a package for \$24,500 (all prices in USD) that also includes the Simplicity II tonearm and Thales Isolation Platform. The 'table presents as a low-slung, somewhat featureless monochrome slab. It's a sparse, elegant look, with the light-gray platter mat breaking up the brushed, anodized aluminum. The turntable is also available in black, but I thought the silver color was extremely attractive; that's what I'd choose. It would also look cleaner for longer; during the review period, the dust that's inevitably generated when cleaning records didn't bother me on my sample.

The most glaring difference between the Thales system and most every other turntable is the Simplicity II's dual arm tubes, which are of different diameters to cancel out resonances. The two arm tubes move with slightly different trajectories as the cartridge traverses the record. This differential reduces tracking error to near zero. The cartridge doesn't rotate relative to the groove as it spirals in toward the deadwax, as with a conventional single-pivot tonearm, but remains parallel to it. At the headshell end, the arm tubes terminate in tiny bearings that are pre-tensioned at the factory.

There's lots of forward thinking in the turntable chassis, as well. The TTT-Compact II's motor is inboard and connected via a short, thick belt to two pulleys close to the subplatter. This drive mechanism has some similarities in function to the idler-wheel concept found on older Thorens, Lenco, and Garrard turntables, where the motor drives a rubber wheel that's in direct contact with the platter. My neighbor Ron has a restored, vintage Thorens TD 124, and I've spent a couple of afternoons listening to the snappy, impactful way it reproduces music.



The motor's power supply is tricky, too. The motor is battery-powered, and Thales states it works best when isolated from the mains. I thoroughly concur with this assessment. Here's how it worked for me.

The power switch has three positions—Standby, Off, and Charging. It's not exactly intuitive, but once you get into the swing of it, things come together. *Standby* means that the turntable's motor is ready to go, ready for use. The two power controls—labeled 33 and 45 at the front—start the platter. Simple enough, right? *Off* means it won't spin and it's not charging. *Charging* means just that—it's charging the internal battery, but you can't use the 'table because the motor won't spin.

So most of the time, I would plug the power supply into the socket in the back of the turntable at the end of each session to recharge the battery. When I wanted to listen, I'd unplug the charger and flip the switch to Standby. According to Thales, the motor will run for at least 12 hours on a full charge. I never ran the battery all the way down. There's no charge-level indicator, but I didn't feel the lack of one, given that my listening sessions did not exceed 12 hours. I never really found a use case for the Off position.

Here's what's interesting about this whole disconnected-from-the-mains thing. The Simplicity II arm comes prewired, and there's no ground wire, just a dual RCA cable. So when I first set up the 'table, I ran it without a ground. With the charger disconnected, there was absolutely *zero* hum. There was a robust 60Hz buzz when I plugged it in, but this was moot; when listening, I unplugged the charger. I later hooked up the provided ground wire and found no added benefit.



HiFiction AG, parent company of Thales, also makes X-quisite cartridges. In Canada, where I live, both brands are distributed by Wynn Audio, which provided my review sample. Wynn Audio offers the 'table, arm, and X-quisite Voro cartridge (\$8000) as a ready-to-go solution, preconfigured, assembled, and delivered, with a discount of 10% for the package. This is the configuration I tested.

I wrote about the setup of the TTT-Compact II turntable with its attendant Simplicity II tonearm and Voro cartridge in my editorial last month, and followed that up with a full review of the Voro, so I'm not going to get into the weeds on what's involved in getting the 'table set up, aligned, and running.

Dead simple

So who is Thales aiming this turntable *system* at? Not me, the inveterate tinkerer who swaps cartridges, turntables, and tonearms around like I'm changing my underwear. It's not for the shallow-of-pocket crowd either.

Please shift your gaze over to *SoundStage! Simplifi*, and take note of the reviewing habits of managing editor Gordon Brockhouse. Over the past year, Gordon has reviewed two turntables: the Pro-Ject Audio Systems T2 W and the Cambridge Audio Alva TT V2. Both of these 'tables were delivered to him mostly assembled and pretty much ready to play. Gordon, who's a digital guy at heart, just had to unbox them, plonk the platter onto the spindle, screw in the counterweight, and that's pretty much it. The cartridge was preinstalled and aligned, and I'd imagine it was ten minutes' work to get these guys up and running. But both turntables cost less than \$2000—so relatively affordable and far, far less expensive than this Thales setup. Gordon tells me that he wants all the products he reviews to follow the *Simplifi* concept—plug-and-play components that work well, without fuss.



Now imagine someone like Gordon, but with more money than God. This über-Gordon has decided he wants a turntable, but he doesn't want to piss around setting it up. And he wants *the best* turntable money can buy, but it better be small and unobtrusive. He may well read this review—or have one of his peeps do it for him—and decide the TTT-Compact II is the solution for his downtown-Toronto penthouse office. He'll call Wynn Audio and have a Thales package dropped off same day.

As with any turntable package, there's *some* assembly required. Gordon's *team* would open the brilliantly laid-out box, and find that the main chassis of the TTT-Compact II lifts right out with the Simplicity II tonearm already installed. It's a chunky little guy, carved out of a solid billet of aluminum. They'd place it on the shelf and remove all the transit screws. Next, they'd lower the platter on top of the subplatter.

The X-quisite Voro cartridge comes prealigned on its mounting plate. The team would remove it—carefully now—from its plastic box, slide the mounting plate on to the end of the Simplicity II tonearm and tighten the tiny setscrew. Easy-peasy.

After inserting the counterweight into the ass-end of the tonearm, all that would remain would be to set the tracking force. Here is the only vinyl-specific task that might be a little tricky for someone who's never touched a turntable.

One housekeeping detail—the TTT-Compact II ran slightly slow when I first received it. There are two adjustment pots, one for each speed, conveniently placed on the front of the chassis. I inserted the provided screwdriver into the one that controls 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm speed and goosed it a touch. It was easy to get it up to 33.3-ish and there it remained. Wow figures varied a bit, measuring best when the 'table had a chance to settle in for a few minutes. At worst, when the Thales had just started up and was still ice-cold, I still got a respectable 0.12% as measured with the RPM Speed & Wow app on my phone, which I've found to be incredibly consistent. When the Thales had a chance to spin for a few minutes, that number decreased to an excellent 0.05%.



Once set up, the Thales system is a miracle of compact simplicity—hence the name, I’d guess. Push the 33 button and the platter quickly spools up. The headshell has no lift appendage attached, but I found it quite easy and stable to use the tip of my thumb to move it over to the record. The cueing arm’s damping was excellent—I could just dump it down without thinking. The record weight deserves special mention, as it was far heavier than it looked, and its profile provided a firm, stable grip. The weight is terminated with the same material as the platter mat, a high-density rubber that falls flat like a worn-out squash ball—an ideal material, I’d imagine.

The Thales ’table and accompanying arm and cartridge were an absolute pleasure in use. The arm tracked like a champ and the cartridge was extremely quiet in the groove. One oddity I couldn’t resolve was that I could *hear* the motor when I put my ear close to the platter: a small amount of what seemed like audible rumble. However—and this is vitally important—none of that noise made it through to the output signal. I’ve had turntables with inboard motors before, and on occasion, I’ve heard some motor noise come through the speakers. But here, with the Thales . . . *nothing*. Playing “Blank Track” from my *Cardas Sweeper* record, I heard a little bit of the inevitable groove noise, but even with the volume cranked *way* up, there was nothing audible that I could correlate with motor noise. How is this possible? Beats me. I’ll chalk this one up to Swiss ingenuity.

You gotta watch out for the little guy

A decade spent training in mixed martial arts taught me two things. Both lessons were equally valuable. The first one was I’m not that tough. You gotta be sturdy to keep up that activity, and I’m not sturdy. I never felt as healthy as I did when I quit. The second lesson was that it’s impossible to tell who is tough by appearance alone. Some of the toughest, fastest, most deadly people at my old club were the least imposing. You’d never guess.

And here we have this compact, modest-looking Swiss turntable, this little slip of a thing. How could it possibly live up to its chunky retail price? Well, it’s one of those small, unassuming tough guys.

As with my review of the Voro cartridge (which I loved), I fed the TTT-Compact II’s RCA cables into my Aqvox Phono 2 CI via its balanced current-source inputs, using the RCA-to-XLR adapters that came with the phono preamplifier. The ’table sat on my custom-made steel and walnut rack, right next to my VPI Prime Signature.

Jane’s Addiction is coming to Toronto this fall, so it seemed expeditious to yank *Nothing’s Shocking* (Warner Bros. Records 92 57271) out of the rack where it has resided for at least 20 years since I’d last listened to it.

What a great-sounding record. It’s a huge, atmospheric rocker, and the perfect album to help me describe to you what’s so special about the Thales TTT-Compact II. “Summertime Rolls” starts off calm and introspective, and the Thales system layered the appropriate level of menace as it builds. Quiet in the groove, as I said earlier—here on this track, Dave Navarro’s guitar rose up out of a subterranean silence, with huge air around that terrifying instrument. The track is obviously a studio recording, but the production on *Nothing’s Shocking* is very good. The Thales lobbed out a sound *cave*, a soundscape inside of which the music took place. So that’s superb imaging out of the little guy.



It recently occurred to me that I haven't been listening to Tom Waits as much as I used to, and something in the way that the TTT-Compact II presented music made me drag out the remixed version of *Real Gone* (Anti- 87548-1). As I sat there, feeling dirtier as the album pressed on, I realized it was the Thales's dynamic snap that drew me to give this grimy album another listen. Waits overdubs himself right through most of the faster tracks, beatboxing in the background like he's constipated and trying to take a dump, which makes the whole thing sound much more unsettling than it might otherwise. It's often hard to differentiate the percussion from Waits grunting away to himself. The Thales decrypted this disturbing mess, letting me hear each part of the mix as a distinct item. About two-thirds of the way through "Shake It," Waits lets out a guttural shriek, sounding like an animal in pain. I've listened to this album many times, but I've never noticed that howl before, even though it lasts about eight seconds; it's hard to make out given there's so much *sound-effectey* stuff going on at that point in the track.

Dynamics—that's the key here. The Thales system made a distinct happening of the start and stop of each note, each effect, each sharp moment. So when Waits disburges a grunt or a grumble, it stood out from the other instruments and sounds that make up this complicated song. The Thales does it again on "Metropolitan Glide," where Waits's front-and-center vocals gained an appropriate serving of spit and gristle, the Thales expanding the reach and spread of his explosive, whole-head voice.

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The Thales slowed down time. When I first cued up "Top of the Hill," I thought maybe the motor was spinning too slowly. So I checked it with my Samsung phone, and—nope—it was fine, running at a consistent 33.37 rpm. And when I cued up the record again, I could hear that, yes, it was running at the correct speed. But the feeling remained, giving the impression that I was floating inside the music,



suspended in a bath of (gritty, Waitsian) gelatin. Again, I think this sensation resulted from an excavation of dynamics, with the Thales's motor and drive system keeping up with the micro-demands of a sudden spike in the physical groove. So time was dilating the tiniest bit, due to the accentuated rising and falling of the dynamic swings—there was more going on in the same timeframe, which made the music seem to stretch out.

Tonally, the Thales system was admirably neutral, and the bass was weighty, solid, and appropriate. I keep returning to St. Vincent's *MassEducation* (Loma Vista LVR00448) whenever I want to hear how an actual, acoustic bass instrument sounds in my system. The lowest note on most pianos is an A that's four octaves below middle C, which correlates to 27.5Hz. I am pretty sure Thomas Bartlett bangs away at that leftmost key on his grand piano a whole bunch of times in "Savior," and the Thales reproduced it just perfectly. Please note that the little guy didn't *add to* or *overemphasize* the bass. No, it played those notes as they should be played. It straddled the line between re-creation and editorialization, maybe adding just a *touch* of appropriate depth. I say "maybe" because the bass reproduction was so satisfying I found myself wondering if the 'table was excavating something that wasn't actually there. Let's just say that the Thales just rocked it down low.

Same thing up top—silky where appropriate, biting and crisp where called for. Giant Sand's *Cover Magazine* (Thrill Jockey THRILL104) jumps from a whisper to a shriek in seconds, going from a soft, traditional-style mashup in "El Paso / Out on the Weekend" to an abrasive rocker with "Johnny Hit and



Run Pauline.” The high, tinkly-tink piano notes on the “El Paso” portion were precise and crisp, but eminently listenable. Same goes for the harmonica in the “Out on the Weekend” refrain—extended but silky and lovely. But “Johnny Hit and Run Pauline” is supposed to sound harsh and uncomfortable, and the Thales system relayed that disquiet, that fight-or-flight response. This track is like an ongoing car crash and the Thales didn’t pull any punches, but neither did it render the track unlistenable.

As I said, I recently reviewed the X-quisite Voro and found that it punched pretty much all of my buttons. It was that perfect blend of neutrality and above-average reproduction of detail, along with an admirable sense of warmth—essentially everything I could ask for, all wrapped up in an elegant package. I suspect that the TTT-Compact II turntable and Simplicity II arm were designed and built with the Voro (or another X-quisite cartridge) in mind. There’s serious synergy here. All of the aspects of the Voro that so appealed to me are present in the Thales package, and they’re most definitely amplified when considered as a whole. Crisp, dynamic reproduction of transients, an ideal bottom end, marvelous reproduction of space, and an easeful but extended top end—it’s all here, with a cherry on top.

Perfect, in the right setting

Unlike the über-Gordon in the little thought exercise I laid out earlier, the Thales TTT-Compact II isn’t really for me. I want a man-sized, gingerbread turntable. I want to be impressed by a shiny, multilayer wedding cake ascending to heaven. Looking at the petite Thales next to my (suitably man-sized) VPI

Prime Signature was instructive for me; it reinforced my personal ideal of what a turntable should look like.

But that's me. I have a dedicated listening room, and I'm totally good with big speakers and amps, lots of wires, an ostentatious turntable, and not much else. I can imagine incorporating the Thales in a mixed-use environment, with the 'table sitting on some sort of elegant (but compact) stand, a couple of Devialet amplifiers hanging like artwork on a wall, and a pair of polished-up Sonus Faber Aidas holding court over the proceedings—a chic scene that might have tuxedoed butlers milling around, dispensing tiny, expensive snacks from silver trays.



... Jason Thorpe

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Associated Equipment

- **Analog source:** VPI Prime Signature turntable; EAT Jo N°8, DS Audio DS 003 cartridges.
- **Digital source:** Logitech Squeezebox Touch, Meitner Audio MA3.
- **Phono preamplifiers:** Aqvox Phono 2 CI, iFi Audio iPhono 3 Black Label, Hegel Music Systems V10, EMM Labs DS-EQ1, Meitner DS-EQ2.
- **Preamplifiers:** Sonic Frontiers SFL-2, Hegel Music Systems P30A.



- **Power amplifier:** Hegel Music Systems H30A.
- **Integrated amplifiers:** Hegel Music Systems H120, Eico HF-81.
- **Speakers:** Focus Audio FP60 BE, Estelon YB, Aurelia Cerica XL, Totem Acoustic Sky Tower, DALI Epikore 11.
- **Speaker cables:** Audience Au24 SX, Nordost Tyr 2, Crystal Cable Art Series Monet.
- **Interconnects:** Audience Au24 SX, Furutech Ag-16, Nordost Tyr 2, Crystal Cable Diamond Series 2.
- **Power cords:** Audience FrontRow, Nordost Vishnu.
- **Power conditioner:** Quantum QBase QB8 Mk II.
- **Accessories:** Little Fwend tonearm lift, VPI Cyclone record-cleaning machine, Furutech Destat III.

Thales TTT-Compact II Turntable System

Price: \$24,500, including Simplicity II tonearm and Thales Isolation Platform; add \$8000 for X-quisite Voro cartridge.

Warranty: Three years, parts and labor.

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