

Thorens MM-008 Analog to Digital Converter (ADC)

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For many of us who have gotten used to the relatively superior convenience of storing, accessing and playing digital music files, it is quite a chore to play our music collection on vinyl records. It is a pain to gingerly take vinyl records out of their sleeves, place them on the turntable, clean them and then carefully place the stylus on the disc. It is also a pain to repeat the whole process every 20 to 25 minutes when the stylus reaches the end of each side of a vinyl record. I also find it annoying trying to place the stylus on exactly the right spot when I want to hear a particular track on a vinyl record and it is not the first track on the disc.

In contrast, with digital music tracks, all you need is just one or two clicks of the mouse to instantly play any track in your collection and, unlike vinyl, you can make your favourite playlists for every one of your moods and jump from any track to any other track, again, with just a click or two without even leaving your sweet spot.

To transcend the drawbacks of listening to vinyl we have the option of converting all our vinyl based music into digital files and storing them on our computers or external hard drives so that we can enjoy them with the convenience that digital playback offers. However, hitherto, we had to opt for either the very affordable USB turntables that made the process very simple but resulted in digital files that are a poor facsimile of vinyl playback in terms of sound quality or alternatively, we had to spend big bucks to acquire a high quality analog to digital converter to turn our vinyl based music into digital files that had sound quality that is acceptably close to vinyl playback.

design features

It was therefore with great delight that, at TAVES 2013, I happened upon an Analog to Digital converter that had most of what I was looking for. It is compact,

well built and at \$450, reasonably priced. It did not hurt that it is made by Thorens, a highly reputed vinyl component manufacturer from Switzerland. The bonus is that this little unit doubles up as a moving magnet/moving coil phono pre-amplifier as well. I immediately asked Robb Niemann, the CEO of Rutherford Audio, distributor for Thorens, when he could send me one for a review. He explained that this component was not officially launched yet, but I could expect to receive a unit when it did make its debut. The wait was long, but as they say, good things come to those that wait and in mid 2014, I finally received a review unit of the Thorens MM-008 ADC. According to Robb, the Thorens ADC was extremely well received and he is selling them as fast as he can get his hands on them.

The unit arrived in a compact and very well packed carton that should shield the MM-008 from the vagaries of most of the rough handling that it could be subjected to during shipping. The unit itself has a very elegant, minimalist design that consists of a silver or black brushed aluminium façade with no controls and just one blue light at the center. The unit I received was the silver version.

The rear of the unit is also very well laid out and consists of an MM/MC selector switch and RCA sockets for MC loading, stereo MC and MM inputs from the turntable, a power switch, a power socket, a pair of RCA stereo analog outputs, a USB



socket that outputs to a computer and a binding post for a tone-arm earth wire.

The box also contains three (stereo) pairs of RCA terminated loading resistors. These have values of 10 Ohms, 100 Ohms and 1,000 Ohms and will allow you to fine tune the load on the MM-008 to more closely match the specifications of your phono cartridge, if you use the moving coil variety. To determine which load is the most appropriate, you need to check the manufacturer's specification of the MC cartridge that you use. When using a moving magnet cartridge, the MM-008 offers a fixed resistance load of 47 kOhms.

The MM-008 comes with an outboard power supply which allows you to keep the power supply unit well away from the ADC itself where it cannot adversely pollute the circuits with the noise that it emits. When you connect this power supply to a power conditioner, you should ideally plug it into a socket that is isolated from the other sockets so it does not adversely affect the components that are plugged into the same power conditioner. The MM-008 consumes just 3.5 W/ 15 mA and is designed to be left on all the time.

The MM-008 has a gain of 40 dB for MM and 60dB for MC cartridges. The output resistivity is around 250 Ohms. Signal to noise ratio is greater than 84 dB for MM and 71 dB for MC cartridges. The total harmonic distortion is rated at 0.02%, the frequency response at -3dB is 10Hz to 50kHz, while the total harmonic distortion is better than 0.013% for MM and better than 0.055% for MC cartridges. Crosstalk is around 40dB while the physical dimensions of the unit are 115mm (wide) by 55mm (high) by 130 mm (deep).

The analog to digital converter chip used inside the MM-008 is a Tenor TE7022L, which is a 24-bit Delta Sigma chip. This ADC converter gives you a choice of sampling rates of 16 or 24 bits at 8, 16, 32, 44.1, 48 and 96 kHz. The USB output is version 2.0 but is fully compatible with USB 1.1. The unit is designed to work with Windows 8, Windows 7, Vista, XP, Mac OS.

performance

The MM-008 is essentially a plug and play unit and connecting it to my turntable and pre amplifier was simple and straightforward. I tried out several interconnects and finally settled on the Skogrand SCI Beethoven which proved to be the best match for this unit. The unit was connected to my iMac and operated with the latest version of Audacity, which can be downloaded from the web for free.

I subjected the MM-008 to a break-in period of 100 hours and then, before auditioning its analog to digital conversion capabilities, I decided to check out how it performed as a preamplifier. For such a compact and reasonably priced unit, it punches well above its price class. I compared it to preamps at double and even triple the price and the MM-008 held its own with aplomb. I tried various genres of music and in every case, the MM-008 was incredibly transparent, adding very little of its own sound to the signal. Of all the preamps at this price point that I have auditioned, this unit comes the closest to the preamp ideal of being a straight wire with gain. The only area where it conceded points to its more expensive counterparts is in terms of connectivity. What this means is that if you don't need a multitude of connections, the MM-008 is one of the best preamps you can buy for this

price. And if you have a huge vinyl collection that you will, at some point, want to digitize, this component is an absolute no brainer.

Turning to the analog to digital conversion performance, I used a heavily modified Technics SL1200MkII turntable with a Goldring 1042 cartridge and a Cardas USB cable. The first vinyl record that I converted to digital was the Weather Report album titled "Sweetnighter". This is one of my favourite albums from this highly revered jazz band and it has the infectious rhythm, explosive dynamics and incredible soundstage that make it an absolute joy to listen to.

I kept all the Audacity controls at flat but chose the highest resolution offered by the MM-008 which is 24/96 and set all the controls offered by Audacity for the best quality, in the hope of getting a digital copy that is as true to the original as possible. With bated breath I began playing the digital file and "poof", what an incredibly underwhelming feeling. The digital copy was not even close to the original. The bass was flabby, the mid range was thin and the high frequencies were almost totally without the sparkle that this album is so loaded with.

My first thought was that perhaps the ADC part of this component needed more break-in to reach its optimum performance level and so I put it through a further 100 hours of break-in before once again converting the same album from analog to digital. My instincts were spot on. This time the digital file was a whole lot better, especially with regard to the bass, which was a lot tighter, deeper and more tuneful. The mid range also gained a lot more saturation and smoothness. The treble, while definitely better than before, was still not exactly on par with the original.

Since the MM-008 does not have any controls to tweak the sound for MM cartridges, I turned my attention to the plethora of controls offered by Audacity. I tried various levels of treble boost on the Audacity "effects" option and through trial and error I finally found that an 18% to 20% treble boost brought the treble resulted in performance a lot closer to the original vinyl analog reproduction.

With one of my vinyl records digitized to my satisfaction, it was time to turn my attention to digitizing other albums in

my collection. Next in line was my Supertramp, "Breakfast in America" record. This digital file also turned out quite satisfactorily save for the dynamic range, which was quite a bit diminished from the original. I tried various ways to rectify this but to no avail. However, even without the incredible dynamic range of the original, the digital file of "Breakfast in America" was still very enjoyable to listen to.

I then went on to try out many of my favourite rock, jazz, soul and blues vinyl albums and in every case, the resultant digital file proved to be quite satisfactory. I now have dozens of my records stored in my computer as digital files and for non critical listening, they provide me with the pleasure of listening to my favourite tunes in a manner that is a lot more convenient than going through the required vinyl playback rigmarole.

At \$450, the Thorens MM-008 is one of the great values on offer in the world of high-end audio. If you have a good sized vinyl record collection and listen to them only occasionally because you could not be bothered with the numerous intricate steps that you have to go through, the MM-008 is just what you need to add to your system. Besides transcending the hassle-ridden rituals of listening to vinyl, the MM-008 will also extend the life of your stylus, lessen the wear on your record grooves and motivate you to listen to your vinyl tunes a lot more often. In addition, this little jewel of a component will allow you to carry your vinyl based tunes as digital files with you when you are on the go, on your laptop or smart phone. Now, any way you look at it, the MM-008 is definitely worth the price of admission.

quickinfo

Thorens
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