

Kinetik Energy – the new ISOkinetik Modular One Turntable

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ISOkinetik, who already have a great reputation for turntable upgrades, have now launched their first home-grown unit. Neville Roberts puts it through its paces...

"If it sounds better, it is better!" These are the words behind the design philosophy of ISOkinetik – a company with experience in both the audio equipment and sound engineering industries, which has earned an excellent reputation for developing enhancements and upgrades to existing audio products, in particular, record decks. I guess it was therefore only a matter of time before the company would develop its own turntable from scratch. Enter the ISOkinetik Audio Enhancement Modular One turntable!

According to Karl Smith, the man behind the ISOkinetik name, the design is based in the careful choice of materials, coupled with strict adherence to mechanical, electrical and acoustic engineering principles. The end result, he claims, is a product that is designed to maintain the absolute integrity of the original music signal.

Modular design



The Modular One is the first in what will be a series of ISOkinetik turntables. It can be supplied as an entry-level unit which can then be upgraded by the user in stages, as funds allow. Alternatively, it can be supplied with all the modifications and upgrades already fitted. The Modular One can be supplied with either a Jelco or Rega arm.

Jelco's Japanese engineering is superb - they even make their own jewelled bearings. Many well-known brands have marketed Jelco arms under their own names. The Jelco SA-250 has an 'S' shaped arm and a removable headshell, but the version supplied by ISOkinetik is the SA-250ST, which has a straight arm and a fixed

headshell. The Jelco arm uses the standard 5 pin DIN connector in the base, giving a choice of interconnects. This unit was tested with the Jelco 90 degree tonearm cable.

The Rega RB250 (Rega Britain), which was supplied as standard on the Planar 2 and P2 turntables, is legendary. The RB251 is an enhanced evolution of the RB250 and uses hand selected high quality vertical and horizontal bearings. It is also the first in the Rega range to use their high pressure die-cast silicon alloy arm tube and the three point fixing technique, based on the mounting system of their flagship tonearm, the RB1000. This mounting system is designed to reduce stress on the plinth and tonearm in order to give the arm greater stability. The ISO251C tonearm used here is the RB251 upgraded with the ISOtone wiring, incorporating Cardas golden section Litz wire, ISOweight asymmetric counterweight and ISOend stainless steel end stub.



The turntable is designed as a fully customisable, upgradable base on which to build according to the user's personal taste – and pocket! The resulting unit, it is claimed, will compete favourably with its more expensive competitors.



The plinth is CNC machined from highly polished billet acrylic, giving it a great finish. The feet are machined from Delrin and have dense sorbothane anti vibration pads. Incidentally, Delrin is an acetal resin and, according to the manufacturers (DuPont), it bridges the gap between metals and ordinary plastics with its unique combination of strength, hardness, resistance to solvents, low wear and low friction. The bearing assembly is made of phosphor-bronze and incorporates

a ceramic ball. This assembly is fitted to an aluminium and ground-steel sub-platter which is precision engineered to exacting tolerances with 0.001mm concentricity between the axle and hub.



A high quality asynchronous motor spins the platter at either 33rpm or 45rpm. Like many other turntables in its class, this speed change is accomplished by moving the drive belt on the pulley. However, better results can be achieved by using the ISOdrive quadrature-quartz speed generator turntable motor drive system as an upgrade to bring greater pitch stability and speed accuracy, as well as a push button speed change facility.



The turntable benefits from having a tonearm transfer plate, which allows the user to fit almost any tonearm to the turntable. This also facilitates the comparison of various combinations of tonearm and cartridge which, once mounted on a transfer plate, are simply dropped into place.



The basic model is supplied with a 12mm diamond polished acrylic platter, which is said to have a neutral character. Upgrades to this are available, including a 25mm thick acrylic platter, as well as platters manufactured from Delrin or ply materials, together with a number of colour options.

The unit on test



The turntable supplied for this review had the ISOdek S1 acrylic shelf, ISOdrive off-board PSU, the ISOplatter 25mm acrylic platter and ISOlube spindle oil to drop into the bearing assembly after insertion of the ceramic ball and before insertion of the 'ISOsub' sub-platter. It was also supplied with two tonearms and associated transfer plates: the ISO251C tonearm with integral cable and the Jelco SA-250ST tonearm and Jelco 90 degree cable. A Goldring 2400 moving magnet cartridge was also supplied with the unit for testing. However, I soon realised that using a different cartridge from the one I was accustomed to added another variable, so I decided to remove my trusty Lyra Clavis DC moving coil from my own tonearm for use in these tests.

The ISOdrive is a neat little unit that takes your noisy 240VAC mains, converts it to a 24VDC and uses this to power a quartz oscillator to produce switchable 50Hz or 67.5Hz and steps the result up to 115VAC to run the synchronous motor. The drive belt can then be left on the upper '33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm' pulley as depressing the button on the front of the ISOdrive changes the indicate LED from red to green and increases the oscillator frequency from 50Hz to 67.5Hz, thus increasing the turntable rotation to 45rpm.

I must say that the whole unit looks impressive and it is very apparent that everything has been manufactured and finished to an extremely high standard. Although the style is simple and uncomplicated, it looks very modern and elegant with just the right use of black and transparent acrylic with splashes of silver aluminium around the motor pulley assembly. Of course, looks can be deceiving, so it was time to power things up and start spinning some vinyl.



Before starting, however, it was essential to properly set up both arms on their transfer plates, with my chosen cartridge. VTA, cartridge alignment, tracking force and bias all required careful adjustment before any meaningful comparisons could take place. Once done, however, it meant that swapping between the arms was relatively straightforward as they each had their own transfer plates and I just needed to realign the cartridge in the headshell after fitting.

Spinning the vinyl

I chose three albums for the tests: 'Vivaldi Concerti Volume 2' by Concerto Amsterdam (Telefunken Das Alte Werk 6.42355), 'Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 4' by Lorin Maazel and the Cleveland Orchestra (Telarc Digital 10047) and for something a bit more upbeat, the classic 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' by Simon and Garfunkel (CBS 63699 Half-speed Mastered Audiophile Pressing).

First up was the Modular One fitted with the Jelco SA-250ST arm in place. Starting off with the Vivaldi, the Modular One/Jelco combination set the bar high. The baroque music had a real openness and transparency – breathtakingly realistic. Instrument positioning was excellent, both side to side and front to back.

The trumpets in the Tchaikovsky symphony were extremely clear and open, yet strident as indeed they should be. The lower middle range was well controlled and tight. Moving down in frequency, the bass drums were punchy with great grip and also very well extended.

The CBS recording of Simon and Garfunkel can easily sound muddled and confused, especially as the sound engineers in the late '60s - early '70s had a penchant for messing around with the mix using their new-fangled electronic gadgets! I chose this recording as it does take something a bit special to untangle the mess – and I have to say that the Modular One/Jelco did an excellent job. The usually muffled midrange and limp bass were cleaned up and the bass was brought to life in a way I had not heard before with this recording.

At this point, I brought out my copy of Image Hi-Fi's 'Vinyl Essentials' test record to check the tracking and tonearm/cartridge resonance. With the Jelco arm, the cartridge managed to track 80 microns before showing any signs of breaking up with the characteristic buzz on one or both channels. The arm resonance was at about 12Hz, which is fine. Anything over 14Hz and you're getting too close to a real-world signal and anything around 6Hz and below will produce subsonic noise and the harmonics of this will inevitably interfere with the audio signal.

Swapping the arm was indeed a very simple process as this just entailed unscrewing the four screws holding the transfer plate. Out went the Jelco and in went the ISO251C.

Playing through the same series of records demonstrated that the ISO251C offered an arguably cleaner top end than the Jelco. The bass was very tightly controlled and drums packed a real punch. However, I wondered if it was almost too controlled as, overall, I felt the Jelco went down a bit deeper. As with the Jelco, the vocals on the CBS recording managed to be extracted from the processed mush and the solos on 'So Long, Frank Lloyd Wright' were beautifully clear with a great presence.

The 'Vinyl Essentials' tests gave an identical tracking ability result and the arm resonance was at 10Hz – comfortably in the acceptable range.

Conclusions

The Modular One is a great looking turntable and its performance lives up to the elegant and refined styling. Careful thought has been given to a product that can be upgraded easily by the user as funds permit. Attention to detail in the manufacturing processes ensures that all the elements of the unit and its upgrades blend together perfectly. A unit of this quality can only be made by people who take pride in their work, as well as having professional skills.

It's a tough call to say which of the two arms I preferred. On balance, I felt that the Jelco won me over with its smooth and extended bass performance. However, I can see many people preferring the tightness and openness of the ISO251.

The company promises a Modular Two and Modular Three turntable to follow shortly. The Modular One turntable starts at £429 without an arm or £525 with the ISO251 tonearm.

Review deck parts list

- Modular One turntable with Rega and Jelco ST transfer plates
- ISO251C tonearm (a Rega RB251 upgraded with the ISOtone wiring incorporating Cardas golden section Litz wire, ISOweight asymmetric counterweight and ISOend stainless steel end stub)
- Jelco SA-250ST tonearm with Jelco 90 degree tonearm cable
- ISOdek S1 acrylic shelf
- ISOdrive off board PSU
- ISOplatter 25mm acrylic platter
- ISOlube spindle oil
- The model reviewed with the above options costs £999 with the ISO251C tonearm and £1,139 with the Jelco SA-250ST tonearm and cable

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