

Digital High Torque Turntables

By /David Eserin

The predecessors to Stanton's new ST-150 series decks (the ST-100s) were pioneering products and amongst the first turntables to offer a decent challenge to the ubiquitous Technics 1210s. However, they lacked the sturdy build quality of Technics and fell behind the competition quite quickly. Stanton quickly focussed their energies again, and have returned with a "no nonsense" update to the original design, aiming this time to create the sturdiest, most durable and powerful product available.

In the competitive high-end DJ turntable marketplace, it's only been a matter of months since Citronic released the PD45 Ultima, which featured the highest strength motor in the business. But these new models from Stanton have already caught up and are offering the same; a massive 4.5 kilograms of torque per square cm.

This is combined with a new heavy-duty steel construction, a highly stable platter and tone-arm design and improvements to the digital innovations found on the previous range. So, yet another contender for the coveted honour of top dog?

Design

The ST-150 and STR8-150 (the difference is only in the choice of a straight or traditional s-shaped tone arm) come in either blue or grey enamel finishes. The top of the unit is very clean and free of clutter. No internal parts, apart from the motor magnet, can be seen with the platter off. It's also immediately obvious from picking the deck up that it's made of some pretty tough materials. The top case is solid steel and the base is made from an extremely tough rubber. The enamel finish is very en vogue these days, it's similar to that of the new Technics Mark 5G and looks pretty cool. The brake and start adjustment dials could have used better, more attractive dials, but the way all the controls are laid out is discrete and not too confusing. The lack of any display or excessive controls purposefully allows the DJ to concentrate on the performance rather than the set up. The buttons on the Stanton feel like they will last and look good with their accompanying blue light. There are dual start/stop buttons for convenient use in both the traditional and battle positions.

The tone arm construction actually looks sexy, (sorry, but it's true). Comparing it next to other decks highlights the fact that there have been some serious efforts put into this series. The base of the arm sits firmly in the body of the deck and can be fully adjusted in all the ways DJs are used to. Plus, with a choice of either s-shaped (ST-150) or the more scratch-friendly straight design (STR8-150), all styles of DJing are covered.

Most DJs seem to stick to a certain playing style, even when using different music, so with the right choice of model made, you have a deck for life. It is however a shame that-unlike with Numark 's TTX1 model-club owners or DJ collectives do not have the facility to interchange between straight or traditional tone arms on the same unit.

Torquing Sense

Even for pro DJs, using a new deck can take a bit of getting used to. For example, playing for the first time on a pair of 1210s after learning to mix on a cheap pair of belt drives can almost be like learning all over again. But for most DJs, an increase in quality and motor strength is the logical progression for better and more accurate mixing. So with this theory on board, Stanton and Citronic have chosen to take this approach when designing their ultimate decks. The motor on the 150 is extremely powerful, almost three times as strong as the 1210. This makes using features, such as reverse, and performing some complicated or rough scratch moves far more accurate.

Key Correction

For those who are unfamiliar with this digital feature, the key correction facility locks the musical key of both line and phono outputs to the zero percent mark. Therefore vocals and melody don't change key as the DJ increases or decreases the pitch to the right speed for a mix. The quality of this facility has been notably improved over previous attempts (both by Stanton and other companies), but make no mistake, this process still degrades the sound at extreme pitch bends. It is currently difficult to produce realistic results at extreme pitch percentages without the use of technology in the range of £4000. However, the on-board facility is certainly usable to a certain extent within the standard 8% range.

Key correction works by basically chopping up the sound into thousands of pieces either spread out or squashed together depending on direction of the pitch adjust. This causes some short sounds to appear doubled up, at sub 12%. On the other hand, taking the pitch higher produces more natural sounding effect to pitches as high as 14%, which is still the most that anyone is generally likely to need.

Outputs

After testing some of the other new high-end turntables recently, we have become used to the convenience of non-grounded turntables. The Stanton is another example of this new breed and can plug straight into a mixer without needing those nuisance little grounding wires that always seem to be braking and getting lost if you move the decks around a lot. This also brings us on to the joys of detachable cables. The back of the ST/STR8-150 houses a small recess for power and audio connections and a switch to select either the standard phono level (straight from the needle) or the amplified line level output (as on CD players). The key correction facility only works with a line level connection. There is also a digital output (S/PDIF) for handily plugging straight into your CD-R or computer sound card.

Extra Features

The two dials for brake and start adjust are located at the front of the deck and stick out slightly from the unit. They are not retractable by pressing, but are low enough to avoid an accidental adjustment. The less moving parts there are, the less there is to go wrong, so this is a good thing.

Turntablists are the most common DJ to use this feature to its full extent. Used carefully it can add a very subtle trademark to a performance and can make new and interesting scratch moves possible. Reverse play is also engaged from a button on the front, as is pitch select to +/-8%, +/-25% and +/-50% and a new, removable target light. Curiously though, the pitch bend buttons from the earlier 100 models have been removed from the new design.

Both new models come with a Stanton 680HP cartridge mounted on a headshell included as standard. This is very handy for getting up and running with the minimum of fuss.

Conclusion

The overall design is very clean and we challenge anyone to find a heavier and more feedback-resistant DJ turntable. The motor is as powerful as it gets today and, regardless of what anyone says about different torque levels, we find the step up in torque reassuring and easy to get used to (stepping down in torque is another story). Any DJ worth their salt should really be able to adjust to the new feel before bringing in their first mix.

The tone arm is one of the most highly engineered and well-structured designs we have seen, but it does seem a shame to restrict the user to making a decision on straight or s-shaped tone arms at the time of purchase. For the scratch DJs, we have found no sturdier deck for the abuses of our enthusiastic scratch test.

The ST/STR8-150 is undeniably a superior turntable to the recently upgraded Technics Mark 5G, while attractively also costing around £50 less for a pair. Every major DJ equipment manufacturer now has some serious contenders in their range to take Technics' scalp, but 1210s remain notoriously enduring and popular. It will be interesting to see if this new offering from Stanton is the one to finally change the status quo.