

NAD 5120

Reviewed in July 1984

THERE'S A HISTORY TO THIS TURNTABLE WHICH those of you with longer memories may recall. The 5120 was originally supplied with a flat tone arm made of printed circuit board material, which had been carefully, I say carefully, worked out so that the structural resources (there were the most absolutely ginormous bending and rotational modes — the thing was a shambles) slotted into the audio bandwidth in such a way that they were inaudible. Honestly, that's what NAD said.

I remember this much because I was at the press conference where the 5120 was launched. It was one of the all-time classic functions, a fiasco of the highest order, and truly excellent entertainment. Andy Giles would probably wish to forget it, but I have to get my own back somehow. They — I mean NAD — actually imported a born-again member of the US press, one Peter Mitchell, to extol the thing's virtues, and were promptly hammered for their efforts by the entire corpus of the British press in one of its rare displays of unanimity.

Of course, the deck went on sale, its prospects oiled by notoriety. In the meantime, however, Mr Giles was in serious discussion with his principals with a view to securing a manufacturing change from the flat to a conventional tone arm. Until today I had no idea what he said to them, but by the magic of the telephone I have found out. 'I said' (he said) 'this is load of old llobokcs.' I think that was it. Anyway, it had the desired effect, and the rest is history. The 5120's flat arm was changed for a cylindrical one about a year into its life (it's four now).

'We were going to build the deck right here in this country', I was told, 'but we couldn't find anywhere to do it well enough — no you'd better not quote me on that — so it's being made in Chezklovakia. Czechoslovakia even.'

Over the years the deck has bucked all trends by coming down in price, not just in relative terms but in the number of pound notes you need to lash out. For a long time the deck was priced at £109, later it sold for



£99. Now the thing is fetching £89.95, a price that includes everyone's favourite OEM cartridge, the Ortofon OM10. And a highly serviceable cartridge it is.

The deck as a whole is highly serviceable, in fact. As you must know, it's a sprung subchassis belt-drive player, with a simple plastic subchassis, an ultra-thin 'sewing gauge' main bearing (lots of lovely slop) and a clever platter consisting of a lightweight pressed steel plate the top of which is encased in a heavy rubber mat which forms the major structural part of the assembly. This clever inversion is one of the ways in which NAD can build the deck cheaply — which means you can buy it cheaply too.

The surrounding structure is clever too. For £90 you don't get acres of ivory or artificial gemstones obviously, and many cheap turntables look something of a mess, especially where the plinth and lid mate. NAD have a moulded plastic plinth with raised sides (it look like quite a hairy moulding to my unpractised eye) so that all it needs is a simple wrap-over cover. The results are simple, clever, elegant and cheap. Especially cheap. Though not entirely practical, since the arm is rather too close to the raised sides.

The arm is a push-fit on to the arm pillar (it has been this way from day one) and there's a switched speed change. I'll repeat that: a switched speed change. At the end of the record side, the arm lifts and the deck shudders to a halt. The mechanism by which it does so seems a bit Heath Robinsonski to me, but maybe it's just simple, elegant, cheap...

When I first tried the 5120 for this test, I thought I'd warm it up in my office system, next to the word processor, so that I could get the flavour of the thing as the cartridge, bearing and motor bedded in. It's asking a lot of any deck to perform under such conditions, but the NAD did show its mettle in that pounding away on a hot keyboard on the same surface had no noticeable effect on it. And I mean zilchski. Rougher treatment too was meted out without problems, the

suspension proving to be an extremely efficient isolating filter. Even slamming the lid of the deck down while playing a record failed to upset its composure. Pitch stability was also good, without enjoying the rock-like certainty of a Linn or Roksan.

And then there's the music. I wasn't able to do a side-by-side comparison, but from what I can remember, there's no reason for Dual 505 owners to chuck their decks away in favour of this one. Perhaps the opposite. The NAD is a little heavier and slower sounding, with a slightly flatter, less articulate mid and top, probably because the arm is still a very modest device to put it mildly. But the NAD is hi-fi, and I mean that in the most positive sense of that much misused work. It has a straightforward, honest sound which is reasonably integrated and balanced, and without any particular nasties. I particularly like the midrange which although a touch heavy-handed seems very stable and solid, and therefore kind of believable.

It's worth reflecting on the price for a moment: £90 less 5p is something like £35 less than the nearest equivalent. The Dual CS-505 II costs £125 in its cheapest form; the Ariston Q-Deck, another great little mover, is £139; and the Rega Planer 2 (without cartridge) is £135. As it happens, the Dual and Ariston come with precisely the same cartridge as the 5120, which on its tod is listed at £19. I repeat, then, that the NAD is far and away the cheapest satisfactory turntable on the market, and should enable a quite respectable record playing system — say with a NAD 3020e amp and a pair of Toshiba SS-33s — to be assembled for about £280 plus stands and cables. Say £320. Go through the back pages of *What Hi-fi?* for yourself and see if you can do any better. □

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