

booplith custom LP12 plinth

by Roy Gregory

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Linn’s venerable LP12 Sondek – over 40 years young – has become so synonymous with the succession of upgrades that have been applied to the basic deck since its launch, that it’s now almost impossible to talk about the turntable without applying some qualifying suffix. Of course, most of those upgrades have originated with Linn itself, reaching so deep that platter apart, pretty much nothing else remains of the original – although any Sondek can be updated to current spec if the inclination exists and funds allow. In fact, these days, there is no one Sondek, but three distinct levels of parts and all the pieces to step between them.

But one element of the deck has remained almost untouched since the earliest days: aside from adding corner braces and reinforcing blocks early on, Linn has left the plinth essentially unchanged, a decision that has opened the way for a recent flurry of alternative plinths from third party sources – although interestingly these have tended to concentrate on aesthetic or practical considerations, offering alternative woods or extended footprints intended to accommodate longer tonearms. Now comes yet another ‘after-market’ plinth for the LP12, but this is very definitely a plinth with a difference...





Whereas virtually all the other LP12 plinths, whether they come from Linn or alternative suppliers, feature the same simple hardwood picture frame construction, the booplinth is built from bamboo – a material that isn't actually a wood at all. So much has been written about this almost 'magical' material (magical at least from a sonic standpoint) that I won't repeat it all here, but the key thing to know is that this fast growing, carbon-positive grass is formed from long, resin bound fibres. Its tubular structure means that in order to create useable sheets of material you can actually make things from, you need to slice it into strips that are then pressure laminated to form slabs. The end result is incredibly strong, resilient and yet relatively light. It also creates a random structure built from differential strips of a random material, and as well as being seriously random that makes it deeply dispersive in nature, aided by its fibre/resin matrix nature. Its mechanical appeal is matched only by its eco credentials, which explains why it is cropping up in everything from the shelves in hi-fi racks to loudspeaker cabinets – with readily demonstrable sonic benefits all round. This is the material from which the booplinth is built.

But that's not the only major difference between boo and the neighbours. The other thing that sets this plinth apart is that it's CNC machined from a single slab of bamboo. Compare that to the standard LP12 plinth that consists of no fewer than 17 separate structural elements, including separate strips of wood that are attached to the inner face of the frame and act as shoulders on which the top-plate rests. In contrast, the booplinth's one-piece construction is both stronger and mechanically more stable, while the nature of the process that creates it guarantees that those bits that are supposed to be level and parallel actually are, those corners that are supposed to be 90 degrees really are right angles – and stay that way. One of the great, unresolved debates in Linn folklore revolves around which age and/or colour of plinth sounds best. The answer is, they all sound different, irrespective of vintage or hue, and if you look at how they're made and what they're made from, that's really no surprise. The booplinth doesn't just promise superior sonic and mechanical performance, it should also deliver much greater consistency. ▶

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▶ Which all sounds good until you come up against the wince-inducing price tag of £1,650. Yep – you read that right: around three times the cost of a replacement plinth from Linn (there’s a reason that they make them that way).

Now, I could tell you how difficult it is to CNC mill bamboo, that the complex multi-profile shape of the LP12 plinth requires machining in two stages, from above and then below and that that means that with a CNC machine dedicated to the task you can still only produce six plinths a day. I could point out that both the manufacturing technique and the material itself result in greater precision and closer tolerances, that the price should include installation, and that the booplenth comes in four different colours (to start with): and it would all be true – but it would still cost £1,650. Such a serious price-tag asks some pretty serious questions and demands equally serious answers. It’s not just a case of does the booplenth make a difference, but how big is that difference and, just as importantly, where (if at all) does it fit into the great hierarchy of LP12 upgrades? I don’t normally indulge in ‘awayday’ reviews that involve visiting alien listening rooms and systems, but in this instance, it really was a necessity. The need for multiple decks and on the fly changes meant a visit to Brian and Trevor’s in Manchester: audio consultants, Linn specialists, and the people behind the booplenth.

They still had the pair of (as near as possible) identical ‘tables that they’d demonstrated at the Bristol show – ‘junior’ Sondexs with bonded sub-chassis, AC motor, Lingo power supply and each carrying an Akito tonearm and Adikt MM cartridge. Internals were of similar vintage and the cartridges had almost identical running times. But in this case and to take things a step further, the decks were both swapped on and off the same shelf and connected to the same Lingo and tonearm cable, eliminating acoustic and cable/ancillary variation and narrowing sonic differences down to the plinth and nothing else – which made the extent of the musical difference between the two decks all the harder to credit. Playing familiar material, the bamboo plinth wrought such a monumental improvement in clarity, timing, tonality, pace, dynamics and separation that it rendered the result a slam dunk – even before you consider the substantial musical benefits. Because that’s the real clincher here: the booplenth isn’t just better hi-fi, it makes significantly more sense of the music and delivers a substantially more convincing performance. Leave the increase in intelligibility to one side, this was the most convincing ‘tune’ demo I’ve ever heard, making the LP12 better at exactly what LP12s are supposed to be best at.

Record after record revealed the same result, bass notes that gained shape, character, and attack, better separation between instruments, more presence, more immediacy, more sense of real people playing real instruments, more music and less system. Listening to Suzanne Vega’s revisiting of ‘Tom’s Diner’ (on *Close Up Vol 2, People And Places*) the muddy grumble that filled the lower registers on the deck with the standard plinth was transformed by the booplenth into discrete bass guitar notes with pitch, leading edge attack,

texture, tone and detail. Vega’s voice stepped forward, more convincing, more immediate and far more natural – and the cello? I’ll leave that to your imagination. On this simplest of tracks the difference was unmissably obvious: what was ordinary, congested, and compressed with the standard plinth was rich, vibrant, alive, and musically compelling with the booplenth. And, as things get more complex, the differences became both more obvious and more musically significant.

With my hands firmly on the demonstration tiller, the next step seemed obvious (at least to me): I had intended to work my way up the LP12 hierarchy to see where the booplenth fits in, but it dispatched the standard plinth with such negligent aplomb that the only logical response was to wheel out a fully loaded LP12, complete with Keel, Radikal, Ekos SE, Kandid cartridge and on-board Urika phono-stage – or, around £5K plays £15K. No contest you might well think – and you’d be right: the booplenth-ed deck, bonded sub-chassis, cheap arm, MM cartridge and all, absolutely buried the LP12 Klimax. Playing ‘Listen To The Radio’ from Nanci Griffith’s *Storms*, you couldn’t fault the detail coming off of the Linn flagship, but the song was leaden, lacking pace and its normal insistent sense of rhythmic drive. The individual elements were all there, but they just didn’t hang together. The rhythmic hitch kick that propels the song into its second verse passed almost unnoticed and the piano break lacked separation, shape, and attack. Back in the land of boo and normal service was blessedly restored: the track sprang forward with proper musical enthusiasm, Nanci’s vocals took on a carefree, engaging quality, locked to the rhythm, that hitch kick propelled the song forwards (just as it should) and the piano took on a presence ▶



▶ and stabbed attack to its phrases that had been entirely absent on the Klimax deck equipped with the standard plinth.

Which of course, left only one other thing to do: drop the Klimax innards into a booplinth. Trevor duly obliged and we sat back to see whether the natural order had been restored. Which it had, but only in part. Now, all the benefits of the Klimax rig were working for it and finally working together – it's just that even so, the 'junior' set up (somewhere between an LP12 Majik and an Akurate) got uncomfortably close. It might not have matched its bigger and much more expensive brother in terms of subtlety and detail, but boy was it fun to listen to – the very quality which established the LP12's reputation in the first place.

Which brings me to perhaps the most interesting thing about the booplinth. It doesn't just slot straight into the LP12 upgrade logic, it jumps the queue straight to first place. Doesn't that upset the front-end first apple cart? Actually, no. If the turntable is the foundation of and defines the record player's quality, then what's the foundation of the turntable? That would be the plinth – the mechanical element that ties all the others together. Think about the parts that make up the deck, how they interrelate and what happens to noise generated within the structure and suddenly it all starts to make sense – and suddenly the venerable LP12 has got a whole new lease of life. It's 30-years since I last owned a Linn Sondek, but all of a sudden, I'm taking the idea seriously again.

The booplinth represents the biggest and most musically fundamental upgrade I've yet heard to the LP12 – and that includes all the various Linn parts. For anybody who has played with bamboo in an audio system already, that probably won't come as a surprise: it's the scale of the improvement that's going to be the shock. How much of that is down to the material and how much to the improved manufacturing accuracy and mechanical integrity is impossible to say, but the sonic and musical results are simply astonishing. £1,650 is a lot of money – but to put it into context, it's way less than you'll be

charged for a Keel, a Radikal or a Urika and the booplinth makes a bigger and musically more important difference than those three put together. The booplinth is available in natural bamboo and cherry, ebony, or black stains – with dark rumours of a Nextel option too. It's time to pick a colour, because no matter how new or old your LP12, or how far up the upgrade ladder it's climbed, the booplinth should be your first/next priority. Once you've heard it there's no going back. But look on the bright side – the LP12 has never, ever sounded this good, this musically engaging, or this much downright fun. +

DETAILS

booplinth – engineered bamboo plinth upgrade for the Linn LP12

Replaces existing wooden plinth

Price: from £1,650

Manufactured by:

The Booplinth Company

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