

Player Upgrade to the internal VSE Clock - Terra Firm Lite

Player Modifications:

Upgrades or modifications to CD/SACD/DVD players are comprised of two types of audio lover camps: Believers and Cautious.

The cautious camps have valid points: unable to audition modified players (unless a local owner is willing to open their home to you), how to resell a player that has been modified (limited buyer base), how to get service on your player if problems occur (if company is no longer around), warranty voided by manufacturer if changes are made (some companies will still honor warranty). These are just a few of the discussed items you will find with some research.

The believer camps have modified players in hand (ear?) and have heard the improvement of modifications. All, or a very large percentage, are highly satisfied with their new players and sonic improvements they have achieved. The main discussion is related to cost versus performance when they are evaluating the sound of their modded player against stock.

So what are some of the modifications available?

1. Part swapping – there are many companies out there who will take out part “A” and put in part “B” as a “better” part – and hopefully a better sounding part. These parts can be anything from resistors to caps to power components within the player.
2. Clock Upgrades – taking out the stock clock and upgrading to one of the many new clocks available.
3. Output stages – new output stages are installed in the player bypassing or eliminating the stock output stages. These new stages can be tube output or solid state depending on the modifying group.

Everyone has their opinion on which items result in the greatest improvement. Generally upgrade clocks and output stages have garnered the greatest satisfaction/improvements from owners.

Modification Paths:

For myself, I initially did part swapping – resistors, caps, Op-Amps (cheap initial jump into modifications). It was a nice change to the sound of my player. Next a new clock was installed in the modification process. This was a greater change (positive) in sound compared to part changes. I then had a new output stage installed. This was an even higher (positive) change in sound quality over the new clock. I then had an upgrade to power components for the player. The power upgrade helped take the sound quality up another level, but not on the same level as the new output stage did.

Now what to do:

I had been very happy with the sound of my modified player, but with all the discussions of the new VSE Clock, I decided to have my current upgraded clock, replaced with the new VSE Terra Firma Lite (TFL) Clock. This is an internal clock change/mod for players. (VSE's top of the line clock, "The Uber Clock", is an external box which connects via BNC to your player). VSE states the TFL will produce 2/3 improvement at 1/3 the cost of the "Uber Clock". With other funds currently allocated for other parts of my audio rig, the TFL was ordered from Bill Thalmann at Music Technology, Inc. in Virginia.

VSE TFL Installation:

Before getting into the sound of the VSE TFL I want to give a big thumb's up to Bill at MTI with their excellent work and customer service. Anyone considering having their player modified or work performed on audio equipment, Bill and the gang are the people to turn to. During the time period from when I ordered my clock until its arrival and then through installation Bill dealt with multiple emails from me asking many questions with prompt and professional replies. After receiving the player, Bill followed up with me to make sure all was well and answered any further questions I may have had.

Sound of the VSE TFL:

There are many terms which can be used to describe sound we hear from our audio rigs. Some people use one term, other people use another, and on and on and on. There should be a dictionary or translation guide published specifically for these audio terms, but then getting everyone to agree. Here are my thoughts on the TFL:

- Bass: Some would think the bass is now less with the new clock? But it is less boomy or muddled sounding – more accurate. I had to make some changes in my Bass EQ system with the new clock.
- Upper Midrange and Highs: The edge, glare, grunge, zzzz sound, whatever you want to call the typical digital sound, is gone. Some would say the high end is being rolled off – that is incorrect with the TFL. The highs are there and great sounding. Sounds like drum sticks hitting cymbals, and then hearing the sound of the cymbals ring is a great example of the improved high end.
- Vocals: Have more depth and presence, but it is not accentuated midrange. You have a greater sense as if the singer is in your room with you.
- Stanley Clarke Trio (Stan, Lenny White, and Hiromi - has had heavy play in my rotation prior to the VSE TFL install). The piano a full, richer, more "you are standing there live" piano sound (Upright Piano compared to Grand Piano is a good analogy – and I believe she is playing an open top Yamaha ("Grand?")) piano on this disc). And Stan's bass work if it is plucked/bowed/fingered, etc. has better detail to it. One can really start to appreciate the abilities of this artist. The pluck has a greater attack/transient sound, and then you hear the string vibration and its sound. Before it was not as delineated.

- The overall sound:
 - More 3-dimensional sound image to music. More depth and width as the sound stage is better defined for instrument placement.
 - More separation between instruments with improved instrument detail. You are able to hear each instrument better.
 - Transparency and Ease to the music
 - Makes you want to sit and listen to music for hours and hours at a time – the true testament to how good it really is.

All of these comments are relevant for both Redbook and SACD. Albums which I really like the music on, but the quality was suspect, now had an improved sound to them. The clock and the player was starting to show what really was in the recording instead of masking it. Top quality SACD was just stunning.

A side benefit I had with my player is since it uses just one master clock, even my MCH playback improved (I like Classical in SACD MCH). When I popped in my first MCH Classical disc Sunday morning, I sat there for a minute and thought how good it sounded. But wait, I thought it would only be for 2 channel music? A quick email with Bill explained the single master clock in my player. So not only did I get 2 Channel improvements, I also received improved MCH playback too – BONUS!!!!

The Real Bottom Line:

If I had to do it over again, would I have the TFL installed in my player? **Absolutely!!** It has taken my player another couple of levels up in improved sound. I did not think the improvement would be so drastic but it was. It has been a bit since I had the output stages put in and that was a very nice improvement. Now since the player is able to present a more accurate picture of the source, the output stages perform better too IMO. “Garbage-In-Garbage-Out Theory.”

While the original upgraded clock improved over my stock clock, I cannot imagine what people will say once they upgrade their stock clock to a TFL – jaw dropping would be an understatement. I whole-heartedly recommend anyone asking or considering the TFL clock to have it installed in their player.

D.S. - Maryland