



# EQUIPMENT REVIEW

## VPI Classic turntable

By Roy Gregory

**W**hen the late, great Edgar Villchur designed the three-point suspended sub-chassis turntable, first seen in the compact shape of the AR-XA, he could have little dreamt of the dominant effect his design would create across the Atlantic. It's not that there was a shortage of competing products and technologies, but the hegemony established by Linn and its cohorts simply shouted down the likes of the Trio LO-7D, Technics SP10 and Goldmund Studio, not to mention uni-pivot and parallel tracking tonearms, moving iron cartridges, DC motors and a host of other approaches which have since resurfaced and more than proved their worth.

Across the pond, things were rather different. The LP12 was sufficiently expensive in the US market, which allowed breathing room for 'tables that conflicted markedly with its design strictures. For example, with each iteration of Harry Weisfeld's VPI designs, suspension became less and less laterally compliant until, in the Aries, it was gone altogether. Meanwhile, motors became free-standing, suspended mass increased and fly-wheel assemblies became the order of the day – all in the name of increased speed stability.

Little surprise then, that in seeking greater performance at lower prices, Harry has taken the final, almost taboo step of bolting the motor directly to the same plinth as the main-bearing. Doesn't that send vibrational energy straight through the structure and into the stylus, where it's added to and thus horribly distorts the signal?

Well, turntable power supplies are significantly better than they used to be, which allows synchronous motors to run far more quietly. Phono-stages have improved too, meaning that we can now hear the underlying costs of the floating sub-chassis as well as its benefits. CD has given us a greater appreciation of speed stability, while the increasing understanding of the crucial role of phase coherence in audio performance has further underlined that need. So, did we all imagine that the LP12 was good? No – it remains a genuinely great deck, but as is so often the case, its greatness is ascribed to the most obvious facet of its design, rather than the complex underlying strengths that really mattered (main bearing, heavy platter, the MC/medium mass tonearm match). Just look at what has pretty much remained unchanged, against all the things that have changed in the design if you want the proof of that particular pudding.

Nevertheless, the sub-chassis suspension is so deeply ingrained in the audio community that the Classic's direct coupled path is an eyebrow-raising one. All of which makes VPI's decision to develop and launch the Classic either very brave or very foolish; but given that Mr Weisfeld has been making turntables for longer than most of the competition (this is a 30th Anniversary product), we should be prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt...

The Classic is a large and actually rather handsome beast, in a foursquare, uncluttered sort of way. Its deep, wooden plinth and massive, one-piece aluminium platter create a seriously retro feel, and I'm certain that DNA testing would show up some deep-seated throwback to the Pioneer PL12D. The solid plinth is constructed from three layers of MDF, comes in

black or Walnut finishes and is supported on four adjustable feet. These are derived from the TNT in terms of shape, and compliant mounting of their threaded posts provides a measure of isolation from the outside world, while three tiny balls sunk into the underside of each one ensure a stable footing. The platter revolves on a large diameter inverted bearing, bolted securely through the plinth and employing the VPI trademark thrust-pad, although in this case made from PEEK, chosen to support the heavier platter mass.

The motor occupies the front left hand corner of the plinth, rigidly clamped between a thrust plate and the triangular top-plate, topped by a stepped pulley to allow adjustment between 33 and 45RPM. The pulley itself runs very close to the platter periphery, which it drives via a round section, stiff rubber belt. A spare is provided with the deck. There is no platter mat, just a label recess in the centre of the aluminium top surface, while the spindle is threaded to



accept the supplied VPI clamp (or optional record weight). Flip the platter over – no mean feat given its 18lb mass – and you'll see a stainless steel damping plate firmly bonded to the underside, there to add mass and stop the whole thing ringing.

The 'table will also take the VPI peripheral clamp and can be used with the SDS external power supply, but the star of the show is undoubtedly the Classic tonearm. One benefit of such a straightforward plinth is that it frees up more money for the

▶ tonearm, and here you are getting what amounts to a refined and simplified version of the VPI JMW 10.5, complete with detachable armwand assembly and the option of 'on the fly' VTA adjustment if you are prepared to pay \$700 for it (and I would be). This versatile uni-pivot design allows precise alignment of the cartridge in all three planes, alignment that's preserved if the armtube is swapped. Stability and azimuth come from a low-slung, weighted collar around the bearing housing and the under-hung counterweight, while a simple falling weight bias system is provided, although I prefer the sound without it. Bear in mind that this might lead to uneven cartridge wear, although as a long

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time JMW user I've yet to experience this problem. Add in the VTA option and you've basically got a full-blown 10.5 arm in its own right, which on a deck that lists in standard form for less than £2,500 is little short of astonishing.

The deck that arrived for review was the standard model but with the VTA option on the arm and a second armtube to allow quick cartridge swaps. Of course, I've also got the SDS and Peripheral clamp from my TNT, allowing me to ring the changes as far as options are concerned, but I started without any extras, simply using the deck as supplied with the centre record weight and a Lyra Skala mounted in one tonearm and the Dynavector DV-20X in the other.

The first thing that strikes you about the classic is the absolute, rooted stability on which it builds the sound. If you are thinking staid or sluggish as a result you couldn't be more wrong. The firm footing under the music is a

perfect launching pad for whatever dynamic fireworks the disc wants to throw at you. Take a listen to 'Paper In Fire' from the John Cougar Mellencamp album *Lonesome Jubilee*. This was never a great recording but it's most definitely brilliant music. The Classic picks it up by the scruff of the neck and drives this high-tempo track right into the room, giving it a sense of both physical presence and musical purpose that belie the thin and glarey recording. The energy and sheer life are infectious, but not bought at the expense of poor definition or separation. Just listen to the clean, crisp leading edges on the wood blocks, or the natural tonality and separation of the vocals. Sure, the deck can't disguise the glaze that coats the crescendos, but it can dig through it to stop the instruments congealing into a single whole, keeping the band stable in space and the track on course. If this record on this 'table doesn't get you up and dancing then you are probably dead from the neck down.

But it's not just about get up and go. 'Real Life' is also a high tempo number, but its feel is quite different, the urgency tinged with an empty need and desperation. It's a shift that's well within the Classic's expressive compass and the deck makes no bones about what motivates this track, leaving the listener achingly aware of the underlying poignancy that fuels the lyric. In part, that emotive range is down to the sure-footed rhythmic agility of the Classic, a quality that allows it to deliver the drum accents that conclude each chorus and the bridge with real impact and precision. Grin factor? Off the scale and climbing fast!

Switching to something acoustic and arguably a little more delicate leaves the deck completely unfazed. The famous Romero's recording of the *Concierto De Aranjuez* (Alessandro and the San Antonio S.O.) may lack the astonishing immediacy and spectacular space and transparency of the Argenta/Yepes reading, but it is nevertheless a majestic performance with a wonderfully coherent acoustic spread, orchestral perspective and a solo performance that seamlessly blends fiery passion, poise and delicacy. The rock solid rendition delivered by the Classic helps bring the performance to life, enclosing the listener in the same ▶





## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Belt drive record player  
**Speeds:** 33 and 45, manually shifted  
**Electronic Supply:** Optional SDS  
**Platter:** Aluminium/Stainless Steel  
**Platter Weight:** 8.2kg  
**Clamp:** Record weight or optional peripheral clamp  
**Lid:** Optional  
**Finishes:** Black or Walnut  
**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 527 x 250 x 400mm  
**Weight:** 20.5kg  
**Tonearm:** JMW 10.5 Classic  
**Type:** Medium mass with interchangeable arm-tops  
**VTA Adjustment:** Optional vernier type

Prices –

**Classic Record Player:** £2139.95  
**VTA Adjustor:** \$700 (UK price TBC)  
**Peripheral Clamp:** £381.70  
**SDS Power Supply:** £949.99  
**Lid:** £(UK price TBC)

**UK Distributor:**

Analogue Seduction  
 Tel. (44)(0)1733 344768  
 Net. [www.analogueseduction.net](http://www.analogueseduction.net)  
**Manufacturer:**  
 VPI Industries Inc.  
 Net. [www.vpiindustries.com](http://www.vpiindustries.com)

► acoustic space with a sense of real, living, breathing musicians. The sense of focus, of an instrument locked in space and a person playing it is noticeably enhanced by the use of the record weight, or even better the peripheral clamp. Transparency improves as does depth, while the stage boundaries become more apparent and the images more dimensional and solid. Listen to the carefully structured opening of Rodrigo's Second Movement and you quickly realize that the Classic got a full quota of the VPI spatial DNA, the various instruments beautifully located and stepped across the orchestral plane.

And the Classic isn't just about scale and power. Play something delicate like Janis Ian and the musical coherence and intimacy are underpinned by the easy musical flow, the levels of low-level instrumental resolution and detail. The stark, almost etched transparency that comes with a plastic platter is not part of the Classic's sound, but listen into the music and you'll soon realise that the detail's in there – it just isn't spot lit.

Its mastery of time and space, its almost boundless dynamic range and energy, its sure-footed confidence set it apart from almost all other decks at this price. Almost, because there's also the SRM Arezzo Reference out there (and reviewed in the last issue), a deck which shares more than a little of the VPI's attitude and musical virtues. There are clear differences between these two decks – but between them they conspire to set a completely new benchmark as far as musical performance at this price level goes.

Apart from anything else, aesthetics alone are going to split potential customers. The large footprint and retro-chic of the VPI will attract the nostalgia vote, but the compact elegance, shiny surfaces and supplied lid of the SRM will definitely appeal to the modernists out there. And in some ways, the differences in sound mirror the differences in appearance. Where the Arezzo, even with the new, heavier flywheel is all about deft agility and evenhandedness, the Classic is much more about power and scale, its dynamic range being far broader and sheer presence more physical in nature. In that respect it is definitely and obviously a VPI, but the sense of unstoppable drive and energy that characterizes both these 'tables makes it a whole new enchilada compared to its predecessors at this price level.

The other big difference between these two record players is the upgrade path available for the Classic, but given the space I've expended already that is going to have to wait for another day. But what really binds these two 'tables together, places them apart from and above the crowd, is their uninhibited sense of musical flow and momentum. This isn't breakneck speed and it's in no way out of control. It's about the sheer power and drive inherent in the music

– be it sumptuous and all encompassing, or poised and latent. Yes, the VPI is warmer and richer, fuller and more explosive as compared to the SRM's leaner, cleaner approach, but they both bring this same compelling quality to the music they deliver.

Not so long ago, a musician friend of mine heard the Classic compared to what is one of the finest and most expensive decks in existence. Yes there were differences, but they were more presentational than musical and they weren't major. "How much is the difference in cost?" he said, "HOW MUCH?" For lo, a true audio bargain is a rare and wonderful thing – and I think I'm still struggling to come to terms with this one. +