

# The VPI HW-17F Professional Record Cleaning Machine

by Simon Groome

As an avid collector of vinyl, I am convinced that the regular use of any of the vacuum-cleaning machines on the market is essential, for both the longevity of your records, and in the pursuit of ultimate sound quality. But, with a number of such machines available, it can be a daunting task to select just one.

I have been happily using my Loricraft PRC2, for a few years, but

directly compare both my own machine and the subject of this review, the VPI HW-17F

VPI manufacture three models of vacuum-cleaning machine, from the HW-16.5 (see RP's review in issue 1), up to the HW-17

machine, and filled the reservoir from the supplied 8oz of Record Cleaning Machine Fluid, just secure the record to the turntable, before flicking the "Table" switch upwards, for clockwise movement of the disc. The machine is not as silent as the Loricraft, omitting "gear noise". Swing the applicator over the record and press the "Pump" button briefly, to dispense the fluid – this is the only area of operation that needs a little care, as

pressing for too long can release too much fluid. After three revolutions, the turntable should be reversed, before returning the applicator head to its rest position. It is then ready to vacuum the disc. The

direction of revolution should be returned to clockwise, before swinging the pickup tube across the record and switching the "Vacuum" on. This produces a noise rather like a vacuum cleaner, and the tube is sucked onto the surface of the disc. Again the Loricraft is much quieter, but if memory serves me, the HW-16.5 is even noisier. Two revolutions later switch off the "Vacuum" and return the tube to its rest position, before removing the record and repeating on the other side. And believe me, it really is easier than it sounds.

As with all these cleaners, it is vital that the cleaned disc is now "zapped" with a Milty Zerostat, and given a new anti-static inner sleeve. The waste fluid is transferred to a "catch basin", which is easy to empty via a drain hose, although



at £1595 it is out of the equation for all but the most dedicated collector.

In the past, when asked which machine any prospective buyer should purchase, I have simply worked on the assumption that they should work out some kind of "cost per clean" philosophy, to ascertain a relative figure to spend on such a device. While a basically sound theory, this is an over-simplified way of contemplating the predicament, and works on the assumption that you pay for what you get. It was therefore very interesting to have the chance to

(not imported to the UK) and 17F – the F model includes a fan for continuous use. At £895, it is not the cheapest cleaner on the market, but should be within the reach of many collectors. All components are heavy duty and, although not displaying the same build quality as the Loricraft, it should be dependable throughout many years of use.

This has got to be one of the most uncomplicated vacuum-cleaning machines to operate – with a comprehensive, yet straightforward, instruction manual. Having set up the

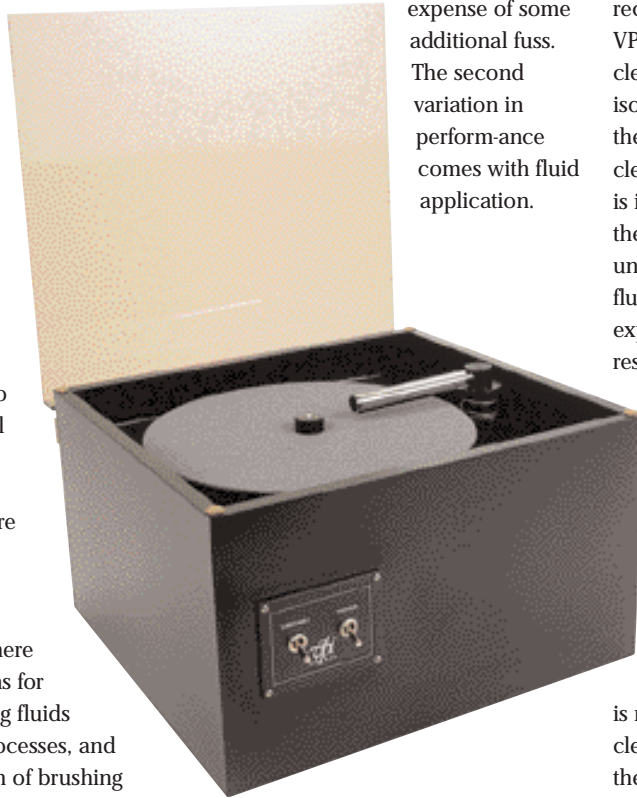
▶ evaporation handles the product of all but continuous use.

While perfectly happy with the ease of operation, I was initially less delighted with the audible results, but only because I had the Loricraft with which to make direct comparisons. Using the 12" single of *Perfect*, by Fairground Attraction (RCA PT 41846), the VPI made the sound slightly clearer, as if a veil had been lifted, and there was now a larger soundstage. But, once cleaned on the Loricraft machine, this recording revealed more detail, an even deeper soundstage, and far more body and presence. Overall, images seemed fuller and more coherent, and the whole recording became more alive and easier to follow. Through careful tests, on a number of recordings, from new pressings, which require the removal of mould release agents, to old, fairly worn vinyl, I was able to discover that there were two major reasons for this. Firstly, the cleaning fluids involved in the two processes, and secondly, the operation of brushing the record's surface.

VPI advise that you should only use their own cleaning fluid, as "others...may contain chemicals that can damage... the machine", but also go on to say that "adding 25% isopropyl alcohol to VPI fluid will give better cleaning of dirty records". Loricraft recommend fluid comprising one-third isopropyl to two-thirds distilled water. The adding of isopropyl to VPI fluid results in quieter backgrounds, more detail, and a more three-dimensional soundstage, and I now regard this mixture as a necessity for getting the

best out of any VPI machine. However, the use of isopropyl is frowned upon in certain quarters, where critics claim that it can lead to the leaching of stabilisers from the vinyl surface and subsequent long term damage. Whilst this isn't my experience, for those concerned by the possibility Disc Doctor fluid, a 'two-pot' treat and rinse solution, offers an alcohol free alternative which delivers excellent

results at the expense of some additional fuss. The second variation in performance comes with fluid application.



The VPI HW-17F's applicator head has a brush on its under-side which spreads the fluid across the surface of the disc, while the Loricraft is manual in operation, like the HW-16.5, and requires a separate, hand-held brush to do the job. If using an independent brush on the HW-17F I have discovered, much of the variances in audible results are redressed. This can only be a result of a lack of pressure from the HW-17F's applicator brush, and I would therefore advise the use of a separate brush when using this

machine. The brush from the HW-16.5 is readily available as a separate item.

Having worked out howto get the best results from the 17F, lifting its performance to the same level as the Loricraft, there remains one other thing to watch out for. With the Loricraft machine, the vacuum pickup tube rests on a small length of cotton thread, during operation. This is then moved approximately 5mm, onto a clean area for the next record side. But, in the case of the VPI, and the majority of vacuum-cleaning machines, the tube is isolated from the disc's surface by the same two velvet pads for every cleaning. If you have ever seen what is in the waste fluid produced by these types of machines, you will understand my concern. All cleaning fluids start as clear liquids, but when expelled after use, they usually resemble murky soup, with grease and grime floating in them. After regular employment, this filth and debris could be smeared over your records. Therefore these pads need cleaning on a regular basis, and although VPI recommend that they should be "gently wiped...with a slightly damp cloth each time you finish using the HW-17F", I feel that this is not enough. A good scrub with clean record cleaning fluid is nearer the mark. Luckily, the tube and its turret simply lift out of the machine (mainly to allow them to be swapped for an alternative tube with a shorter slot should you want to clean 7" or 10" records) making thorough cleaning an easy proposition. It's also an essential one if you want to maintain the cleaning performance of the machine.

Having had an opportunity to reflect on my experiences, I'm now in a position to offer rather more robust recommendations when it comes to cleaning records, and I'll start with technique. Some form of vacuum ▶

▶ machine is essential, but to get the best from it you are going to have to take care when it comes to choice of cleaning fluid and its method of application. You also need to ensure that the mating surfaces of the machine (record mat and vacuum nozzle) are kept scrupulously clean. Bearing this in mind my recommendations are as follows:

For most people the HW16.5 offers a fast and effective way of cleaning records, and at £425 is all the machine they'll need. It offers much of the robust quality of the 17F without the latter's automation or fan cooling.

I would however recommend replacing its foam mat with the cork version from the 17F allowing easier cleaning. Even better, use two separate mats, one for clean record sides, one for dirty.

The 17F is larger but quieter than the 16, although not as quiet as the Loricraft. Unless you see yourself using it on a continuous basis (about ten minutes of record cleaning is about as much as I can take!) its real advantage lies in its use with 'two-pot' cleaners where the active agent can be applied by hand and the distilled water used for rinsing held in the reservoir. If you

go for a 17F then make sure that you use a separate applicator brush and follow the advice regarding mats outlined for the 16.5 above.

As for myself, I will stick to my trusty PRC2, but with Loricraft now producing a scaled-down PRC3, for £950, this may become my recommendation for the future. As they say, "watch this space".

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