



VPI Aries Scout Turntable and JMW 9.0 Tonearm

by Roy Gregory

It suddenly occurred to me the other day that the world has changed. Gradually, bit by bit, without you even noticing, the status quo is overturned and things just aren't what they used to be. You wake up and realise that some self-evident truth that you'd always taken for granted was simply no longer the case. It can come as quite a shock. I mean, who would ever have thought the day would come when serious turntables used anything other than a suspended sub-chassis? But the truth is plain. There are plenty of new turntable designs hitting the market, and fewer and fewer of them employ a floating sub-chassis. Instead, the new hegemony revolves around solid, damped plinths with motors placed in separate mass loaded housings. It's not hard to understand a sprung sub-chassis and you are using that suspension to isolate the stylus record interface from vibrational energy emanating from the motor. This is unquestionably a good thing. However, it has its down sides too, most notably the poor coupling between the motor and the platter leading to lousy speed stability and limited dynamic range. Of course, when that was all we had, we knew no better, but once CD came along, especially once we actually got it to work, suddenly poor speed stability and compressed dynamics were only too obvious to all who heard them. From that day onward, even though we didn't realise it, the classic three-point suspended turntable was a dying breed. They still exist, but for the most part they represent designs

that hail from analogue's heyday. Likewise, there are still seriously expensive designs that employ the approach but that merely underlines the precision, cost and effort it takes to get around the associated problems.

Instead, we see designs from Clearaudio, Kuzma, Amazon, Verdier, Project, Well Tempered and VPI which all employ the simplified approach. Don't they suffer from motor noise contaminating the signal they produce?

Yes they do, to varying degrees, but it's a problem that can be mitigated by today's improved isolation platforms and motor power supplies. And they all benefit from dramatic improvements in speed stability and dynamic range, as well as other things we'll get to.

But the other thing that I realised was even more interesting. Out goes the old in comes the new. But along with the departing thinking go all the associated rules. We always used to spend the lion's share of the budget on a turntable, followed in turn by the arm and finally the cartridge. The Rega RB300 already put a dent in that theory, but remove the expensive suspension and the complexity that entails and you're really starting to go places. Given the stability possible from a basic solid plinth, just how good an arm can you sit on it? Enter then the VPI Aries Scout turntable and JMW 9.0 tonearm, an £1100 combination that burns half the budget holding the cartridge up. It's a proposition that would have been

completely unmarketable a few years ago.

Of course, there's more to the Scout/9.0 set-up than that. Harry Weisfeld has been making turntables for far too long to miss a trick. Having said that, the original impetus for the design came from this side of the pond.

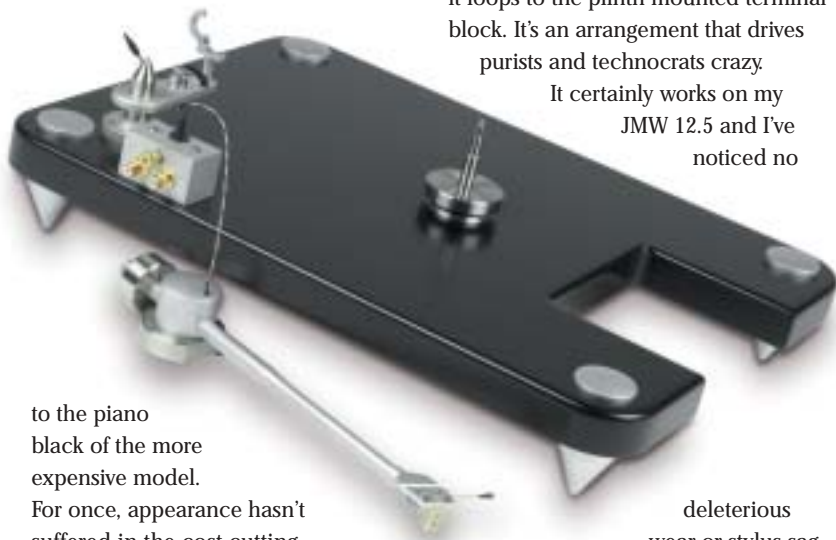
VPI's Dutch distributor, Johan Bezem of Audio Classics, wanted something that embodied the ease of set-up and compact practicality of the Aries in a cheaper package. It goes without saying that he also wanted to maintain as much of the Aries' performance as possible. We'll see in a moment whether or not the Scout meets that stiff brief, but in the meantime we'll see how Harry set about it.

No prizes for guessing that the basic structure remains the same. The Scout uses a solid plinth, isolated on four conical feet, the motor mounted in its own separate housing. Although the plinth is thinner than that on the Aries, it's still a pretty substantial lump, constructed from a sandwich of 30mm MDF with a slab of steel bonded to its underside. That creates a self damping combination, the glue acting as a constrained layer. The conical feet are mounted on threaded posts allowing for levelling. In the Scout these dispense with the compliant mountings of the Aries, seating instead against delrin discs. The feet themselves are more than simple aluminium cones, each being



▶ tipped with a ball bearing. However, like all such arrangements it's best to leave the cones screwed tight against the plinth, levelling the supporting surface instead. The other major cost saving on the deck itself is the platter, a simple solid acrylic disc rather than the mass loaded composite TNT III platter employed by its dearer cousin. The Scout uses the same standing bearing design.

In the name of simplicity (and in line with the TNT Hot-Rod) the Scout also does away with an armboard, the tonearm mounting directly to the plinth. It's cheaper and more rigid that way. Cannily, the cut-out will accept a Rega arm as well as the company's own JMW 9.0, designed to use the same geometry as the popular budget design. One last thing that needs mention is the turntable's excellent black satin finish, preferable if anything



to the piano black of the more expensive model.

For once, appearance hasn't suffered in the cost cutting exercise. The Scout is a classy looking beast whose presentation belies its budget price.

A major slice of the Aries price tag is accounted for by its inclusion of the complex, excellent but expensive JMW 10.5 uni-pivot tonearm. Essential in reducing the overall cost was a simplified version of the arm, so out went the intricate micrometer VTA adjustment, replaced with a simple

post and socket arrangement of the type that's been deemed acceptable on British built tonearms for years past. Gone as well is the concentric damping bath that surrounds the arm's pivot point, along with the complicated machining necessary to produce it. What stays is the bearing itself, the tonearm structure and excellent set-up tools. The counter-weight moves on a tight thread, making downforce refreshingly easy to set accurately, while the low-slung eccentric mass that surrounds and stabilises the bearing housing makes azimuth equally easy to adjust (helped by the horizontal rod that's provided to sit in the lateral groove across the headshell).

The most controversial aspect of the JMW design remains. Following Harry's "simple is better" mantra, bias is applied by the tension in the twisted lead-out wire as it loops to the plinth mounted terminal block. It's an arrangement that drives purists and technocrats crazy.

It certainly works on my JMW 12.5 and I've noticed no

deleterious wear or stylus sag in any of the cartridges I've been using. The arm that arrived for review was the first produced, but full production versions will also feature the Lemo connector between the lead-out wire and the terminal box, allowing owners to swap whole tonearm assemblies (although not correct the VTA as on the more expensive models). It's an impressive list of attributes, especially at the price,

but then any arm that is going to survive needs to better the redoubtable Rega RB300 in terms of both sound and facilities.

I've been using the Lyra Helikon mounted in an Incognitoed RB300 on the Clearlight Recovery for some time. With CB reviewing the Helikon SL I borrowed his standard version and mounted it in the Scout. It made for an interesting comparison. Bear in mind also that the Recovery is the very same set-up that favourably impressed the



assembled populace at our Manchester show comparison between SACD, DVD-A and LP. It's a turntable that majors on natural colour and perspectives. Well, playing the Classic Records re-issue of the Dvorak *Cello Concerto* (Piatigorsky, Munch and the BSO LSC-2490), the baby VPI combination couldn't match the superb midrange palette or low level resolution of the much more expensive Recovery. However in other important regards it was able to match or better it.

Let's start with the soundstage, always a VPI strongpoint. The Scout projects a wider and much more coherent soundstage, especially laterally and vertically. (The tendency to clump images around the speakers and drop the bass lower in the soundstage are known RB300 shortcomings.) The heavy bass bowing that underpins the opening of the first movement is better defined, with better shape and texture and far more energy. It also separated the timp rolls from the bowed bass arpeggios that reach a climax just before the entry of the ▶

► solo cello. It imbues that crescendo with greater drama and impact, conveying the depth and complexity, the range of instrumental forces employed. Piatigorsky's instrument is bigger, more dimensional and placed slightly further forward. It's full of vibrant energy and purpose, the virtuosity of the playing plain to hear. In fact the whole sound could best be described as big and full of controlled energy. It's a sound that will be familiar to anybody who has heard one of the bigger VPI turntables:

It's a sound that runs through the range of JMW tonearms: It's a sound that gives you the shape and flow of the musical dynamic. It's a sound that I once described (in reviewing the original TNT) as meaty, beaty, big and bouncy, and I find it remarkable that a table that uses such different technology and materials can still display such a heavy print of the company DNA.

What I also find fascinating is the sophistication of the musical presentation. Using the JMW 12.5 on the Recovery tells me where that internal intricacy comes from. The impressive thing is the extent to which that capability is embodied in the cheaper arm and released by the simpler deck. What is more, further experimentation with the Clearaudio Accurate Power supply confirmed that the basic platform embodies serious further potential, just waiting to be unlocked. And the really scary bit is that even in this form the Scout would still only set you back around £2K. Of course, VPI produce their own turntable power supply that would also do the trick, and expect a range of other hop-ups such as an add on fly-wheel to appear in short order.

Of course, the Scout/9.0 combination isn't perfect. It lacks the air and soundstage volume of a turntable like the TNT, the definition of the space between and around the

instruments. It also has a lighter overall balance, something effected by the surface on which it stands (and one of the variables introduced by a solid plinth). But at the price it presents a broader bandwidth and greater

energy and drive than anything else out there, which combined with the spatial evenness and inter-instrumental sophistication of the tonearm makes it a powerful contender.

Take this player's sense of musical shape and substance and add its considerable organisational and rhythmic coherence and it'll come as no surprise that it excels when it comes to reproducing vocals, especially multiple voices or duets. *Ray Charles and Betty Carter* (DCC LPZ-2005) proves the point. Okay, so there's some loss of texture and inner detail compared to the best, a smoothing and rounding of syllables, but if anything it makes the musical lines flow even clearer, making their interlocking patterns even more explicit. The result is both expressive and involving.

The bottom line? The VPI Scout/JMW 9.0 turntable takes what analogue does well and by reassessing its engineering approach and budgetary allocation, brings excellent performance down to a new price level. It's a case of carefully blending the sonic strengths and mechanical simplicity of a solid plinth and separate motor assembly with the balance, refinement and expressive sophistication that come with a better arm. It's a combination that offers even greater musical value

from your investment. High definition digital formats might be making all the noise, but on this evidence turntables are doing music better and cheaper than ever. VPI are offering you a triumphant example of simple



engineering delivering musical excellence. It also offers a clear and cost effective upgrade path. What more can you ask for? At this price, absolutely nothing! ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Belt drive, solid plinth turntable and uni-pivot tonearm
Speeds:	33 and 45 RPM (+ optional 78)
Clamp:	One-piece screw down
Tonearm Length:	230 mm
Effective Mass:	8.7 g
Output:	2x RCA phonos
Lid:	Optional extra
Dimensions (WxHxD):	483x178x330mm
Weight:	14 Kgs
Finish:	Satin black
Price:	£1100

UK Distributor:
Cherished Record Co.
Tel. (44) (0)1579 363603
Fax. (44) (0)1579 363604
E-mail. email@cherished-record-company.co.uk

Manufacturer:
VPI Industries Inc.
Net. www.vpiindustries.com