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# VPI Aries turntable and JMW Memorial tonearm

by Jimmy Hughes

There are two kinds of High End turntable. The first is hyper-critical over setting up, needing careful adjustment and continual fine-tuning to maintain peak performance. Great if you want a full-time hobby. The second is far less picky, needing very little beyond basic setting-up. The VPI Aries sits in the latter camp, and should prove very dependable once installed - an important plus factor for those unable or unwilling to go through the rites and rituals of constant fine-tuning.

Paradoxically, given what I've just said, the Aries fitted with VPI's JMW Memorial tonearm (the combination supplied for this review) is actually a tinkerer's delight, allowing incredibly fine VTA adjustment. It enables you to set stylus vertical tracking angle (VTA) to suit each LP individually, thereby optimising reproduction.

The main chassis of the Aries is made from 5cm thick MDF with a ten gauge steel plate bonded to its underside for improved damping and stability. Finished in an attractive high-gloss black polyester, the whole assembly sits on four widely-spaced adjustable neoprene isolated Tip Toe cones, while the motor is housed in its own separate assembly weighing a substantial 7.7 kilos. The motor simply needs positioning in a recess to the left. After that, you fit the belt, level the top, plug in - and that's it.

Well, not quite. The tonearm still

needs careful setting up to suit the needs of the cartridge. But that's true of all turntables. As previously mentioned, the review Aries was supplied with VPI's JMW Memorial tonearm; a 10" (There's also a 12" version for £1350) damped uni-pivot model dedicated to the memory of the designer's son Jonathan who was killed in a road accident in 1995. Its principle attraction is easily adjustable VTA via a calibrated



turret to the left of the bearing housing, allowing increments of 0.00035". That and the fact that the entire arm tube can be easily removed, complete with counterweight. Combined with the simple and repeatable VTA adjustment, running more than one cartridge is as simple as buying an extra arm tube assembly, but I'll come back to that.

The turntable came supplied with a special VPI commissioned version of the Grado Reference Sonata cartridge - a reasonably priced, and in this case very low-output moving iron design that has low-impedance coil windings suitable for most MC phono inputs. Later I fitted the Koetsu Black Urushi,

with predictably superb results. But the much cheaper Grado sounded excellent too - though alas it proved a little oversensitive to the stray hum field produced by the mains transformer of a nearby EAR-859 integrated valve amp.

First impressions of the Aries were of a smooth, solid, very stable presentation. Using the Grado, background noise (hiss and LP surface ticks) sounded low, despite a wealth of detail at middle and upper frequencies. The impression of rock-steady stability was aided by the substantial 38mm thick, 7.5kg heavy two-piece turntable platter, made from acrylic, stainless steel and lead, and inherited, along with the bearing, from

VPI's top of the line TNT 5.

Bass was firm and tight, yet warm and voluminous, with excellent power and control.

The main bearing is a 12.5mm diameter steel shaft tipped with a hardened steel ball. It runs on a tungsten-carbide thrust plate, and the bearing bushes are made of Delrin. The bearing shaft fits tightly enough, with only a trace of free play (side to side rock) discernible. Being so heavy, the complete chassis/platter system is reasonably immune to feedback and transmitted noise despite the lack of any real suspension. However, there may be situations where the turntable benefits from being sat on an isolation platform - a big, big one - able to take its 50cm x 40cm footprint. ▶

► VPI intend you use the Aries without a mat, employing the supplied record clamp and rubber washer to 'bond' the LP to the acrylic platter. Doing this gives a firm tightly defined presentation that's very tidy and precise. However, I preferred to forgo the services of the clamp for my regular Shun Mook Mpingo record weight. And I also added a QR Developments Ringmat. This gave the sound increased ease and space without losing focus or precision, and subjectively (I felt) improved naturalness.

Indeed, the Aries/JMW combination is nothing if not natural. The presentation was crisply defined and articulate, yet without any sense of the music being straitjacketed or 'tight' in the pejorative sense. The mid-band felt beautifully fluid and open, with a nice mix of precision and relaxation. The music had a CD-like focus and firmness, but without the sterile tonal hardness/forwardness that tends to mar silver disc. Detail was precisely honed and sharply defined, yet beautifully open and (that word again) natural.

Initially I used the JMW Memorial arm minus damping fluid - I just wanted to check everything was working okay before going the final mile. The fluid - a heavy viscous silicone - goes in a dashpot into which the uni-pivot sits, and serves two main purposes. Because the whole arm assembly is effectively suspended on a single point, there can be problems with spurious torsional motion. Also, the unipivot bearing may 'chatter' in sympathy with vibration produced by the pickup.

Adding damping fluid usually firms-up the sound, improving stability and pin-point stereo imagery, making the musical presentation more solid.

However, with the JMW, I found the differences pre and post damping to be smaller than usual - only a marginal increase in security was noticeable

- a good thing, I think, as it points to the JMW's inherent stability and lack of bearing noise.

The makers claim the long distance between unipivot bearing and stylus, coupled with reduced headshell offset angle, improves tracing accuracy leading to

lower distortion. Indeed, other reviewers have claimed for this tonearm the best features of pivoted bearing arms (stability, solidity, security) with the low distortion, 'air', and sound-staging of linear trackers. I'd agree with this assessment; the

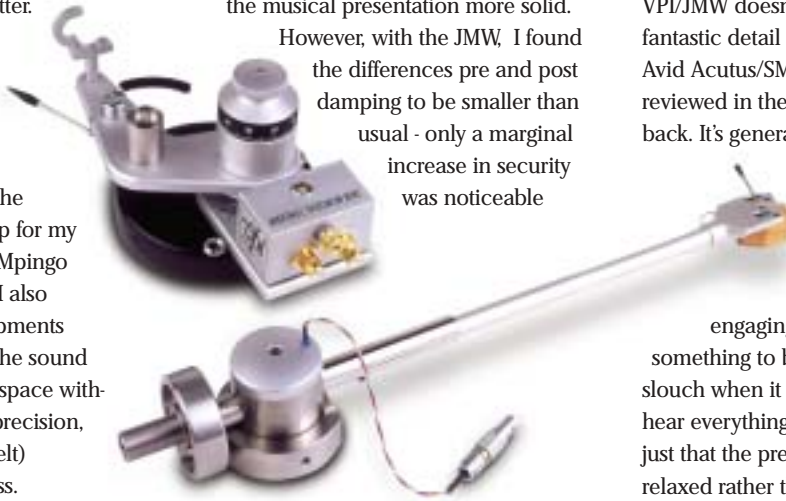
JMW does combine these seemingly contradictory attributes.

Going on memory, I'd say the VPI/JMW doesn't quite equal the fantastic detail and precision of the Avid Acutus/SME combination I reviewed in these pages some months back. It's generally looser and more relaxed (though not ill-focussed or sloppy), with a beguiling charm that's extremely likeable and engaging. Music is, after all, something to be enjoyed! But it's no slouch when it comes to detail; you hear everything that's on the record, it's just that the presentation is friendly and relaxed rather than steely and forced.

Having adjustable VTA is certainly useful. Indeed, for many US audiophiles it's said to be an absolute must. And of course they're right. However, speaking personally, I'm not sure I could always be bothered to reset VTA for each and every LP played! 20 years ago, perhaps, today.. The need to adopt different cartridge VTA settings arises because of differences between LPs.

In the '60s the disc cutting stylus angle was typically around 15°, whereas in the '70s it was altered to 20°. Nowadays there's also the issue of different record pressing weight (and hence thickness).

Raising the back of the arm, so the cartridge points down slightly when viewed from the side, gives a positive VTA and a slightly sharper brighter sound. However, beyond a certain point, there may be an increase in high-frequency edge, giving the top-end a thin metallic quality. A negative VTA, where the pivot assembly is lowered so that the arm tube slopes down slightly to the back, has the opposite effect, reducing high



▶ treble and bringing up the bass.

But taken too far, a negative VTA leads to thick dull sound devoid of sparkle and life. Less predictably, changes in vta can subjectively alter timing, making rhythms sound snappy or leaden. With most tonearms, altering arm height to adjust cartridge VTA is a tricky job; often it's virtually impossible to accurately and repeatably set a particularly height. You can get pretty close, but you're never sure the arm is exactly where it was before.

The beauty of the JMW's adjustment system is its simplicity and consistency; you can go from one extreme to another quickly and precisely. And (if need be)

return to your original setting



just as painlessly - useful for instance if you have a collection that contains a fair number of 180g pressings alongside your standard records. After all, that's only a case of two, easily remembered settings. Even then, for some listeners, life will doubtless seem too short to indulge in such hair-shirt pursuits. But the JMW makes adjustment so easy, it's almost a crime not to experiment.

As a front for my laziness, I'm still a believer in a single 'optimum' VTA for most LPs. But if you've a disc that sounds excessively bright (or the reverse) it's worth trying different arm heights to see if an improvement occurs. If it does, make a note to the effect that

that particular LP sounds best at such and such a setting. You can then quickly reset the arm for optimum vta each time the record is played.

For the Koetsu Black Urushi, I adopted a slightly negative VTA with good results. The JMW's supplied counterweight coped with this heavyweight pickup, and the minimal anti-skating force (Harry Weisfeld uses a twist in the arm's leadout wires to provide the modicum of side force he prefers) did not seem to cause problems. Although I filled the pivot dashpot with as much fluid as it would take, I felt the damping effect was lower than is often the case with arms of this type - not a criticism, just an observation!

As I mentioned earlier, for the well-heeled with more than one cartridge, it's possible to buy complete tonearm assemblies that allow one to interchange pickups quickly. Just remove the multi-pin plug from its socket, lift the arm off its unipivot, and that's it - though you'll need to take care not to spill damping fluid from the arm bearing. One other thing about the arm; it's the first damped unipivot

I've tried which doesn't rely on some kind of adjustable outrigger weight system or an eccentric counterweight to balance the arm laterally. The main centre housing is very substantial and quite heavy, while cartridge offset is minimal. These things, coupled with a low centre of gravity for the bearing itself, mean that a twist of the eccentric ring round the bearing base is sufficient to achieve correct azimuth. It also perhaps explains why fluid damping makes less difference than usual...

All in all then, a very potent turntable/arm combination - stylish, solidly engineered, beautifully finished, plus easy to operate and set-up. The sound is clean, open and natural,

without being the least bit 'hi-fi' in terms of presentation. Yet there's all the detail and clarity one could wish for. Moreover, VPI offer a range of upgrades and improvements (such as a heavy flywheel for the motor) that can be added later for those wishing to further enhance performance.

The VPI Aries fitted with the JMW Memorial arm offers real analogue naturalness, allied to the focus and stability one expects from CD. It's a precision instrument, yet doesn't need cossetting, and it should provide consistent quality sound over a long working life span. I'm impressed - I think you will be too!



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### VPI Aries turntable

Speeds change:	33/45 Manual
Armboard:	Separate, pre-cut for all common arms.
Clamp:	One piece, screw down.
Lid:	Optional extra (61x23x46cm)
External Flywheel:	Optional extra (E895)
SDS Electronic	
Speed Control:	Optional extra (E895)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	56x15.25x40.6cm
Weight:	29.55Kg
Finish:	Piano Black
Price:	£1995.00

##### JMW Memorial 10" Tonearm

Bearing Type:	Fluid damped uni-pivot
Effective Length:	250mm
Effective Mass:	10.2g
Price:	£1095.00

##### Distributor:

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