



VPI Aries Scout turntable & JMW-9 tonearm

By Art Dudley • Posted: Feb 16, 2003

Oh, I talk a good game when it comes to the whole music-lover-vs-audiophile thing. But I admit that when it comes to record players, I'm just another hardware junkie. I love turntables and tonearms for more than the musical enjoyment they give me. Turntables and tonearms are my favorite toys.



I'm endlessly fascinated with the science behind them—at least partly because, as with theology and frankfurters, the real essence of the thing I'm trying to know is in fact unknowable. Given the subjectivity we bring to music appreciation and the fact that we can't see what's *really* going on in the groove during record play, theories and guesswork are all we have to go on in the world of phonography, notwithstanding some tedious and unintentionally funny claims to the contrary. Like it or not, wherever two or more people gather to write or read reviews of record players, faith is always close at hand.

So here goes:

How It's Done

Designer Harry Weisfeld has whapped the ball so far out of the park with this one, it isn't funny. There's a glorious sense of completeness—of wholeness and rightness—in the way the Aries Scout/JMW-9 combination of turntable and tonearm plays music, echoed and underscored by those same qualities in the player's appearance and ease of use. The Scout and JMW-9 are serenely well-designed, as opposed to being just a frantic collection of the latest analog fads and follies, and their construction quality is nothing short of astounding for the price.

The solid-plinth Scout starts life as a sheet of 1 1/8"-thick MDF, machined to shape and finished in semigloss black. Most of its underside is covered with a thin steel plate for rigidity and damping, the latter thanks also to a thin layer of silicone sealant. The right-rear corner is drilled with a 1"-diameter hole for VPI's standard arm-mount collar. A Rega RB-300, with its pillar diameter of 22mm (or just over 7/8"), will fit, but the VPI's platter is way too tall for the Rega arm by itself, even with the usual 1/16" spacer: If that's what you have in mind, you'll have to get a machinist to make you something special.

Four aluminum cones support the plinth, although these aren't quite as simple as they appear: A steel ball is pressed into each point, à la Bic, for enhanced isolation from outside vibrations, and the thick, spongy washers—made of something called Poron—between the cones and the underside of the plinth ensure that the feet can be adjusted for height without losing contact.

The Scout has an inverted bearing, the well of which is machined from sintered bronze (a graphite-based lubricant is contained in pores in the alloy itself) with a Teflon thrust disc on top. This is a departure from VPI's recent standard practice of making bearing wells out of a thermoplastic called Rulon—designer Weisfeld says that sintered bronze can be machined more accurately with fewer operations, thus keeping comparative costs down. The Scout's bearing shaft, massively bolted to the plinth, is case-hardened tool steel, meaning it's actually somewhat softer at its core than its outer surface: Theoretically, at least, this could aid in damping vibrations. The business end of the shaft encapsulates a chrome steel ball whose hardness is 60 on the Rockwell scale.

VPI chose a Hurst 5.5W AC synchronous motor for the Scout, which is less torque than the ones used for the company's other models—but then, at just 4 lbs, the Scout's acrylic platter is less massive than most, including those in the rest of VPI's line. Other than the shelf they'll sit on, a thin, round drive belt is the only mechanical link between motor and turntable—the motor enclosure is a structure separate from the rest of the plinth. That chunky little steel box also contains a pushbutton switch, an AC cord socket, and two capacitors, one of which is used to "phase" the motor, the other to suppress turn-on thumps (at which it is only partly successful). The motor armature is topped with a two-speed Delrin pulley, which is both grooved and slightly tapered (1.5 degrees), allowing the user to make minor speed adjustments by choosing lower or higher positions for the belt. The pulley is so free from visible run-out error that you might have to touch it to know if it's turning.



That thick (1.5") acrylic platter is likewise well-machined, but otherwise unremarkable. VPI recommends putting records directly on the bare platter and flattening them with their standard screw-on Reflex clamp (supplied), although the perennially diplomatic Harry Weisfeld stops short of suggesting that this is the only, or even the best, way to do it. When I said that I preferred using the Scout with my own thin felt mat and without the clamp, he replied, "Arthur, I would never tell anyone *not* to do it that way." The thing is, I know from past conversations that Weisfeld's receptiveness to clamps has less to do damping vibrations in the vinyl—a fool's errand if ever there was one, I think—than it does with a simple desire to make records as flat as they can be. Among other things, flat records make life a lot easier for any cartridge mounted in a unipivot tonearm, and unipivot

arms are another specialty of the house at VPI.

Introduced in 1996 as a tribute to his son, the late Jonathan Weisfeld, Harry's JMW tonearm line has grown to include three different sizes; the JMW-9, which comes standard with the Scout, is the newest and shortest of these. Like the other JMWs, the '9 uses a reverse-missionary bearing with a devilishly sharp tungsten-carbide point hardened to 92 on the Rockwell scale, and a machined and hardened-steel set-screw for a cup. The cast-aluminum arm's beaded texture matches the finish on the upper parts of the Scout's adjustable feet, and the tube is filled with a 1.7-lb-density urethane foam. The mounting base, lower bearing housing, and cueing support are also aluminum alloy, while most other bits are stainless steel—including a weighted ring that's fastened to the bottom of the upper bearing assembly. Not only does this weight stabilize the arm, but because the mass of the ring isn't consistent around its perimeter, rotating it has the effect of subtly tilting the entire upper bearing assembly in one direction or another, thus effecting a change in cartridge azimuth if needed. Clever.

Like other unipivot arms, the JMW has a quick-connect plug in its signal line for easy removal and thus easy cartridge swapping—although I know of no one else using either so fine a plug and socket (Swiss-made Lemos) or so handy and straightforward an output-jack box, the latter mounted close to the arm mount on the Scout's back edge. The lead wire is 32-strand copper made for VPI by Discovery Cable.

The JMW's armtube/upper bearing assembly *feels* massive, which is not at all surprising given that the above-mentioned ring weight is heavier on this arm than on VPI's [larger tonearms](#) (a decision motivated by an even greater need for a stabilizing force with the JMW-9, since it lacks its bigger brothers' fluid-damping option). In fact, because that weight is located well below the pivot point, it doesn't contribute to the mass the cartridge "sees" in the vertical plane, in which sense the effective moving mass is a perfectly reasonable 8.1gm. The counterweight supplied with the '9 is suitable for a fairly wide range of cartridge weights, but a more massive one can be had, either as an extra-cost add-on or a free swap-out for the standard jobbie, in case you think you'll need it. More typical Weisfeld *i*-dotting and *t*-crossing.

The JMW-9 is height-adjustable, and while the mechanism for doing so isn't quite as slick as the one on VPI's more expensive arms, it's nonetheless smooth, continuous, and seemingly precise. And the height-adjustment provision doesn't appear to compromise rigidity in any way.

Ready for a bit of controversy? Like VPI's other tonearms, the JMW-9 has no antiskating mechanism in the accepted sense. Weisfeld believes that, all other things being equal, schemes to counter skating force—the tendency of a pivoting arm with an offset headshell to push itself toward the spindle during record play—do more harm than good. Consequently, he recommends a two-pronged approach for owners of JMW arms: Help your stylus maintain contact with both groove walls by goosing up the tracking force a little. Then, if you're still concerned about skating, dress the tonearm-to-junction-box lead wire so that the arm gets a gentle push toward the edge of the record.

I agree with him that there's nothing wrong with erring on the side of heft in choosing a downforce: I think that many of us Americans over a certain age have been conditioned by the junk magazines of the 1960s and '70s into thinking that phonography is little more than a quest for ever-lower tracking forces. (Since they ignored music reproduction altogether, the audio writers of the day apparently had nothing else to think about.) It's high time we got over that: Our records suffer much more from a lack of contact between stylus and groove than they do from an excess of same.

I also agree that a more or less "sufficient," if imprecise, antiskating force can be had by dressing the JMW tonearm's lead wire *just so*, but I add two caveats. First, watch what you're doing, because it's just as easy to dress the wire for a side force in the wrong direction as it is the right one. Second, if you want to get totally persnickety about it, you must resign yourself to the notion that you'll never get a perfect side force in this manner, since the part of the arm where the lead wire exits (and thus applies its force) is higher than the bearing's pivot point. As I said, persnickety—and quite possibly of no audible consequence.



TURNTABLE REVIEWS

To check my impressions, I referred to the ever-popular *Test Record*, from the UK's *Hi-Fi News & Record Review*. Using an exemplary cartridge—the medium-compliance Miyabi 47, which nominally tracks at 2gm—I found that a small increase in downforce and just the right twist in the lead-out wire could be combined to coax a satisfactory antiskating performance from the JMW-9 tonearm. The [Naim Aro](#) and Rega RB-300 are both better in this regard: They can, with careful adjustment and a little luck, handle the tortuous track 9 (the left and right channels combined in a spirited 300Hz test tone at +18dB), which the VPI could not at all. In fact, the VPI barely kept the stylus in the groove during track 8 (+16dB). But those two tests are unrealistically severe; I believe that a properly set-up JMW-9 will play most, if not all, LPs with no more distortion or record wear than you'd experience with other players.

Now, for the records in my collection that actually contain music...

Listening to Actual Music

I started with a simple, direct song: "Bury Me Beneath the Weeping Willow," from Ricky Skaggs' and Tony Rice's 1980 duet, *Skaggs and Rice* (Sugar Hill Records 3711). (For those of you not familiar with this LP, it's a wonderful collection of 10 bluegrass, old-time, and gospel standards featuring only Rice and his voice and guitar and Skaggs and his voice and mandolin, with no overdubbing or trickery of any sort.) One song was all it took—one *verse*, if you want to know the truth—to know that the Scout/JMW combination did an excellent job of getting the notes off the record and weaving them into believable, convincing, rhythmically involving music. This player had a fine sense of flow, and did an equally fine job of conveying the way the two musicians *lean* into the beat on some numbers, as well as the more rhythmically intricate and unexpected temporal shadings in the solos that both of these masters perform.

In other words, the VPI combo did something that I used to consider the sole province of such generally low-mass, generally undamped British record players as the Linns, Roksans, Pink Triangles, and Regas: The VPI played music, and did so convincingly.

How did the *sound* of the VPI record player compare to that of my [Linn LP12 turntable](#) with [Naim Armageddon power supply](#) and [Naim Aro tonearm](#)? In general, the Scout/JMW combination sounded a little darker and thicker than the LP12/Aro, and a close listen told me that the British combo does a better job of clarifying the attack components of notes, especially in bass lines. But the sustain components of those notes—the bass *content*, if you wish—was more powerful and substantial via the Scout/JMW. Up to a point, this seems like a replay of the usual dichotomy between British and American record players, the former sounding rhythmic and quick but not so deep or spacious, the latter giving up some temporal precision for deeper bass and a bigger sound. The surprise was that the VPI player was not at all slow or ponderous or uninvolved in the way it played the music.

For instance, the wonderful XTC song "Senses Working Overtime," with its deep, sliding electric bass part, showed just how well the VPI package communicated the pitch and character of low-frequency lines while still sounding solid and very, very big. Yes, if I worked at it, I could hear that note attacks were a little duller than with my more expensive Linn/Naim/Naim front end. But I didn't have to work at all to hear more substance in the bass notes themselves—and, consequently, a greater sense of foundation overall. Same notes, same beats, same feelings, different presentation.

I wrote down a few thoughts while comparing the players with the Krips/LSO recording of the Schubert Ninth (Decca)—and, again, there's much to admire with both. My Linn does a somewhat better job of conveying the distinct leading edges of note attacks—the sudden burst of air at the beginning of each note—in the famous horn opening. String tone sounds stringier with the Linn/Naim, too, although whether that's more or less to your liking—or more or less realistic—is forever open to debate. For its part, the VPI sounded a little more open and spread-out, and just plain bigger, while being just as involving and emotionally convincing.

I kept hearing the same differences between the VPI and my Linn with many, many other records. Take the well known Barbirolli/Philharmonia disc of Elgar's Symphony 1 (Seraphim): This 1963 recording sounds rather old even for its day, and the Linn makes it more so while the VPI made it less so. The Linn gives a more midrange presentation—although its midrange is more textured than that of the VPI, even at its best—and the Linn's presentation is spatially smaller, closer to sounding like a mono mix. The VPI seemed to broaden the response curve in both directions, and the soundfield was much bigger—man-on-the-street bigger, not something I had to strain my audioweenie ears to hear.

The VPI combo also sounded different from the Linn in its sense of scale and space. The Scout and JMW-9 did a better job of separating voices and instruments from one another, and overall created a bigger "stage" between the speakers. The Linn/Naim combo sounds smaller, with more of a chunky, mono-like focus that some may or may not prefer.



TURNTABLE REVIEWS

One more observation: Some hi-fi reviewers, myself included, are anxious to tell you when a product makes a musical performance sound tighter, more together, whatever. That judgment may well be true a lot of the time, but neither should you want a product to homogenize your records in that sense—to make things sound more upbeat, or even more together, than they really are.

Well, don't sweat it, Harry Weisfeld: Your record player made music as interesting as it really is, but no more. The members of the Vienna State Opera Orchestra, under the otherwise beloved (by me at least) Hermann Scherchen, still played the first movement of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* as if they'd never met (Westminster), and listening to Uncle Tupelo's "Graveyard Shift" (from *Uncle Tupelo 89/93: An Anthology*, Sundazed 5153) on the VPI didn't make it any easier for me to imagine country musicians who have less feel for country music than Jeff Tweedy and Jay Farrar. What a couple of posers.

Final Comparisons & Conclusions

I wrote about the more expensive VPI Aries turntable/JMW-10 tonearm a little over two years ago in *Listener*. I liked the combination, with only minor reservations, and thought it offered good value for the money. Today, I think the less expensive Aries Scout and JMW-9 actually play music better, and I felt that way within a minute of first hearing them. At the very least, this is the best value among VPI's record players, and to some listeners it may be their best, period.

I can only guess why this should be. One guess revolves around the fact that this is simply Harry Weisfeld's latest creation, and Harry keeps getting better at what he does, kind of like Tom Petty.

Maybe it's part luck. I believe that one of the keys to good record-player performance is to make sure that the major parts of it—the tonearm, the platter, and whatever structure connects them—all behave the same way: Rather than trying to keep everything from resonating, the good designer makes sure that everything resonates to more or less the same extent, so there's no *relative* movement of those parts. (That's one reason a damped tonearm like an SME doesn't sound good on a Linn, an undamped arm like a Linn Ittok doesn't sound good on a SOTA, the application of damping substances to the underside of a Linn LP12's subchassis makes it sound much worse, and so forth.) So perhaps, with the Aries Scout and JMW-9, Harry has found a combination of parts that work especially well together.

Perhaps it's just me—or, more to the point, my system. Maybe the cartridges I used—the aforementioned Miyabi 47, plus Supex 900 Super, Lyra Helikon Mono, and no fewer than *two* Rega Exacts—just happened to lock in. Or maybe the VPI just really, really loved the Mana Reference Table I sat it on. I don't know.

I own two turntables these days: a Linn LP12 and an older-style Rega Planar 3, which I've upgraded with the motor from the new P3. The Linn and the Rega sound more like one another than they do the VPI, but all three get the essentials of music right, and at one time or another I have cried in response to music with each. Bingo. Stop there if you want to.

The \$750 Rega P3, with its clever economies and fine, singing voice, sounds tentative and small by comparison with the more substantial VPI combination. Adding a [Naim Armageddon power supply](#) to the Rega's AC motor restores its comparative edge in this regard (don't laugh—I've actually done this), but that alone is a \$1350 option, and is also a pain in the ass to do. The Rega remains a superb bargain—you can't take that away from it—but it's no longer the only great bargain in the house.

The Linn/Naim/Naim combo retails for something like \$5770. Although I've had the financial luxury of starting out with the LP12 Basic/Rega RB-300 combination and of upgrading it to its present level over time, and while I paid retail for the turntable and the arm, I did so at times when they cost a lot less. (I recall the Aro costing closer to \$1000 than \$2000.) I had the further luxury of buying the power supply at cost, as a reviewer's "accommodation." The Linn/Naim/Naim's musical prowess is second to none, and its textured and downright organic sound is very much to my liking. I also just plain like it as a "thing," if you know what I mean.

But if you're just starting out in analog or upgrading an existing front-end, and if you can spend \$1500 on a turntable and tonearm, here's some advice: Go hear VPI's new player right away. This is not a cautious, conditional, "for special tastes only" recommendation. (No offense to those things that are: Hey, I love my Lowthers, but God knows they're not for everyone.) Rather, this is a flat-out, unconditional, "Holy Mother of Crap, I can't believe how good this thing is" recommendation. It's hard to imagine another way of spending \$1500 that will add this much to your system.

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