

VPI Scout

A SYNDICATED ARTICLE FROM GERMANY

This review first appeared in the August 2009 issue of hifi & stereo magazine fairaudio.de. You can also read this [review of the VPI Scout](#) in its original German version. We translated it through a syndication arrangement with our German colleagues. As is customary for our own reviews, the writer's signature at review's end shows an e-mail address should you have questions or wish to send feedback. All images contained in this review are the property of fairaudio.de or Krell. - Ed.

Reviewer: Ralph Werner

Financial Interests: click [here](#)

Sources: **Analog – deck** - Acoustic Solid MPX; **tone arm** - Phonotools Vivid-Two, SME M2 12-inch; **pickup** - Denon DL-103, Ortofon MC Rondo Bronze, Shelter 201, Zu Audio DL-103, The Cartridge Music Maker III; **digital - CD-Player** - audiolab 8000CD, HiFiAkademie cdPlayer; **Computer & Co:** Logitech Squeezebox, Readynas Duo NAS-Serve, HP Notebook; **D/A converter** - Benchmark DAC1 USB

Amplification: **Phono** - Aqvox 2 CI MKII; **preamp** - Octave HP 300 MK2; **power amp** - Electrocompaniet AW 180, SAC il piccolo; **integrated** - LUA 4040 C, Myryad MXI 2080

Speakers: ASI Tango R, DeVore Fidelity Nines, Zu Essence

Cables: Various

Stands and supports: Creactiv, Taoc, Liedtke MetallDesign Stand, Shale Audio Base

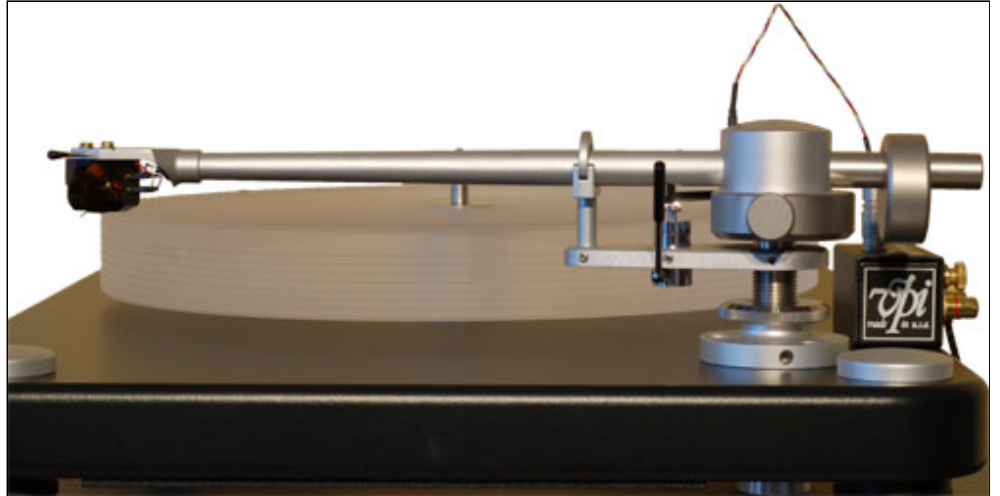
Review Component Retail: €2,200



Situated in the wider NYC area, VPI Industries has plied the analogue trade for more than a few days. Besides turntables and tone arms, they also make record cleaning machines and began it all some 30 years ago. The subject of today's review is VPI's Scout in its most current incarnation. At €2,200, it is their most affordable deck. It includes their JMW 9 arm which has some regard the proposition in reverse – buy the arm, get a free table.

This surprise inversion has traction in the fact that by itself, the 9-inch arm commands €1,200, i.e. 55% of the table's combined total. Compared to equivalent competitors who charge from 15-30% for their arms, that's unusually high. The Scout package does not include a cartridge but you do get a record clamp, setup level and various tools.

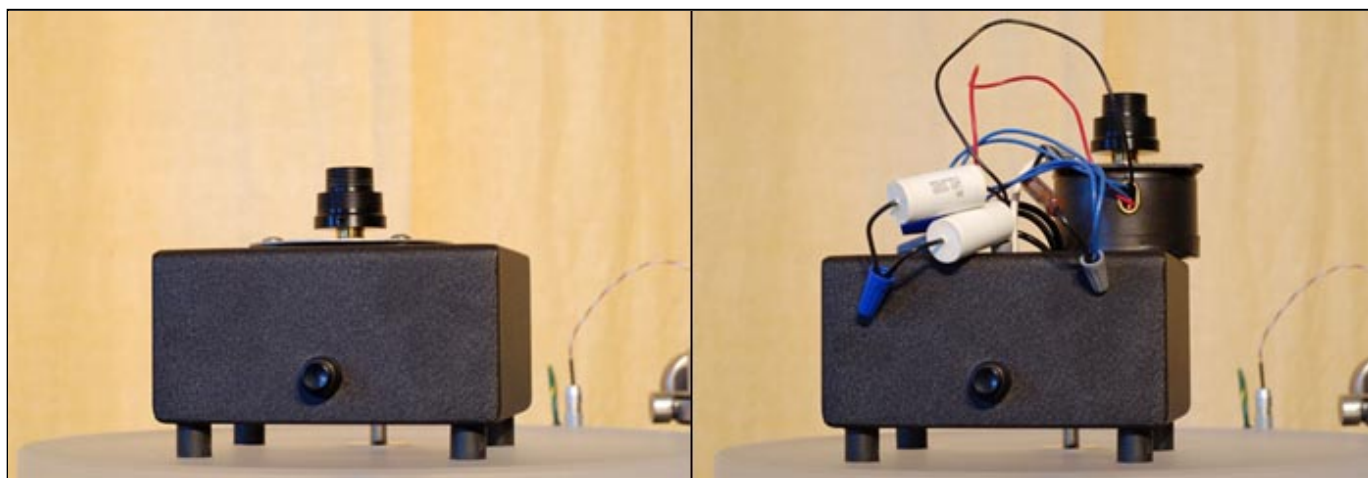
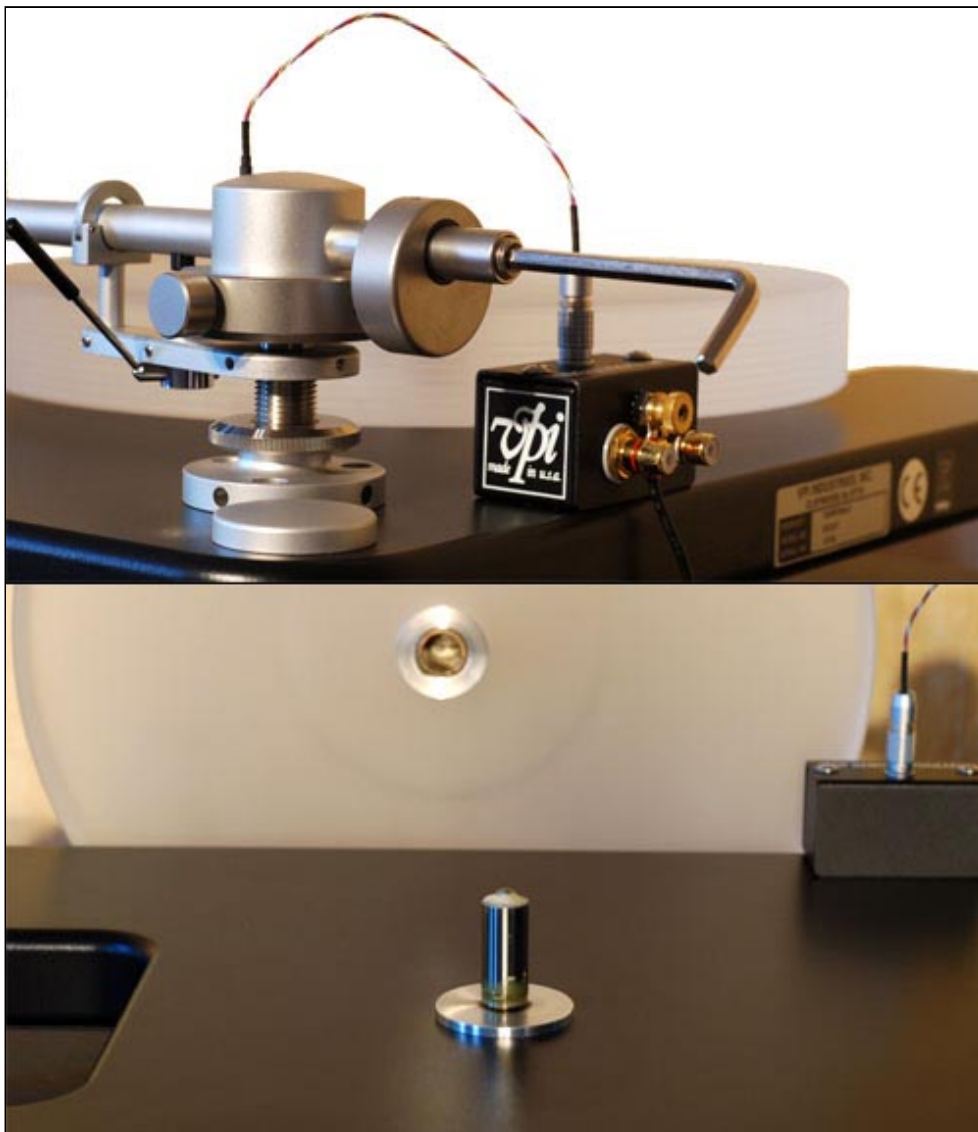
Even though the black licorice spinner had pulled duty for weeks already, I still remained ambivalent about its cosmetics. The inherent simplicity appealed but what about those gaudy silver corners? The cool filigree of the arm was tasty, the protruding cable on the rear somewhat freaky but cool because of it yet the black junction box a major mar on the otherwise fine plinth. The nomenclature was nicely rendered again. In toto, this neither spelled Italian or Scandinavian design schools. Nor was it German heavy metal whose occasionally outright brutishness the VPI Scout trumped with, dare I say it, near *British* understatement.



Tech and handling: The latest Scout introduces three novelties – tone arm shape, tracking force adjustment and motor controller. Up until a year ago, the arm was straight and its diameter at the head shell identical to the diameter at the bearing. Two tubes were fitted one inside the other and damped. The present tube is single and conical to measure 10.5mm across at the head shell, 12.5mm in the rear. This is said to better suppress standing waves and resonances and the internal damping too was revisited. The counter weight hangs quite low to move the center of gravity downward and it is fixed with a small grub screw.

So far so good but fussy too. Those keen on squaring tracking force down into the 0.1g circle—that would be me at times—will start to sweat as insufficient care with tightening this set screw will ruin the adjustment. The VPI arm adds to that an eccentric bore on the weight which can end up hanging somewhat askew. With a unipivot, this would cause azimuth error. Hence VPI came upon the very simple but effective idea to thread the end of the arm and fit to it a 3g nut. Turn it toward the pickup and tracking force increases – or vice

versa. The adjustment window spans about $\pm 0.2g$ so your prior aim should have been steady and overhang and azimuth been already locked in. The final tweak can be concluded with the small counter nut to simplify the affair. But what about final? Is any arm setup ever final? Say you change VTA—and perhaps you do this routinely—to automatically skew/screw up the tracking force. The tiny counter weight can rectify the situation. This circumvents upsetting the happy apple cart with the big weight. It's a practical solution for all analog twiddlers.



The new motor controller—if such you wants to call it—is a 24-pole AC synchro affair from supplier Hurst and couples quite directly to the AC line frequency. Previously the black steel box ran a capacitor between power inlet and motor, now there are two caps (VPI also claims tighter selection tolerances) and a resistor for a basic but quite common solution. The intended effect is a lowering of the rotational inertia of the motor to minimize a constant source of tiny accelerations and breaking during final speed gathering. But no fear, the desired RMPs are reached in seconds, the platter isn't *that* heavy. Those keen on more avantgarde speed controllers from the same maker can reach for the €1,450 SDS module but that would be a quite invasive upgrade surgery.



Aside from these items, VPI's Scout relies on a proven recipe. The plinth consists of a 3cm thick MDF slab to which attaches a steel plate from the bottom to lower resonance. Four cone footers decouple via foam interface and require a perfectly level shelf or setup surface since a just 2mm loosening of the footers along their shanks removes contact with the foam patch. The steel axle is embedded in the plinth and meets a Teflon-mirrored bearing in the 3.5cm thick acrylic platter. Hence this is an inverted bearing, a quite common geometry nowadays whose proponents claim significantly lower chatter over 'normal' bearings.

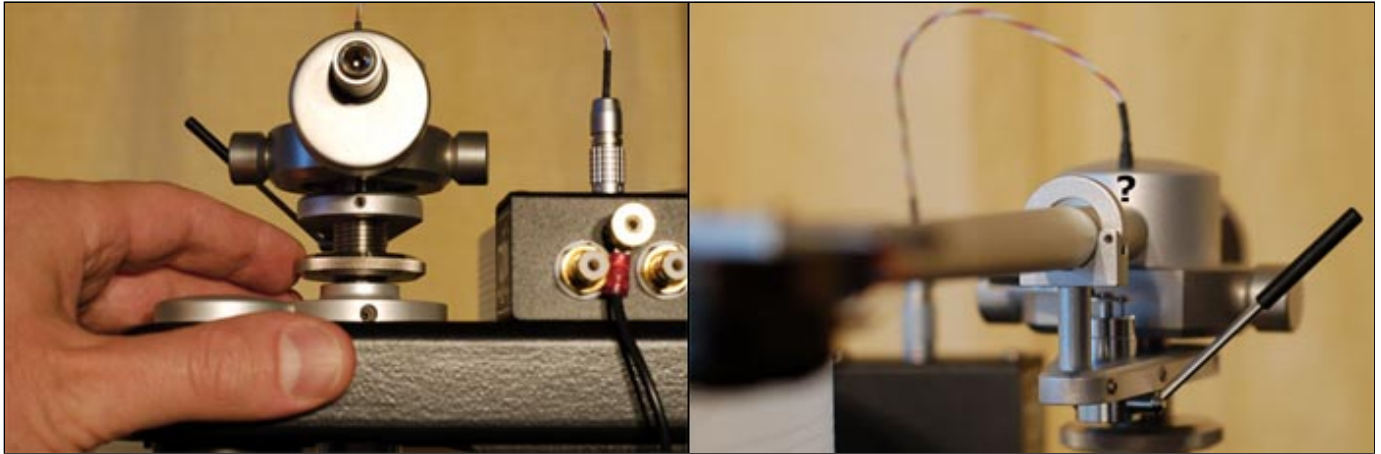


One Scout highlight is clearly the arm which, with VPI, simply *had* to be a unipivot design. Its advantage over four-point suspensions is reduced friction. With a wickedly pointy bearing shaft meeting a polished counter race, where could be the rub? But there's no light without shadow. A unipivot can go sideways to tip. The art thus resides in the construction of the affair which must lower its center of gravity to increase stability. VPI tone arms always added lateral counter weights which increased circumferential mass and reduced tipsiness.

Besides constructional finesse—and hopefully benign effects—VPI's JMW9 is plain *practical*. This includes the aforementioned small counter nut to fine-tune tracking force, a good thing. The ring with the lateral outriggers turns precisely against resistance to lock in correct azimuth. Small but important, the race sports an exact apex bore to eliminate any wonder where its precise center might be. I loved the little nut for lead pencils in the head shell. And unlike with my SME 12-incher, the VTA set screw isn't blocked by another stupid screw. You can get to it directly just as it should be. And naturally, there's a groove in the tone arm shaft to prevent the arm from turning during VTA adjustments – which I've encountered elsewhere. To get at anti skating via tensioning the tone arm wiring is an original

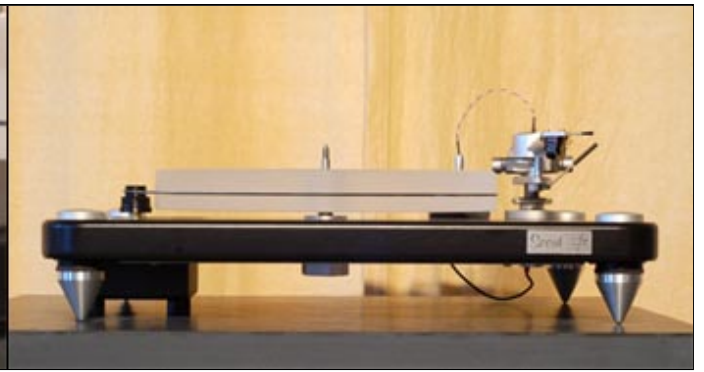
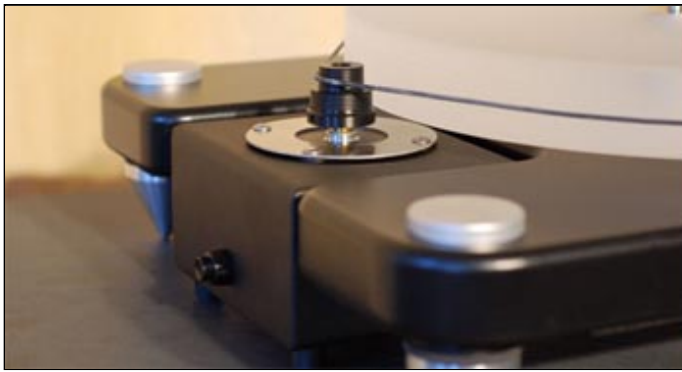
notion but one I shunned. But the fact that the complete arm can be lifted off its base and—perfectly pre-dialed of course—switched out in seconds for another arm is a daytime wet dream for anyone who compares cartridges as can be the case with reviewers. With a swap wand available for €700, I can't for the death of me figure what prevented me from ordering one. I must have been out to lunch (and I can't even remember what I ate)....

On its own, each of the above itemized points might appear minor but after a good dozen setups I can state with conviction that it all adds up to extreme user friendliness. This arm is easily adjusted with neither fuss—big counter weight excepted—nor nerve-wrecking obstacles. That's what endears me to these Yanks. They think about the actual user. And fit 'n' finish are top drawer. Why the retainer ring doesn't perfectly straddle the arm wand is my only open question.



But let's not forget the record clamp. It's not a heavy metal but light plastic job which needs to be screwed down as its own mass wouldn't suffice. One first places down a ca. 2 Euro-sized hole-punched rubber disc on the axle to have the record float about 1mm above the platter before the concave clamp torques down good on even bowed or wavy vinyl. It's not a new invention but effective. At this juncture, I strapped on the familiar Ortofon Rondo MC, slapped on Paul Simon's *Graceland*, clamped the sucker down, cued up the eponymous track and...

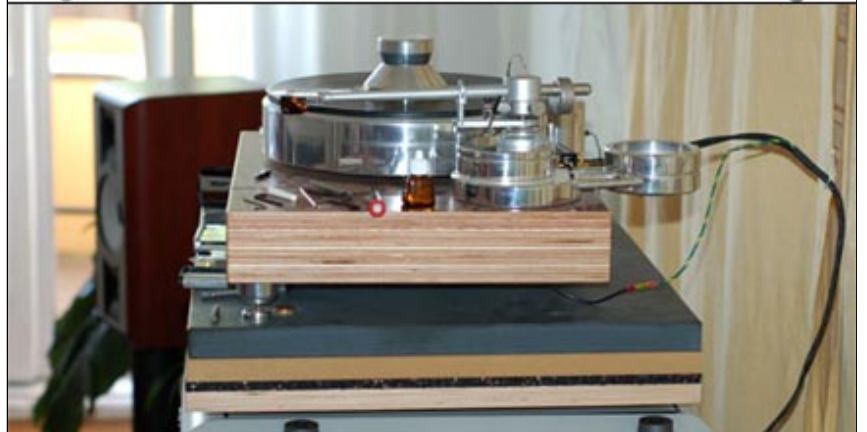
Sonics: If you imagine a review like a job interview, this candidate would have been handed the contract after the first handshake. Why bother with a half hour of small talk? The first impression stuck – self confident, relaxed and friendly, with good manners rather than mannerisms. Eccentricities, be they tonal, dynamic or relative to soundstaging, were absent. The VPI was a winning charmer but I was initially somewhat at a loss to explain what caused the charm. My comparator was the broad-shouldered, long-armed Acoustic Solid MPX with 1-foot SME M2 (and for alternative sport, the MPX also saw the Jelko 9-incher as well as the VPI arm).



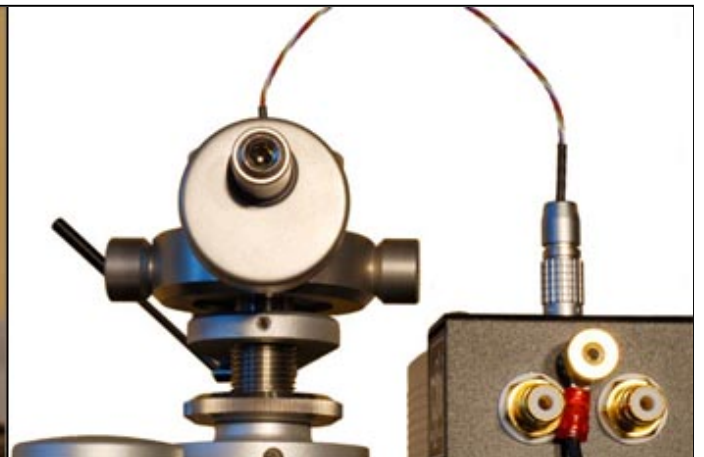
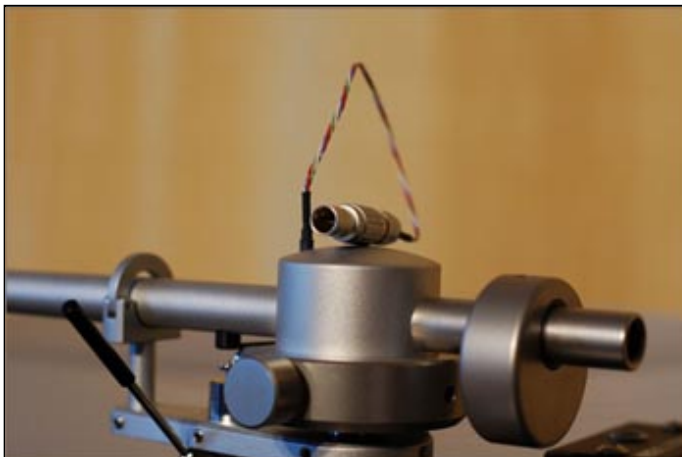
In matters of soundstaging, the VPI left my reference in the dust and did so on all parameters, be it stage dimensionality, image focus or body. While these aspects aren't usually highest on my totem pole, the VPI addressed them. Depth and width became positively voluptuous but not by artificially blowing up instrument for perhaps curious but unnatural endowments. Rather, the space/air around the instruments increased and thus scaled up the music.



The result was a virtual stage set truly free. The VPI was the polar opposite of a stage compactor. With very high image focus but more importantly a great tactile factor for plasticity and embodied sounds, staging freaks should be in heaven. For its sticker, I can't imagine what more anyone could want. Truly top of its class.



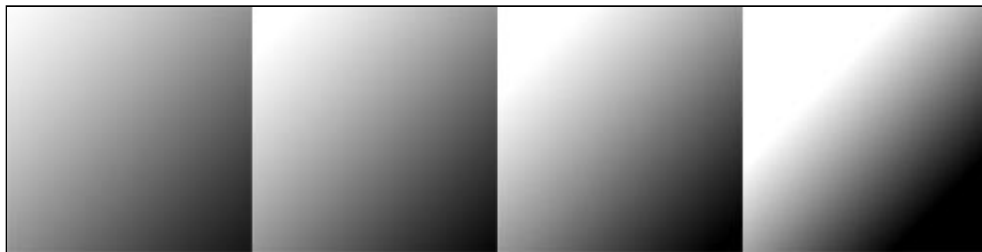
Scoutish charms: Without downplaying its tonal and spatial merits, they don't fully explain the winning charm with which the Scout is clearly pregnant.



Again the VPI played it balanced if one subscribed to the mental game of parceling out musical flow over here, resolution over yonder. The Scout neither swung so hard as to have fun swallow up certain details; nor did it peel out tertiary stuff to strut pertly on the silver platter. Both seemingly opposing needs were served equally. But if you insisted on any tendency, I'd say flow came first in a pinch.

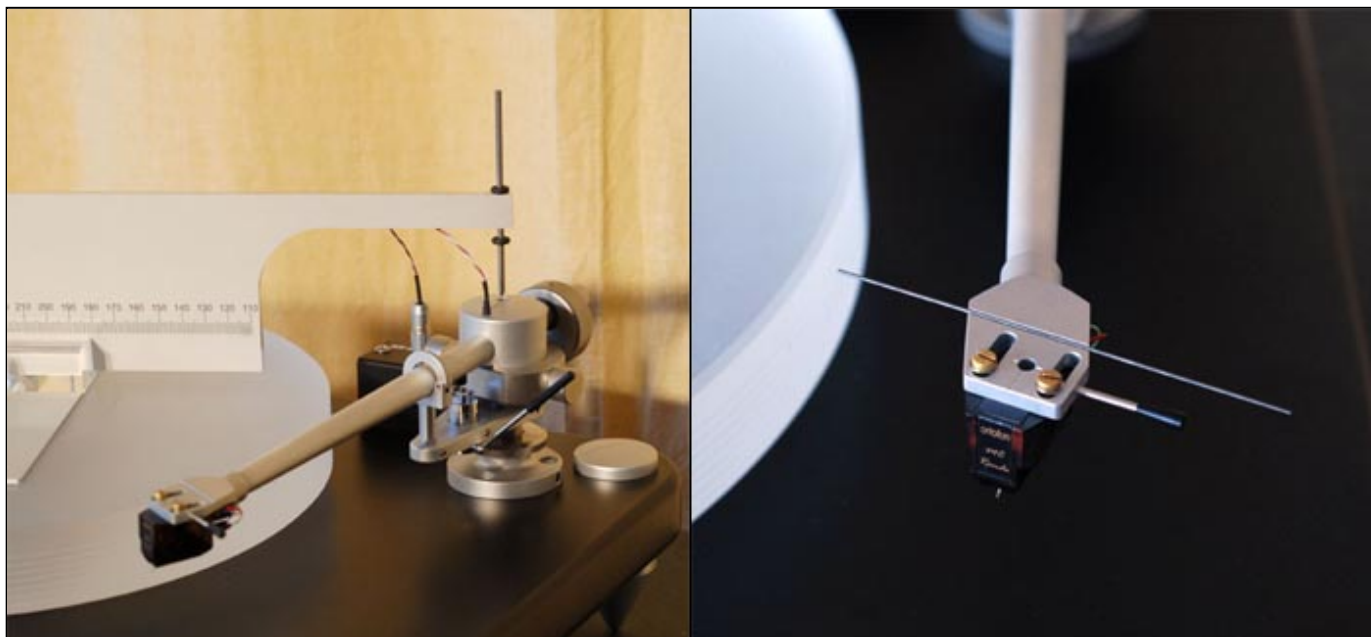
Attacks and decays were finely tracked even when *very* subdued or—as is often the case in music—staggered and overlaid. The Scout revealed the whole tone regardless of what occurred around it. There was great stability through

the whole sustain/decay phase and the fade-out of sounds didn't fray at the edges as routinely happens when these effects scatter and diffuse into the room. Nor did good rhythm get confused with transient emphasis. That would blot out the smaller-amplitude ring-outs to clip off the last third of each note. In short, a very well balanced timing finesse was one of the Scout's great strengths. This was demonstrated by involving piano music. Simply pay attention to the clarity of the hammer falls and the decay trails following them. The little Scout really walks the middle path to perfection.



While bestowing praise can get tiring, I still must mention the Scout's microdynamic chops. If pictures make up 1000 words, perhaps this will help. The four white/black transitions lose gradation values from left to right, starting with 256 and ending with 128.

If we reference dynamics as being analogous to these gradations, the point is quickly made. The vital area is the gray zone. All images contain black and white but the transition from one polarity to the other is significantly longer (and hence more highly differentiated) in the left-most image. And the Scout never paints just black or white. It's got too many intermediary values in its pocket and handles the microdynamic range with far too many nuances. This results in highly articulate and realistic dynamics. That was the quality I got stuck on – even the finest of shimmies and fades were extracted from the groove and playback remained very much alive during the quietest of passages.



Facts:

- **Category:** Turntable with 9-inch arm
- **Trim:** Black plinth, silver anodized arm
- **Concept:** MDF/steel plinth with loosely decoupled cone footers; inverted bearing; AC synchro motor with round belt; unipivot tone arm
- **Speeds:** 33 1/3 and 45 RPM
- **Footprint:** 48 x 36cm (WxD)
- **Weight:** 13 kg
- **Other:** €100 optional cover / comprehensive upgrade options
- **Website**

