

The VPI Classic 1 Turntable (originally featured in issue 46)



It's easy to compare turntables to vehicles, and for good reason: They share a related sense of implementation and involvement. Much like vehicles of the two- and four-wheeled persuasion, a turntable requires more knowledge and guardianship than just turning a key to achieve a rich experience.

Rather than like eye-catching European automobiles to which high-end turntables are often contrasted, the VPI Classic 1 is more akin to an unmarked mid-90s Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor, recently decommissioned and returned to service as a street car. Casual observation yields few clues to what lurks under the hood, but careful scrutiny reveals a very purposeful vehicle. Everything, including the engine and suspension, is calibrated for high-speed performance.

The VPI Classic 1 boasts analogous aspects. In today's world of superfly, bling-laden turntables, it's easy to pass by the Classic 1 from an aesthetics standpoint—just like every teenager that has sped right past an unmarked squad car. Don't be fooled by the basic wood trim and lack of plating. The Classic 1 is purpose-built. There's no fancy casework, external power supply, or exotic wiring. It doesn't have a dust cover or tonearm cable.



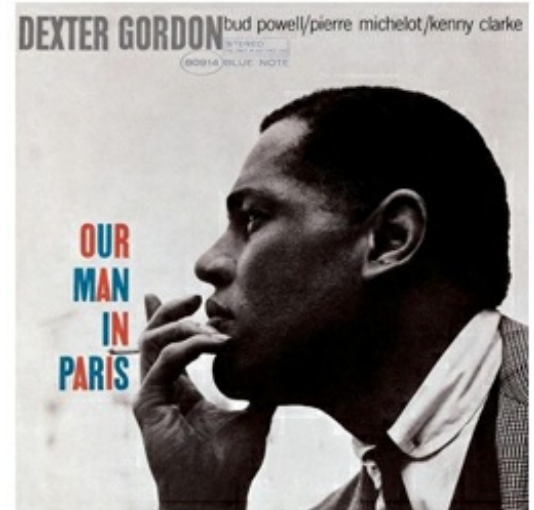
An output pod with RCA jacks and a grounding terminal lurk at the rear corner of the plinth. There's a quick-release connector, meaning tonearm wands are easily interchanged and cartridges effortlessly swapped. And since Lyra's Kleos and Kleos mono cartridges possess identical bodies and parameters, the switch between stereo to mono is a snap.

While it flies in the face of convention, the Classic 1 differs from VPI's other 'tables given that its AC synchronous motor is mounted to the plinth (rather than the motor housed in a separate enclosure). Thanks to careful mounting and fine-tuning, no vibration creeps into the presentation. Yes, the Classic 1 boasts a big sound. Al DiMeola, Paco deLucia, and John McLaughlin's acoustic guitars seemingly appear out of nowhere as the stylus travels the grooves of ORG Music's recently remastered *A Night In San Francisco*. Wonderful guitar tones linger, applause swells from the soundstage, and the percussive thud of feet stamping on the stage leaps from the speakers.

The Soul of a Much Bigger Turntable

The Classic 1's distinctiveness relates to its build and ability to extract musical soul from an LP in a way few under-\$10k record players can muster. I've unboxed too many \$3,000 turntables that my dog could chew to bits in a matter of seconds. VPI's robust construction puts any such fears to rest. The unit weighs 60 pounds, nearly a third of which is concentrated in the solid aluminum platter.

Playing through the new Audio Research REF Phono 2 SE, the Classic 1 ably cruises through recent Music Matters Blue Note remasters. Comparing the playback on “Scrapple From the Apple” (From Dexter Gordon’s *Our Man In Paris*) between the Classic 1 fitted with the Kleos cartridge to Lyra’s flagship mounted to my reference AVID Acutus Reference SP with TriPlanar arm reveals the Classic 1’s ability to cover the basics—rhythmically and dynamically. Of course, the AVID/TP combination offers a larger dynamic swing, but the Classic 1 always captures the essence of the performance, with Dexter Gordon’s tenor sax escaping out into the room in a manner it doesn’t via lesser turntables.



In the context of a system comprised of the factory-rebuilt CJ MV-50 amplifier, Coffman Labs preamplifier, and Harbeth Compact 7ES-3s, the Classic 1 paints a larger musical picture than one might think could sprout from such diminutive speakers. The Classic 1’s tonal body will thrill you when listening to vocal-dominant material. Whether you prefer Johnny Cash, Dusty Springfield, or Diamanda Galas, the ‘table’s weightlessness will leave you swearing you’re listening to something with a much higher price tag.

Such advantages should keep classical and hard rock aficionados equally happy. A quick spin of the recent Black Keys LP demonstrates the Classic 1’s capabilities. The grungy guitars, only part of a large noise ball on an entry-level ‘table, now have well-defined space and texture. It feels as a wall of amplifiers is in the room. A recording that always feels too densely packed, Fear’s self-titled album now offers more bloom. Singer Lee Ving’s vocals are no longer drowned out by raging guitars on “Let’s Have a War,” and the saxophone lead on “New York’s Alright if You Like Saxophones” is truly discernible.

Increasing the volume to near concert-hall levels reveals a total absence of acoustic feedback—especially impressive for a non-suspended turntable. With the volume control on the ARC REF 5SE at 70, the woofers of my GamuT S9s remain controlled, no matter the program material. Plus, the Classic 1 generates a prodigious soundfield in both dimensions. All of the twinkly bits on Jean Michel Jarre’s *Equinoxe* float around like funnel clouds.

What You Don’t Get

The world’s finest turntable/tonearm combinations require no sacrifices on the part of the listener. They feature enormous dynamics, a wide tonal palette, incredibly low noise floors, and virtually perfect speed accuracy. All are prerequisites if and when one is asked to spend crazy money on a record player. The Classic 1’s strength stems from its balance. No single parameter is given priority, and because no area is deficient, the resulting blend allows you to concentrate on the music. It’s a tough balance to achieve at any price.

No, you don’t get any excess aesthetic touches. This is a record-playing machine, not a piece of fine jewelry. However, the product’s honesty is refreshing. Founder Harry Weisfeld’s son, Mat, emphasizes that VPI’s business philosophy and attention to the bottom line are responsible for the Classic 1’s amazing price. Not only is the Classic 1 made in America, all VPI turntable components are produced locally. “This keeps costs way down and minimizes the shipping expenses necessary to get parts to the factory,” says Weisfeld. “My Dad always kept an eye on the bottom line, allowing us the ability to offer a great product at a fair price, so everyone can earn a living.” The Classic 1 shares the same 600 RPM drive motor with the Classic 2 as well as other key components that are purchased in bulk.



Which Model?

VPI's new Classic 4, with two tonearms, is catnip to this analogaholic. While it is the ultimate expression of the Classic concept, the \$10k 'table isn't as stealthily priced as the entry-level Classic. Other models in the Classic lineup offer more performance and versatility, albeit at higher cost. The Classic 2 (\$3,495) provides the ability to set VTA (vertical tracking angle) on the fly, which needn't be a concern to those relatively monogamous with cartridges.

Thanks to a more massive plinth and the addition of VPI's Ring Clamp, HR-X weight and 300 RPM motor, the almost twice-as-expensive Classic 3 (\$5,995) presents serious sonic upgrades over the 1 and 2. For better rigidity, the 3 also upgrades from aluminum to stainless the armtube on the JMW 10.5i tonearm. Additionally, the copper tonearm wire is upgraded to Nordost's legendary Valhalla.

Overwhelmed? Begin with the Classic 1 and just start playing records, dammit. The Classic range is fully upgradeable, so you can take a Classic 1 all the way to the Classic 4 level, should analog madness get the best of you.

Keeping Perspective

Remember, analog is about flavor. The Classic 1 might not be for you, but it turns me on. And while I won't be putting my reference AVID decks on the auction block, listening to the Classic 1 is so enjoyable, it's easy to forget about high-zoot hardware. Some days you want to drive the Porsche, some days you want to drive the police car.

Listeners that don't want a harem of analog playthings, take note: Match the Classic 1 with a great phonostage, a solid cartridge (I suggest the Lyra Kleos), and relax. Price be damned, the Classic 1 is one of the most engaging turntables I've had the pleasure to use. For \$2,750, it's a steal. Sure, more performance can be had, but it will cost you at least \$5k-\$10k, whether or not you move to a different platform or upgrade within VPI's ranks.

The Classic 1 is highly deserving of our Exceptional Value Award. It exemplifies the concept.



VPI Classic 1 Turntable

MSRP: \$2,750

Manufacturer: www.vpiindustries.com

Peripherals

Cartridges Lyra Kleos, Kleos Mono and Titan i, Sumiko Pearwood and Palo Santos, Grado Statement 1, Dynavector DV-20xl, Rega Apheta

Phonostages ARC REF Phono 2 SE, ARC PH8, Manley Chinook

Preamplifier ARC REF 5 SE, Burmester 011

Power Amplifier ARC REF 150, Burmester 911 mk. 3, Coffman Labs PR-01

Speakers GamuT S9, Sonus Faber Ellipsa SE, Harbeth Compact 7 – 3

Cable Cardas Clear

Power Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim

Accessories Furutech DeMag and DeStat, Audience Au24e phono cable, AudioQuest LeoPard phono cable, Audio Systeme Deck record cleaner.