

# VPI Prime Turntable Review

Is this the most affordable superdeck on the market?

by [Ed Selley](#) Aug 25, 2015

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## What is the VPI Prime?

Some of the more attentive readers of the reviews section will recall that when I kicked off the AVForums turntable reviews, I said that they would go up in price each time, focus on user friendliness and would be designs where everything turned up in the box that you'd need to make them go. Above all of these things however, I said that there would be four of them. Poor though my maths skills are, there is no arguing with the device you see here being a fifth turntable. What gives?

Well, the manufacturer of this particular device says that this is an opportunity to hear a turntable of a different level to the ones previously covered but at a price that is almost terrestrial- the superdeck. I've alluded to these in previous reviews but in essence superdecks are turntables that avoid design compromise wherever possible. They make use of exotic materials in their construction and more often than not- like supercars and supermodels, they look fantastic. They are also, as you might expect usually on the expensive side.

This makes the VPI Prime a very interesting device. What you see here is a turntable that is designed around the principles of the superdeck but thanks to some clever thinking and innovative material usage, it weighs in at under £4,000 which in turn means that it is within a logical jump point from last month's Clearaudio Performance DC. The Clearaudio is a seriously clever deck in its own right with sparkling performance. Can the VPI move the game on still further and really give a taste of superdeck performance at (almost) terrestrial money?

## Design



Previous turntables reviewed on AVForums have been plinth or skeleton designs. The Prime takes elements of both design principles without quite being either. It has a plinth into which the bearing and the armboard are fitted at a fixed distance from one another. Rather than being a conventional rectangle though, the VPI is the shape of a bow tie when viewed from above with both the horizontal and vertical edges being curved inwards.

On the left side, the curve is much more pronounced because- with nods to the skeletal design principle, the motor is designed to live in the resulting alcove in the plinth rather than somewhere completely out of sight. The motor itself is a whopper- a 24 pole 500 RPM AC device that weighs more than a complete Rega RP3 and is selected specifically for the UK 230v model. In keeping with many decks, the motor spins at a set speed and changing between 33 and 45 is done by moving the belt from larger to smaller pulleys.

Of course the motor is not the only part of the Prime that is fairly hefty. That plinth is vinyl coated MDF which doesn't sound too substantial until you realise that a single piece of 11 gauge steel is sandwiched to the underside which means that the plinth is a very solid piece of kit indeed. At each corner sits a Delrin foot assembly that sits a spike in a receiving foot which means that once placed and levelled, the VPI is very unlikely to go anywhere.

To be extra sure though, the platter is an enormous steel affair that when combined with its bearing weighs as near as makes no difference, ten kilos. This particular platter is not specific to the Prime and has been used on other VPI designs both past and present. This is topped with a screw clamp to securely anchor your record to a very inert turntable indeed.



So far, all of the design principles are impressive in their scale and execution but they are practices that you will find on a number of turntables. What makes a VPI a VPI is the tonearm which is rather unlike anything on the market. The Prime uses a unipivot style arm which means that instead of separate assemblies to move the arm in the vertical and horizontal axis, it unifies this pivot point. While many unipivots still have a bearing of some description which is 'captured' to ensure the arm only moves in the directions you'd expect it to, the VPI principle is rather more... hardcore.

This means that the arm of the Prime, without exaggeration for dramatic effect, balances on the head of a pin. The balanced arm then moves balanced at the pivot and supported by the stylus of the cartridge at the other end. As there is no means of getting the tonearm cable out through the pin, it instead exits vertically out of the top of the arm before looping down to a terminal board. This is not for dramatic flair either- the loop of the cable in turn provides sufficient anti skate to mean that the arm has no other real need for any to be set. In an absolute sense, the arm is crazy but once set up (more about that in a bit), it functions incredibly well.

The Prime's arm has two further features of note. The first is that while a conventional arm has an effective length of nine inches, the Prime uses that interesting Plinth to extend the armboard length away from the platter and means that it has an effective length of ten inches. The thinking goes that with extra length comes a reduction in distortion from the action of the pivot. This has to be balanced against the increased length adding mass and other issues to the performance but VPI has thought about this too. The Prime's arm therefore is a 3D printed affair that takes the length and resonances into account in the design- while also costing less than a equivalent metal one.

## Positives



Coming straight after the beautifully finished and designed Clearaudio, the Prime still manages to impress. It feels outstandingly well made and well thought out with no rough edges or imperfections to any part of it. It also has a shelf presence that is far beyond most other devices. The combination of black and steel sections makes it look extremely smart without being showy. In the time it has been here, it has attracted nothing but positive comment. I don't want to pretend that £3,750 is anything other than a lot of money but you could sit the Prime in a lineup of turntables that cost twice that and unless you knew what they all were, I don't see you fingering it as the 'cheap' one.



It is also quite unexpectedly child friendly. As the arm has no physical attachment between it and the Prime, it means when you aren't using it, you can undo the cable plug and simply store the 'wand' out of the reach of prying hands. Alternatively, you can buy more than one wand and simply keep them with different cartridges set up and dialled in on them. As all the settings are made on the arm itself, you can drop them back on and they are ready to go.

## Negatives

Like most designs at this price point, the Prime has no lid which does rather add weight to my conspiracy theory that high end turntable manufacturers must also have shares in cleaning companies but this is by the by. The greater width of the design also means that it takes up rather more space than a conventionally sized design. More specific to the Prime is that the setup- while a great deal easier than I had imagined it might be (and indeed than my last experience of building a VPI was) is still something to undertake with plenty of time and the right tools- which to VPI's eternal credit are all supplied less a spirit level.

Effectively, while the arm can be removed to make fitting the cartridge easier, it is still not the job of a moment to balance it and get the azimuth (the angle of the stylus of the cartridge) in the groove of the record correct. Quite correctly, VPI has made the arm suitable for a very wide selection of cartridges but this means that the range of adjustment to allow for this is rather considerable and this in turn means that you can spend a fair bit of time on it. The Prime competes with designs that have conventional gimbaled arms and while VPI can make some very coherent arguments as to why theirs sounds better, the business of getting it to do this is more involved.



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## How was the Prime tested?

The Prime was supplied without a cartridge. The distributor Renaissance Audio did kindly offer a selection of breathtaking designs but conscious of sharing the room with a toddler, I declined and firstly used the Prime with the Clearaudio Virtuoso 2 supplied with the Performance DC and then with an Audio Technica AT33PTG/II which turned up for review. The Prime was principally tested with an Avid Pellar phono stage, Naim Supernait 2 integrated amplifier and a pair of Neat Momentum 4i speakers all connected to an Isotek Evo 3 Sigmas mains conditioner. Once again, I elected to use vinyl as the test medium funnily enough.

## Sound Quality



Listening to the Prime has been an experience and an education. The latter is because the Prime has demonstrated in no uncertain terms the worth of synergy between the arm and the cartridge is deeply important. With the Clearaudio in place, the Prime is good- seriously good in fact- but the performance with the Audio Technica in place has quite honestly at times been other worldly. The interesting part of this is that that Clearaudio is £200 more than the Audio Technica and is in almost every aspect of its design and operation a fantastic cart. For reasons that are lost in a hundred tiny calculations, the Audio Technica monsters it. As such, the comments on sound quality largely apply to this pairing.

Simply put, in some aspects, the VPI puts more clear air between it and the preceding level than any previous price jump this process has covered so far. In many ways, the Prime is much more conventional than the Clearaudio but the sheer effort that has been lavished on the engineering means that it still manages to deliver an exceptional performance. It is huge and heavy but with many records, if you close your eyes, the Prime just isn't there.

Part of this is down to the Prime being exceptionally quiet in operation. It is completely silent and the resulting impact on the audio performance is apparent in a noise floor that simply isn't a perceivable issue on anything other than tired pressings- and even then, the noise is hardly the Prime's fault. With external sources of noise eliminated, the VPI cracks on with offering truly biblical dynamic range. I have read all the arguments on analogue versus digital and I reiterate that my digital source is price comparative with the Prime but with the material being in anyway equal, the VPI would be the option I'd choose every time.



How much of this can be attributed to that incredible arm is open to a degree of conjecture as it is not easily used anywhere else but there is an effortlessness to the way the Prime makes music that is quite unlike anything else I've experience at the price. There is a flow to the performance that is consistently present and exceptionally engaging. It is as apparent on the slow and considered *Phantom Limb* by the band of the same name as it is on the endlessly funky *Feats don't fail me now* by Little Feat. Everything happens in a way that feels superbly and engagingly real. The placement of musicians and instruments is convincing and the Prime has no difficulty allowing the soundstage to rise and fall in relation to the scale of the piece being played.

Don't for a second assume that the Prime is simply a big softy with no sense of attack to it though. My brand new copy of Leftfield's *Alternative Light Source* showed up while the Prime was in situ and the first listen with the volume levels heading toward the lively was absolutely magnificent. The bass response is especially impressive. This has not traditionally been the strongest area for unipivots but the VPI is possessed of powerful, deep and clean bass that integrates extremely well with the rest of the frequency response. This means that tracks like *Little Fish* are simply sublime- a perfect combination of poise and fury.

Against all this positivity, there is little to complain about. The arm can be affected by damage to the record that more conventional designs don't seem to be bothered by and there is the slightest sense with very bass heavy records with indifferent mastering that the VPI can't resolve the information on the disc as effectively as it can better recordings, but this is not unique to the Prime and it must be said that the VPI seems more forgiving of poorer pressings than some of the less expensive players.





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## Conclusion

### Pros

- Exceptional audio performance in all regards
- Superb build
- Stunning looks

### Cons

- Setup requires care
- Needs some thought given to partnering equipment
- Big

So then- a Reference badge. I've taken the time to explain why I have made the decision to bestow this badge on the two previous occasions I've awarded them so here is why the VPI deserves such an honour. First, in a cold and logical sense, the Prime is likely to be the most expensive turntable we ever review. Even if we look at more models in the future- and I hope we will- I imagine they will be back at more terrestrial price points. The VPI as the most expensive design we've tested that in turn manages to move performance on from the Clearaudio Performance DC will therefore likely be our absolute standard by which other designs are judged.

Beyond this logic is also the sense that this is a deeply special design even judged at the not inconsiderable price tag. The VPI elevates vinyl playback to something truly spectacular. I have listened to and used designs that cost considerably more than it does that cannot eke out a decisive advantage over this deck and I have enjoyed every second of using it. The best performance is likely to depend slightly on cartridge choices and setup needs to be undertaken with a degree of care but the way I see it, those foibles are fairly irrelevant given that once you have the Prime up and running, you are entirely unlikely to ever want to put it back in the box.