

Audiophile Turntable/Preamp Review! VPI Scout 1.1, Luminous Audio Arion “Turntable, Preamp With Accuracy Focus”



Price: Scout 1.1 (\$2,000); Arion(\$6,395)

Likes: tracking, accuracy, rugged USA build

Dislikes: must have expert arm setup (VPI)

Wow Factor: masterful vinyl playback system

by John Gatski

As much as I am a proponent of pushing digital recording and playback's ultimate resolution and realism for music playback (Tom Jung and I, as an audio journalist, were involved with DSD since its practical beginning). I still have a fondness for LP records, keep a good turntable on hand and have plenty of hi-res vinyl.

When you consider how old the technology is, records can still sound fantastic. Much to the amazement of many audiophiles, the phonograph biz has actually picked up over the last five years — with more affordable audiophile products and, of course, there is no shortage of good sounding vinyl to listen to — from vintage treasured LPs to state-of-the-art remasters and pop album releases.

From the equipment perspective, you can spend a few hundred dollars to a few thousand, or more, to get the right feature set for your turntable and your preamp purchases. For this review, I got the chance to test the improved version of the fabled VPI Scout, the Scout 1.1, and the Arion, a dandy, discrete phono preamp – from Tim Stinson's Luminous Audio, located in Richmond, Virginia. The preamp was designed by audio engineer Mike Bettinger of GAS Audio modification fame. ([Click here](#) to read more about Mike's design and background.)

If you are a vinyl stalwart with a bit of disposable income, the VPI Scout 1.1 and Luminous Audio Arion are two worthy candidates for purchase. If you are moving up, or even as a first turntable system purchase, it might be the last vinyl system you need to buy.

Tested here is the recently upgraded VPI Scout 1.1 belt drive turntable, priced at \$2,000, with an Ortofon Black MM cartridge mounted on the JMW-9T unipoint tone arm, and the Luminous Audio Arion solid-state, phono preamp, priced at \$6,395.

Luminous Audio Arion

The Arion is a single-purpose preamp and, as such, means ease of operation and intuitive connectivity. It features a front panel mute button, on/off switch and a MM/MC cartridge switch. On the

back are a pair of unbalanced and a pair of balanced (rare) XLR inputs, unbalanced inputs and unbalanced outputs (RCA). The power switch is located on the rear as well. The Arion package also includes a hospital grade power cord.



The Luminous Arion is a discrete, Class A stage phono preamplifier. The preamp stage design incorporates Toshiba JFET and output transistors, Sanyo power transistors and Analog Devices JFET devices, mounted on a 4-layer PC board layout. Polypropylene film capacitors and

1% metal film resistors are utilized throughout the layout. The power supply contains split-bobbin C-core transformers and Fairchild Stealth rectifiers. Separate transformers are used for the +/— raw supplies.

The Arion contains a two-stage design with a cascoded discrete JFET input stage, followed by a differential cascode JFET second stage and a passive/active RIAA EQ stage. The first stage provides an interface with the cartridge, and it provides the gain and drive for the passive EQ network. This stage includes cascoded, parallel JFETs and bipolar cascoded voltage amp stage. Gain switching is accomplished through latching relays. The second stage provides additional gain for the low-frequency RIAA curve. Its circuit layout features cascoded Toshiba JFET differential amplifiers. The final output is Class-A biased.

The unit comes from assembly with a factory 47-kOhm MM setting and 100 Ohm MC setting, which can be designed with optional resistors to precisely match a cartridge. All in all, the Arion is a phono preamp with an emphasis on performance.



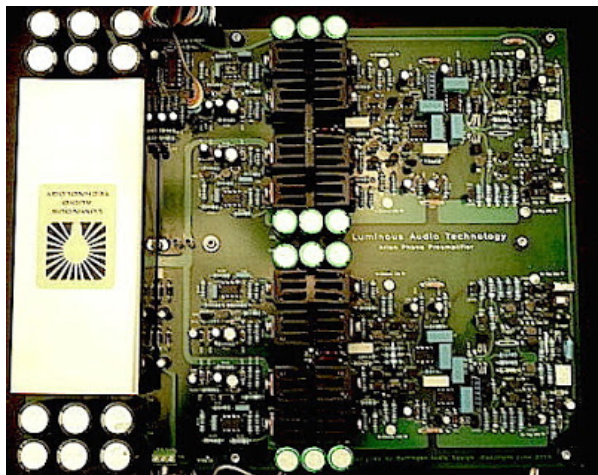
Simple, but effective Arion connection panel

Factory rated specs include: .005% distortion, 85 dB S/N (A-weighted MM), 78 dB S/N (A-weighted MC), 40 dB gain (MM), and 62 dB gain (MC). The unit measures 17.25 inches wide, 13-inches deep and 3.50 inches tall. Weight is 20 pounds.

The Arion design concept began after Stinson met Mike Bettinger at a Richmond Audio society meeting, where Bettinger engaged him in conversations about high-end audio design. Stinson eventually made a visit to Bettinger's home and was "blown away" (his words) by the designer's system.

"The bottom line is that his system instantly fit into one of the top two or three that I had ever heard in my life" Stinson recalled, "and with \$3,500 MartinLogans as the speakers. I had never heard ML's sound quite like this.

"Impressed with Bettinger's background and the products that he modified for his own use, Stinson commissioned him to design the high-end, no limits Arion. "I literally came to Mike and told him to design the Arion, regardless of cost," Stinson explained. "He (Bettinger) was totally taken back. 'Engineers are never given a blank check,' Stinson remembered Bettinger responding. "What a concept!"



Inside the Luminous Audio Arion phono pre

Since Stinson had a high-end phono preamp in mind, he asked Bettinger about adding more “exotic” resistors, caps, etc. as he expected it to potentially approach a \$10,000 price tag. Bettinger quickly addressed this high-end parts list request, Stinson noted, by pointing out that such components are often “designed” to sound soft or more “musical,” etc, but not accurate.

Thus, Bettinger used components, board design and a custom power supply to create a phono preamp that showcased the best LPs, cartridges and tone arms — no added coloration from this preamp.

The VPI Scout 1.1

The updated Scout 1.1 tested here is the successor to the original Scout. Similar in design and appearance to the original, the new version gets the heavy duty, 1-1/8"-thick MDF bonded-to-a-12-gauge steel plate VPI plinth. The new platter is a 1 3/8"-thick 6061 aluminum design (no more acrylic platter) featuring a stainless-steel damping mount, which rests on an oil bath bearing by a Number 2 Jacobs Taper. The bearing mechanism contains a PEEK thrust-disc and machined-graphite, impregnated brass bushings — using a Thompson Engineering 60 Rockwell case hardened shaft.

The 600 RPM AC synchronous belt-drive motor (from the Traveler) is self-contained in a steel housing located on the turntable’s left side. The Scout also includes the Traveler’s record mat, which is claimed to offer superior resonance dampening.



The VPI Scout 1.1 tracks as good as it looks

The Scout 1.1 came with the JMW-9T tone arm with an Ortofon 2M Black MM cartridge, a decent MM cartridge that sounds good on most kinds of music, But in my opinion, the Ortofon lacks the upper-end detail and space attributes of better MC cartridges. The JMW-9T tone arm takes a bit of setup — with its required tracking angle, height adjustment and the friction anti-skate setup that we ignored while using our beloved L04 MC cartridge. It also needs a stylus force gauge for proper balancing.

The Scout 1.1 utilizes a connector block mounted behind the platter that allows the owner to use his

favorite unbalanced cables. It also includes a ground post for wiring the ground to the preamp. There also is a ground post on the chassis. With its heavy metal platter and platform, the Scout 1.1 weighs in at a solid 40 pounds. I am a sucker for a good looking turntable and this VPI looked grand in my rack. Ain't nothing like a turntable sitting in your rig to make an audiophile beam out loud.

The setup

One of the requirements of being a high-end vinyl tester is that, unlike digital players, you gotta do some manual labor to make sure those LPs play properly. Turntable needs include cartridge mounting and setup, installing the motor and belt, installing ground wires and cables. The preamp is pretty much plug and play, unless your MC cartridge needs some resistance tweaking to get that ideal match.



An ideal match: Benz cartridge and JMW-9T arm

For these review associated setup tasks, I turned to Music Technology in Springfield, Va. Audio ace extraordinaire Bill Thalman, who set up the Scout 1.1 for me, made a resistor change in the Arion so we could optimize the re-tipped, fantastically accurate-sounding Benz L0.4, a \$1,200 cartridge from a decade ago that has since been superseded. The MM Ortofon is okay for casual listening, but for such a revealing phono preamp, and the fact I was using MartinLogan Montis electrostatics and a very revealing amp, the Benz was a much better fit.

Bill Thalman installed the cartridge into the JMW-9T arm, setting tracking angle, azimuth, and stylus force. He also pulled the cover from the Arion and changed the MC resistor to net a bit more smoothness in the treble.

I immediately zeroed on Arion's dynamic range, excellent signal-to-noise, and its ability to relay the bass without bloomy midbass bottom end — a character I have noticed in numerous high-end phono preamps.

The Scout's arm has a mechanical anti-skate, but we did not use it, instead adding a bit more tracking force (overall 2.5 grams) to compensate for the skating effect. With the Benz L0.4 and the precision JMW-9T, our play tests revealed no audible artifacts, such as the tell-tell end of LP inner groove distortion. It all sounded clean and ready for some serious record playing.

I should note that I also did additional listening using a Clear Audio Emotion turntable and the classic MM AT-ML150 cartridge, the 1980s version, which is still in pristine condition. But that was not the focus of this review. The AT cartridge had a more pronounced treble than the Benz, but the bottom end was tight, and midrange clear with great channel separation. A good cartridge for dull recordings.

I monitored the VPI and Arion in a couple of different scenarios; first with headphones and then speaker/amp listening. To get a "closeup" listen, I connected a pair of [Wireworld Eclipse](#) RCA cables from the VPI to the Arion; another pair of the WW Eclipse's linked the Arion to a Bryston SHA-1 headphone amp. Headphones included my reference AKG K702 Anniversary, [Oppo PM-1](#) planar magnetic and [Shure SRH1840](#) headphones.

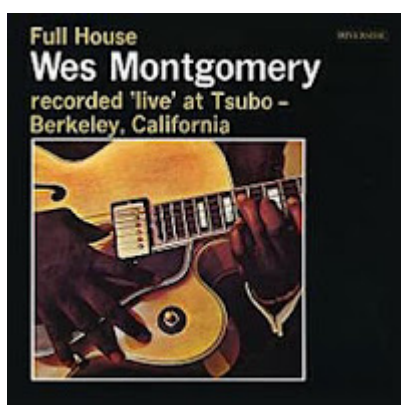
The second listening setup linked the Arion to a [Pass Labs XP-10](#) line preamp, which was wired to a

Rogue Audio Medusa hybrid tube/digital amplifier with the Wireworld Eclipse cables. The amp powered my reference **MartinLogan Montis** electrostatics, again using premium Wireworld speaker interconnects, a perfect scenario to hear how much air the phono/preamp combo dished out.

The audition

With the set up complete, I brought out a bunch of albums, plus bought a few new ones for the review. First up was my **Wes Montgomery - Full House** live concert (circa 1962) half-speed mastered, special-edition LP. This album has that classic Riverside jazz sound — with excellent imaging for its time. The instruments range from the thumb-picked, warm Gibson L5 jazz guitar from the master, as well as saxophone, piano, drums and bass. Love those cymbals. (*To sample an audio snippet from this album, click the player in the sidebar: VPI/Arion Review Demo*)

On my headphone set up, I immediately zeroed on Arion's dynamic range, excellent signal-to-noise, and its ability to relay the bass without bloomy midbass bottom end — a character I have noticed in numerous high-end phono preamps.



Two fantastic LPs to make your vinyl gear sound good

The Benz cartridge's natural midrange and top end and just the right amount of air come through in spades from the *Full House* LP. Man, do I love this album. I actually own and play a two-pickup version of Wes' guitar through a Fender

Twin Reverb, and I know that tone. The record, VPI arm, Benz cartridge and the Luminous Arion all contribute to make it as real as possible. And the original recording is more than 50 years old!

The cut "Come Rain or Shine," a Johnny Mercer composition that is perfect for Wes' band style, has a very modern jazz combo sound with surprisingly good detail on the L5CES guitar, piano and drum cymbals, considering the recording vintage. And because the vinyl is so damn quiet, you'd swear you were listening to digital. In fact, I dubbed two selections to my Mac computer in 24/96 PCM — via a Benchmark ADC1 A/D. I edited out the lead-in and lead-out's surface noise, and played back the recordings for several picky audiophiles. They swore they were listening to hi-res downloads of the album cuts.



More choice LPs for the Arion/VPI rig

Switching to classical, I mounted up a brand new copy of the 2013 remaster of the 1953 RCA Red Seal LP **Jascha Heifetz/Emmanuel Bay** — *Beethoven's No. 8 and 10 Piano/Violin Sonatas*. This mono recording came from the early days of tape, but even lacking stereo, its essential Stradivarius violin tone, with

those luscious harmonics — as well as the Steinway piano, shine through this brilliant remaster. Plus the music is being presented by two masters of their instruments.

The VPI/Benz/Arion trio handled the duos with exquisite class. I don't know what kind of microphone was used for this early '50s recording (probably a Telefunken or AKG), but the violin textures are amazing, much of the complexity was captured on the tape and this remaster just brings it home.

Turning to another jazz LP, I clean brushed my 1973 copy of **Isao Suzuki Trio/Quartet - Blow Up** (*Three Blind Mice - TBM-2515*), which is still in great shape. (Bought it in a hi-fi shop when I was 19).

This recording combines elements of classical and jazz — with piano, cello (Mr. Suzuki expertly plays), bass and drums. It has a stripped down, small club concert kind of presentation with a wonderful analog dynamic.

With the right cartridge, the VPI/Luminous Audio system allows the music's realness to emerge as much as LP records can. Sure, records don't have the ultimate dynamic range and low noise of digital, But even by today's digital standards, this "ancient technology" can still sound damn good!

I love the sonic textures of the cello and the air around the drum cymbals. Again, the Benz L0.4 mounted on the accurate tracking VPI arm brings this recording to life through the Arion. About as good as I ever have heard this record in 35 years of playing it.

I have to mention another jazz album that played spot on through this review set up. My beloved **Stephan Grappelli** — *Uptown Dance (Concord 1978)*, an under-appreciated record that features Mr. Grappelli and band working with an orchestra. Its Nelson Riddle-like strings, combined with Grappelli's signature signature tone and supporting band, portrays a lush, detailed soundscape; the strings and solo violins offer up a pleasant, Easy Listening aura that vinyl sweetens even further. Too bad there is no hi-res of this and many other Grappelli releases. I dubbed it to digital to maintain a copy of the record in its best state.

The VPI/Luminous set up also acquitted itself quite well on pop records. My vintage copy of **Michael Jackson** — *Thriller* received the royal treatment with that throbbing bass line from "Billy Jean," and 1986's **Dwight Yoakum** — *Guitars, Cadillacs, Etc.* emerged with that punchy, mix of electric, acoustic guitars, fiddle and steel guitar. The stand out cut is "It Won't Hurt."

Other records that impressed through the VPI/Luminous audio test duo included Flim and The BBs' first album, which was recorded by Tom Jung on the Sound 80 label and predates his all-digital DMP label by a couple of years.

Other records that impressed through the VPI/Luminous audio test duo included **Flim and The BBs'** first album, which was recorded by Tom Jung on the Sound 80 label and predates his all-digital DMP label by a couple of years. The sessions were recorded in the early days of digital before CD. Thus, the tracks went straight to tape, using an early version of the 3M 16-bit/50.4 kHz digital tape recorder; the master lacquer was cut from the 3M digital tape since the originally planned direct-to-LP disc release fell through because the master lacquer was damaged.

Flim's dynamic, percussive jazz tones, judging by this first album, was already well established, and it foreshadowed the highly regarded *Tricycle* and *Big Notes*; Flim and the BBs DMP CD releases from 1983 and 1986. The LP's direct-to-tape energy and dynamics play well via the VPI/Arion phono system. Those high-velocity drums tracked perfectly, and the Benz gave those keyboards and sax tracks a bit of vinyl smoothness.

The verdict

Since I did this review with four critical components: the turntable/tonearm/Benz cartridge and Luminous Arion phono preamp, you never know, beforehand, how such a phono playback system will synergize. For me, I want an accurate-as-possible dynamic and a low-noise character from a turntable set up. I don't like warm, musical, laid back, etc. In my music playback. I want it to sound like music. I play guitar. I play the piano; I know what they sound like. The electronics have to be faithful as possible to the real sound character.

That is the sense that I get from the VPI Scout 1.1 and the Luminous Arion. With the right cartridge,

this system allows the music's realness to emerge as much as LP records can. Sure, records don't have the ultimate dynamic range and low noise of digital, and they wear out. But I have never abandoned the format — continuously maintaining a turntable (or two) for the last 40 years. Even by today's digital standards, this "ancient technology" can still sound damn good!

The Arion is not cheap at \$6,395, and the VPI takes some patience to set up, but what you get is a USA-made turntable and preamp that reproduce the music about as good as it gets for under \$10,000 (and exceeds many separates that are well above that price).

If you are a vinyl stalwart with a bit of disposable income, the VPI Scout 1.1 and Luminous Audio Arion are two worthy candidates for purchase. If you are moving up, or even as a first turntable system purchase, it might be the last vinyl system you need to buy. An **Everything Audio Network Stellar Sound Award** for each component and a nomination for our *2015 Gear of The Year*.

John Gatski has been evaluating consumer, audiophile, home cinema and professional audio gear since 1992. In 1995, he created Pro Audio Review, and he has written for Audio, Laserviews, Enjoy The Music, The Audiophile Voice and High Performance Review. Everything Audio Network is based in Kensington, Md. Articles on this site are the copyright of the ©Everything Audio Network. Any unauthorized use, via print or Internet, without written permission is prohibited. John Gatski can be reached via everything.audio@verizon.net