



Recently, I had an unforeseen reason (disaster?) that offered me a chance to check out a new phono cartridge for my VPI Industries Scout turntable. Among the cartridges I focused on for review was the Grado Labs Statement v2 [[reviewed here](#)] but it was a much more serious and expensive cartridge than the one I had before (the very nice moving magnet Ortofon 2M Black). As such, it was considered by both Grado Labs and VPI Industries to be more suitable for a higher level turntable, so I used a Prime in my Grado review; I am grateful to VPI President Mat Weisfeld for allowing me access to the Prime for that review. Here, I review

the Prime itself; after all, I have spent quite some time with it by now -- and I am deeply impressed by it. A fine cartridge can't show off unless it is mounted on a fine turntable, right?

The Prime, at \$4000 retail, is the 3rd (from lowest to highest out of 4 total) in VPI's Production Series, sandwiched between the Prime Scout (\$2200), and the Prime Signature (\$6000). (VPI recently replaced the regular Scout by the new 'Prime Scout' which is about the same smaller size as the Scout was.)



My Grado Labs Statement v2 cartridge.

The Prime is larger and heavier than the Scout, has a longer (10" versus 9") tonearm and the tonearm is a 3D printed one (JMW 10 3D Arm & VTA Base). The tonearm is a unipivot design, meaning that the back part rests on a thin spike; this leads to a wide range of movement. And this tonearm allows for extensive manual calibrations including anti-skating, azimuth, and vertical tracking angle. Moreover, the tonearm recently allows an optional small simple 'dual pivot' attachment for those who might not want

so much range of movement. (More about that later in this review.)

The platter itself is an impressive 20 pounds of aluminum incorporating an inverted bearing using a hardened stainless steel shaft and chrome, hardened ball, thus minimizing internal vibrations while spinning smoothly. The vinyl wrapped MDF chassis comes in black or brown. As compared to the Scout, the Prime also has a larger and heavier motor case (which helps reduce vibration of the motor from reaching all else, for one thing), better footing/isolation feet for resonance control, a heavier record clamp, and one simple grounding post with no additional wire (the Scout has an additional grounding wire coming from it's underside that needs to be grounded). In short, this is one solid, heavy-duty well-made and thought out unit. This is not an 'entry level' turntable, it has the ingredients of a high-end audiophile unit -- at a price that is not out of hand. Various upgrades are possible, too, without going the full monty to the next level 'Prime Signature', an example being a version of the tonearm fitted with Nordost Reference wire.

The Prime is manufactured and assembled in the USA by VPI Industries in New Jersey; even the motor and the tonearm cueing lever are now manufactured in the USA.

How does it look?

As stated on the VPI website, 'The shape of the Prime is meant to have a curvier and sexier look compared to the "classic" look of our tables over the past 10 years, while at the same time having the footprint to accommodate the space needed for a 10 inch 3D arm.' (The new Prime Scout, too, has this curvier and sexier look, but in a smaller size/scale.) I chose the black model for review. Yes, I do think the Prime is curvy and sexy, but I would add beautiful and modern looking. Not a visitor comes by (audiophile or not) who does not complement me on that turntable's looks—even if they do not even know what it is.



The VPI Prime in black.

Setting it up

My trusted brother and audiophile Nick had driven me by car to pick up the Prime at VPI Industries (about a 1-hour drive), and also helped me set it up when we got home. It took us about 20 minutes before music came out of my system. Just twist in the footers, place the platter on, snap in the arm, connect RCA cables from table to the phono stage, place the separate motor appropriately on the left side, attach the belt from motor to platter, and ground the

table to the phono stage with one wire. Done.

The only minor issue we had was having to rotate my turntable audio cabinet by 90 degrees because of the larger size of the Prime versus the Scout; the width of the Prime matched with the length of my cabinet top, while the depth of the Prime matched the width of the cabinet top. I must confess, and in case you are wondering: the cartridge had already been expertly mounted for me by VPI; so that highly non-trivial part of the set up I was relieved of from duty!

I should add as a note that because of the ease with which the tonearm attaches (just snap in the cord and place on the pivot) one can, if they so wish, keep on hand or borrow more than one 3D printed tonearm, each equipped with its own (previously and properly mounted) cartridge, and swap out within seconds whenever wanted. Very convenient. I am hoping to try this out soon (borrowing).

As with the Scout, the 'table powers on by pushing a button on the motor and both 33RPM and 45RPM are options by manually positioning the belt on the high or low post of the motor itself.

The first LP I put on (Steely Dan, *Aja*) played without any glitch and the Prime required no tweaking for the grounding that I had initially set up; that was unusual in my experience with turntables. In short, I would say that the Prime is a non-finicky turntable concerning its use; simple, easy and straightforward from the start.

Protecting it

Having in my apartment such an expensive and delicate piece of equipment I knew I had to seriously protect it from mischief due to children, animals, etc. during my review. (The Prime plus Grado cartridge retails for \$7,500.) AudioShield makes a very protective cover for the Prime, so that is what I used throughout my review. It is a rectangular clear acrylic cover and protects the valuables very well.

Isolation

The four isolation feet on the bottom of the Prime,



sitting in Delrin corner posts, were inspired by Stillpoints according to Weisfeld, and I must say that these offer remarkable stability and resonance/mechanical noise control. The heavy-duty 20 pound platter also contributes to this firm stability. I kept the Prime sitting on a solid walnut block (cabinet made by Audio Vault USA) where my Scout had recently sat. One of the first things I noticed when using the Prime was that aside from 'Pogo' dancing from the late 1970s of which I am guilty of both witnessing and attempting in those days while living in London, dancing in front of the unit had no effect on the LP playing—the arm did not join in the

dancing. With the Scout, dancing and other banging around on the floor had to be far more subdued. (My kids are quite happy about this Prime; they no longer experience my wrath; instead I encourage them to dance.)

Sound

I really lucked out. When people found out that I had a nice LP set up at home, some brought me LPs as gifts, and some, from an older generation, donated their entire collection to me—and wished me the best of luck. I had ample of both during my review of the Grado Labs Statement v2 cartridge; so man did I have fun listening over the last 2 months. For example, my brother Nick (for my birthday) gave me wonderful LPs such as a 1966 *The Very Best of Roy Orbison*, on Monument, with its classic cut (1964) *Oh Pretty Woman*. Meanwhile, my neighbors upstairs gave me boxes of old LPs, of almost exclusively classical music, some of which turned out to be in almost new condition. (Thanks so much to my Editor who helped guide me as to how to quickly filter through hundreds of classical music LPs thrown in my lap at short notice! I am still sifting through them). It never ceases to amaze me that an LP sitting alone for decades in a closet can survive with no damage to its sound; only the cover seems to suffer.

From the above mentioned trove of donated classical, these two I took a strong liking to right away:

- Decca, Gold Label Series LP, *Maestro Segovia*, with Andreas Segovia solo on guitar playing a variety of pieces by composers from as early as the 16th Century (Luis Milan, Domenico Scarlatti) up to the 20th Century (Federico Moreno Torroba) with several others in between such as Haydn, Robert de Vis'ee, and Mendelssohn. (1965)

- RCA Victor Red Seal LP, *Mozart: Four Horn Concertos*, with Alan Civil on French Horn, conducted by Rudolf Kempe, Royal Philharmonic. (1967)

The Prime handled these brilliantly; the first with its natural live-sounding acoustic guitar, and the second with Civil's truly magnificent horn playing and lovely timbre of the horn. The dynamic expression of these two great musicians (Segovia, Civil) was highly apparent through the Prime.

Interestingly, I also found two old LPs of Haydn's *Symphony No. 101 in D Major, 'The Clock'*, both of which were in mono, and one was quite a fascinating find: a Mercury Records recording from 1957 conducted by Antal Dorati with the London Symphony Orchestra. On the back cover it described the recording method as follows,

A single omni-directional microphone suspended

at the aural focal point of the hall, approximately 15 feet above the conductor's podium was employed throughout the session.....Control of balance and dynamics remained solely in the hands of the conductor, the end result being a faithful reproduction of the sound of the London Symphony Orchestra and of the acoustics of the Watford Town Hall.

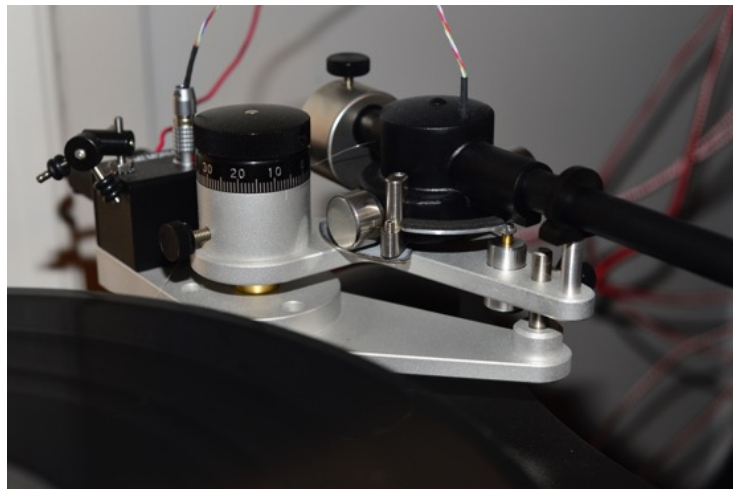
That album playing on the Prime gave me a new respect for mono recording.

Aside from classical music, I also checked out Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*, Joan Baez' *One Day at a Time*, Frank Sinatra, *Strangers in the Night*, and Ginger Baker, *Horses and Trees*.

Overall, bass extension, too, was displayed very nicely by the Prime, as witnessed by listening to organ, timpani, bass, and bass drums.

Option Dual Pivot

As mentioned earlier, the JMW 10 3D Arm & VTA Base is a unipivot design, meaning that the back part rests on a thin spike. It is extremely sensitive to even a minor touch. Some find this too fragile—one wrong move while drinking wine might do you in—and they do not like the slight wobbling of the arm from side to side when you change tracks or first start an album. But this design allows for an extraordinary freedom of movement of the arm, not only in (say) 2 directions; this allows the arm to do its job once settled in the groove.



Arm with dual pivot device attached.

VPI offers a (new) optional 'dual pivot' device that can be attached to the 3D tonearm. I was given one of the first of these in case I wanted to use it. Not actually a second pivot, instead it is a tiny clamp that attaches onto the back housing of the arm; it prevents the wobbling motion. It rests on a small, thin metal plate that you place right below the clamp. Some might impulsively want this attached because they do not feel comfortable with the wobbling; but that might not be the optimal thing to do—soundwise.

Different cartridges can yield different results, and most will probably not benefit from using this. In my case: I did not have any issues with the freedom of motion/wobbling of the unipivot, it did not bother me; actually I found it quite fascinating, but I was advised by both VPI and Grado Labs, that the specific cartridge I was using, the Grado Statement v2, would benefit soundwise by using it. For example, John Chen, Director of Sales for Grado Labs mentioned that it would 'further define the stereo imaging.'

For this Prime review, I decided to finally take advantage of this option and attach the dual pivot; by now the cartridge was well burned in and I had already settled into a fine mode of listening and enjoying. By studying some photographs of an attached dual pivot that VPI provided for me, and being careful, I was easily able to attach it. After placing the thin plate down, one only needs a jewelry-sized Allen wrench to turn a tiny screw in the clamp to control the azimuth of the arm.

The benefit this awarded to the sound was immediate: A tightening up of the sound of instruments (and voice) and a tighter arrangement of the placement of instruments within the imaging. It was like someone had carefully listened to and studied the position of instruments in the soundstage, slightly modified their

positioning to optimize—and then nailed each down on its perch to stay put! I decided I would keep the dual pivot in place for the remainder of this review. What a clever little device. But again, this does not mean it will help any cart in the same manner; check it out for yourself and decide—it's easy to remove. I still plan to experiment with it, by repositioning it (there is no fixed spot where you must place it).

As a final side note: Because of Grado Labs and VPI having experienced this interesting match among other things, in a conversation by phone with Weisfeld two days ago, he told me that Grado Labs is in the midst of manufacturing a cartridge exclusively for VPI turntables; there will be some surprises at AXPONA in Chicago 2017 later this month.

Summary

The VPI Prime is a solidly built, audiophile quality turntable utilizing modern technology including a remarkable 10" 3D printed tonearm that can accommodate a wide range of cartridges, offers manual adjustments, and superb isolation/resonance/mechanical noise control. It is also curvy and sexy (Oh Pretty Woman!) non-finicky and can be upgraded as well; what more can one ask for at \$4000?



VPI Industries Prime Turntable

Manufactured by VPI Industries
77 Cliffwood Avenue, #5D
Cliffwood, NJ 07721

website: <http://www.vpiindustries.com>

Price: \$4,000

Source: Manufacturer loan

Associated Reference Equipment

Speakers: Alta Audio Celesta

Amplifiers: 2 Merrill Audio Veritas Monoblocks Special Edition (SE).

Preamplifier: PS Audio BHK Signature

Phono stages: PS Audio NuWave PhonoConverter, Schiit Audio Mani, Ear 834P

Interconnects : Anticables Level 6.2 ABSOLUTE Signature RCA,

Anticables Level 4.1 Reference PLUS Xhadow (with cryo option) XLR and,

Waveform Fidelity GS Mk3 RCA, Antipodes Reference XLR.

Speaker cables, jumpers, power cords: Waveform Fidelity.

Power generator: PS Audio P3 Power Plant.

Turntable cabinet with solid walnut top: Audio Vault USA