

VPI Avenger Turntable w/JMW-12-3D arm

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For the last decade I have been living happily with my upgraded AVID Volvere/SME IV turntable/arm combination, but ten years is a very long time and I got that itch. You know, that 'itch'. The one that grabs hold and says I need to make a change, something new to satisfy that need for something better.

During this ten year period the fate of the LP has dramatically shifted. The LP has come back from the dead and a resurgence of sales has occurred. Demand for records has skyrocketed. New generations have 'discovered what we oldsters have known about for a long time, the sound of the LP is still superior to that of digital and when played on a good system, absolutely breathtaking.

This rebirth of the LP not only impacts the turntable, tonearm and cartridge industries, but improves the health of all segments of the highend audio industry. This benefits all of us.

Under the leadership of Harry Weisfeld, VPI Industries has been successfully designing and producing turntables for over 35 years. While Weisfeld is still involved in design and development, his son Mat has taken over the running of the company. Mat has learned much from his father especially the importance of build quality and sound quality.

Mat has exhibited a gift for organization and marketing that is critical for success. I called Mat to arrange a visit to the factory. He was glad we were coming and was all excited to show us his latest tables and especially their Reference Line of which the

Avenger is the line's base model. The Avenger is customizable and upgradable with the ability to handle up to three tonearms!

In over 20 years of reviewing, I've never reviewed a turntable. Turntables occupy a special niche in the world of hi-fi. Unlike most other hi-fi equipment they are electro-mechanical machines. Like a ballerina, they have to perform the most delicate movements with complete confidence and at the same time they need to respond like a fullback exploding through the line for a touchdown. Most turntables are designed using one of two methods to control vibration: one is the use of spring-like suspension systems separating base and platter and the other is employing the use of mass and rigidity. VPI's choice? The heavier, the better.

Both are methods used by manufacturers in order to minimize the impact of vibration, airborne as well as other types from ruining the sound. Another factor is the quality of the motor. While providing and maintaining the accuracy of speed control it must also be isolated, preventing the transfer of its own vibrations to the table.

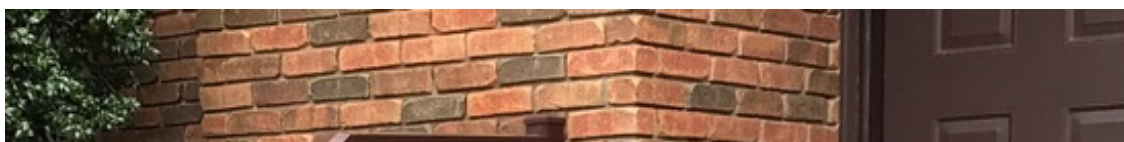
Turntable design, along with the arm and cartridge is as much art as science. It lends itself to constant tinkering and experimentation in order to maximize the musical performance. Tweaking goes on indefinitely at VPI. They are experimenting with differing arm lengths, and materials, 14inch, 16inch! The Weisfelds seem to know what they're doing.

I'll be reviewing the basic Avenger system which includes the turntable and the JMW-12 inch 3D (uni-pivot) arm with standard arm to cartridge pure copper wiring. My reference cartridge, the Shelter 9000 was used.

First, let me say how impressive-looking the Avenger is. Purely on aesthetic grounds, it's a knock out. It has the look of solidity and serious performance just the same way a Ferrari has, even when it's sitting still, it looks like it's accelerating.

My experience with turntables has only been with spring suspension models and I wondered what I would discover with the Avenger which uses the mass approach to turntable design. Both approaches have produced successful turntables but each has their unique problems to overcome.

Before I took possession of the Avenger, Harry Weisfeld mounted the cartridge for me. I sat and watched the master, with his 40+ years of expertise do the deed! As he worked, I was referring to the instruction manual, making sure I could follow everything he was doing. I could. We repacked the turntable for its journey to Riverside Drive in Manhattan where we set it up. According to Weisfeld, the tonearm wiring almost never truly burns in due to the very low signal strength it carries. He felt it could take as long as 20 years! I don't have that long and 100 hours will have to suffice for now. Now for some listening.





I chose four of my favorites LPs for critical listening:

London LDR 71047, Copland Dance Symphony, "Fanfare for the Common Man"

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra w/Antal Dorati Conducting.(1981)

WaxTime 771743, "Frank Sinatra Sings for Only the Lonely," original Capitol W 1053-(1958)

Columbia PC8271,Miles Davis, "Sketches of Spain." (1959) original LP

EPIC 34188,"Boston,"CBS Master Sound, Half Speed Mastered (1976 with full dynamics)

I started with Copland's,"Fanfare for the Common Man" and compared it to my AVID/SME systemI immediately noticed an increase in detail, more air and separation of instruments. When the opening bass drum hit I knew this arm/table combo was

instruments. When the opening bass drum hit I knew this arm/table combo was properly named Avenger. Wow! It was so powerful and yet defined that I couldn't keep the smile off my face. Then came the famous opening trumpet phrase..There, in all its glory, was the common man rising with hope for a future, a hope that his family could and would do was worth his back breaking toil, all of this, and how it defines America, was brilliantly captured by Copland. The purity of that opening trumpet was captured effortlessly with full dynamics and solidity. I was truly in awe at what I was hearing.

I briefly wrote earlier about the different approaches to dealing with vibrations and how each approach has issues that need to be dealt with. On the next cut I played from PROPRIUS 7762, "Cantate Domino," side B cut no.2, I encountered an issue with the VPI approach: suddenly there was an increasingly loud low frequency distortion: I quickly grabbed the remote and turned down the volume to avoid any possible damage to my speakers. Feedback had struck.

Two other reviewer friends happened to be there to witness this event; Karl Sigman from Audiophilia, and friend and neighbor, Stereophile's Jim Austin. I had been playing the system at loud volume levels for about two hours without any feedback at all. It seems that the "Contate Domino" was recorded at a lower volume than typical LPs but with substantial lower bass output. I had to use appreciably more gain to achieve the appropriate volume for this recording, and that's when the feedback kicked in.

Prior to this listening session, I discovered this feedback issue and thought I had solved the problem by placing rubberized/absorptive footers under the Avenger's legs, or so I thought. Jim Austin who is a lot more knowledgeable about this topic than I was, explained the possible reasons for the feedback and potential solutions. Somehow at high volumes with this bass-heavy track, the vibrations emanating from the speakers were making their way back to the stylus, creating positive feedback a la Hendrix. The question was, how was the speaker's output getting back to the stylus? Was it directly, through the air, or was it possible that the location of the turntable being positioned close to the corner, where bass room modes are strongest contributed to the problem? Or, were the speakers causing the floor to vibrate traveling up the rack and into the turntable?

When I contacted Mat Weisfeld and explained to him what we heard he was very surprised and suggested that the problem might be due to the location of the table causing a room interaction with airborne vibration on the cartridge. He said that he would send a set of VPI footers that should take care of this problem.

In my room there is very little space for moving the location of the turntable. As it turned out a few inches made quite a difference. After making adjustments in the location of the turntable, by shifting the rack six inches further from my listening position, and placing additional vibration absorbing devices under the rack, at floor level, the problem was solved. Whatever volume I now required was achievable without the dreaded feedback rearing its ugly head. I don't know if it was the location shift or the additional absorptive floor footers under the equipment rack, the problem stopped. Often one reads about the importance of the listening room and how equipment

Often one reads about the importance of the listening room and how equipment sounds in different in different environments. This experience definitely confirmed that. Back to listening, thank you.



Switching to "Sketches of Spain" was enlightening. The soundstage was huge, replete with subtle detail and a captivating airiness. The improvement in clarity made the arrangements of Gil Evans more appreciated than ever. The subtlety of the instrumentation came through with more body and had a greater physical presence than my previous reference. Adapting such a recognizable piece of music, Rodrigo's Concierto de Aranjuez from its classical origins to a jazz idiom, was bold and experimental. The brilliance of Gil Evans and Miles Davis in sensitively handling this piece is one of the watermarks of jazz music and one of the most recognizable

piece is one of the watermarks of jazz music and one of the most recognizable recordings in all of jazz discography.

Now to "Boston," one of the greatest rock albums of all time: The album is filled with recognizable hits but the last two cuts on side one, FOREPLAY/LONGTIME do it for me and the two cuts together create an explosive listening experience that leaves you in awe. Imaging was three dimensional and rock solid. The bass and drums had more weight and slam with greater definition than previously heard before. It was crazy to think that the old vinyl could sound this good. The Avenger breathed new life into this recording and anything else I played on the system. It also allowed my Shelter 9000 to really show what an outrageously good cartridge it is. Hi-res digital, while very good, does not have what vinyl can produce [*...and Marty's digital front end is outrageously good! - Ed*].

Last but not least comes Mr. Blue Eyes, Frank Sinatra, pouring out his soul to you. "What's New?" side 1 cut 3 captures Frank, wearing a brave smile, trying not to let the hurt of a broken heart show. The solo trombone playing at the rear of the stage creates a pall of sadness over the entire song and the Avenger communicates this sadness superbly. With the genius of Nelson Riddle and his orchestra doing the accompaniment, Frank never sounded so good, so complete. The Avenger invites you into the performance with a greater sense of intimacy that brings the recording to life. Bravo.

10K US is expensive. But the performance characteristics you will attain will place you solidly in the top tier of the highend. If this is not enough for you, the Avenger offers various levels of upgrades that could total an additional 10K US. This could be done in stages or all at once. I'm hopeful that in the future I will have the opportunity to try these upgrades and report back to you. After all, the base model sounds so damn good it is not leaving this house. Thus the Avenger has now taken its place in the Audiophilia cosmos [*the editor/publisher is a Rega man, but after touring VPI during #audiophiliacamp2017, and listening to Marty's and Karl's VPIs at length, I'm tempted, their products are so good --Ed*].

As soon as I receive the footers, should be in about ten days or so, I will report on their impact on the performance of the system.

Specifications

The Table:

- The Avenger chassis is three layers of bonded acrylic/aluminum/acrylic with damping material between layers.
- 3 stainless steel corner posts for both isolation and tonearm mounting and for mechanical grounding (up to 3 will fit).
- The 300 RPM, 24 pole, AC synchronous motor is capable of high torque and quiet operation. The motor is installed in a separate aluminum and steel machined assembly

- The inverted bearing features a hardened stainless steel shaft, 60 Rockwell chrome hardened ball, spinning in a phosphor bronze bushing and sits on a PEEK thrust disc. The belt side load is placed at the center of the spinning bearing for zero teeter-totter effects
- The 20 pound 6061 aluminum platter has an accuracy of +/- .001" in a 39" circumference
- The motor pulley has an accuracy of +/- .0005" when leaving factory
- JMW 12-3D with VPI pure copper wire
- Wow and flutter: <.1%
- Speed Accuracy: <.03%
- Rumble: >75db down
- Overall Dimensions 27" x 23" x 10"
- Footprint is 23" x 20"
- 87 lbs packing weight

Reference System

Amplifiers: Merrill Veritas Monoblocks

Preamplifier: Music First Classic v2

Speakers: Alta Audio Celesta FRM-2

Analogue: Avid SEQUEL SP/SME IV arm; Cartridge: Shelter 9000

Phono Preamplifier: AVID Pulsare updated to II

Digital: MSB DATA CD IV Transport

Preamplifier/Processor: The DEQX HDP-4 w/USB option board used as DAC and Subsonic filter; QoSignal Completion Stage

Speaker Cables: ANTICABLES Level 5 SIGNATURE, Acoustic Zen's Absolute, Waveform Fidelity GS Mk III

Power Cords: Waveform Fidelity GS Mk II

Interconnects: ANTICABLES The Level 4.1 xlr REFERENCE PLUS XHADOW, Antipodes Audio REFERENCE, Acoustic Zen's Absolute Copper, Morrow Audio MA-7

Accessories: Redpoint BLAKHOLE's, Herbie's Audio Lab Tenderfeet, Soundcare products, Acme Audio Labs wall outlets

Power Conditioning: Waveform Fidelity

Further information: [VPI Industries](#)