

# VPI Industries Prime Signature turntable

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When it was launched back at the end of 2016, the VPI Prime changed the game, proving to be one of the best turntables we'd heard at anything close to the price. So impressive, in fact, that I bought the review sample within seconds of first hearing it. The Prime Signature – first seen in 2016 – is what happens when you take that Prime design and extend it to its present logical limits.

In fact, the success of the Prime allowed VPI to radically shake up its entire line, looking closely at some of its past glories with a more measured eye, and making some tough decisions in the process. As a result, the Prime Signature is top of VPI's fourstrong 'Production Turntables' range (with the aforementioned Prime, the re-introduced Scout, and the all-in-one Player filling in the rest of the line). There is also a 'Reference Turntables' line, based around the three-footed Avenger design, and sometime soon there look set to be a 'Bespoke Collection' line featuring made-to-order versions of models like the VPI Classic. Regardless, the Prime design is core to the Production Turntables line.

So core, in fact, it's hard to describe the Prime Signature without reflecting it in the Prime itself. To recap, the original Prime features a vinyl wrapped MDF chassis, bonded with an 11 gauge steel plate, and featuring four Delrin corner posts for isolation and mechanical

grounding. The deck features a 500 RPM (300 RPM in the US), 24 pole, AC synchronous motor, housed in a separate aluminium and steel machined assembly. It sports an inverted bearing with a hardened stainless steel shaft and a 60 Rockwell chrome hardened ball, spinning in a phosphor bronze bushing, all of which sits on a PEEK thrust disc, and the belt side load is placed at the centre of the spinning bearing for zero 'seesaw' or 'teeter-totter' effects. The Prime also features a 9kg aluminium platter, and the arm is a 10" variant on the company's ever-popular JMW unipivot tonearm complete with the useful VTA base that allows vertical tracking angle to be adjusted on the fly. Renaissance offers both a phono and XLR breakout box for the arm at purchase (the XLR box is a £175 option otherwise). The Prime was the first turntable to offer a completely 3D printed arm-wand (wired with Discovery wire), pivot housing, and counterweight outrigger. Finally, the original Prime sits on four custom-made isolation spiked feet and includes a clamp.



The Prime Signature improves on the original in several obvious ways. Perhaps most immediately obvious is an aluminium plate, in place of the steel plate in the Prime. This makes the chassis thicker and heavier than the Prime, and the aluminium plate is visible as the silvery 'meat' in the black, vinyl-wrapped chassis sandwich (the steel plate on the Prime is hidden from view). This performs the same resonance and feedback control as the steel chassis plate on the Prime, but also improves chassis damping.

The Signature sits on its own four feet, which are a step up on the standard issue feet on the Prime. In fact, eagle eyed VPI followers might spot that these are the same feet found on the Classic Signature; solid, conical, adjustable feet with metal rings at their base. Their tower covers atop the chassis are also chrome plated to match (these are flat black in the Prime). These feet are required because of the additional weight of the Prime Signature chassis.



The additional thickness of the Prime Signature platter and the taller Signature feet mean the motor housing needs to be taller and its aluminium and steel housing is therefore heavier and also better at controlling vibration, resonance, and feedback relative to what is basically the same AC motor in the Prime. Finally, while the platter remains the same as the Prime, the Signature features the heavier stainless steel record weight (which is an option for the Prime... more on this later). The result of all this additional size and mass means the Prime now ships in two boxes instead of one (the second for the platter).

Perhaps slightly less immediately obvious are the changes to the tonearm between the Prime and Prime Signature. This new model uses the 3DR version, in place of the 3D model on the Prime. Aside from the new 'metallic black' gloss finish (which looks great in

the flesh), the 3DS is internally wired with Nordost Reference wire, through to the terminal block. Finally, alongside the motor housing, the Delrin posts and armboard have all received a higher grade of stainless steel. Having done my time in a precision small turned parts factory, I'm guessing by looking at the two armbases side-by-side this has meant a move from Type 304 to Type 316 or even Type 440. What that means to non-steelheads is a move from standard stainless steel (which is slightly dull, but has good tensile strength but less good hardness) to the kind of steel used in watch cases, surgical implements, or cutlery, which combines a brighter look with very good tensile strength and very good to excellent hardness. OK, so I just hugged my inner nerd, here, but it was important in padding out the story!

There are almost two reviews here; the Prime Signature in its own right, and the Prime Signature viewed through the medium of the original Prime. Both are equally valid ways of thinking about the Prime Signature.

Starting with those approaching the Prime Signature from new, what you are met with is an extraordinarily confident presentation. The Prime Signature always has its feet on the ground, and presents a sound that is solid and stentorian in its depth and range, but also possessed of a sense of musical structure and remarkable midrange openness and, although it sounds almost paradoxical following the use of words like 'solid', filigree beauty at the top. It's hard to think of this in musical terms, and wind up thinking of its performance more like Gaudi's still unfinished La Sagrada Família cathedral in Barcelona. If you've seen (or seen pictures of) this stunning architectural work, you'll know it rises up from a solid base to produces endlessly fascinating and diminishing towers diminishing to points. Structures dance around other structures; it's bewildering, complex, and one of the most organic looking structures man has ever made. And the VPI Prime Signature has something of the same properties to the way it makes music. Sounds rise organically out of a solid, near noiseless foundation. It's closer to listening to just the record than most turntable replay systems at anywhere near the price. In fact, the one that gets closest to the Prime Signature here, is the Prime itself.



Audio reviewers use LPs a bit like test discs. We play the same recordings over and over again, because they contain useful passages that show us what a product is doing. For example, I use an old Decca SXL of the D'Oyly Carte and the LSO playing *The Pirates of Penzance* because few recordings I've heard since give a better sense of stereo image placement and stage width, depth, and height. The problem with all that is we end up

listening to those pieces so comprehensively that they become almost musically bankrupt. The Prime Signature is like the musical reset button, which makes these recordings come back to life, for the reasons you used them in the first place.

Yes, the Prime Signature does all the hi-fi things, and does them exceptionally well, in fact. There is a sublime sense of midrange honesty that comes through on small-scale, predominantly acoustic recordings like Beck's *Sea Change* [MoFi], but there's also a wealth of dynamic range that comes across when listening to 'It's All Right With Me' from the Marty Paich Big Band album *The New York Scene* [Discovery], and there's endless detail on offer from any of the excellent Chasing The Dragon direct-to-disc cuts. The soundstage too is excellent, with great depth and even height on offer in the aforementioned Decca disc.

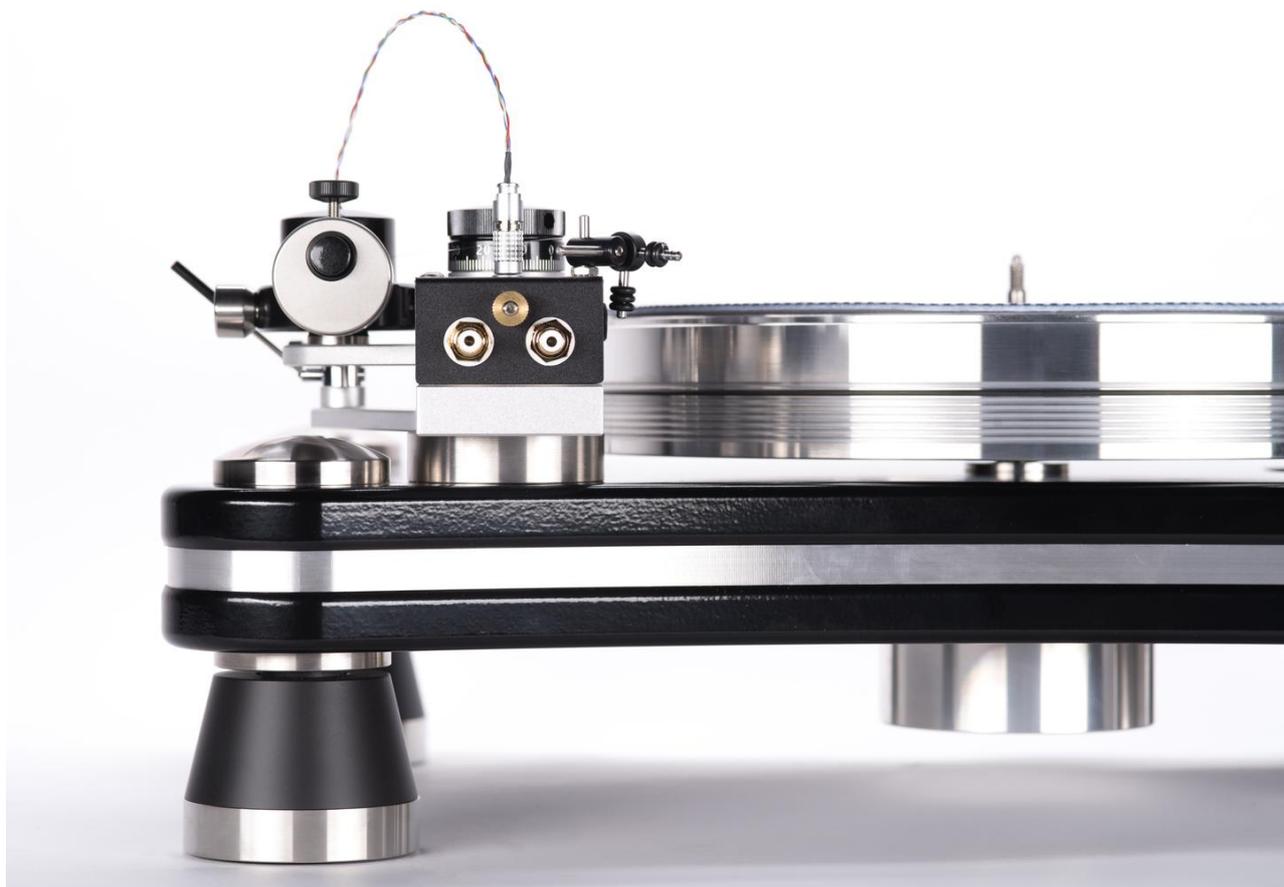
More than all this, however, is that the Prime Signature retains that elusive property that VPI got so right on the Prime, and the Classic before that: It makes music enjoyable. I know that sounds a bit odd – no one buys audio equipment that makes music sound bad – but there are a lot of systems that make a big, elegant, and sophisticated sound that no-one in the world could actually sit down and enjoy, where as the Prime Signature makes a big, elegant, and sophisticated sound that makes you want to pull out those old Led Zeppelin albums and play them at a decent lick. Yes, if your record collection comprises two copies of *Cantate Domino* and one of *Jazz at The Pawnshop*, the Prime Signature's sonic credentials will please you every bit as much as other great decks, but if you view such audiophile confectionary as meaningless fluff, this will make those Fall records sound fun when you need a bit of sonic abuse. This comes because the Prime Signature is both fundamentally pitch stable, and because it has a truly outstanding sense of rhythm and timing.

Like the standard 3D arm, the 3DR works well with almost any cartridge, but is particularly good with Benz, Dynavector, Lyra, Ortofon, and Soundsmith designs. That covers most of the bases today, but a surprising number of VPI decks end up sporting cartridges, and do so for a reason... they sound great together. The best part of this, however, is the 3DR retains the 3D's ability to wring the best out of lower-end cartridges but not hold back more up-market designs. And also as with the 3D arm, it has an almost seamless frequency response, with the unipivot's natural tendency for mild roll-off at the extremes ably countered by the turntable design, the Prime Signature and its attendant 3DR arm strike such a perfect balance it makes you wonder why you need to move beyond this level.

Moving to the second part of the test, the best way of viewing the Prime Signature as a Prime owner is thinking of this like the dating game. Imagine you are dating a witty, intelligent, and beautiful girl who could easily be a model. You are invited home to meet the family, only to discover that her sister is brighter, wittier, and models clothes for Victoria's Secret. There is absolutely nothing wrong with the Prime – it remains one of the

best turntables you can buy at anything close to the price – but once you try out the Signature, you are in sexier sister territory. You aren't settling for second best with the Prime, but the Prime Signature just gives you that little bit more, all round.

Finally, there is chance for a little spot of parts raiding between Prime and Prime Signature. Interestingly, the only available option – the better record clamp – is the only one that works. I'm not entirely convinced that it's a move for the better, as it can sound slightly dynamically slugged, and I suspect this is a stepping-stone for the full spindle/periphery clamp duo. However, trying the standard clamp on the Prime Signature is a lot worse, as it seems to give the sound a bit of a unnecessary 'bounce' in the upper midrange. I expect if you go full clamp, the Prime gets closer to the Signature, but the Signature still has the edge.



The VPI Prime Signature has big shoes to fill because the Prime itself is so damn good. It fills those shoes easily, however, because it is so damn better. Not a transformation, but it does all the things the Prime does, and does them better. It's more dynamic, more expressive, more rhythmically integrated and driven, and a lot more detailed. It's sufficiently better enough for this Prime owner to think about signing up, even though the Prime does all the right things already. Looks like VPI has another winner on its hands, and the Prime Signature comes very highly recommended indeed!

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Belt-driven, non-suspended turntable, with 3D printed unipivot tonearm

Turntable

Chassis: Black textured vinyl over MDF, with a sandwiched aluminium plate

Isolation: Four adjustable stainless steel corner assemblies

Motor: 500rpm, 24-pole AC motor in a separate aluminium and steel housing

Bearing: Inverted design, hardened stainless steel shaft, 60 Rockwell chrome hardened ball, phosphor bronze bushing, PEEK thrust disc

Platter: machined 6061 grade aluminium, 9kg

Wow & Flutter: > 0.03%

Speed accuracy: > 0.04%

Rumble: > -82dB

### **Tonearm**

Pivot to spindle distance: 258mm

Effective length: 273.4mm

Overhang: 15.4mm

Offset angle: 19.98°

Average RMS distortion: 0.311%

Internal wiring: Discovery wire, optional Nordost Valhalla

Dimensions (W×D×H): 53.5×40×12cm

Weight: 36.75kg

Price: £6,000

Manufactured by: VPI Industries Inc

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