

# VPI Prime Scout turntable

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We got our wish. Phonograph ownership is once again depicted as commonplace, even *hip*, in popular films, TV shows, and ads for other products. Turntables and LP jackets show up in photos in *Elle Decor* and *Vanity Fair*. New LPs are sold in stores in nice neighborhoods, and in malls with Cinnabon franchises and J.Crew stores. A shockingly high percentage of new record releases in which normal people are interested, and a few in which they are not, are now available on vinyl. For the first time in decades, I receive occasional gifts of new LPs—presumably because they're once again easy for nonenthusiasts to find and to buy—and the very few CDs I've received in the past few years have been homemade.

We got our wish, but now there's a new challenge: When our hip, nice, *Vanity Fair*-reading, J.Crew-wearing, normal friends remember that we've been blowing this horn for dickity-seven years, and they come to us to ask, *Which record player should I buy?* . . . what are we to tell them?

As long ago as the 1990s, I gave friends the same advice they probably heard from other people in my line of work: Buy a Rega Research Planar 3. If they were financially comfortable, I suggested a Rega Planar 9 or a Roksan Xerxes. If they were comfortable and had a tweaky streak, I suggested a Linn LP12. But in 2005, when I was assigned to review for *Stereophile* the VPI Scout—a turntable-plus-tonearm package that then sold for \$1500—it impressed me as a solidly good alternative to my usual recommendations. The Scout sounded *bigger* and a little less light than my other choices, and was musically competitive, with good momentum and flow and a decent sense of impact. Perhaps best of all, it was easy to set up and use, evidently reliable, and nontweaky.

A dozen years after the Scout's introduction, New Jersey-based VPI has replaced it with the Prime Scout (\$2199 with tonearm). This nudges the original model more in the direction of the VPI Prime, which designer and company president Mat Weisfeld describes as their "curvy, easy to use sonic powerhouse." And so the question becomes: Can the heavier, more expensive Prime Scout inspire as much love as the original Scout?

## Description

At first glance, and despite their functional similarities—both models are belt-driven turntables with solid plinths, outboard motors, and unipivot tonearms—three things distinguish the Prime Scout from the Scout: an apparently larger, curvier plinth; a platter machined from aluminum rather than acrylic; and a better-executed, better-finished tonearm.

The Prime Scout's plinth measures 19" wide by 14" deep—the same as the Scout's, though the original was closer in shape to a plain rectangle. The Prime Scout's plinth is more fancifully shaped, with a more generous cutaway for its outboard motor pod. As in the original, the plinth is cut from MDF—1.5" thick for the Prime Scout vs 1.375" for the Scout—and its bottom is reinforced with a steel plate about 0.125" thick. The plinth rests on four tapered and compliantly mounted Delrin feet about 2" in diameter at their thickest and standing 2.25" high.

The platter bearing is built on a brass-lined well with a polymer thrust plate and a bore that's approximately 0.65" in diameter. This contains a steel bearing axle that's fitted with a ball bearing on its bottommost surface, and is machined with a Jacobs taper near the uppermost part of its 3.75" overall length. The very top of the axle is 0.25" in diameter, and is threaded to accept a screw-on Delrin record clamp (supplied). The tapered portion of the shaft mates with the bore of the 1.25"-thick aluminum platter.

The Prime Scout's 300rpm, AC synchronous motor is housed in an aluminum pod 4" in diameter. Built into the side of this housing are a pushbutton on/off switch and an IEC socket for the supplied power cord, and it's topped with a Delrin pulley with separate steps for  $33\frac{1}{3}$  and 45rpm playback.

The Prime Scout's tonearm is the latest version of VPI's JMW 9, a unipivot design with an effective length of about 9.5". Supporting the tonearm, and preassembled to the Prime Scout's plinth, is a mounting collet of the usual sort, rigidly fastened to the plinth. Central to the collet is a height-adjustable support pillar topped with a sharp, slender (0.045"), upward-pointing spike that serves as the male portion of the arm's unipivot bearing—the JMW is a reverse-missionary (or, if you prefer, cowgirl) unipivot—along with an aluminum-alloy gantry that supports the arm rest and cueing mechanism.

At the pivot end of the JMW 9's 0.375"-diameter aluminum armtube is a cylindrical bearing housing, made of aluminum alloy, about 1.5" in diameter. This is contained within an aluminum ring, to which two outrigger weights (think: tightrope artist) and a counterweight-support tube are integral. Inside the top of the bearing housing is the small (perhaps 0.2" diameter), conical, steel bearing cup that accepts the aforementioned spike. The steel counterweight is cam-shaped: it rides on its support tube with most of its mass at the bottom, but it can be rotated and locked in place to shift the armtube assembly's weight one way or the other, thus adjusting cartridge azimuth. (Azimuth can also be adjusted by loosening two locking screws and rotating the aluminum ring and outrigger weights that girdle the bearing housing.) The downforce is set by moving the counterweight fore or aft; the counterweight is uncalibrated, but VPI includes an electronic stylus-pressure gauge of quite decent quality.

VPI is well known among hobbyists for its distinctive point of view regarding tonearm setup: They have long believed that most tonearms, including their own, sound best without the use of antiskating mechanisms, be they of the magnetic, spring-actuated, or thread-and-weight variety. The lead wires of VPI's unipivot arms exit the top of the bearing housing and describe a generous loop before terminating in a push-on Lemo

connector, which itself leads to a junction box on which are mounted a pair of RCA jacks. VPI continues to recommend that the user dress these leads so that they exert a slight spring force against the arm, in the direction of the record's lead-in groove. That said, the JMW 9 supplied with the Prime Scout was the first VPI unipivot I've reviewed that also comes with a thread-and-weight antiskating mechanism, for those who want *more* (force, that is). Like the arm's counterweight, this mechanism is uncalibrated.



### Installation and setup

Setting up the Prime Scout turntable was a simple matter of placing the plinth and the motor pod next to one another, and the platter and its mat on the bearing axle, then installing the drive belt and plugging in the motor. One could consider the Prime Scout a true turnkey record player, if not for the work required to install and adjust the JMW 9 tonearm—and even *that* wasn't too terribly difficult. At the end of the day, the most tedious of the tonearm chores was installing the cartridge and adjusting it for proper overhang and lateral tracking angle—things one would have to do with any arm of any design, save for those players that come bundled with pre-adjusted cartridges. Even so,

the cartridge-alignment jig supplied with the Prime Scout is clear and easy to use.

Of the chores that remained, the only one that seemed to have the potential to frustrate the newcomer was getting the bearing's spike and cup to line up properly when putting the removable tonearm tube-bearing cup assembly in place: On many of my own attempts, the spike found not the center of the cup but a ridge on the cup's outer edge—made evident by the fact that the arm simply would not balance properly. The only cure: Repeated attempts.

Miscellany: I admit, for aesthetic reasons if nothing else, that I didn't like the Prime Scout's platter mat, which appears to be made of felt laminated with a polymer-like skin on its underside. This thin (0.06") black-and-white mat is decorated with a very large rendering of the VPI logo and the words *made in usa*, encircled by a ring of 50 white stars. While I've never reacted to it one way or the other on the many recent occasions I've seen these mats at hi-fi shows, the graphics are jarring, and just a bit gaudy in a domestic setting. It also made me cranky when I noticed that the Prime Scout's mat is bigger than its platter, the former overhanging the latter by about 0.15"—but then, after trying two other mats I had on hand and discovering that they, too, overhung the platter by more or less the same amount, I realized that this was a case of the VPI's *platter* being smaller than average, presumably to keep the LP flat by leaving the its thicker outer edge unsupported.

And that brings me to the Prime Scout's record clamp, which is intended to be used in the manner of virtually all such things: by first placing a soft rubber washer (supplied) over the record spindle before lowering the record onto it, thus raising the very center of the record-label area just enough that pressure applied by tightening the screw-on clamp will push the disc's grooved area down into more or less intimate contact with the mat.

Previous experience with the brand tells me that VPI sees their record clamp more as a means of flattening warped records than of enhancing playback quality. If so, that's fine by me: The few times I tried it, the clamp was indeed a decent flattener. But in every case, I disliked the clamp's effect on the sound, which I heard as a fairly drastic decrease in spatial scale and an increase in that most difficult to describe of all sonic shortcomings: fussiness. (Someone else may hear those things as an increase in soundstaging accuracy. Each to his own.) Consequently, all of the listening I've described below was done clamplessly.

### Calling Dr. Feickert

Near the end of my listening, I measured the Prime Scout with Dr. Feickert Analogue's Adjust+ test record and PlatterSpeed software for Apple iOS, with the MusiKraft Denon DL-103 cartridge, on which I'd relied most heavily. I observed a mean frequency of 3177.4Hz for a 3150Hz groove modulation (figs. 1 & 2): obviously, a little high. I also observed  $\pm 0.16\%$  dynamic wow and  $\pm 0.22\%$  2-sigma wow. When I ran the same tests with the VPI's rubber platter washer and record clamp (figs. 3 & 4), the speed remained almost exactly the same, but dynamic wow increased to  $\pm 0.20\%$ , and 2-sigma wow decreased to

$\pm 0.14\%$ . Similarly, the Prime Scout's negative maximum speed deviation went up considerably, positive maximum speed deviation, down. For the record (haw), this was later in the afternoon, with higher ambient temperatures and humidity than when I took the readings without the washer and clamp—conditions to which these small and crazy changes could be attributed. It may be worth noting that, at its best, the Prime Scout exhibited roughly twice as much wow as I measured in my 1950s Garrard 301 (with its original idler wheel).

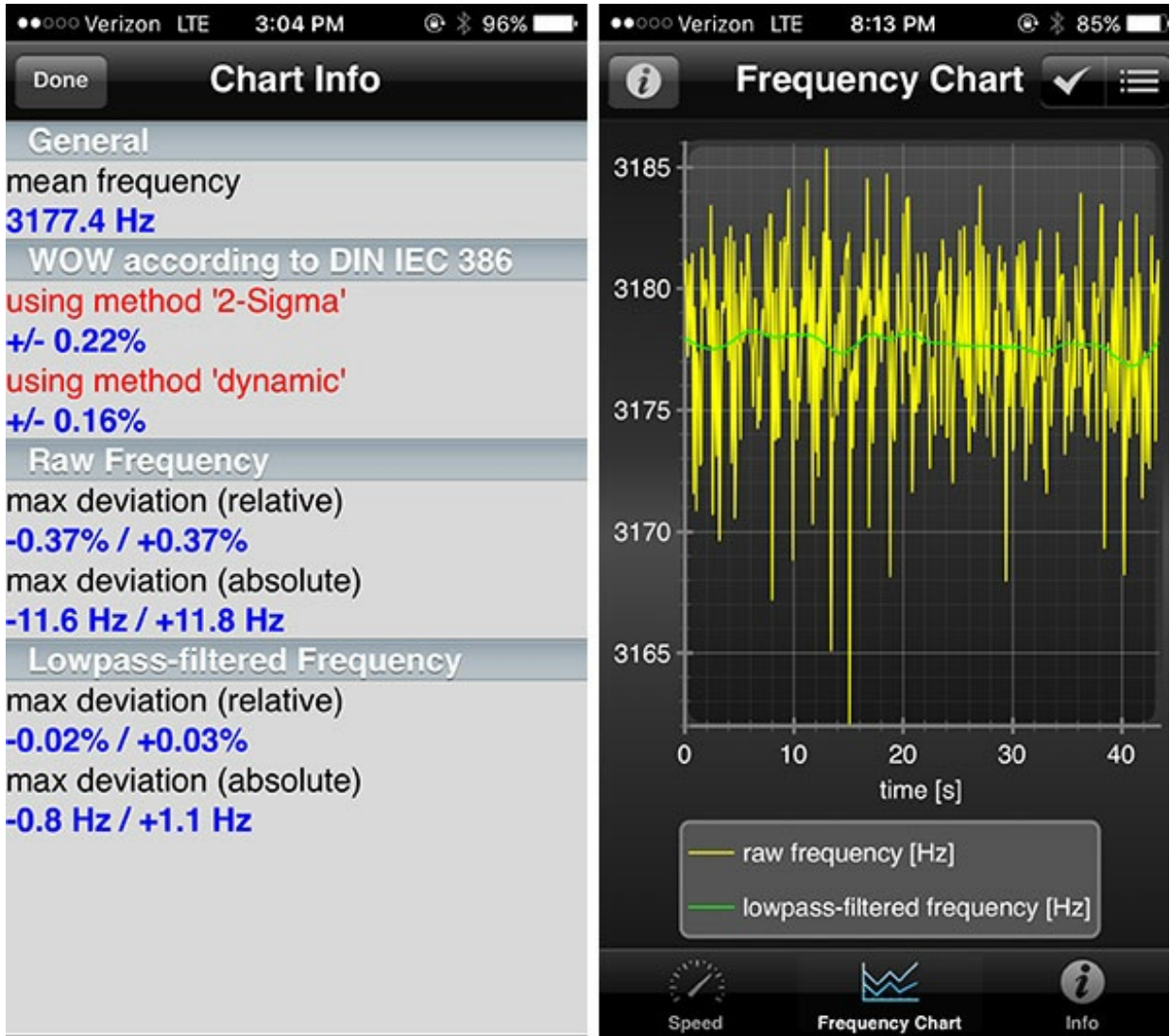


Fig.1 (left) VPI Prime Scout, speed stability data without clamp.

Fig.2 (right) VPI Prime Scout, speed stability (raw frequency yellow; low-pass filtered frequency green) without clamp.

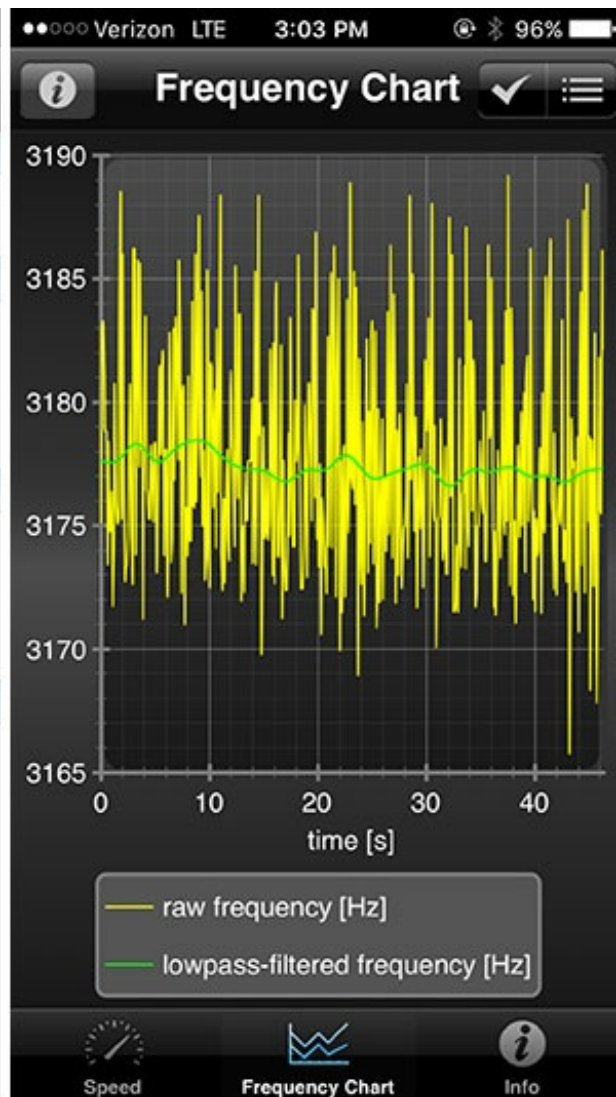
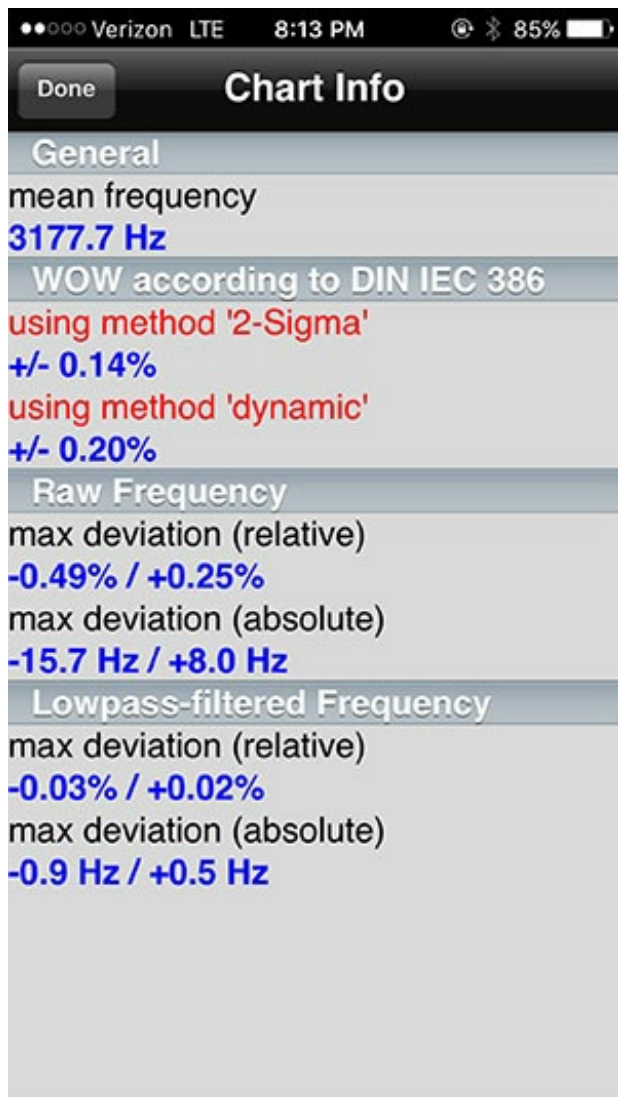


Fig.3 (left) VPI Prime Scout, speed stability data with clamp.

Fig.4 (right) VPI Prime Scout, speed stability (raw frequency yellow; low-pass filtered frequency green) with clamp.

I also used *Hi-Fi News & Record Review's Test Record* (Hi-Fi News HFN 001) to evaluate the compatibility between the VPI's tonearm and the MusiKraft/Denon DL-103 cartridge, and measured a strong lateral-plane resonance at 9Hz—though not so strong that the stylus lost contact with the groove—with "sidebands" at 7 and 11Hz, and a pronounced 10Hz resonance in the vertical plane. Those numbers suggested a solidly good match of cartridge to arm, as I'd expected from the moderately low-compliance Denon and the *empirically* high-mass VPI. (VPI specifies for the JMW 9 an effective mass of 10.2gm, which strikes me as a little low.)

I was impressed by the VPI player's build quality, thinking this iteration of the JMW 9 is perhaps the best-finished I've seen. More important, the machining evident in the Prime Scout's aluminum platter was superb: It ran impressively true. The only visible shortcoming was a slight amount of wobble in the motor's polymer pulley, which came into focus when I slipped a 0.5"-thick strip of wood between the top of the motor body and the underside of the pulley, and watched as the tiny gap between the two fluctuated

in size. I also heard, with slight annoyance, a faint, brief screech every time I switched on the motor; the thorough instruction manual mentions that this might happen, and recommends talcum powder on the belt as a cure. I had none at hand (remarkably, given that I'm writing this in July), so, as Leonard Cohen once sang, I never tried.

### **Listening**

The Prime Scout didn't just sound good in my system—it played music with excellent momentum and, when called for, swing. The first record I tried was the Original Jazz Classics reissue of *The Thelonious Monk Orchestra at Town Hall* (Riverside/OJC-135)—a disc that, through less sympathetic gear, can sound lightweight. (I've never heard an original Riverside copy.) On the Prime Scout, with the MusiKraft Denon DL-103 cartridge, the music's eccentric, relentless drive came through loud and clear—and, happily, Sam Jones's double-bass lines were both audible and colorful. Listening through to the next number, "Crepuscle with Nellie," I was no less happy to hear abundant texture and color from the alto, tenor, and baritone saxes, and from Monk's piano—that, and a beautifully realistic sense of touch.

In fact, I was so impressed by the sound of the piano in the Monk recording that I moved right on to Claude Helffer's recording of Schoenberg's complete works for solo piano (Harmonia Mundi HM 752). This is the sort of music my family doesn't care for—it is, in a word, noisy—so I don't trot it out very often. On this outing, it sounded impressive overall: there was a purposefulness about the performances that escapes lesser turntable-tonearm combinations—in whose hands the disc really *is* little more than noise—and the piano's tone had sufficient meat. Very early in the album, near the record's edge, I heard some pitch instability—which, on closer examination, seemed to spring (sorry) from a jiggling cartridge. I carefully re-cued the track to hear if there was some basic incompatibility between the MusiKraft-Denon and the VPI arm (this was before I'd made the measurements described above), or if the cartridge was just having a hard time finding its poise when first set in the groove. The latter proved true; with the JMW 9 more than with, say, the Naim Aro unipivot arm, I found that in cueing LPs, extra care was rewarded and haste punished.

I may not be a soundstaging freak, but the importance of good spatial performance to the high-end audio experience in general—and to high-end phonography in particular—is not lost on me. I had a delightful time playing on the Prime Scout a few sonic spectaculars known for their impressive spatial content, including the famous recording, by Ernest Ansermet and the Swiss Romande Orchestra, of Falla's *The Three-Cornered Hat*, on a US pressing (London CS 6224). Reproduced well, this recording throws a remarkably big, spacious, convincingly detailed soundstage—all of which qualities the VPI 'table and arm served up in spades, including, early in the piece, a very convincing portrayal of the offstage voice of soprano Teresa Berganza. Even more impressive were the believable weight and resonance of the kettledrums, the forceful and well-textured thrum of the massed strings, the perfect tones of all woodwind instruments—piccolos and flutes sounded as *hard* as they should, but no harder—and the fine sense of musical drive overall.

Speaking of drive and force, the VPI player did a pretty good job with Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band's *Clear Spot* (Reprise MS 2115), a brilliant, groove-rich record that disappoints only in using bassist Roy Estrada (aka Oréjon) on most numbers, instead of the group's far more talented Mark Boston (aka Rockette Morton), who on this album plays second guitar gamely but unspectacularly. But Boston's electric bass is featured on "Golden Birdies," the album's final number, and the Prime Scout delivered a good measure of the tone and touch that are typical of his brilliant playing, though those qualities stand out better on my old idler-wheel Garrard 301.

At the other end of intensity spectrum, yet no less in need of a player capable of communicating *touch*, is Ricky Skaggs and Tony Rice's *Skaggs & Rice* (Sugar Hill SH-3711), a well-recorded program of 10 old-time country and bluegrass standards, picked and sung to perfection. The VPI player *nailed* the sounds of Skaggs's extremely precise vocal intonation and brisk mandolin breaks—he borrowed David Grisman's Gibson F-5 "Lloyd Loar" mandolin for this record, and through the VPI, the instrument's power and tone came through loud and clear—and Rice's slightly mellower, richer voice and incomparably fluid flatpicking. Especially with "Where the Soul of Man Never Dies," in which Skaggs and Rice channel Bill and Charlie Monroe, the Prime Scout plus modified Denon cartridge played the music with unerring momentum and complete emotional immersion: It would have been impossible not to listen to both sides, straight through.

At one point I switched from the MusiKraft Denon cartridge to my Miyajima Premium BE Mono, the low compliance of which usually ensures good performance with higher-mass tonearms, and I began my mono listening with the title song of June Christy's *Something Cool*. (Although I enjoy the excellent Classic Records reissue of the full album, this time out I played my original 10" LP from 1955, Capitol H516.) From the descending arpeggio of double bassist Harry Babasin's entrance, it was obvious that the combination of Prime Scout and Miyajima cartridge was a very musical one: that bass was as taut as it should be, with exceptional touch and color—and, on the very lowest notes, impressive power. Even at their loudest, the horns retained their composure, and Christy's up-front voice had very good presence and body—and, especially in such up-tempo numbers as "It Could Happen to You," this combination *swung*.





My favorite piano recordings are mostly mono LPs from the late 1940s through the early 1960s, and I couldn't let the Prime Scout leave the house without playing a few. With the Miyajima cartridge along for the ride, the VPI player communicated Walter Gieseking's spirited playing and technical mastery in his recording of Beethoven's Sonata 4 (Angel 35655), and reminded me of how brilliantly good—tonally well balanced and full, with plenty of force and spatial presence—his recordings from this era sound. And the VPI was sufficiently insightful that the musical distinctions between the versions of Chopin's 24 Preludes by Alexander Brailowsky (Columbia ML 5444, in a nice "six-eyes" pressing) and Samson François (UK Columbia 33CX 1877) were clearer than ever: With Prelude 2, for example, Brailowsky was precise but emotionally shallow (and he goes overboard on the pedal), while François sounded hypnotic in an absinthe-soaked way that seemed appropriate in the extreme. Time and again, the VPI found those elements that distinguish a transcendent recorded performance from the run of the mill, and put them across to great effect.

### **Conclusions**

How did VPI's Prime Scout stack up against the Scout? The Scout is gone from their line, and my review sample long gone from my home, so I'm forced to rely on memory—and memory suggests that the new model sounds like a clearer, tightened-up, altogether more engaging version of the old. If you liked the Scout, you'll really like the Prime Scout, which seems to offer good value, both comparatively and in and of itself.

Competition? In addition to the products mentioned at the start of this review, in recent years my recommendations to friends have expanded to include a few other reliably musical players, especially Well Tempered Labs' entry-level models—and, for people who have a taste for the performance attributes associated with vintage record players, the PTP Solid12 with a Thomas Schick tonearm and an Ortofon SPU or EMT TSD 15 pickup.

I could suggest those and sleep easy: They were—and still are—really good recommendations, albeit as distinct from each other as a KT88 tube is from a 6L6 is from a 300B is from an EL34. No less worthy, and no less distinct, is VPI's Prime Scout (an EL84?), which combines compelling musicality with semi-turnkey ease of use—and, as its platter mat reminds us, is *made in usa*. As they say in New Jersey, what's not to like?