

VPI Prime Scout turntable

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The VPI Prime Scout is the entry-level model in VPI's core 'Prime' range of turntables, which consists of three models: the Prime Scout, Prime, and Prime Signature, the other two of which have already been very favourably reviewed in these pages. At £2,650 (plus cartridge and interconnect) the Prime Scout sits comfortably below the Prime in price, and comfortably up from the Avid Diva II that has sat happily in my system until fairly recently. It is evident some savings have been made from Prime to Scout, but it is also clear these have been carefully chosen to represent the minimum compromise over the Prime itself in performance terms.

The most obvious difference is that the Prime Scout eschews the Prime's 10" one-piece 3D printed tonearm wand in favour of a more conventional 9" three-piece aluminium construction, but it should be kept in mind that this is still the latest iteration of VPI's classic JMW 9 Memorial unipivot tonearm, which remains among the very best I've heard. The Prime Scout also does without the ability to adjust VTA on the fly, having a much simpler armbase without that function. Arm height, and hence VTA, is adjusted at setup, and locked with grub screws in the usual fashion. This removes a degree of flexibility which might be useful if you have a mixed collection of different weights of vinyl, but adds simplicity, reduces cost, and probably represents a compromise most of us are happy to accept. I've heard the difference 'correct' VTA will make, and it's not trivial, but as the retail price of the adjustable armbase and 3D arm wand alone is more than the cost of the Prime Scout, it's clear that removing these allows the Prime Scout to occupy a different price point entirely. And it's not like every other tonearm out there has easily-adjustable VTA, so when you haven't had it, you don't miss it.



Other differences include a lighter plinth, vinyl-wrapped MDF bonded to a thinner steel plate than the Prime, simpler (but still adjustable) one-piece Delrin feet instead of the more sophisticated two-piece units on the Prime and Prime Signature, and a shallower, and hence less massive, aluminium platter. The rather gaudy platter mat remains the same, a screw-on record clamp is still provided, and the all-important main bearing is similar to the other models, albeit simplified. The 500 RPM (on UK models) motor is essentially common to all three tables, but with additional mass and damping on the more expensive variants.

The distributor provided me with an Ortofon 2M Blue moving magnet cartridge at my request as I'm very familiar with it. Setup was very straightforward, being mostly a simple assembly of the various boxed parts (the tonearm base is pre-fitted to the plinth before shipping), installing the cartridge and adjusting the geometry, arm height, tracking weight and azimuth using the excellent tools and protractor provided. Mind you, one aspect did cause a degree of unparliamentary language on my part. The JMW 9 being a unipivot design, azimuth suddenly becomes a potential issue and it is set by the simple expedient of locking the counterweight ever so slightly offset on its off-centre stub, to ensure the top of the tonearm sits level. The problem is that the counterweight is very free-floating on its stub, secured by a grub screw which needs loosening off for adjustment, so each time you shift the counterweight this way for azimuth, you also tend to move it a tiny bit that way down the stub too, thereby undoing the tracking weight you'd so painstakingly set. The result seems to be a variation on Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, in that you can either have precise tracking weight, or accurate azimuth, but achieving both is well nigh impossible. So, n+1 cups of tea later, having finally achieved an acceptable compromise of accurate azimuth and close-enough tracking weight, I sat down to play some music.

It was immediately obvious that here was a turntable whose primary characteristic was unobtrusiveness. And if that sounds like faint praise, then it is intended to be pretty much the opposite – unobtrusive is not a synonym for unimpressive. The Prime Scout wasn't getting in the way; it didn't give undue emphasis to any part of the frequency envelope, nor was it putting any obvious constraints on dynamics, rhythmic integrity or timing. 'Anitra's Dance' from the Marriner/St Martin in the Fields account of Grieg's Peer Gynt Incidental Music [EMI] trips along lightly with a genuine dance-like feel to it, and the way the various parts interact, passing themes back and forth, was very clearly enunciated; 'Solveigs Song' had great depth of expression and fluidity. A very promising start which improved steadily as the cartridge settled in.

What this turntable sets out to do is give a hint of the high end, at the sort of price that those of us without investment portfolios, tax consultants, or private banking facilities might aspire to. By and large I think it succeeds admirably, through the simple expedient of letting the music do the communicating, and imposing as little of itself on proceedings as it can. The title track from *Famous Blue Raincoat* [Cypress Records] created a mood of late night intimacy, almost banal yet surprisingly moving due largely to the unaffected way Jennifer Warnes delivers the song. You can mess this up in two ways, either by failing to pull out the emotional payload at all, or by working too hard to impress with big powerful sonics, and overwhelming the pathos. Ironically, it is the latter trap which many 'high-end' turntables fall into. The Prime Scout treads the line in an assured and understated way which inspires confidence.



I've come to the conclusion that I like what a good unipivot arm brings to the party. Firstly, of course, they might create a party where one was hitherto unapparent and, like Anitra's Dance above, Kate Bush' 'Jig of Life' from *Hounds of Love* [EMI] did bring out that impression of a dance, propulsive but still light on its feet. Again, I've heard bigger and 'better' turntables than this go large on the drumming and the dynamics, and fail to notice the jig within. Purcell's Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary, with the Monteverdi Orchestra and choir conducted by John Eliot Gardiner [Erato] is stately and commanding, the VPI arm and table working well together and making following the complex contrapuntal lines easy, while also bringing out the essential humanity present in pieces like 'Man that is born of woman'. This was not a cerebral, technical presentation either, but got to the heart of the matter without making a big deal of it. Conversely, John Ogdon's muscular style was never more apparent than in his rendering of the, often overlooked, Shostakovich Second Piano Concerto [EMI] where the VPI created some truly excellent dynamic contrasts, the piano had a good degree of mass and scale and there was a strong impression of structure in the way the orchestral parts were presented. But in the sections where bombast gives way to lightness and frivolity, the turntable showed its admirable ability to simply reflect the material it was given.

VPI itself (among others) recommends the Ortofon 2M Black, so as I had one to hand, this quickly found its way onto the arm once I'd got the measure of the 2M Blue in this setting. Back to the Grieg, and 'Solveig's Song' retained all of its fluidity, but Lucia Popp's voice was now simply captivating, its beauty, colour and character allied to exquisite phrasing and expressiveness. Kate Bush again, and 'Jig of Life' was more layered, with inner detail and definition much more clearly and meaningfully brought out, the percussion and timing was tighter and more resolved. It was abundantly clear that this table and arm was more than capable of supporting a considerably better transducer, should you choose to fit one.

As somebody now attuned to CD, pitch stability is always something I can't help but notice when playing vinyl and, while the Prime Scout wasn't exemplary in this regard, it fared very well, and it was only on some sustained notes, and occasional piano, that a very mild warble was ever apparent. No doubt the deeper, heavier platter of the Prime would help a little here. Which brings me to the upgrade options: the Prime Scout can be fitted with the Prime's heavier platter, and I've already mentioned the arm base and 3D arm wand options; with the Prime's platter comes an opportunity to use the periphery clamp, which I've heard used to very good effect on the, considerably more upmarket, VPI HR-X tables. All these options will doubtless let the Prime Scout's performance approach that of the Prime itself, but if I'm honest, their cost as individual components probably makes this uneconomic, and if that's your game plan, the Prime, as a package, represents better value when you factor in the price of all those bits it comes with as standard.

So, if what you really want is the Prime, I'd save a bit harder and go straight for the more expensive turntable. But, if what you want is a turntable for under £3k which gives more than a hint of what a proper high-end 'table can do, then the VPI Prime Scout delivers a great deal of the important stuff, without apparent effort. And that's a neat trick in itself. Recommended!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

VPI Prime Scout

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

Turntable

Chassis: Black textured vinyl over MDF bonded to 12-gauge steel plate

Isolation: Four adjustable Delrin corner assemblies

Motor: 500rpm, 24-pole AC motor in a separate steel housing (UK models)

Bearing: 60 Rockwell case hardened shaft, graphite impregnated brass bushing, PEEK thrust disc

Platter: 1 3/8" machined 6061 grade aluminium, approx mass 4Kg

Wow & Flutter: > 0.1%

Speed accuracy: > 0.08%

Rumble: > -78dB

Tonearm

Pivot to spindle distance: 223mm

Effective length: 240.7mm

Effective mass: 10.2g

Overhang: 17.7mm

Offset angle: 22.85°

Average RMS distortion: 0.36%

Internal wiring: Discovery wire

Dimensions (W×D×H): 47 × 37 × 17cm
(to top of record clamp)

Weight: 14.5kg

Price: £2,650

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