

VPI TITAN TURNTABLE REVIEW

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Great and insightful reading again from Mono and Stereo's Senior Analog Contributing writer and our premium asset Richard H. Mak - The Mighty VPI Titan Turntable.

It was a cold winter night with a heavy blizzard pounding our city. As the temperature dropped to -8F outside, a bottle of 1997 *Ceretto Bracco Rocche Prapo Barolo* kept me warm while rich sound waves coming from the music of Carl Orff caressed every part of my body. Orff's recording of the highest caliber is found on his lesser-known operatic work "Die Kluge", with Herbert Kegel conducting the Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra on the ETERNA German label (827155-156*). Words cannot describe the level of realism, extension and dynamics I've heard that evening, as I played the album on the VPI Titan turntable. It is one of the most dynamic renderings of this album, I have ever experienced with any turntable.

The reproduction was so accurate and precise that I've played the double LPs three times consecutively. Yes, that's 4 ½ hours of non-stop playing...

**Equally impressive is Made in Holland Philips' pressing (6769 094), if you cannot find either,*

the Berlin Classics reissue is also very high equality. I give full credit to Dietrich Brakemeier of Acoustical Systems for introducing me to this album. Detail exposition can also be found in his book *Living Stereo*, published in 1994, in German.

The name **VPI** needs no introduction. The brand name is as iconic as McIntosh or Audio Research, when it comes to American made audio equipment. **VPI** is a standing pillar of America's turntable industry and the pride of the "Made in USA" symbol. Let's not forget the hugely popular VPI 16.5 Record Cleaning Machine which is probably the most commonly found accessory at the homes of vinyl lovers.

The Titan is VPI's current flagship model and a joint project by both Mat and Harry Weisfeld. From concept to completion, it took approximately 6 months. It is an evolutionary advancement of the Avenger turntable introduced in 2014. The Titan is a 158 lbs beast which has a commanding presence in looks and in weight. A dual layer, 50 lbs spinning platter is housed in a double stacked Avenger Reference Chassis. The 40lbs top platter is levitated in mid-air by opposing magnets, driven solely by the 10lbs sub-platter through magnetic force. VPI calls this the *Magneto Drive*.



(Design sketches at concept stage, photo courtesy of Mat Weisfeld, CEO, VPI Industries)

Turntables usually come in one of the two categories. Either as high mass solid tables with big platters, which dissipate vibrations by virtue of weight, or as suspension tables with light platters, that eliminate vibrations by springs or suspended elastic bands.

High mass tables tend to produce rock-solid bottom ends, while lightweight suspension tables tend to produce better top end frequency extensions. Magnetically levitated tables

occupy a category of their own, by utilizing powerful opposing magnets as a suspension, that let the very high mass platter floating in mid-air. VPI is the not first manufacturer to introduce magnetically levitated platters or double spinning platters. The JC Verdier La Platine (a table which I own), for instance introduced the magnetically levitated platter in the 1970s. The same concept was later adopted by the DaVinci Audio's Gabriel turntable, as well as Clearaudio's Master Innovation.



However, what separates the Titan from the competition is the design implementation and the quality of the materials. Take the size of the magnet, for instance. It is literally three-four times the size of the one found in the Clearaudio Master Innovation. This gives the Titan much greater driving force which increases speed stability during the playback of complex passages. The JC Verdier does have a magnet of comparable size, but the entire table rests on 3 spring suspensions which are somewhat wobbly. In my own JC Verdier, I had to custom made suspension springs that are 1.6 x the tension of the original in order to add stability to the table. On the other hand the VPI Titan sits firmly on a frame with much wider footprint, providing far superior stability. Furthermore, the entire table rest on three pneumatic air suspensions, thus reducing the vibration transfer to the minimal. The cartridge and tonearm are literally two turntables away from the audio rack, and the upper platter is almost completely isolated from the

drive mechanism.

The cumulative result of all this is a turntable that combines the strength of both solid high mass tables and suspension tables, without sharing any of the weaknesses. Take "Swan Lake" from RCA Living Stereo's famous *Royal Ballet* album (LDS 6065) for instance. The plucking of the harp strings come close to being as open and airy as suspension tables such as Oracle V. Yet, Titan achieves the same with a much quieter background and a backdrop which is almost "pitch black" in color - a trait found in high mass solid tables. The midrange tonality of the mass strings is as rich-as warm as the Nottingham 294, and as textured as the TW Raven AC (with Black Knight Platter). But, when the complex passages come on, the bass impact of the bass drums and explosive dynamism of grand orchestral movements, very few tables can rival the rock solid performance of the Titan. Watch out, Raven Black knight! Watch out, Artisan Fidelity SP10 Mk3 (currently under review), the Titan is onto you!

The soundstage and solidity of 3-D images produced by the Titan, is where it excels, well demonstrated by the "Die Kluge" album mentioned at the beginning. The heroic voices of the tenor and the baritone are projected from a deep space into the soundstage, painting solid colors on the backdrop of airy hall ambiances, with all its unusual resonances reminiscent of Proprius' famous *Cantate Dominos* album, or the famous *Noye's Fludde* by Benjamin Britten on the ARGO label (ZNF-1). The sudden impact of the bass drums is weighty, solid, carrying with it plenty of dynamic low-frequency impulses. Equally impressive is the dynamic range I've heard on Dvorak's "From the New World" (DECCA SXL 2289 ED1), or Tchaikovsky's "Capriccio Italien" (DECCA SXL 2001 ED1). These are all very difficult recordings, that can easily veer off to become edgy and abrasive. The sound coming from the Titan is BIG, expansive, and enveloping, yet it is a rich and full-bodied. This is the very sound, that only the very best high-end turntables can deliver, fully reproducing a full-sized orchestral symphony with all its unmitigated realism right in my living room.

The overall tonality of the VPI Titan is quite a significant departure from that of the old VPI HR-X, which despite being remarkably fast, dynamic and detailed, it can be brighter than neutral, and lacking in musicality. The Titan, however, blossoms in the mid-range regardless of the tonearm, cartridge combination of choice. If you are looking for ultra-detailed glittery Hi-Fi sparkles, look elsewhere. I would qualify it as closer to the richer and warmer sounding end of the spectrum than neutral. Almost like an open-reel analog tape.

I would be remiss, however, to strictly categorize the warmish tonality of the Titan as a sonic universal, because it can vary by the choice of drive mechanism as well as the choice of tonearms. Finding perfect balance requires to experiment with different configurations until you find the most suiting one for the type of a music you're mostly listening.

The Titan comes standard with one of two Tonearms. The uni-pivoted JMW Fatboy arm, or the gimbal pivoted Companion Fatboy arm, but it also has a space to accommodate three tonearms. My review sample came with the JMW 12" 3D Printed Reference tonearm. You can order any number of arm boards from the factory and they will be pre-drilled for the specific brand of tonearm you have. As for the drive mechanism, VPI recommends and prefer the Rim Drive. They will configure table as such for shipping, but if specified ahead of time, the user can choose the belt drive alternative.

The Rim Drive is much easier to install than the Belt drive mechanism. You simply position the rim drive so that the rubber belt on the Rim touches the platter. A control knob built into the front of the assembly allows users to fine-tune pressure exerted onto the rubber of the rim drive. With [my cartridge calibration software](#), I've simply determined the optimal pressure by choosing the setting which yields the lowest "WOW & FLUTTER" and "Vibration Measurements". The control knob will also allow you to decouple the rubber from the platter when it is not playing, preventing the formation of a flat spot over time. If you carefully mark down the number of turns on the knob, you can resume playing at the exact same level of pressure.



Changing over to the Belt Drive requires you to unmount any tonearm you have installed, followed by disassembling of the top platter, as well as the top acrylic/aluminum in such way that three rubber belts can be looped around the platter. It is not difficult and requires nothing other than common sense. However, a careful attention must be paid to ensure proper tension on the three rubber belts, as if it would

accidentally slip off the platter, you will likely have to spend a good half hour trying to loop the 3 rubber belts back onto the platter. I would advise users to give manually give the platter a spin before hitting the "ON" button, as the belt has a tendency to slip off otherwise.

The sonic difference between the Rim Drive vs the Belt Drive is one of personal preference. They do sound quite different. On the 1st movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 2, with Bernstein directing NY Philharmonic Orchestra (Analogphonic DGG 423 395-1), the Rim Drive offers a more upfront and robust presentation which brings you closer to the front seats. At the same time there is great accent on bass extension, and more colors and weight on the individual instruments. The belt drive delivers a more laid back presentation with less solid images and less bass impact, but you'll get more top end ambiance, more finesse, more harmonic decay and a more relaxed sense of "musical flow". The same can be said of "The Music of Pablo de Sarasate", performed by Aaron Rosand (VOX STPL 512.760). The belt drive mechanism delivers more harmonic richness to the sound of his famous Guarneri del Gesù violin, allowing more of the microdynamics to come through as his bow dances on the strings.

I am normally not a jazz fan and listen to very few jazz albums, yet when I've played Ben Webster and Joe Zawinul's "Soul Mates" album (FANTASY OJC-109), I've much preferred the sound of the Rim Drive mechanism. There is a notable immediacy of Webster's saxophone which projects the image closer, with a tonality that is more full-bodied. On the belt drive, the saxophone sounded somewhat more distant and with more reverb. The same can be said of Johnny Hartman's voice on the "Once in Every Life" album (Analog Productions APJ-105). The Rim Drive renders his voice deeper, richer, and with full masculinity.

One thing remained constant with both drive mechanism. The Titan comes with one of the best speed controllers on the market, the VPI ADS. On my calibration software, I detected a Wow & Flutter of only 0.05-0.65% at the optimal level, which is one of the best readings ever registered of all the turntable I've measured.

The Titan turns into a full chameleon as you begin to experiment with a myriad of tonearm cartridge possibilities. In this review, I've experimented with the following combinations:

- *VPI 12" JMW 3D Printed Reference Arm / ZYX Universe Premium Cartridge*
- *Rossner & Sohn 12" Si 1.2 with Ebony arm-wand / Kondo IO-M Cartridge*
- *Graham Phantom Supreme B12, 12" arm-wand / Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement Cartridge*
- *Thales Simplicity II 10.5" with ZYX Universe Premium Cartridge*

On the Rim Drive mechanism, the uni-pivoted JMW Fatboy and the Graham Phantom II Supreme bring more finesse, liveliness and top end extension on the aforementioned

Royal Ballet recording; bringing back some of the qualities of the Belt Drive mechanism. Clearly, uni-pivoted arms would be my choice if I was to choose the Rim Drive. The reverse is also true when I paired up the gimbal pivoted Rossner & Sohn and Thales Simplicity II with the Belt Drive Mechanism. These combinations have brought back some of the bass impact and dynamic contrast, that seems to be lacking. The tradeoff, however, is soundstage width and depth. Gimbal pivoted arms gave a more stable and dynamic presentation, whereas uni-pivoted arms project a bigger soundstage, but at the expense of a less solid holographic image.



(VPI JMW 12" 3D Printed, Reference tonearm)

THE CONCLUSION

I shall end this review with Carl Orff's magnum opus, the Carmina Burana, made famous by the opening and closing movement "*O Fortuna*" which is widely used to portray dramatic or climactic scenes in movies such as *The Doors*, *Leon The Professional*, *Glory*, and it was used even in Domino's pizza commercials. I've pulled out the 1981 Telarc recording, with Robert Shaw directing the Atlantic Symphony Orchestra (Telarc 10056/57 1981 German Pressing) and played it with the tonearm, cartridge, and cartridge/drive mechanism combination which I found most favourable on the Titan turntable.

Using the Graham Phantom II Supreme B52 12" arm, the Clearaudio Goldfinger

Statement cartridge, and the Belt Drive, I've heard one of the most satisfying reproductions of this album ever. The sheer dynamic power and scale of the full orchestra demand every ounce of energy from the equipment.

The strength of the chorus combined with an earth-shattering bass drums drove my 1000 watts bi-amped McIntosh MC3500 amplifiers into clipping territory, yet the VPI Titan didn't even flinch. On a lesser turntable the orchestral sound will get disorganized and the chorus will be garbled up. The Titan sailed effortlessly through the most difficult and complex passages with ease and reproducing a majestically powerful sounding orchestra in my listening space. Make no mistake about it, this is a turntable for the big boys!

It took me seven months to complete this review which is much longer than expected. With two drive mechanisms and four tonearm combinations, it is almost combining eight reviews into one. Rest assured, the chameleon like flexibility of the VPI Titan will not limit the sound to a specific tonality. With the right arm/cartridge/drive mechanism combination, there will bound to be a combination which will satisfy the most discerning audiophile gunning for the very best analog equipment. Surely, both Mat Weisfeld and my editor Matej Isak were both kind enough to accept my excuse for a much delayed reviewed, but the truth is, I wanted to hold on the table just a tad longer. Now I just will have to come up some serious cash because the table is listed at \$ 40,000 US Dollar.

Time to start saving.

Richard H. Mak





PRICE

\$ 40,000

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