

# VPI Industries HW-40 Direct Drive Turntable

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In October 2018, I was invited by Mat Weisfeld (President, VPI) to attend a party at the VPI Industries Listening House to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the company. The main event was the debut of a new and remarkable item that is the basis of this review: the VPI Industries 40th Anniversary Turntable, HW-40, named after VPI founder Harry Weisfeld (HW), who attended the event and even swapped out various high-end cartridges on the fly throughout.

Although from a distance the HW-40 (**\$15,000 incl. arm**) appears to be a \$30,000 VPI Classic Direct Drive Turntable (to be discontinued), closer inspection reveals an extraordinary revision chock full of newer technology including an updated and upgraded version of their Direct Drive Motor that now incorporates motion control software, an internal linear power supply, a JMW-12-Fatboy Gimbal tonearm (not pivot), a whopping removable 25 pound platter, a high-grade removable acrylic dust cover and exceptional new footing/isolation that defies belief in the ability to ward off resonance and vibration: You can pound your fist on the shelf top where the table is sitting and playing music and the needle does not dance; the sound is not disturbed. This is accomplished by a mix of reinforced composite absorption pads and the construction of the chassis. And to top it off, it comes with both a Stainless Steel Outer Periphery Ring (to flatten the record onto the platter, eliminating edge warps and more completely coupling the record to the platter), and a 'Signature' stainless steel clamp. Only 400 units are to be manufactured for sale, so this anniversary version is a Limited Edition —for now.

I am very grateful to Mat Weisfeld for offering Audiophilia the opportunity to be the first to review the HW-40, with special thanks to Michael Bettinger (Director of Electrical Engineering) for personally and meticulously setting up the cartridge/table before I took

Engineering) for personally and meticulously setting up the cartridge/table before I took it home.

My current reference for turntable is the modern and sexy-looking [VPI Prime](#) with a [Grado Statement v2 Cartridge](#). I love that cartridge. To make an immediate comparison sound-wise for this HW-40 review, I had my Prime's Grado cart installed on the HW-40 tonearm (which is 2 inches longer than the Prime's tonearm and gimballed as opposed to pivoted) and used my same reference analog setup: [Pass Labs XP-17 Phono Stage](#), [PS Audio BHK Preamplifier](#), [Alta Audio Celesta FRM-2 speakers](#), and a pair of [Audio by Van Alstine DVA SET 600 Mono Block Amplifiers](#). Cabling is a mix of Waveform Fidelity and Anticables. So, the only change was the turntable and since both the HW-40 unit that VPI loaned me and the Grado cart had already had use in advance, no burn in of any kind was needed for this review. Yeah! I was able to immediately begin evaluating the HW-40 without added variables to complicate matters.

### **Setting up the HW-40**

Unlike the Prime with its removable pivot tonearm, the tonearm for the HW-40 (Gimbal JMW-12-Fatboy) can't be removed. Although this will require very careful packing/boxing when shipping [*VPI is renowned for the care and quality of its shipping-Ed*], I took the HW-40 home in an open box in the back seat of a car without having to unpack anything. In advance we just separately kept the 25 pound platter off in a separate box to reduce weight. And don't forget that Direct Drive means that no messing about with an external motor unit and rubber belts; only 3 buttons on the top of the unit take care of that aspect (45RPM, 33RPM, Stop) all with impeccable electronic precision: luxury.

Once in my apartment, it only took minutes before all was up and running: Put the platter back on, snap in both a power cord and the RCA interconnect between phono stage and turntable (and attach a ground), switch the power on in the back of the unit and no more. But keep in mind that at 75 pounds in weight and relatively large in size, make sure to place the HW-40 on an appropriate support. The button that is pressed shines blue, and one can keep the power on when in Stop mode. The speed changes from start/stop in only 1 second; very nice.



Music came out right away with no glitches. The only adjustment I made was to lower the tracking force of the cartridge to 1.8g after some initial listening displayed some distortion. The Grado Statement v2 has a suggested working range of 1.5g–1.9g and it got a dash out of whack (moved up to 2.2g) during travel from VPI to home. Turntables are so damn sensitive. But I must say that the ease at which tracking force can be finely modified with the JMW-12-Fatboy Gimbal tonearm as opposed to the Prime's pivot tonearm was a treat; you just turn the weight at the end clockwise/counterclockwise. And the wobbling that goes with the pivot is gone with the Gimbal; yet another treat. I had tried using the 'dual pivot' clamp with the Prime; no longer needed with the Gimbal.

Due to inadvertently attaching the wrong power cord to the phono stage (Waveform Fidelity—it was meant for high-current amplifiers as opposed to a solid state phono stage or a source component), I noticed something odd in the sound. I eventually realized the mistake and placed in the correct Waveform cable. After those simple changes, right on, read on.

### Specifications

- Tonearm wired with Nordost Reference Wire
- Direct Drive Motor; 2.68 Nm/sec motor torque, 1 sec start/stop time, 2,500 pulses/revolution speed monitoring
- 12" Aluminum Platter, 25LBS
- New VTA Base on the Fly
- Dustcover Included
- Internal Circuitry and Power (linear power supply)
- Size: 22" x 17" x 10"; Weight: 75 lbs



## Sound Quality

The sound of instruments had enormous richness and depth on a larger scale than I have previously witnessed from my system when playing records. So vivid with near perfect tonal balance and no fatigue after long listening. The soundstage was larger. The low bass was very powerful with natural weight and slam when needed, and exceptional attack, decay and clarity were at hand for percussion. I must say that the HW-40 offered one of the most immediate and significant upgrades in sound quality I have experienced in my system; it was also noticeable by anyone with ears who came to visit. 'Did you get a new stereo system?', or 'I can't believe that is vinyl' were some comments I received. And I must add: I think that the Grado cart took to the Gimbal tonearm revealing itself at its best.



## Examples

- Janis Ian, *Breaking Silence*, Analogue Productions, Limited Edition, 180g. This was a revelation. I already thought it sounded outstanding with the Prime turntable, and was an example (to me) of an LP outdoing any digital version of the same album hands down. But the HW-40 took things to a higher plane. The presentation was huge. Natural room sounds in the recording were more apparent. Gentle cymbals had more lifelike decay; they sounded like tiny gongs sprinkled about the soundstage. Thunderous sounding tom toms, the echo of wooden blocks, vibrating snare drum sounds, a powerful booming bass drum, and of course Ian's lovely and intimate voice way up high and center. (My Editor, who wrote a very positive and thoughtful review of this album after visiting me last year will have to visit again!)
- Andy Zimmerman, *Half Light*, 2017 Newvelle Records. The inner details exposed on the HW-40 were extraordinary; the sound of air emanating from Zimmerman's

saxophone and Douglas' trumpet were like nothing I heard before on this wonderful album. I have now played it twice in a row, and plan to revisit this album more often.

- Manuel de Falla: *The Three Cornered Hat* (complete), with Victoria des los Angeles (voice), The Philharmonia Orchestra, Raphael Frühbeck de Burgos (1964). Angel Records. This is yet another LP that I adore and have used on my Prime in the past. But yet again, the MW-40 made it larger than life: The timpani, and trumpet fanfare followed by castanets in the beginning swept back and forth across the soundstage like a giant moving 3D mural. Of particular note were the powerful rich, warm, earthy and deep lower stringed instruments' timbre (cello, double bass), and the high dynamic range overall. I am in the midst of buying an EMI version of this, can't wait.
- Cécile McLorin Salvant, *Woman Child*, 2013, Mack Avenue Records, 180g (Many thanks to Jim Austin, Editor of *Stereophile*, for lending me his signed copy). At only 23 years old on her second album here (she is now 29 years old), it is impossible not to sense a star in the making. I recently saw her live at the Jazz Standard in New York City and was quite amazed. For pitch, she can go low, she can go high and at long stretches and she can sing in English, French and Spanish. Watching her sing, she radiates warmth, happiness and humour and you can sense that she picks up vibes easily—switching to sadness or compassion when a song requires it. Even though *Woman Child* is a studio recording, the MW-40 yielded a faithful reproduction of what I heard live, with her intimacy, rich and mellow sounding voice and innate musicality. She is now being compared to greats like Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, and the first track of *Woman Child* is 'St. Louis Gal' which was recorded by Bessie Smith almost 100 years ago. She has earned a Grammy Award for Best Jazz Vocal Album three times now, the most recent for her 2018 album *The Window*. I must seek out an LP of that.

## Summary

The VPI Industries HW-40 turntable is by far one of the finest turntables that VPI has produced (some might even think the best), and at a price that appears to be a bargain. Neither sexy nor fashionable looking, instead it is elegant and reminiscent of an older era in looks—and is endowed with some of the finest modern technology, impeccable sound performance and ease of use. A winner. This might become a flagship for VPI.

Further information: [VPI Industries](#)

