



# VPI TNT-HRX Record Player

by Roy Gregory

Trying to pin down the output of Harry Weisfeld's fertile imagination is worse than trying to hit a moving target. At least with a target you can see what you're shooting at, with Harry you never know quite what to expect until you open the box. It goes hand in hand with a policy of constant evolution, a policy that's a way of life at VPI. Add to that the fact that I've never met another company so willing to listen to sensible advice from outside interests and VPI products, particularly new ones like the HRX reviewed here, seem to exist in a constant state of flux. Further evidence rests in the fact that despite the vast array of turntables that the company offer, the entire family has evolved from just two basic designs, and one of those goes back earlier to the isolation plinths that VPI started out manufacturing for direct drive decks. It's a long and convoluted history, although one that's entirely logical, but with the HRX it's entered a new phase and a new plane of performance.

There have been many examples of technological or engineering trickle down with VPI 'tables. The original TNT platter found its way, along with the main bearing, clamp and thicker armboard, onto the HW19 Mk4. The Aries is a simplification of the TNT Junior, itself a simplification of the original TNT. Then of course there's the Scout, a simplified and re-engineered

Aries, and the inspiration, believe it or not for the new flagship, perhaps the company's first example of that rarest of events, trickle up. That influence is perhaps the least obvious element of what is a visually pretty impressive beast. Having said that, it's also at the core of the new

'table's step up in performance. We're talking main-bearing here, and in turn the constraints it places on the platter design.

In a quest for a cost effective bearing solution that wouldn't bust the ultra tight budget he'd set himself for the Scout, Harry adopted a Teflon thrust pad. The resulting bearing is both smooth and quiet. Smoother and quieter in fact than it has any right to be in a record player at the Scout's modest price (and a major contributor to that deck's stunning performance). Which is exactly what

got Harry started on a revised version of the TNT – a project that eventually transmogrified into a different beast altogether, and thus was born the HRX.

Indeed, the new table does away with many familiar elements

of the TNT. The separate motor and flywheel assemblies have been integrated into a single, solid aluminium housing, only there are now two motors facing each other and running out of phase to cancel vibration.

However, they still run from the TNT's external power supply, thus enjoying the same maniacally precise speed adjustment. The main chassis has been reshaped

and tapered, making it visually more attractive as well as offering a more diffuse resonant character. And for the first time, the chassis itself is a laminate, acrylic and aluminium in a beautifully finished sandwich. The suspension towers contain the same extremely effective air isolation pods as those on the TNT, but now they have thinner walls and are made from a single piece of stainless steel, doing away with the old Delrin top cap. The resulting gap between ►



▶ the suspension pod and the tower is filled with a collar of foam damping, resulting in even better isolation due to the reduced coupling, but no loss of stability.

But the real changes arrive with the platter. TNT's have always used composite platters, acrylic generally being combined with lead and stainless steel or aluminium. Despite the massive main bearing employed (the ball looks more like a marble!) the Teflon thrust pad won't support that kind of high-mass approach. So thinking laterally, Harry produced a thick, all acrylic platter to which he added

The slightly smaller footprint of the HRX also necessitates a revised version of the familiar JMW 12.5 arm. Dubbed the 12.6, it uses a heavier but shallower counterweight running on the threaded stub of the 9.0 in order to clear the rear suspension tower. However, the sliding weight combined with the threaded stub has made precise downforce adjustments a real fiddle, the locking screw only wanting to move in increments of a whole thread. As a result, a small screw on rider weight has been produced to make life easier, without sacrificing the benefits of the heavier main one sitting closer to the pivot. It works perfectly but,

away from the spindle to prevent mechanical fouling. The Triplanar is fine, but the Tangent requires a special platter with the peripheral mass relocated within its traditional dimensions. Thus you need to specify the arm when ordering, and a little forward planning might be in order.

The other thing you'll need to plan for is accommodating the deck. Smaller than a TNT it might be, but it still makes most racks look pitifully inadequate. I resorted to a couple of slabs of MDF with a layer of non-slip rubber matting between them. It worked rather well, but I'm sure it's far from the last word in support. I'm sure that Harry has a view on that too, so I'd take his advice.



a stainless steel peripheral ring. By placing the mass outside of the main platter dimensions he achieves the same inertia and speed stability from a lighter overall platter. Smart, but not as smart as the execution itself. You see, the external ring simply sits beneath the record, suspended from the specially machined shoulder in the platter. But you can also place it over the record in which case it acts as an extremely effective peripheral clamp. You also get what looks like a centre clamp, but in this instance it's simply a record weight, and the option of a thin, black plastic mat, of which more later.

unfortunately it arrived too late for photography. The VTA adjustment can now also be locked using a small, knurled thumbscrew. All good stuff.

The 12.6 is directly mounted to the chassis in the same way as on the TNT-HR (see Issue 10) although you can also order the HRX with a separate armboard, decks in the field already successfully employing Triplanar and Air Tangent tonearms. But here you run up against the one downside of the oversize platter. You'll have trouble getting some of the shorter arms out there far enough

Set-up is as straightforward as all the other VPI 'tables, and differs little from the procedure employed with the TNT Hot Rod. The deck stayed level and the speed stayed constant throughout the extended review period and other than that there's little to say on the practical side. ▶

► Systemwise I got to use the HRX with half a dozen cartridges including the Titan, DV-XV-1s, Accurate and Koetsu Black (courtesy of the interchangeable armwands) as well as the Groove and Plinius M14 phono stages. Amplification came from Tom Evans, Border Patrol and Hovland, while speakers included the usual suspects plus the Alon Lotus Elites and KEF Reference 207s.

It's an unusually long (and a very distinguished) list, but it helps to underline the sheer variety of systems in which the HRX was used. It's an important element in the conclusions regarding its overall sonic character – or rather, lack of one.

As suggested earlier, the HRX marks a new level of performance for VPI turntables. Where earlier flagships like the various TNTs have always scored highly on musical grounds, they've also possessed a particular character and family sound. That flavour has been reducing over the years, and the Hot Rod shaved off yet another layer, but with the HRX Harry has stripped away the remnants. More importantly, he's done it without diluting what has always made the VPIs so listenable. The sound of the HRX is still big, bold and stable, it still has dynamic pace and impact, and it still presents music with the sort of mobile weight and presence that few if any turntables match. The VPI sound has always been about musical energy and that hasn't changed with the HRX. Playing the Classic Records re-issue of the Everest Antill *Corroboree* (SDBR 3003) serves to underline that fact in spectacular fashion. The primal quality of the music is brutally threatening, sharp in contrast to the snatches of melody. The array of

percussion is brooding in the bass, whip-like and snappy further up. The drums have texture and are precisely located in the cavernous acoustic, the attack and speed of the other instruments is breathtaking in its impact and precision. It's then that you start to realise what lifts the HRX above its siblings.

The warmth and velvety smoothness that has defined the sound of all previous VPI decks (save perhaps the Scout) is no longer there, its absence heard in the sudden increase in focus and transparency, texture and tonal shading. Whilst it's a taint that has

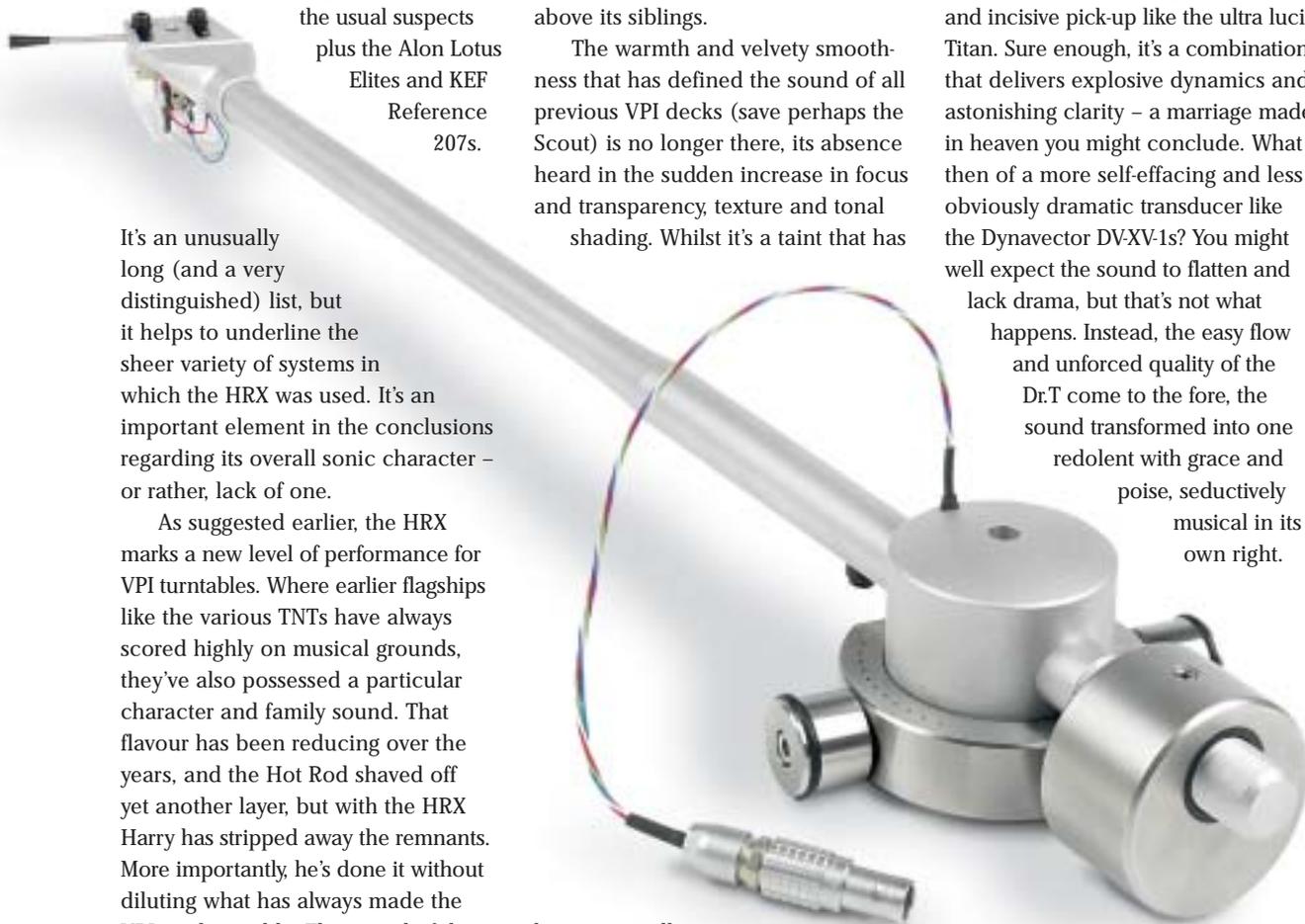
been musically benign, even attractive in the rounded warmth that it brings to musical proceedings (did someone mutter “valvelike”?) there's no denying the evidence of the HRX. Warm and inviting it may have been, but it has also been costing the decks resolution. The new model manages to be just as inviting and entertaining, grafting on the extra transparency and resolution in place of the comfort factor of old. The result is significantly greater musical insight combined with lower listening effort. Listening effort?

Yes. The stability, clarity and musical organisation of the HRX makes it easier to hear into the performance.

What's even more interesting is the way the sound of the deck changes with different cartridges. Big, bold, stable: the natural assumption might well be to reach for a quick, detailed and incisive pick-up like the ultra lucid Titan. Sure enough, it's a combination that delivers explosive dynamics and astonishing clarity – a marriage made in heaven you might conclude. What then of a more self-effacing and less obviously dramatic transducer like the Dynavector DV-XV-1s? You might well expect the sound to flatten and lack drama, but that's not what happens. Instead, the easy flow and unforced quality of the Dr.T come to the fore, the sound transformed into one redolent with grace and poise, seductively musical in its own right.

Swap in the Koetsu Black, the Helikon or the Accurate and in each case the sound transmogrifies to embrace the key strengths of whichever cartridge you select. The only other product I've come across that achieves the same trick, coaxing the best out of whatever you partner with it, is the Triplanar. It too seems to allow the mounted cartridge to stretch its wings, breathing new life into the music played.

Using the Vivante/Alto 180g ►



▶ pressing of *Yola* (VA302) the nature and extent of the differences becomes clear. Playing 'Did I Hurt You' on the Titan separates the guitar better from its backing: the Dynavecator lets you hear its strings. The Titan lets you focus on McEvoy's voice and vocal technique – the way she works the lyric.

drops into place, bringing with it a solidity to instrumental presence and a darkness to the musical background. I found myself liking its control and precision on larger scale works, but often preferred the lightness of touch and extra life on smaller, more intimate recordings that came without the weight.

(adjusting VTA accordingly, plus 70 on the JMW scale) brings you close to a half way house, with greater focus, separation, a darker background and more presence and mid-band energy – so much so that the sound can become slightly forward. In which case the weight really comes into its own, settling things down nicely. For the most part I found myself using the deck with mat and without weight, in which trim it combines a nice sense of



The Dynavecator is tonally more natural and sweeter with a more credible dimensionality. The Titan displays the precise shape of the stabbed piano phrases, the Dynavecator the harmonic structure and weight of the instrument. You pay your money you take your choice, but what's relevant here is how readily the HRX lets you hear not just how different these two cartridges sound, but lets you hear them at their best.

Of course, the platter options on the HRX offer their own set of sonic influences. The peripheral clamp, extremely effective on rim warps is simply too much hassle to use on a record by record basis. I found myself leaving it on the shoulders of the platter unless the record demanded its use. The record weight is another matter. Nice to handle, it simply

A matter of taste? More a question of individual recordings, their balance and style. Either way, it's a nice option to have. Which would make a nice conclusion of sorts if it wasn't for the late arrival of the thin plastic mat that I mentioned earlier. Using this

purpose and presence with excellent clarity and focus. It's a nice balance of virtues.

How does it compare to other leading contenders? Well, the Clearaudio Master Reference, Master TQi, Insider Reference set-up provides even greater clarity, transparency and focus coupled to a quicker and

more rhythmically explicit presentation. But it lacks the presence and beautifully weighted purpose of the HRX, as well as its sonic invisibility. In short, impressive as the

Clearaudio most certainly is, part of that quality comes at the expense of drawing attention to itself in a way that ▶



► the VPI manages to avoid. The big American deck also provides a more coherent overall acoustic – another VPI trademark. Unable to match the Clearaudio set-up for inner detail, it wraps the performance in a believable and clearly defined acoustic space, something it does better than any other deck I know. Playing Louis Fremaux's explosive, almost bombastic

and the fact that on more than one occasion I found myself having to restart the comparison process because one deck or the other had pulled me much further into the record than I'd intended. And before you scream "cop out!" it's nothing of the sort.

stands alongside the other frontrank options. Could I live with one? Simple to set-up, interchangeable armtubes, highly enjoyable sound. What do you think? ➤+



performance of the Massenet *Le Cid* (CBSO, EMI Studio Two Stereo) the Clearaudio astonishes and beguiles with its speed, clarity and transparency. It's a dynamic firework show of a performance, one that suits the music – and one that you might well think would be hard to follow. Swapping the record to the VPI's platter and dropping the needle into the groove rewards you with a soundstage that lacks the expanse of the Clearaudio's but whose boundaries are better defined and which delivers a compact substance, presence and power. It seduces with its easy musical flow and melodic shape, its sense of drive and purpose.

Making these comparisons I was struck again and again by two things: these decks might sound totally different to each other, but both sound remarkably impressive. That

These decks are clearly different from each other (in just about every imaginable way) yet both succeed handsomely on their own terms. In the case of the VPI that means making music with purpose, power and presence, driving its musical message into the room. It's a performance that stands the HRX right in the front rank of analogue replay. You can quibble with this aspect or that of the overall package, and other decks offer a different balance of virtues, but what's important is that the HRX has a recipe all its own. If I want sheer detail and resolution then I'll reach for the Clearaudio. Absolute neutrality? Then it has to be the Kuzma/Triplanar combination. But for unobstructed access to the recording, musical presence and emotional communication the HRX tops the list. Until someone designs a deck that does it all (and no one has yet, despite claims or suggestions to the contrary, and yes, I have lived with the Rockport Sirius 111), the VPI

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable –	
Type:	Belt drive turntable with uni-pivot tonearm
Speeds:	33 and 45, electronically adjustable
Platter Diameter:	342mm (inc. peripheral clamp)
Lid:	None
Dimensions (WxHxD):	650x254x495mm
Tonearm –	
Effective Length:	308mm
Effective Mass:	11.5g
Prices –	
TNT HRX and 12.6:	£10,000
TNT HRX:	£8,000
JMW 12.6 Tonearm:	£2,250
Spare 12.6 Armtube:	£950

#### UK Distributor

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