

The Audio Beat

VPI Industries • Classic Turntable

by Marc Mickelson | October 21, 2009

I've eaten my share of jumbo shrimp and contemplated the purpose of peacekeeper missiles, but I still can't quite get my head around the oxymoron that is the VPI Classic. Here is a brand-new turntable from Harry Weisfeld with a name that suggests the timelessness and permanence of Gibraltar. The \$2500 Classic looks and feels the part, though, its handsomeness and solidity leaving no doubt that it is a well-wrought product. Pick it up and you will be surprised by its 55-pound heft, all that weight coming from a combination of wood, MDF, steel and aluminum. So many turntables look alike -- rectangular platforms that carry the motor to the left, the platter in the center, and the tonearm to the right -- and the Classic doesn't alter the profile.

The Classic does, however, deviate from the look of so many recent VPI 'tables, and this is important to understanding both its newness and nod to tradition. While it looks rather like VPI's 20-year-old HW-19, whose outer wooden frame encloses its bits'n'bobs, that 'table was a suspended design, which the Classic is not. In the place of the onboard motor assembly of the well-known and still-manufactured VPI Scout and Scoutmaster, the Classic's motor is mounted to its platform. The idea that VPI has worked with in earlier designs was

for the motor to be isolated from the platter and tonearm, and this goal is also accomplished with the Classic. The motor is pressure fitted from below and affixed to a triangular piece of steel that is separated from the platform's steel top plate by a rubber rod. A rubber damper rests beneath the motor. "Works perfectly," Weisfeld told me of this configuration. "No motion, no noise."



The Classic's platter is also a departure from those of the Scout and Scoutmaster, which are fashioned from thick slabs of frosted acrylic. The Classic's platter is solid aluminum, like the HW-19's. Weisfeld's rationale: "You can machine aluminum much better (+/- .001" in a 29" circumference), it can be damped easily, it is heavy (good), it is temperature and humidity stable, and it adds a sense of life that the acrylic doesn't have without the artificial brightness that acrylic can sometimes bring to the sound."

Another point of departure is the Classic's tonearm, a special version of the unipivot JWM 10.5i that

omits the on-the-fly VTA tower but uses new silver-coated-copper wire. The standard '10.5i costs as much as the Classic alone, so something had to give. The 'arm on the Classic does allow VTA adjustment via a ship's-wheel ring at its base, and it has all other important features, including two types of antiskating compensation: the springy wire that connects the tonearm to the RCA-connector

block, which is VPI's preferred method, and a weighted mechanism similar to that used for most high-quality tonearms.

While VPI could have put simple rubber nubs on the bottom of the Classic, as these would have provided some isolation, newly designed feet are used instead. These are threaded to allow for easy

leveling, which is especially important given that the tonearm balances on a single point, and their Delrin and stainless steel help dissipate vibration. VPI claims that the Classic can be placed near large subwoofers without feedback issues.

The Classic's platform is a sandwich of thick MDF and 11-gauge steel that are secured to each other with bolts and adhesive. With a 3/4"-thick frame of walnut or black-stained oak around its periphery, this is effectively a solid block of materials fused together. The AC synchronous motor runs at 600rpm and drives the platter, which weighs 18 pounds, via a

single round-profile rubber belt. The motor represents the first point of upgrade for the Classic -- to VPI's SDS speed controller and line isolator. Classic owners can also add a dustcover (important here in gritty, static-prone Arizona) and a periphery ring clamp that flattens the LP's outer edge. The Classic comes with a Delrin screw-down clamp for its threaded spindle, but VPI also offers an unthreaded weight that damps the LP and looks much nicer.

Some assembly required

The folks at VPI don't mince words when describing the effort and expertise needed to configure the Classic, calling it, "The easiest turntable in the world to set up." And in many respects they're right. You won't need exhaustive instructions or a slide rule to assemble the Classic, even if you're an analog newbie. Optimizing its performance is a different matter, however, and here VPI helps you by providing a number of useful accessories, including a very detailed manual with pictures, a Shure stylus-force gauge, and a machined alignment jig specifically for the Classic's 10" tonearm. Stevenson and Baerwald fans will lament the jig's one-point alignment, but I heard no inner-groove distortion with either of the cartridges I mounted with it, so I was satisfied. Fine-tuning the tonearm was straightforward, if a little tricky because of its tipsy nature. That's just the way it is with a unipivot.

If you still find assembling and tweaking the Classic too confusing to attempt, there is a reference that will walk you through the process. Michael Fremer's first DVD, *21st Century Vinyl*, covers setting up a VPI Scoutmaster, and it's basically the same as with the Classic. This DVD is such a useful resource that including a copy with each new VPI turntable would certainly reduce frantic calls to the factory.

One unique feature of the Classic's special '10.5i tonearm, and indeed all VPI tonearms, is the ease with which you can swap cartridges. With 'arms that have removable headshells or armwands, you still have to readjust tracking force, VTA and azimuth when you want to use another cartridge. You are really only saved the time it takes to mount the cartridge and connect the leads. With the VPI tonearm, you swap everything that rests on the pivot, including the counterweight, which is also used to set the azimuth. Thus, with a second tonearm assembly, changing cartridges requires unplugging the lead to the junction box, taking the 'arm off the pivot, replacing it with the new 'arm, and reconnecting the lead. If you're changing cartridge brands or models, you'll probably have to adjust VTA. With stereo and mono cartridges from the same maker, you can be ready to play records in less than 30 seconds. Having a second Classic (hey, that's not such a bad idea) is more convenient, but only if your phono stage has two inputs.

Time will tell

Analog playback gets high marks for its ease and richness, but as experienced listeners know, these are the most general of attributes, akin to calling water thirst-quenching because it's wet. Great turntables, tonearms and phono cartridges have sonic personalities all their own. They don't merely present the music with enhanced ease and richness, and the VPI Classic is a distinctive case in point. It conveys the rhythm and timing of the music with extreme stability, enhancing the music's foundation and coherence in ways that don't really hint at ease or richness. Transients are quick and precise, just as some direct-drive 'tables capture them, and the music holds together in a way that conveys an inevitable sense of forward momentum. All of this is obvious with any kind of

music; play classic rock, a baroque chamber piece or some hard bop and get ready to be swept along with the rhythmic tide. Low frequencies are nearly as well defined and pistonic as those from digital playback.

Remastered rock albums seem to come in bunches these days, even if originals are plentiful and inexpensive. Much of U2's catalog has been re-released, and the sonic improvement over the originals takes no straining to hear. Early albums like *Boy* [Island 001084301], *October* [Island 001082901] and *War* [Island 001083201] are not sonic spectaculars, sounding gray -- as though the music is overlaid with a powdery grain -- throughout the mids and treble. The Classic doesn't somehow remedy this, but it does make the slight added presence of the reissues all the more obvious, and this helps repair what are rather blah-sounding recordings. Whoever remastered these knew what he was hearing and did what he could to correct it. With the Classic, the rhythmic drumming on "The Refugee" from *War* was remarkable for its transient snap, making this cut (if not any other on the album) into one you can play for friends who are stuck in the "ease and richness" rut.

The Classic ably unravels complex instrumentation, never accomplishing this through crispy edge definition or frequency-band highlighting. Instruments sound distinct down into the bass, which is, once again, well resolved to its very depths. Great-sounding LPs, like Harry James' once-ubiquitous *King James Version* [Sheffield Lab 3], which is heavy with brass, sounded vibrant and snappy, the collective blat of all those horns absolutely blasting into the room. However, smaller-scale stuff like a two-eye pressing of Bob Dylan's *Greatest Hits* [Columbia KCS 9463] was not artificially ramped up. Dylan's subtle phrasing on "Just Like a Woman," a song I've heard at least a few hundred times, was

captured before receding into the LP's noise floor, which is rather low for a mass-produced record from the early 1970s.

The Classic's nimble, open sound isn't just a matter of superior timing and resolution, however. Dynamics, both the range from very soft to very loud as well as small shifts in volume, are handled as well as with any turntable I've heard in my system. When the army of brass from *King James Version* lets loose, it does so in an instant, the music never lagging behind its intent. But when subtle handling of a solo instrument is required, the Classic scales realistically, small inflections taking on their proper proportion and importance.

Music Matters' amazing catalog of Blue Note reissues is the perfect way to hear this. Dexter Gordon is a master of subtlety on *Doin' Allright* [Blue Note/Music Matters MMBST-84077], his first recording for Alfred Lion. "Society Red" is 12-minute blues during which Gordon and Freddie Hubbard take turns toying with tempo and tone, at once wailing and then scaling back for some more reflective playing. This number is an obstacle course of marathon length, and the Classic negotiates it like an elite athlete, handling the climbs and falls of the horns with grace and seeming ease.

If you skipped to the end of the review and peered at the listing of ancillary equipment, you have already noted the two cartridges I used with the Classic -- the Dynavector XV-1s and Audio-Technica AT33EV. They are both low-output moving-coil cartridges, but their prices differ wildly. The XV-1s is now \$5250, while the AT33EV can be found online for around \$500. I know what you're thinking: One is priced too high to be realistically used with the Classic and the other is priced too low. But are they?

Both of these cartridges sounded darned good with the Classic, although they weren't sonic twins

by any measure. The XV-1s was suave through the midrange, finely drawn in the treble, and well defined in the bass, if not quite reaching the absolute depths. The AT33EV will sound polite, even boring to some listeners, but this is actually a sign of its balance and overall quality. All of this was readily apparent with the Classic. I suspect that an unusually high number of Classic owners will use cartridges that cost more than their turntables -- the Classic urges such extravagance. However, it makes an equally strong case for putting most of your analog budget into the turntable and finding a bargain-priced cartridge of uniform excellence to use with it. In fact, the latter might make more sense than the former, using any money you have left to add VPI's SDS or periphery ring clamp. Even without these add-ons, I would be very happy with the Classic and AT33EV, although I'd immediately buy a second tonearm assembly and an Audio-Technica AT33MONO cartridge to mount on it.

Same difference

The Classic's rhythmic correctness and coherence put it in contrast to so many turntables made today that use DC motors and exotic suspensions. This happened completely by design. Aside from making turntables, Harry Weisfeld is keenly interested in the history of LP playback, citing the Empire 298 from the early 1960s and the renowned Kenwood L-07 direct-drive 'table from the late 1970s as two of his influences in designing the Classic. "From the Kenwood you learn about the speed stability of a really good direct-drive, and from the Empire you learn about the explosive dynamics a high-speed belt-drive system can produce."

I bought my TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable (\$14,500) a couple of years ago and have had only positive experience with it since then. In fact, this is an understatement -- I adore the

Raven AC. It is ostensibly a mass-loaded design -- it weighs 100 pounds -- but its calculated use of disparate, inert materials and some very effective isolation footers also help address the noise that can so easily mar the experience of playing LPs. Initially I had only a Graham Phantom tonearm mounted on my Raven AC, but with the addition of a Tri-Planar Mk VII U2, I was able to luxuriate in another facet of this 'table's performance: rock-solid image placement and focus amidst a dense, rich-toned presentation. The Phantom is great in its own way, of course, defining and delineating instruments with striking precision, particularly down into the bass. With either tonearm and any cartridge I've tried, the Raven AC offers a consistently information-dense presentation that's abundant with tonal color.

"Rich-toned," "tonal color": these are not phrases I used to describe the VPI Classic, and they signal one of the most obvious differences between it and the TW-Acoustic Raven AC. While the Raven AC sounds muscular, well focused and full, the Classic is wideband, lively and agile. The handling of tone, the voice of each instrument or singer, is the Raven AC's most remarkable trait. There is natural color for sure, but also a luminous quality that pushes reproduced music one step closer to the live event. The Classic, in contrast, doesn't have quite as deep a tonal palette. Bob Dylan from his *Greatest Hits*, for instance, sounds a little less present and lifelike, his nasally drawl a touch more generic. This also affects the image roundness and tonal saturation that give performers their humanness. Again, the Raven AC is expert here and the Classic less so. Depending on how you hear things, you may write the difference off to tonal neutrality -- the Raven AC sounding somewhat cloying and the Classic being just right. (This underscores one of the challenges of writing audio reviews -- trying to put your observations and, moreover, your preferences into proper perspective.)

Throughout the midrange the Raven AC portrays the music with greater lushness than the Classic, and its bass displays slightly more weight and thus more power. Still, the rhythmic precision and drive of the Classic are beneficial with all kinds of music, and so is the unflappable way it cuts through dense music without skewing the spectral balance.

The Raven AC's character aligns very well with what I value most about the sound of analog playback, but I cannot say that is more musically relevant than the Classic's well-defined and energetic disposition. As with so many choices we audiophiles have to make, this one involves tradeoffs, although there is no doubt that the Classic's price makes it especially attractive.

A detailed summary

When the Classic was first introduced, Harry Weisfeld was outspoken in his praise for it, and he did something truly attention-grabbing: He ranked it among the very best turntables he has created, including the massive HR-X, whose cost is nearly five times greater. I've not heard the HR-X in my system, but I can say that the Classic's performance is consistent in so many ways with that of a first-rank turntable. It is able to dig all of the musical information out of each record's grooves and convey it with unwavering pace, precise timing and acute dynamic expression. It may not be the choice of listeners who like their records to sound primarily warm,

rich and laid-back; there is no denying the exactness of the Classic's presentation or its musical soul. It's not a turntable that requires pairing with an expensive cartridge, although doing so will reveal that cartridge's true worth. The Classic deserves to be surrounded by the best components you can afford, and it won't be embarrassed in this pursuit. It was frequently the least expensive product in my system, and it fit right in.

I don't know of a better way to spend \$2500 in the service of music than on the VPI Classic. Harry Weisfeld's jumbo shrimp is a feast for the ears, and that's my unbiased opinion. ☺

Price: \$2500
 Warranty: One year parts and labor.
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Associated Equipment

Analog front-end: TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable, Graham B-44 Phantom and Tri-Planar Mk VII U2 tonearms, Dynavector XV-1s (stereo and mono) and Audio-Technica AT33EV cartridges, AudioQuest LeoPard phono cable, Lamm Industries LP2 phono stage.

Digital: Audio Research Reference CD8 CD player, Ayre Acoustics C-5xeMP universal player, Zanden Audio Model 2000P CD transport and Model 5000S digital-to-analog converter.

Preamplifiers: Convergent Audio Technology SL-1 Legend with phono stage, Lamm Industries LL1 Signature, Zanden Audio Model 3000.

Power amplifiers: Audio Research Reference 110 stereo amp, Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference monoblocks.

Loudspeakers: Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX Series 3.

Interconnects: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Shunyata Research Aeros Aurora-IC.

Speaker cables: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Shunyata Research Aeros Aurora-SP.

Power conditioners: Shunyata Research Hydra V-Ray Version II, Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference.

Power cords: Shunyata Research Anaconda Helix CX and Python Helix CX, Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference.

Equipment rack and platforms: Silent Running Audio Craz 4 Reference isoRack plus and Ohio Class XL Plus2 platforms (under Lamm amps), Harmonic Resolution Systems M3 isolation bases under digital gear.

Accessories: Boston Audio Mat1 and Mat2 record mats, Harmonic Resolution Systems Analog Disk record clamp/weight, VPI Industries HW-27 Typhoon record-cleaning machine, Loricraft PRC4 Deluxe record-cleaning machine, Audio Intelligent Vinyl Solutions record-care products.