

Vinyl Lives!

Turntables

Trickle-Down Technology At its Finest

VPI ARIES SCOUT AND JMW-9 TONEARM

Jacob Heillbrunn



Were an audiophile Rip van Winkle to wake up today after a decade or so of sleep, the most astounding development for him would probably be the proliferation of turntables. An increasingly ferocious arms race has been taking place among the turntable set as it seeks to remain a step ahead of digital formats. Magnetic drive, belt drive, direct drive, linear-tracking arm, gimbal arm, pivoting arm—all of these technologies continue to be drastically revised in the pursuit of better sound. One consequence of that pursuit, however, has also been steep prices for statement turntables, ranging from Walker Audio to Continuum Labs, from Brinkmann to Clearaudio. How many of these improvements have actually been trickling down to the new, less expensive turntables that have also appeared in the past few years?

VPI's \$1650 Aries Scout turntable offered a fine opportunity to investigate that question. VPI's Harry Weisfeld, who makes no secret of his dismay at the soaring prices demanded by his competitors, has always tried to hold the line on cost. He believes that by manufacturing his 'tables in the U.S., he can offer the most bang for the buck. The longevity of his company suggests that he may be on to something.

Weisfeld's determination to offer value hardly means that he has been sitting still. On the contrary, he obsessively seeks to refine his turntables. In the past few years, he has enjoyed a creative resurgence, retooling his entire line while continuing to provide upgrade paths for owners of earlier models. The HR-X, which I have used and enjoyed since it was introduced, is VPI's most expensive 'table. The Scout is its least. It was thus with



more than a pinch of curiosity that I settled in to hear how they compared.

When I opened up the box, I have to admit that I was immediately smitten by the Scout's looks. Here was no fussy, tweaky turntable, but a slender, elegant creation that could fit most equipment racks. The plinth and feet display admirable rigidity. The JMW-9 arm comes with an anti-skate device. And a small single motor drives the acrylic platter (speed can be adjusted from 35rpm to 45rpm by moving the belt downward to a larger section of the spindle). Still, I was a little unsure about how the Scout would actually sound. The HR-X, with its new 12.7 arm, had reached such a level of performance the previous evening that I was hard-pressed to see how the Scout could even remotely compete. To keep the playing field level, I installed the Dynavector XV1-S cartridge that I had been using on the HR-X in the Scout's JMW-9 tonearm.

The first LP that I played was a Columbia pressing of Duke Ellington's *Piano in the Background*. As the orchestra launched into "Happy Go Luck Local," I was initially perplexed. I was expecting something like what my first turntable, the Linn LP12, had produced—a pleasant but somewhat congested sound that bogged down when passages became extremely complex. The Scout did nothing of the kind. It zipped through crescendos and reproduced Ellington's last chord, a kind of thunderous exclamation mark, with depth and authority. The nuances and inflections of the saxophones were captured with eerie precision.

Initially, I thought I must be deluded. So I went on to pull out trumpeter Harry Edison's Verve LP *Mr. Swing*. Now my perplexity began to turn to admiration. Seldom have I heard the smoothness of Edison's trumpet conveyed as well as it was by the Scout. Its ease and freedom were obvious. There was no sense of overhang; Edison's trumpet limpidly soared, hesitated, and then plunged back into the musical fray on "Baby, Won't You Please Come Home." Fascinated, I began pulling out album after album. Benny Goodman? The Three Sounds? Not a problem for the Scout. Again and again, I was impressed by its clarity. If you wanted to use a fancy term, I suppose you would say that it explored the interstices of the music with great finesse. This was particularly evident on jazz recordings, where the musicians love to play ahead of or behind the beat to keep things swinging properly.

The thing that impressed me most about the Scout was its effervescent character. Perhaps its low mass and acrylic platter are responsible for the sense that it just wants to boogie. While the less expensive 'table doesn't convey a feeling of grandeur like the HR-X, which does a magnificent job of conveying hall space, I couldn't help feeling that the Scout might be nimbler than its big brother. The notes just popped out of it with no sense of delay. I also wondered whether the presentation of the Scout might not be more coherent. Perhaps this was because it doesn't try to portray as large a sonic portrait as the HR-X.

Nevertheless, I didn't feel that the Scout was lacking in this

regard. For example, I thought that the Scout might falter on a big orchestral piece. But it didn't. I was deeply moved by its rendering of the wonderful recording of Fritz Reiner conducting the Chicago Symphony in Brahms Piano Concert No. 2, played by the Russian pianist Emil Gilels. In the Andante, the Scout beautifully evoked the initial interplay between clarinet and cellos before the piano makes its understated and dignified entrance. Would the HR-X have presented this even more vividly and powerfully? Absolutely. But the Scout drew me into the music so much that I never thought about what might be missing.

If all you're hearing is mechanical reproduction, you're on the fastest road to audiophile frustration, unless you can achieve that sense of emotional connection to the music. For me that moment came most poignantly listening to the youthful Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's performance of the "Grecian Gods" on a mono Angel blue label. The song, which exemplifies the 19th-century German

infatuation with ancient Greece, is one of Schubert's most moving. At its conclusion, Dieskau mourns, "Lovely world, where are you?" and then, in triple pianissimo haltingly murmurs, "Where are you?" I was mesmerized by the Scout's ability to capture this haunting passage by maintaining Dieskau's incredibly subtle dynamics.

How much of this was due to the exemplary Dynavector XV1-S cartridge? Oh, probably a lot. I continue to think that it's one of the best cartridges available. Still, to my mind, there is no doubt that the Scout is a frighteningly good performer. In boxing lingo, it fights way above its weight class.

The Scout will not satisfy everyone, but then that's why VPI has a whole upgrade path. Just going from the acrylic to the new 35-pound "super platter" on the HR-X, for example, endowed it with a weight and power and a sense of black backgrounds that it had not previously possessed. What the Scout does show, however, is that, yes, more costly innovations are indeed filtering down to budget 'tables. The result is that audiophiles have more options than ever before. And without a doubt, the Scout is a fabulous one. **TAS**

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Specs & Pricing

Type: Belt-driven turntable

Wow and flutter: Less than .02%

Speed accuracy: Within .1%

Dimensions: 18 1/2" x 14" x 6"

Weight: 32 lbs.

Price: \$1650

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

EMM Labs DCC2 DAC and CDS transport; Messenger preamplifier and phono stage; Pass XVR-1 active crossover; Jena labs cabling and Shunyata power cords; VTL 750 monoblock and Nagra Pyramid amplifiers; Magnepan 20.1 loudspeakers

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