

Spin Cycle

Vinyl junkie Allan Walton finds a worthy American in the VPI Aries Scout turntable

At first glance, the Scout looks plain and simply made, the plinth being manufactured from a 1-1/8 inch sheet of MDF.

However, closer examination shows the wealth of fine detail that has gone into this turntable's design.

The underside is covered with a steel sheet to aid rigidity, while damping is reduced by a sealant. Four aluminium cones support the plinth. Look at the tip of the cones and you'll see an inset ball-bearing to further isolate the table from outside vibrations. A thick, 1.5-inch acrylic platter mates to the plinth via a tooled steel shaft, which in turn runs in a sintered bronze inverted bearing. The whole assembly is securely bolted to the plinth.

Motive power is provided by a Hurst 5.5w AC synchronous motor. This is a separate unit which simply sits in a cut-out in the plinth. It's not as powerful as the motors VPI uses in its more expensive tables, but at 1.8kg, the Scout's platter is not overly heavy. Drive is taken from the motor to the platter via a long rubber belt, which wraps around the outside circumference of the platter itself – an idea originally thought up by British turntable designer Keith Michell. The motor armature is topped with a two-speed pulley, making minor speed adjustments a snap.

So far so good, but it's when you check out the Scout's JMW-9 tone arm you know that VPI's designer,

Harry Weisfeld, has really gone for broke.

Design first

For those, like me, more accustomed to arms such as the SME Series V, the JMW-9 is a bit of a revelation. Quite literally, the arm simply sits atop the arm-mount collar. Once mounted, the work of seconds, the arm is free to rock around as it will – the point of connection to the actual arm-mount being restricted to the contact of a super-sharp tungsten-carbide point on the arm-mount collar which fits into a cup on the inside mount of the arm base. It feels a little insecure at first, but you soon get used to it. A weighted ring is attached to the rear of the tone arm. This not only stabilises the arm on its mount but, because the mass of the ring has been carefully altered around its perimeter, it can be adjusted to the left or right. In effect, this alters the tilt of the upper bearing assembly and provides a useful way of adjusting cartridge azimuth.

Test equipment

Oceania, the NZ distributor of the Scout Aries, supplied us with a Grado Gold moving coil cartridge – which stands towards the middle of Grado's range. I haven't had the chance to audition a Grado before, so this was a first.

Power for our test was supplied by a stylish Unico 80w amplifier, which fed into a pair of Klipsch RF-35 floor-standing speakers.

The Unico wasn't supplied with a phono-stage board and, as any vinyl spinner will tell you, a good phono-stage is an essential for any turntable. The good guys at Perreaux came to the rescue with their Perreaux Silhouette SXV1 – a nice bit of Kiwi kit. So, with the Perreaux' dip-switches adjusted for the Grado, it was time to begin.

Decoding the grooves

I have to admit that I entered into this turntable test in rather a noisier frame of mind than I would do normally and, having already heard good reports of Harry Weisfeld's high-end VPI turntables, I was interested to see how the cheaper Aries Scout would handle something as serious as Chrome. I wasn't disappointed.

Chrome's *Third From the Sun* is not a particularly accessible album, without accurate transcription of the music encoded into the vinyl you'll never experience what's happening in the grooves – let alone be able to recognise instruments and notes from voices and electronic squeaks and squawks. I know from experience if this disc is spun up on a poor turntable, it simply turns into a solid wall of indistinguishable noise, so this was a bit of a test for the Scout. It's a

test my trusty old Roksan handles quite well, even with a rather too mellow-sounding Ortofon MC30 cartridge.

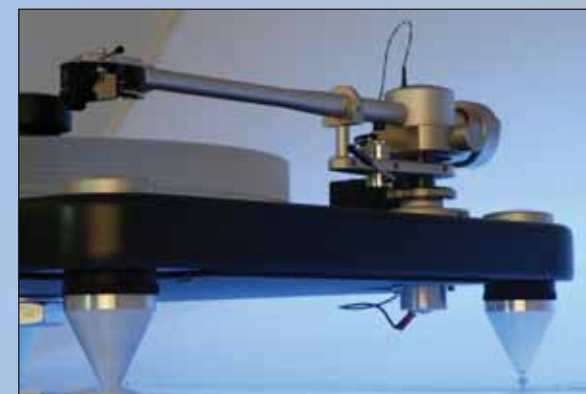
The Aries was well up to the job – and the Grado Gold cartridge supplied was mostly able to keep up with the table and arm combination.

In direct comparison to my Roksan, the Aries sounded as if it gave a marginally sharper-edged tone – illustrating, I suspect, the difference between a dampened and non-dampened turntable. Perhaps, as well, this also shows the difference between US and British turntable design. I would have liked to sample the Aries in direct comparison to a Linn Sondek LP12, but instead made do with my own Roksan Xerxes. Like my Roksan, I would expect the LP12 to deliver a deeper, more mahogany-like tone. However, having said that, there is nothing unmusical about the Aries. Indeed, my Roksan occasionally struggles with bright, attacking contemporary music – and the Aries quickly proved it could take this type of music in its stride.

British vs US

The following day, having removed the Ortofon cartridge from my Roksan (untouched, apart from stylus replacement, in almost 15 years), I installed it in place of the Grado on the JMW-9 arm.

I must've been



feeling more mellow than I had been the previous day, and it was time for something less noisy than Chrome.

First up was Sir Adrian Boult's classic HMV recording of Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*. The Scout put on a stunning show here, accurately reproducing the beautiful wind instrument passages at the opening of Part Two, catching the choral pianissimos perfectly. I was beginning to be seriously impressed.

Moving on to Haitink's HMV Digital recording of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, the Scout maintained its composure, effortlessly handling Gruberová's brilliantly powerful portrayal of the *Queen of the Night*. Perhaps even more importantly, the turntable never produced anything

other than pure music – well done Mr Weisfeld!

The Scout really allowed Mozart to spring to life, realising an effective and well figured sound-stage, with an almost total absence of colouration.

After several hours of concentrated listening, the combination of the Scout, the JMW-9 tone-arm and my old MC30 cartridge was really growing on me. Later that

The Numbers

Belt-drive transcription turntable
Tone Arm JMW-9
Dimensions W/H/D
487 x 115 x 359mm
Weight: 16.8kg
www.vpiindustries.com



evening, with the Ortofon safely returned to the head shell of my SME arm and Roksan, I spun up *Die Zauberflöte* again. Surprisingly, even though I have lived with the Roksan for over 20 years, I found that my ears were leaning towards the Scout.

Without doubt, the Scout is one of the best turntables I

have auditioned for quite some time. And take a look at the price! It may not be super cheap, but measure it against the big daddy of turntables – the LP12 – and it's a positive bargain. You may be paying less, but this effortlessly musical and beautifully designed turntable is nothing less than a wet dream for audiophiles. ■



Perraux Silhouette SXV1 phono stage

Tone RATES		★★★★★	★★★★★
PRODUCT:	VPI Aries Scout turntable / JMW-9 tone-arm	Tone RECOMMENDS	PRICE: Aries Scout: \$3895 Grado cartridge: \$289
+	Great to look at • Even better to listen to • Supremely musical – what more could you ask for in an audiophile turntable?	-	Only that there isn't one hooked up to my home hi-fi system!
IN SHORT:	Can't afford a Linn Sondek LP12? Check out the Scout Aries – it offers high-end performance at an unbeatable price		

