

TEMPTATIONS

EXPENSIVE, YES. BUT YOU
KNOW YOU WANT THEM

VPI Prime 21+

- Turntable
- £6500
- ★★★★★



Image: VPI

This year's changes have brought a smarter, more conventional look



"The most obvious difference is to the tonearm, which now has a gimbal bearing design rather than a uni-pivot"

WHAT HI-FI?

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



FOR

- Bold and controlled presentation
- Dynamic expression and insight
- Solid build

AGAINST

- Tough competition at this level
- Manual speed change

VERDICT

The Prime 21 builds on its impressive predecessor and is one of the class leaders at this level

VPI's Prime record player has been something of a favourite of ours since we reviewed it back in 2015. Since then, it has become one of our go-to recommendations for anyone wanting a true taste of high-end vinyl replay without a five-figure budget.

The new Prime 21 (the number signifies the model year) aims to build on that solid foundation with a series of well-considered changes aimed at improving performance, ease of use and cosmetics.

There are two versions of this deck. The '+' model we have on test here includes the brand new VPI Shyla moving-coil cartridge (custom made by Audio Technica) and the company's Weisline tonearm cable (manufactured by Nordost). The base version of the 21 comes without these two options and costs £4500.

A CALL TO REARM

While this deck is instantly recognisable as a Prime, VPI's changes have resulted in a smarter but more conventional deck. The most obvious difference is to the tonearm, which now has a gimbal bearing design rather than the less common uni-pivot of the original. It seems that some people took against the wobbling that's part and parcel of a uni-pivot when it's being handled (but not when it's actually playing a record).

This new arm is a 10.5-inch, 3D-printed design that feels less fussy in use than its predecessor. It's easy to set up and the bearings feel smooth, although we can detect a small amount of play in its fore/aft movement. VPI claims the new arm marks an improvement in performance over the original, but it's hard to verify that without a side-by-side aural comparison.

As before, arm bias can be set in two ways. There's a pivoted mechanism that adds suitable sideways force, or a tried and trusted VPI method where the innate tension in the twisted tonearm connection wire (the looped piece of cable that emerges from the back of the arm) supplies the outward force. Either method works well.

Another obvious generational change is to the Prime's feet, which are now the same isolating designs as used on the company's £15,000 HW40 deck introduced last year. These should make this deck less susceptible to external vibrations than before.

The 43mm-thick curvy plinth looks much the same as on the previous model, but is now made up of a 3mm aluminium top plate on an MDF base, rather than having a steel plate tacked onto the underside as before. In both cases, the metal is intended to add rigidity and damping to the structure. There's now a choice of two plinth finishes: the original black or a rather nice walnut option for the MDF section.

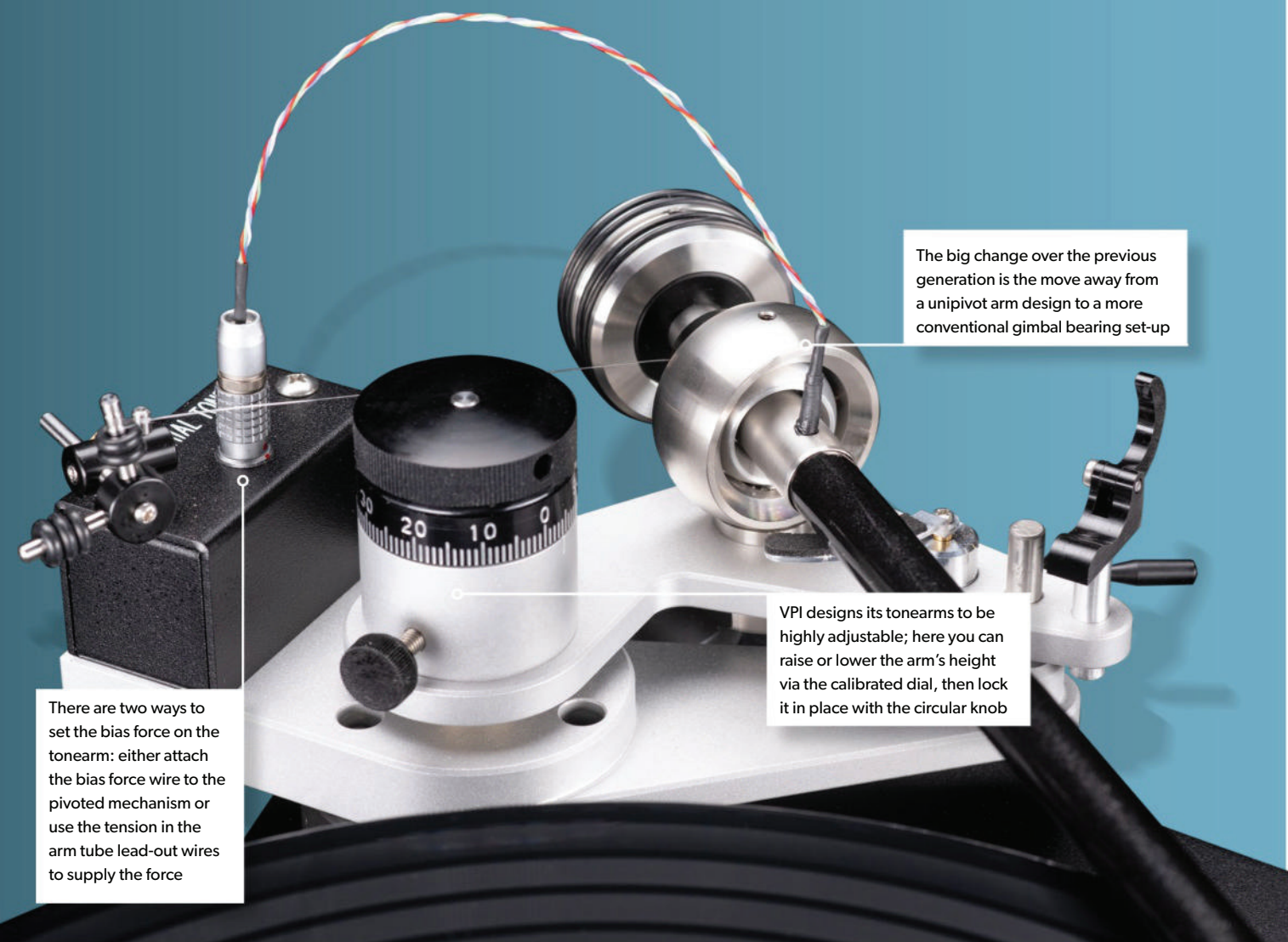
NICE NEW MOTOR

The detached AC motor unit has also been tweaked. It still has the same substantial high-mass aluminium casework to control resonances, but the internal control circuit has been updated to help speed stability. The speed change from 33½ to 45rpm is done manually by moving the belt from one step on the motor pulley to the next. We would prefer an electronic option, but this works well enough.

As before, the VPI's main bearing is an inverted design that uses a hardened steel shaft, a 60 Rockwell hardened chrome ball and a phosphor bronze bushing completed by a PEEK (polyether-ether-ketone) thrust disc. It's designed for precision and low noise, as well as longevity. That chunky platter is still machined from bonded 6061 aluminium and has a damping plate made of MDF. The whole lot weighs in at a substantial 9kg.

There's now a felt mat supplied for those who don't like the idea of putting their cherished vinyl directly on the beautifully machined surface as in the last model. You can still use the deck without the mat, and we'd be tempted to do so as the Prime's sound is a little clearer and more sharply etched when used this way.

□ IN DETAIL...



The big change over the previous generation is the move away from a unipivot arm design to a more conventional gimbal bearing set-up

VPI designs its tonearms to be highly adjustable; here you can raise or lower the arm's height via the calibrated dial, then lock it in place with the circular knob

There are two ways to set the bias force on the tonearm: either attach the bias force wire to the pivoted mechanism or use the tension in the arm tube lead-out wires to supply the force

"In performance terms, this moving-coil is certainly good enough to compete with similarly priced alternatives"

The screw-on steel/Delrin record clamp remains unchanged. Having tried the player with and without, we'd say the clamp is well worth using for the improvement in focus and sonic authority it gives the 21's presentation.

This deck isn't a particularly large unit by high-end standards. Measuring 52cm wide and 40cm deep, it should fit on the top shelf of most supports. Despite VPI's attempts to design in isolation, it still pays to use a rigid, low-resonance platform for the best results.

Make sure everything is level before you start to set up the deck; it also helps to keep the support as far from the speakers as practical to reduce the amount of vibration fed into the turntable's structure. You'll get a better sound.

This deck is designed to be easy to set-up. Not only does the company provide a manual on USB, it also includes a handy video. On our early sample, these were for the original Prime, but there's enough of an overlap between the models for the instructions still to be useful. VPI supplies an electronic stylus scale to help set the tracking force accurately, as well as a nifty alignment gauge for getting the cartridge in exactly the right position. We wish more manufacturers were this thoughtful.

STRAIGHTFORWARD SET-UP

The company claims that this turntable package can be up and running in around 20 minutes; and that proves to be the case, provided you've set-up a record player before. Apart from the option of choosing which arm bias arrangement to use, there's nothing unusual or quirky here. Our '+' version comes with the cartridge already fitted and aligned, which saves a bit of work.

The Shyla moving coil works without issue into our usual Cyrus Phono Signature/PSX-R2 phonostage. We adjust the phonostage's input loading to the recommended 100 ohms, and set the cartridge's tracking weight to 1.9g, and it all works well. In performance terms, this moving-coil is



The revised design for the feet is taken from the company's £15k HW-40 deck

certainly good enough to compete with similarly priced alternatives from the established cartridge manufacturers.

The rest of the system is our usual reference set-up, which comprises a Burmester 088/911 Mk 3 amplifier and ATC SCM50 speakers. We also give Naim's SuperNait 3 integrated amp a go, to see how the VPI performs with more price-compatible kit.

SOUNDS FAMILIAR

Anyone familiar with the Prime turntable will find the 21's sound instantly recognisable, but also improved when it comes to clarity and precision. This is an immensely confident record player. It sounds big and bold, but underpins that with a pleasing level of subtlety when the music demands.

We start with Orff's *Carmina Burana* and are impressed with the VPI's sonic scale and authority. It's rare to find a deck at this level that sounds so composed and controlled. There's plenty of detail and it's organised in a musically cohesive way.

We love how this record player renders large-scale dynamic shifts and backs them up with a thrilling sense of power. There's plenty of punch when the music demands, but also an ability to track low-level instrumental strands, even when the music becomes complex.

Tonally, we find that the VPI comfortably lives up to our expectations of a player at this level. The Prime 21+ package sounds even, open and convincing. This is an impressively even-handed performer that handles the balance between bite, body and refinement well.



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Stereo imaging is good too, with an open and expansive soundstage layered with carefully placed instruments and voices. Importantly, things don't become jumbled when the music erupts. Those familiar with *Carmina Burana* will know that there's no shortage of dynamic excesses and dense instrumentation in this piece.

We switch to *Light A Fire* by Bob Marley and the Wailers, and this VPI continues to shine. While it doesn't quite have the rhythmic snap of Rega's similarly priced Planar 10 or the sheer drive of Vertere's cheaper DG-1 package, neither of those alternatives sounds quite so solid and authoritative.

On the track *Kinky Reggae*, the bass is firm and deep, underpinning the rest of the presentation impressively. Marley's voice comes through with clarity and passion, and is nicely separated from the instrumental backdrop.

During testing, we make a point of taking in a wide range of music, from *Kind Of Blue* by Miles Davis to Springsteen's *Born To Run*, and this VPI never disappoints or feels out of its depth.

A STEP FORWARD

There's punch here, coupled to a sense of power and a degree of insight that puts this deck among the class leaders. This is a hugely capable and rounded package that has a wide range of sonic talents that work across musical genres.

Add solid build, ease of set up and the generous supply of accessories in the box, and it's clear that VPI has pushed its Prime turntable a useful step forward. If you're looking for a record-playing package at this level, this one simply has to be on the shortlist.