



What Goes Around Comes First: VPI TNT Jr.

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I. A Hoary Anecdote to Gain Perspective

Twenty-five years ago, a group of audio enthusiasts met one night in Houston to compare the best of turntable technology with the best of the new-fangled compact disc players. At the time I was young and broke, and attended these gatherings to hear equipment I couldn't afford.

We expected the CD player to pound the daylights out of the turntable: Gordon Holt had promised it would be thus. The CD player was a Kyocera – remember them? The underdog in this competition was a Pierre Lurne table in gleaming black with a sleek SME arm, and a Talisman cartridge.

You know what happened. The sound of digital in the late 1970's was grainy, harsh, and altogether intolerable. The rich guy who owned the hotshot CD player grumbled and swore after the Lurne demolished his Kyocera. I went back to my efficiency apartment and played music on a Thorens 125 with a Grado cartridge. It sounded very musical.

As circumstances permitted I bought a Rega 3 (modest improvement over the Thorens) and then a Linn (substantial step up from the Rega), and since then have bought all the improvements the factory issues. By now the LP 12 has canonical status in the hifi world: you may own some other turntable, but no one ever criticizes the Linn sound.

Recently I replaced the Linn Ekos tonearm cable with a Harmonic Technology product. My cartridge remains the very clean and fast Ikeda.

II. The Escatology of Analogue

Lazy hifi journalists fill pages of rumination about the decline/demise of analogue and the ascension/apotheosis of digital. Since I'm not paid by the word, I will dispense with that, and come to the point: it's irrelevant. The only important development in analogue is that your next turntable is probably going to be your last.

This circumstance is not lost on the people who want to provide that final product. In fact, one importer refused to let me review his table when I stated my intention to compare it with my Linn LP 12. I think you should be given a useful perspective for comparison. After all, we're talking substantial amounts of money for a product which is tricky to evaluate in a dealer's shop, harder to borrow than a CD player, and quite difficult to find with the desired arm and cartridge configuration.

III. VPI vs. LP 12

VPI sent me a TNT Jr., the cheapest of the company's upper level TNT group of

products, with many of the same elements as the most expensive unit, but with a simplified suspension and the platter from the lower level HW-19. If you so desire and finances permit the Jr. can be upgraded to Mark V status in stages. This runt of the litter has a 25"x19" footprint, which means that it won't fit on some stands. It doesn't have a vacuum hold-down, but neither do any of the other TNT's, because the designer thinks they degrade the sound. Price: \$3,000.

Another lazy journalist trick is to waste pages on setting up the 'table. This is the dealer's job. If for some reason a VPI turntable arrives on your doorstep without a dealer, however, don't despair: assembly takes less than thirty minutes.

The factory was kind enough to mount its JMW 12.5 tonearm, a 12-inch-long unipivot design. Do the extra three inches of arm tube translate into less tracking error and thus lower distortion? Without a shorter unit of comparable quality, it's impossible to say.

This is the first tonearm I've used without antiscatter adjustment. VPI says that every mechanism that compensates for the arm's drift also produces an unacceptable coloration. The tonearm cable leaving the pivot can be twisted before it enters a terminal block, so it is possible to generate a little lateral force, but there is no dial. You get to choose the interconnect from terminal block to phono stage, a feature I find very attractive. There's an adjustment for VTA which can be dialed in during play. Since the factory prepared Jr. with the arm base already mounted, I can't comment on how difficult the procedure would be. Price: \$2,800.

A Dynavector XX-2, a low-output (0.25 mV) moving coil cartridge with an aluminum body, was already mounted on the tonearm. This \$2,500 product uses Alnico magnets and copper coils. Harry Weisfeld, who builds the VPI, remarks that Dynavectors are among the few cartridges that meet their specifications.

The first and most prominent feature of the TNT sound is bass: deep, tonally accurate, rhythmic low frequencies. The opening *Ein Deutsches Requiem* has bowed string basses that establish the mood for the entire composition. On the TNT, the sound is profoundly emotional and just a little frightening. For those who doubt that Quad 57s are capable of reaching into the low 40 Hertz range, here is proof.

In comparison the Linn lets you know that there's something going on in the bass; but it's not as tightly defined and articulate. This brought to mind the day (yet another ancient tale) when I asked Ivor Tiefenbrun when Linn Products would bring out a subwoofer. At this point in hifi history Linn had many terrific, groundbreaking products and I wanted something wonderful to produce the bottom octave of music. Ivor said bluntly that I should get an LP 12: his turntable would generate musical bass. Well, I did; but the VPI is better.

It's not so much the quantitative difference from the LP 12 that caught my attention as the qualitative: with the VPI there was a link from Klemperer (still my favorite on this piece) all the way back to Brahms.

The next thing is soundstaging. I am not obsessed with image width, but the difference is easy to observe: with the VPI, orchestras stretch across my listening area from side to side and back to back. The Linn is precise about placement, but doesn't throw that sort of image.

After the table and cartridge had fifty or one hundred hours to break in I noticed there was more dynamic range – not a vast difference, but enough to make me pay attention to passages in familiar performances.

What part does the Dynavector play in this story? My impression is that the cartridge has a very solid bottom end with a smooth but not overly romantic midrange and top. Mr. Weisfeld describes it as more neutral than the Koetsus, but not bleakly analytical. I would point out that this cartridge, which was a perfect complement to the VPI, is substantially cheaper than most Koetsus and other highly regarded cartridges.

After a while these differences made me think of the Linn as a minimonitor, and the VPI as a full range, floor standing loudspeaker. I have enjoyed little speakers since the BBC LS3/5A arrived in America, but switching back to larger systems always reminds me of how music gets truncated by the little guys. That's the sense I would like you to get from this report: it's not that the Linn is deficient – far from it – but the VPI delivers more of the music. These differences aren't gigantic, but they are apparent.

IV. VPI vs. CD

Digital has gotten so much better that many reviewers have promised me that the gap which yawned so wide twenty-five years ago has closed – or even opened in the opposite direction, with digital delivering more musical truth than analog.

Certainly it has seemed that way. In my house we use Dr. Forsell's transport and DAC, and the difference between it and the LP 12 seemed slight. Most of the time I could tell that digital wasn't as good as analog, but the convenience of CDs outweighed the small sacrifice in detail and texture.

That compromise does not apply with the VPI. The turntable is so far ahead of digital that it might as well be 1979 again. There is no musically relevant parameter in which the turntable doesn't beat CD equipment; and the digital stuff is far more expensive than the VPI.

V. VPI vs. VAC

The bigger version of my reference amplifier, which comes from Vacuum Amplification Company, was described in another magazine as the single most significant piece of gear heard in the past decade. I am reluctant to make that sort of statement, even though I have never heard an amp I like better.

Is the VPI in the same category? It has lifted my system up a notch or two from its already high position. In unofficial comparisons I think it sounds better than my friends' Clear and Well Tempered tables. The Clear strikes me as a little stiff, constraining the music, while the WT sounds a little dull in comparison. A lot of variables influence the overall sound, including cartridge, cable, setup, isolation and equipment downstream. Still, I favor the VPI.

Still Another Personal Note

I don't like reviewers who announce their listening experiences as life-changing, quasi-religious events. When I read how some product altered the writer's perception forever, I turn the page and read the advertisements. In this publication, obviously, there aren't any ads; and I'm not going to tell you that the VPI opened unfamiliar doors of perception. I will say this: the VPI gets more music out of the record groove than other machines I'm familiar with.

Another commonplace of audio reviews is the turntable obituary: analog is dead or at least very, very ill. If that is the case, you have a decision: should you buy one last example of the moribund species? The VPI TNT Jr. pounds the daylights out of digital formats available to me. Some day, perhaps soon, digital will reach a point of reproducing music that analogue reached a long time ago. Do you want to wait, or do you want to enjoy the vast repertoire of performances available on black vinyl now?

Decades after the digital-analogue shoot-out in Houston, adventurous rich people are still rushing out to buy the newest digital gimmick. My advice to you: buy the TNT and listen to the music.

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