

Wandering star

Boasting an in-built phono stage, headphone amp and cartridge for under £800, **Andrew Simpson** finds out how much VPI's new vinyl package has to offer



► **DETAILS****PRODUCT**
VPI Nomad**ORIGIN**
US**TYPE**
Turntable package
with built-in
headphone amp
and phono stage**WEIGHT**
5.9kg**DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
470 x 109 x 343mm**FEATURES**

- Belt-driven turntable with manual speed change
- 24V AC motor
- 10in tonearm
- Ortofon 2M Red cartridge supplied

DISTRIBUTOR
Renaissance Audio**TELEPHONE**
0131 5553922**WEBSITE**
renaissanceaudio.
co.uk; vpiindustries.
com

Choosing a turntable is never an easy business and often the more you spend the harder and more complex the choices become. After finding your preferred basic deck, you've then got to consider what cartridge to go for to complement your tonearm, and which phono stage will get the best out of your cartridge while allowing for upgrades further down the line, all of which makes choosing a CD player seem like child's play in comparison. That's why for many a plug-and-play vinyl solution makes a lot of sense, provided the components are carefully chosen and quality prevails over convenience.

Step forward New Jersey's VPI Industries, a company renowned for its high-end decks usually with four-figure price tags. Its new Nomad package, however, is firmly pitched at new vinylistas or those seeking a packaged solution that comes preinstalled with everything you need to listen to your LPs without busting the bank.

The Nomad takes over from the £1,650 Traveler as VPI's entry-level deck, and with more functionality to

Once unboxed, VPI proudly boasts a set-up time of four minutes

boot. It's the only model to include an onboard phono stage and headphone amp, both of which are built by local suppliers to VPI's spec before being tested and installed in its factory. Because the company has chosen to partner the Nomad with an Ortofon 2M Red pick-up, its internal phono stage is precision matched to the cartridge's output and loading requirements. So when the upgrade bug bites an obvious choice is a better stylus from further up the 2M range – given its styli are interchangeable, with similar outputs and loading figures to match.

The Nomad's headphone amp was originally designed with iGrado cans in mind, which VPI planned to include in the box with the Nomad. VPI rethought this approach, deciding to let customers choose their own cans and invested this saving in the Nomad's metal platter bearing instead, which gives better results than the early plastic prototypes.

As with all VPI turntables, the Nomad sports an in-house tonearm and for this deck it's a simplified version of the Traveler's arm, with a ►



Hook up the Nomad directly to the line level input on any amp

stainless steel rod through the gimballed/yoke bearing. At 10in, it's longer than most 'standard' 9in arms in an effort to reduce tracking distortion. Unlike other VPI arms, the Nomad's doesn't rely on a loop of exposed arm wires for anti-skate, which adds to its simple lines and fuss-free user experience.

Textured black MDF is the order of the day for the deck's plinth and 26mm-thick platter. And while the felt mat that's supplied does the job, it feels a bit thin and flimsy in contrast to the rest of the deck, which is superbly finished with smoothly rounded corners and a brushed metal control panel that could shame decks at twice the price. UK-bound Nomads get the same 24V AC synchronous motor as US models, albeit with a different sized pulley and country-specific wall wart transformer that's sourced and tested in the UK. At 33rpm the motor runs silently, although with the belt on the larger 45rpm pulley there is some pulley noise, suggesting it still needs to bed in and ease a little.

Once unboxed, VPI proudly boasts a set-up time of four minutes, which lays down the gauntlet. Aside from levelling, fitting the round section rubber belt (which is a bit fiddly with

the platter's smooth edge), all that's left to do is set the arm's downforce for the preinstalled 2M Red. There's no printed scale on the steel counterweight, so VPI helpfully includes a piece of tape as a marker on the arm wand for where to slide the weight to for optimum downforce. Once set up, a quick glance at my stopwatch shows a little over eight minutes thanks to a slight struggle with the belt slipping and my insistence on using a proper tracking force gauge, adding a few necessary minutes.

Sound quality

With the Nomad feeding my Musical Fidelity preamp via line-level inputs, I get a sense of just how dynamic sounding this package is. Fleetwood Mac's *Isn't It Midnight* from *Tango In The Night* is an instant toe tapper, as the Nomad ensures the music is bristling with life. The track's opening drum beats burst from my Dynaudio loudspeakers and make their presence known across the soundstage with clarity and weight, before the accompanying instruments and Christine McVie's vocals kick in to fill the midrange and treble with lots of energy. With

this album, the Nomad lets you know how big a soundstage it's able to conjure, which is frankly on a scale I wasn't expecting given the deck's modest physical footprint and price. The Nomad highlights the marching percussion of *Caroline* as superbly mixed across the left and right channels, placing each beat well wide of my floorstanders' physical parameters, with the looping lead guitar hook voiced wider still.

While it may read like I'm stating the obvious by describing the Nomad's sonic signature as a very 'vinyl' sounding deck, what I mean by this is that it's not an overly clean or clinical machine. Instead this deck prefers to play to what many

Bass control and extension are notable weapons in the Nomad's arsenal

analogue fans love about vinyl, by presenting the music with a warmer quality that's easy on the ear for long term, fatigue-free listening.

Methane River from Bill Fay's self-titled debut album sounds organic and true to the era it was originally recorded, with the music adopting a lush, rich tone, which can be heard in the soft acoustic guitar strokes and fulsome bass. That said, I've known this LP to sound more polished on decks that go for a more analytical presentation. The Nomad lets the horn and string sections sound effortless and unforced, although on some sub-£1k decks the instruments extend from the soundstage with finer degrees of detail.

Punching above its weight

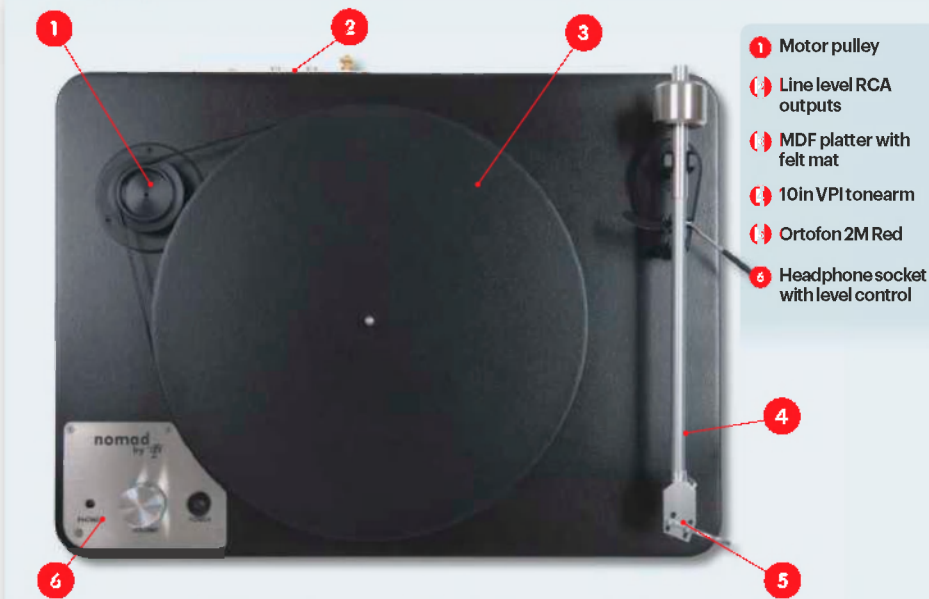
This is hardly surprising given that while doing a dandy job of punching above its weight in terms of separation and bass extension, the 2M Red cartridge is still an £85 pick-up nonetheless, and the quality of the Nomad's arm is certainly worthy of a better cartridge before you'll reach its performance ceiling. Swapping the 2M Red's stylus for the 2M Blue with its improved nude elliptical diamond at £130 (*HFC 375*) brings extra accuracy and clarity to the Bill Fay track, while retaining its rootsy natural sounding tone, revealing that the Nomad's sound welcomes extra fine tuning from a better sounding stylus, or cartridge when funds permit.

Bass control and extension are also notable weapons in the Nomad's



If it's a turntable package you're after then Pro-Ject's £285 Essential II Phono USB with supplied Ortofon OM5e pick-up is the deck to start with. It boast in-built phono stages but lacks a headphone amp, although you do get a USB output as the model name suggests. Alternatively £550 buys you Rega's RP3 and Elys 2 pick-up package with sonics of a similar pedigree to the Nomad's with lots of musical articulation but less bass, although you'll still need to budget for a phono stage and amp, perhaps from Rega's own budget stable.

INSIGHT



FAMILY MATTERS

Founded in 1978 by Harry and Sheila Weisfeld, VPI Industries burst on the scene with the HW-16 record cleaning machine. Then came a series of high-end decks and tonearms, including the JMW Memorial arm, in memory of their son Jonathan.

Since taking the company reigns in recent years, VPI President Mathew

Weisfeld has been on a mission to make quality vinyl replay more accessible, enticing new audiences back to the beloved LP.

First came the £1,650 Traveler deck in 2012, which was inspired by and served as a tribute to Mat's late mother Sheila. Perhaps fittingly, the Traveler started life as a rough sketch

by Mat on the back of an airplane bag on the way home from CES 2012 and signaled a step in a new direction for VPI as a move into high-end/entry-level territory. The Nomad is the next step in this journey and has caused a stir on VPI's native US soil since its launch, as this Bloomberg TV feature reveals: bloom.bg/1rV4wgu.

sonic arsenal. The overemphasised rumbling low end of Interpol's *Untitled from their Turn On The Bright Lights* LP can sound laborious on some lightweight vinyl spinners as it quickly blurs into a murky groan that swamps the soundstage, but with the Nomad in the driving seat, bass notes are kept in check and given the space to extend without becoming overwhelming. The Nomad's bass notes aren't lightning fast, but nor are they in any way sluggish, and the resulting start and stop of bass guitar strings and kick drums resonate with natural sustain.

Pitching the Nomad's headphone output against my dedicated Musical Fidelity M1 HPA headphone amp (HFC 339) reveals this is no mere add on feature and can hold its own against some very serious standalone headphone amplifier competition. Sticking with the Interpol album via the NYC track and armed with a pair of AKG K 242 HD over-ear headphones reveals that while the Nomad has ultimately less finesse and soundstage depth than the Musical Fidelity, it's well rounded across the board with plenty of bass presence and midrange/treble articulation that makes for an involving sound without being too forward.

Conclusion

With its built-in phono stage, headphone amp and supplied 2M Red cartridge, the VPI ticks plenty of boxes in offering a college-friendly complete package for vinyl newbies, or those wanting an analogue front end with minimum fuss. Thankfully at its heart lies a well built and strong performing turntable with a top-notch tonearm for the money. It has clearly been engineered for a warm and traditionally analogue sound to show those looking to take a first step on their vinyl journey why this format is still relevant and even more rewarding in today's digital age ●

HIFI Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Rich analogue sound; quality build; features galore

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Basic platter mat; not as analytical as some sub-£1k decks

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Superb VFM from an established high-end brand with a sound and spec that belie its price

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

Q&A

Mathew Weisfeld

President of VPI Industries



AS: Given all the elements included in the Nomad package, what compromises have you made to keep its price competitive?

MW: To keep the price down we had to use more hard plastics and MDF materials on parts that would be made out of aluminium or stainless steel on a table like the VPI Scout. However, we didn't compromise on the parts that are most vital in creating the sound we have achieved with the Nomad, such as the platter bearing and the tonearm bearing, which both employ appropriate metals for sonic stability and quality. We also purchased supply components at a much greater quantity to help reduce prices. The Nomad isn't a money maker for VPI, it's a table that is important for furthering music in the industry.

Why have you specified an Ortofon 2M Red cartridge for the Nomad?

We decided on the 2M Red after demoing a lot of other quality entry-level cartridges and the Red won on price, sound quality and ease of set up. It really is a lot of cartridge for £85 and we love the consistent quality Ortofon offers in every unit.

What are you most proud of in what you've achieved with the Nomad?

In a word, its usability! I've always had an inclusive mindset about both the high-end music industry and life in general. Music is supposed to be fun and easy to join in with. There has long been the stereotype that you need to be an audio expert to handle a proper turntable. With the Nomad it is ready to play in less than four minutes after taking it out of the box. I'm proud of how the Nomad takes away the intimidation and lets the user focus on something important, like listening to music!