

Pro-Ject Pick it MC9

Designed to take advantage of Pro-Ject's 'balanced' phono preamps, this flag-waving moving-coil marks a departure from the brand's Ortofon-derived moving-magnets
 Review: **Jamie Biesemans Lab: Paul Miller**

As a major turntable manufacturer, Pro-Ject has a longstanding relationship with cartridge builders. This makes sense, as the brand likes to deliver decks ready to play, which requires an MM or MC. Previously, the Austrian company has bundled cartridges from Ortofon with its turntables in Europe, while Sumiko models are favoured in the US, but has lately been launching its own designs, including tweaked Ortofon models such as the Pick it 2M Silver and Pick it S2 C. The Pick it MC9 on test here is something else, though.

Arriving alongside a more affordable MC3 sibling, the MC9 is a low-output moving-coil selling for £1249 and aiming a lot 'higher' than previous Pro-Ject models. The company also claims to have designed and manufactured both its new MCs itself, albeit making use of parts supplied by an unnamed Japanese partner (and you don't have to be a world-class detective to spot clues pointing in the direction of Hana – see PM's Lab Report, p73). Assembly and quality control is completed in Europe.

Next to the advantages of being a manufacturer instead of relying on suppliers, the development of the MC9 ties into a broader business strategy. Last year Pro-Ject, and its CEO Heinz Lichtenegger, started beating the drum for balanced connections for turntables [see PM's boxout, p71]. This in turn requires – or becomes more feasible – with an MC cartridge, as they are more likely, by nature, to offer a balanced output.

BLACK MAGIC

This explains the release of Pro-Ject's MC9 and the £549 MC3, plus the entry-level Pick it PRO Balanced (£179), a collaboration with Ortofon that's immediately recognisable as inspired by one of the Danish brand's products. That's not the case with the MC9, however, which boasts a streamlined all-aluminium body finished in a simple anodised black. This might be less visually striking than the metallic-blue of the MC3 but makes its positioning clear for anyone coming out of the Ortofon universe, where the colour black signals the top tier in the both the Quintet and 2M lines.

The MC9 has a boron cantilever, subjected to a cryogenic treatment said to realign the crystal structure for 'smoother' signal transmission, and ending in a 'Special Elliptical' stylus. This shape (or, at least, the name), has been used before by Pro-Ject on its moving-magnet Pick it models.

The MC9's moving cross coil features a Talar 57 pure iron pole piece with 6N linear crystal copper windings, delivering a claimed 0.35mV output.

Compared to some cartridges, the MC9 is a doddle to setup. There are no visually



ABOVE: The all-black anodised alloy body is smart and, with those straight lines, easy to setup and align. A 100ohm loading is recommended while higher loads up to 1kohm reveal a 'brighter' response [see Graph 1, p73]

misleading curves making alignment by eye challenging, nor difficult-to-reach bolt holes. Even without a more sophisticated tool, like Pro-Ject's Align it Pro, it's not hard to install correctly. Nonetheless, checking everything with a test record like Ortofon's *Accuracy In Sound* or Pro-Ject's own *Vinyl Essentials* remains necessary. As PM mentions in his Lab Report [p73], the MC9

performed better with a higher tracking force than prescribed by the manufacturer.

BALANCING ACT

Dialling in 2g on the digital scale delivered optimal results on my Pro-Ject X2 B deck [HFN Sep '22], which is fitted with a 9in carbon/aluminium sandwich tonearm. Although Pro-Ject states the MC9 is designed for low-compliance tonearms, it is better suited to those with a higher mass. The tonearm of the X2 B, weighing

13.5g, is close to the limit in that sense, making resonance possible at 12Hz. It depends on the system – and particularly the loudspeakers, and whether they are reflex-loaded – if that is an issue.

Lastly, there's a small indentation on the front of the cartridge, making it easy to drop – sorry, carefully lower – the needle into the space between tracks. Obviously, this is not a cart for a DJ deck, but even audiophiles sometimes want to skip an annoying first track...

COIL REFINERY

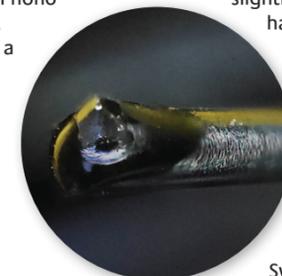
Fitting the MC9 to the Pro-Ject X2 B makes for a big leap forward on the upgrade path, considering the turntable costs about as much (£1399) as this cartridge. Pro-Ject's new pick-up is arguably intended for higher-end vinyl players, but the X2 B is a solid performer that can do better than the supplied Ortofon Quintet Red. In fact, I've already replaced that cartridge with a Quintet Bronze, enjoying its more refined presentation – and the MC9 proved able to repeat the trick. The signal path was completely balanced, passing from the X2 B turntable to Pro-Ject's Phono Box S3 B [also HFN Sep '22], and over dual XLR cables to a Primare pre/power system. Also present: a Ferrum Hypsos [HFN Mar '21] to power the turntable, and a Cork & Rubber it mat.

Pro-Ject makes claims about the MC9 offering a flat frequency response but hedges its bets by also



ABOVE: The MC9's alloy body includes a substantial top plate with threaded holes set at the 'regulation' 0.5in. Tight headshell mounting is a given with this cartridge

including the word 'audiophile' just before that statement. Smart, as both PM's Lab Report and my own listening paints a slightly different picture. The MC9 has a brighter, refined profile,



extracting a lot of resolution and dynamic richness from grander recordings. It's an MC that handles classical set pieces delightfully, but sometimes feels a little polite when confronted with more commercial recordings, such as Taylor Swifts *Midnights* [Republic

LEFT: Micrograph reveals the 5x150µm 'Super Elliptical' stylus glued – with minimum excess adhesive – onto a boron rod cantilever

Records 2445790081] or Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories* [Columbia/Sony Music 88883716861].

EYES WIDE SHUT

'Dream 3', the first track on the condensed 2015 version of Max Richter's epic *Sleep* [From *Sleep*; Deutsche Grammophon 00289 479 5296 GH], features a slowly played cello, which here made a striking entrance against a large scale background populated with sparse piano notes. This piece is a meditative experience, intended to literally get you to nod off. But before that happened, I managed to note there was bountiful midrange texture on offer and a more articulate treble than that heard through the Ortofon Quintet Bronze. And Pro-Ject's MC9 was particularly good at revealing micro-detail in the recording that enabled me to appreciate the ambience of a large church, both during 'Dream 3' and the following 'Path 5'.

Considering the nature of the full version of *Sleep*, the sacral feel to this ode to taking a nap is no accident. In its unabridged form Richter's composition lasts eight hours and has been performed multiples times as a sleep-over, with beds for the audience, in places like the Barbican and the Antwerp Cathedral. That's undoubtedly quite an experience, but listening to its shorter vinyl edition through the MC9 turned out to be satisfyingly



BELOW: Positive reinforcement from Pro-Ject as the 'Excellent choice!' salutation greets every new owner of the Pick it MC9 moving-coil

BALANCING ACT

Balanced input phono stages have typically been the preserve of high-end luminaries – Manley Labs had its limited edition Balanced Moving Coil RIAA Phono Stage in the 1990s, Ayre offered the P-5xe and Zesto the tube-based Andros Deluxe II [HFN Sep '21] with transformer-coupled XLR inputs and outputs. More recently, we've seen the ELAC Alchemy PPA-2 and MoFi MasterPhono [HFN Dec '23], both from the pen of designer Peter Madnick. Nevertheless it's the marketing machine behind turntable brand Pro-Ject – or, more correctly, its irrepressible CEO/president Heinz Lichtenegger – that has most comprehensively put the 'balanced' back into vinyl replay. Pro-Ject currently offers both the Phono Box S3 B [HFN Sep '22] and premium DS3 B alongside the 'full sized' M6x Vinyl and Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 [HFN Feb '24] from sister brand Musical Fidelity.

In practice the vast majority of MC pick-ups are balanced by design, with both the positive and negative arms of their minuscule coils floating from ground. By contrast most, but not all, MMs have their right (green) output pin connected to ground, just as the internal cabling of some tonearms is also earthed – it's worth checking the latter before 'going balanced'. Notwithstanding the duplication of gain stages within a balanced phono preamp, the combination of an MC's low source impedance and balanced output offers the promise of improved noise rejection and reduced distortion. Ordinarily you'll need to make up an adapter to suit the input of the balanced pre, but Pro-Ject is on the ball (again) by offering compatible connections and cables for its newest turntables. PM

CARTRIDGE

RIGHT: The alloy body may be quite compact (no bad thing for resonance control) but the gold-plated pins are still usefully spaced and clearly colour-coded

relaxing even as the cartridge's penchant for highlighting small details kept me engaged.

The MC9 enjoyed a home advantage when I played the Wiener Philharmoniker/Herbert Von Karajan recording of works by Richard Strauss [Decca 028948409617], as this 2019 re-release was supported by Pro-Ject. But 'Don Juan, Op.20' is also the kind of composition to which this pick-up feels particularly suited. A tone poem recorded in 1960, it contains a few crescendos, starting off with subtle strings that the MC9 displayed with a slight edge. And as the dynamics grew, its fast-paced performance ensured I was pulled into the recording.

BLAST FROM THE PAST

Similarly, both the harp and flute on 'Tod und Verklärung, Op.24' were impressively organic-sounding, communicating the sober tone of the introductory part, while the grand horns and percussion arrived with energetic blasts as they symbolised the struggle of Strauss's dying artist. It was engrossing stuff, and though the timpani felt at times a bit recessed, this was fully compensated by the sheer quality of the violins and weight of the horns.



ABOVE: As the boron cantilever emerges from the MC9's front yoke, the 'pure iron' cross coil and 6N copper windings are just visible behind



With Radiohead's *A Moon Shaped Pool* [XL Recordings XLLP790] the Pro-Ject MC9 cartridge did a great job bringing the stabbing strings at the start of 'Burn The Witch' into focus, a slightly manic musical element that was more present than I'm used to. Might the cartridge's treble lift, as noted in PM's Lab Report, be responsible? Probably, which also explains why some other instruments sounded more to the fore, like the piano now taking the lead more than ever in 'Daydreaming', or the reversed sample that repeats at the end. I'd never really noticed this during previous listening sessions, including how it fades off into the distance.

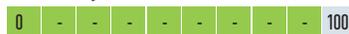
LISTEN AGAIN

As said, Pro-Ject describes its pick-up as audiophile-tuned. That's not a lie if you define audiophile as 'more detail and spaciousness'. Looked at from another angle, the MC9 also encourages you to listen again to records and experience them in a way that feels more revealing – especially when coming from a darker, more mainstream cart. 🎧

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Strictly, the MC9 is not an easily affordable upgrade for all Pro-Ject decks, but neither is it simply a rebranded Ortofon – two things we might have expected. Instead, it's a very capable MC that, partnered with a top-flight tonearm and deck, will deliver an audiophile listening experience. Extracting detail *and* dynamics, this precision pick-up is a worthy choice for consuming classical works and all refined recordings.

Sound Quality: 88%

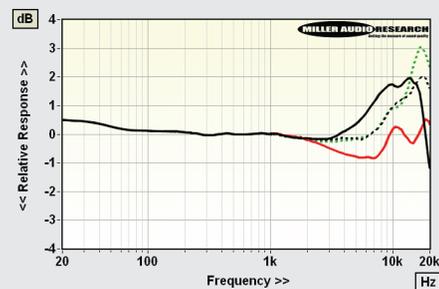


LAB REPORT

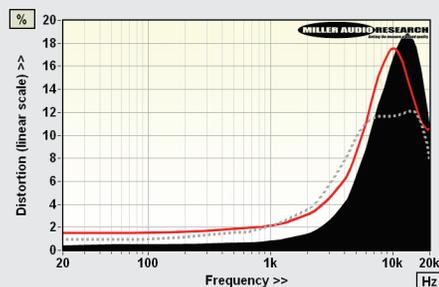
PRO-JECT PICK IT MC9

Although not specifically mentioned in Pro-Ject's literature, the MC9's cryogenically annealed mechanism, pole pieces and boron rod cantilever all *look* like examples manufactured by the Excel Corporation of Japan, and illustrated by the Hana Umami Blue in particular [Umami Red – *HFV* Dec '20]. The MC9 has its own solid alloy body and (possibly) slightly more cost effective 'Special Elliptical' 5x150µm stylus [see micrograph, p71] but output is marginally lower than specified at 315µV (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec into 100ohm) while the channel balance is below par at 0.8dB. That said, channel separation is excellent at ~35dB through the midrange while the frequency response is very extended, closely mirroring the 'shape' of the Umami Red with a rising treble reaching +2dB/19kHz (left) and +5dB/20kHz (right) with stereo cuts [dashed trace, Graph 1] and an asymmetric +2.0dB/-0.2dB at 14kHz with lateral [black]/vertical [red] cuts, respectively. The latter favours strong central stereo images while the high 18-19% distortion above 10kHz [-8dB re. 5cm/sec; see Graph 2] is simply a reflection of the MC9's extended ultrasonic bandwidth.

Pro-Ject suggests a relatively modest 1.8g downforce for the MC9 but as its low 8cu dynamic compliance is rather 'stiffer' than the rated 12cu not only is it better suited to heavy (20g+) effective mass tonearms but its tracking is secure only to 60-65µm groove pitches. It starts to let slip into mere +12dB grooves (re. 0dB at 315Hz/5cm/sec) at ~0.3% THD, increasing to ~3% at +15dB. With this, and the strong treble in mind (and the fact that VTA is closer to 28° rather than 20°) a higher 2.0g downforce is recommended. PM



ABOVE: Frequency responses (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral cut (L+R, black) vs. vertical cut (L-R, red) vs. stereo cut (100ohm, black dashed; 1kohm, green)



ABOVE: Lateral (L+R, black), vertical (L-R, red), stereo (dashed) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harms) vs. freq. from 20Hz-20kHz (-8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving-Coil / 9.6g
Recommended tracking force	16-19mN (18mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	315µV / 0.8dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	8cu / 10cu
Vertical tracking angle	28 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	60µm / 65µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.8-12% / 0.6-18%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+1.4 to +2.0dB / +2.2 to +5.8dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	35dB / 17dB