

Pro-Ject The Classic

Pro-Ject celebrates its 25th birthday in a very traditional way with the release of 'The Classic' turntable – a stylishly simple design that harks back to vinyl's heyday
 Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

When some companies celebrate a notable anniversary, it's often used as an opportunity to do something a little bit flashy. But Pro-Ject has always prided itself on spreading the vinyl message to as broad an audience as possible, so it will be no surprise to readers that on its silver anniversary the brand is offering a very accessible and suitably traditional turntable.

A NOD TO THE PAST

Aptly named The Classic, not only is its internal construction a nod to the past but so is its appearance. Its sleek, clean lines are a noticeable change from the curves of its RPM models [*HFN* Jan '16] and the generally shiny look of its 2Xperience line. So, in its own subtle way it still manages to stand out. Another surprise is that this deck does not bear a lofty price tag. Rather, the very reasonable cost of £799, including an Ortofon 2M Silver cartridge, means that virtually anyone can have a slice of this particular birthday cake.

The reason given by Pro-Ject's founder, Heinz Lichtenegger, for the deck's technology and appearance is quite simple. Basically, he intended it to be an affirmation of his roots in the hi-fi business while also ensuring that the underlying design was bang up to date. As Heinz recalls, his first hi-fi sales in the 1970s were all of turntables with a similar look. This was the era of Linn, Ariston, Thorens and the like, and the suspended subchassis in a wooden plinth was *de rigueur* at the time. In his first year, Heinz sold 50 Thorens TD166s and felt that Pro-Ject's milestone was the ideal time to re-visit that past. As he puts it 'I simply had to produce what I loved once...'

However, wanting his new creation to appeal to a 'non-hi-fi audience' as well as audiophiles, Heinz decided that the

complex set-up and regular fettling of a fully sprung assembly would not be ideal. He wanted the design to be as plug-and-play as possible, and so turned to a very modern alternative to the traditional spring-type suspension. A grade of Thermo Plastic Elastomer (TPE) was chosen for its ability to suppress particular frequencies and this is used in The Classic to provide isolation and damping in key places.

The Classic is based around a wooden frame into which the motor is fitted on a resilient mounting. Six TPE balls are located in recesses within this, and the main chassis plate sits on them. In some ways it recalls another 1970s design, the Leak 2001, which used fluid-filled sorbothane spheres to similar effect. Fortunately Pro-Ject's avoidance of fluid ameliorates the Leak's tendency to, well, leak!

The chassis plate supports the arm and main bearing and is a sandwich construction of metal and MDF. Once again, this eliminates any tendency to ring and ensures vibration is kept in check. The

bearing itself is derived from the Debut turntable, but is machined to tighter tolerances for higher performance. A light sub-platter is belt-driven from the motor and topped by the 2.1kg main platter that – while very traditional in appearance, again – has hidden extras. In practice it's a precisely machined aluminium item and features more of the TPE damping compound, located in a thick peripheral ring on the underside.

SPEED CHANGE WIDGET

Less elegant, perhaps, is the fact that The Classic's speed change is entirely manual, and while a small hook is provided to aid in moving the belt it has the feeling of being one of those small widgets that would soon vanish into the unknown. This is a little surprising for a deck aimed at non-audiophiles but, once again, is probably a quaint reference to classics of the past. While those good old Thorens designs had a mechanical speed change, many of the Aristons did not. As to the Linn, to



RIGHT: Simple, clean styling makes the best of The Classic's wooden plinth and hybrid carbon fibre arm. No arm securing clip is required, due to the rest's clever magnetic restraint



misquote Henry Ford – you could have any speed, as long as it was 33rpm!

Of greater import is Pro-Ject's brand new arm, known as the Classic Tonearm, which will be available separately in due course. This is very similar in appearance to some of Pro-Ject's existing arm designs but is rather different underneath the skin. Although the armtube appears to be another carbon fibre creation, it actually hides another aluminium tube beneath.

The result is a hybrid construction that aims to combine the stiffness of carbon fibre with the damping properties of a lightweight alloy. PM's Lab Report [see p37] suggests this has been a successful marriage, which should bode well for sound quality.

A nickel-finish counterweight, with integrated TPE damping, screws on to the rear of the arm to control tracking force. This is largely uncalibrated, but a basic stylus pressure gauge is provided. In addition, Pro-Ject's traditional thread-and-weight bias adjust system is retained, while the tube is adjustable for azimuth by loosening a screw near the bearing housing. The whole assembly is also height

adjustable for optimum VTA setting. My favourite feature of all, though, is the arm rest. Rather than using a clip to secure the arm here, the rest has a small but powerful magnet embedded in it, which acts on a small plate in the arm tube to 'suck' it into place – very neat!

To complete the traditional appearance of The Classic, which is available in matt Eucalyptus, Walnut and Rosenut finishes, a hinged lid is supplied and the plinth sits on three adjustable feet. Pro-Ject also supplies all the required set-up tools, some natty cotton gloves and a length of its own Connect-It E turntable interconnect cable. For the UK market, the deck comes pre-fitted with

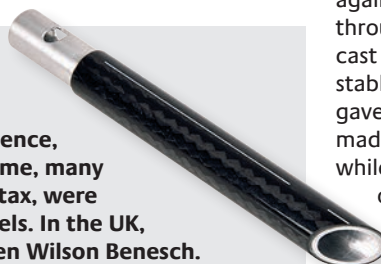
an Ortofon 2M Silver cartridge which is an MM design, based on the 2M Red, but with coils wound from silver rather than copper. Finally, while the platter is normally topped with a basic felt mat, distributor Henley Designs supplied our sample with a £20 Pro-Ject Cork-It cork mat.

CONTROLLED EBULLIENCE
I think Pro-Ject would struggle to make a bad turntable, but occasionally it comes

'The bass was beyond reproach in texture and pin-sharp timing'

THE RISE OF CARBON

The use of carbon fibre in tonearms really took off in the 1970s when designs such as the Infinity Black Widow and ADC LMF-1 and 2 models came into prominence, offering rigidity with low effective mass. At the same time, many Japanese manufacturers, including Sony, Pioneer and Stax, were quick to implement carbon fibre in their high-end models. In the UK, one of the most prolific exponents of carbon fibre has been Wilson Benesch. Its entire product portfolio is based around it and the ACT One arm, introduced in 1991, was its second-ever product. Other manufacturers such as Clearaudio, Opera Consonance and Nottingham Analogue have since followed suit. However, Pro-Ject can certainly claim to have the widest range of models on offer, and the most affordable with its Debut Carbon turntable [HFN May '12].



ABOVE: The top plate rests on six TPE balls inside the plinth to provide isolation. The deck is shown with Pro-Ject's Cork-It mat – not supplied as standard but offered as a £20 option

up with a design that genuinely redefines what is possible at a particular price point. The Classic is a model that can safely join these ranks, turning in a performance that is polished and confident, but without some of the rough, over-exuberant edges that can mar more affordable creations. There's certainly an ebullience to its music-making but one that's always kept under suitable control.

That said, my first impressions of the deck, fresh from the box, were less favourable. The turntable certainly showed promise but the midrange was a little hard and shouty and the bass lacked some detail. However, replacing the standard felt mat with Pro-Ject's Cork-It all but transformed the Classic's performance. I have spent more time than is good for me experimenting with mats in the past and I can safely say that The Classic/Cork-It combo yielded the biggest change I have yet encountered.

With the Cork-It in place, that hard midrange softened and opened out. Singers seemed to be singing properly again, rather than as if shouting at me through gritted teeth. The stereo images cast by my PMC loudspeakers were now stable and very neatly ordered. And this gave the performers plenty of space and made individual instruments easy to follow, while simultaneously offering a cohesive overall picture.

The Classic served up a wealth of information and ordered it beautifully, only displaying its 'affordable' credentials by limiting the spread of sound much beyond the loudspeakers. Frankly however, the bits *between* them were so enjoyable, this really didn't seem to be a major issue! ➔

TURNTABLE



ABOVE: The Classic tonearm's internal leads terminate in a connection box at the rear of the unit with an earthing post between. The supplied lid fits over the hinges shown – these are friction types that will keep it open at any desired angle

Vocalists were rendered with plenty of scale and located neatly to the fore of the action behind them. Al Jarreau was heard enjoying himself performing ‘Mornin’ from his album *Jarreau* [WEA 25-0070-1] – I swear I could ‘hear’ the smile on his face. Equally, though, when he made his vocal crescendo later in the track, The Classic took it comfortably in its stride and there was only the merest hint of that ‘felt mat midrange hardness’ to remind me that the deck’s price tag bears only three digits.

PIN-SHARP TIMING

At the low end of the scale, The Classic does not dig quite as deeply as other turntables at the price, or indeed some of the other models in Pro-Ject’s range. The bass that was present, however, was beyond reproach in terms of detail, texture and pin-sharp timing.

It’s a very rare thing for me to say, but I can even think of a few direct-drive designs that would struggle to match The Classic for the snappy starting and stopping of low end notes. As a result of this, The Classic never came close to sounding lightweight or tinny.

Instead, rhythms were tracked with rail-like security ensuring the deck brought all kinds of songs to life with ease. The reggae-esque bass line underpinning The Wave Pictures’ ‘Red Cloud Road (Part A)’ from their EP *Helen* [Moshi Moshi Records MOSHI178] skipped along with an infectious gaiety but also with an impeccable level of detail around each note. This wasn’t just a bass guitar off in the background somewhere being idly strummed: it was right at the heart of the action and being played with conviction.

At the top end, The Classic package also turned in a highly capable performance. Treble was

certainly detailed, sounding very open and precise with good source material. Fed a well-recorded LP, The Classic’s top end was largely clean, and blessed with a pleasing crispness. However, while a ‘shiny’ top end is not a difficult thing to achieve, the trick lies in ensuring this is not easily provoked into harshness. So the Classic package did falter a little on less forgiving pressings in this respect, where its sound became just a little jumbled.

Replacing the 2M Silver with an Audio-Technica AT-OC9 MLI moving-coil proved very illuminating, as the superior sonics suggested that the turntable and arm were actually exposing the limitations of the supplied MM cartridge.

Had The Classic itself been the issue, then the slightly unforgiving AT-OC9 MLI would have sounded strident, but instead it was sweet, crisp and precise, regardless of the standard of the pressing.

Ultimately, the 2M Silver most certainly completes a highly enjoyable package, but for its lucky owners there is clearly much more potential to be unleashed from Pro-Ject’s anniversary Classic. 📶

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

By designing something positively affordable for its quarter-century, Pro-Ject has come up with a turntable that can hold its head high for the celebration. The Classic is simply and neatly styled and turns in an excellent performance. There is plenty of scope to upgrade it further and I can see it winning many friends. Equally, I can’t wait to see what the company has up its sleeve in five years time for its 30th!

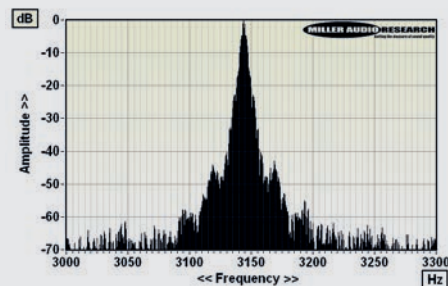
Sound Quality: 83%



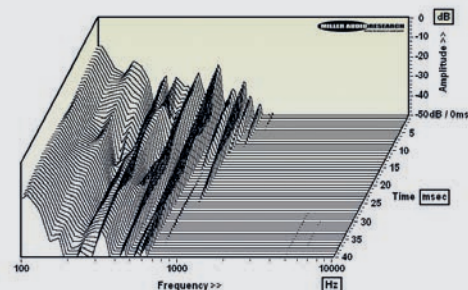
PRO-JECT THE CLASSIC

Such is the extent of Pro-Ject’s turntable ‘landscape’ that there are inevitable similarities in the technical performance of its various models. The AC motor used here is shared across other models while the main bearing, with its hardened steel shaft, bronze bushing and Teflon thrust pad, is a higher-tolerance version of that developed for its Debut range. In this instance, while the start-up time was a fairly rapid 4secs, our sample’s absolute pitch was fractionally (if inaudibly) slow by -0.19% and the peak-weighted W&F reasonably well distributed at 0.03% and 0.04% , respectively [see Graph 1, below]. Through-bearing rumble was impressively low for a deck in this class at -71.2dB (DIN-B wtd) while the through-groove noise did vary depending on choice of cork (-68.2dB) or felt (-69.2dB) mat. The unweighted spectra proved interesting as the cork mat revealed a more obvious structural mode at 7.8Hz that appeared more ‘diffuse’ with the felt mat in place.

Pro-Ject has responded to earlier *HFN* lab reports that revealed the high-Q resonances inherent in its carbon arm tubes by improving the tube’s internal damping, offsetting upper midrange resonances for less subjectively debilitating modes at lower frequency. This latest 9in Pro-Ject carbon/alloy sandwich arm reveals well-damped resonant modes that are not dissimilar to those detected in the 10CC Evolution [see *HFN* Jan ’16], although this iteration has a thicker-walled alloy ‘inner tube’ and a higher resultant 14g effective mass. The main mode occurs at 165Hz here with higher (harmonics) at 310Hz, 450Hz and 615Hz, again all quite quickly damped [see Graph 2, below]. In all, it’s arguably better suited to a lower compliance MC than the, admittedly excellent, 2M Silver! PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted $\pm 150\text{Hz}$, 5Hz per minor division)



ABOVE: Cumulative tonearm resonant decay spectrum, illustrating various bearing, pillar and ‘tube’ vibration modes spanning 100Hz-10kHz over 40msec

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.27rpm (-0.19%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.03% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-69.8dB (felt) / -68.2dB (cork)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-71.7dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-62.2dB
Power Consumption	5W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight (w. base)	460x131x351mm / 10.2kg