

TURNTABLE

Belt-driven turntable with electronic speed control
 Made by: Pro-Ject Audio Systems, Austria
 Supplied by: Henley Audio Ltd, UK
 Telephone: 01235 511166
 Web: www.project-audio.com; www.henleyaudio.co.uk
 Price: £1250 (inc. arm and cartridge)

AUDIO FILE

hi-finews
 OUTSTANDING
 PRODUCT

Pro-Ject Classic Evo

Keeping up with progress in Pro-Ject's Mistelbach headquarters is enough to make anyone's head spin. The latest deck to be updated is the Classic, four years after launch
 Review: **David Price** Lab: **Paul Miller**

As the undisputed juggernaut of the vinyl world, Pro-Ject's progress has been dizzying, particularly in recent years, and the brand now even has its own record label [see News, p16]. So there's clearly a lot to celebrate as the company reaches its 30th anniversary this year [see PM's boxout, p73]. It all started with the Pro-Ject 1 – a cheap, no-nonsense, 'plug 'n play' record player launched when the received wisdom held that vinyl as a format was dying. Since then, the company has produced a huge array of different models – broadening its design strategy to ensure it can offer a turntable for every taste and budget.

Whereas rivals, including Rega, might painstakingly apply one single philosophical approach across all its turntables, Pro-Ject has shown itself to be far less doctrinaire. The Classic [HFN Aug '16] for example, was a nod to the designs of the '70s – in styling if not entirely in construction. It channelled the mid-price, suspended-chassis belt-drives of that era such as the Thorens TD160BC and Ariston RD 40, aiming to offer a sound that was substantially better than entry-level products but without breaking the bank.

POETIC LICENCE

You might say it cheated a bit, because that fussy sprung suspension of the oldies was done away with, and in its place Pro-Ject fitted six Thermo Plastic Elastomer (TPE) balls between the wood plinth and main chassis plate. As we shall see, the new Classic Evo continues with this approach, but adds some tweaks along the way...

The first upgrade is to the optional pick-up cartridge. As per its predecessor, the Evo can be purchased as a package with a bundled cartridge already fitted. The original Classic came with an Ortofon 2M Silver MM for £799, but the new Evo comes with the superior and considerably more

RIGHT: The Evo version of the Classic features a heavier sub-platter, machined from the same grade of aluminium alloy as the main platter. Speed control – 33.33/45/78rpm – is electronic

expensive Quintet Red MC fitted for £1250. Of course, the Classic Evo is also available without a cartridge for £1050.

With its attractive real wood plinth – available in a choice of walnut and eucalyptus – and brushed metal top plate, this deck feels very well made for the money. It has a look and feel that many more traditional vinyl fans will find attractive, strongly resembling the classic designs that dominated the 1960s-70s turntable market before more minimalist and/or skeletal designs emerged in the '80s. In use the Classic Evo feels fairly slick, and is relatively quiet when you tap its plinth while playing – showing a decent degree of vibration damping.

In addition to the new cartridge option, there are two more key tweaks to the design of the original Classic that make up this new Evo version. Rather than the original's plastic sub-platter, the new deck

uses a substantial metal affair that's said to be diamond-cut from the same aluminium alloy as the main platter. The latter, a hefty 300mm diameter affair, sits atop and is lined with a thick ring of TPE damping on the underside. Together, the inner and outer platter assembly is necessarily

heavier than before, and seems impressively inert.

The inner platter sits on a steel/bronze/Teflon main bearing, apparently inspired by that fitted to the Vienna Philharmonic Recordplayer [HFN Jan '18], and is turned by an

electronically-governed AC motor. The two-button speed selection works logically and gives easy switching between 33.33 and 45rpm, with 78rpm also supported.

STRONG ARM TACTICS

The Evo's second upgrade concerns Pro-Ject's latest 9in tonearm, which retains the carbon-fibre wrapped aluminium

'The kick drum was served up with some serious heft'



one-piece tube of the original Classic, but gets a larger, beefed-up bearing housing. The counterweight is finished in bright nickel and, again, damped with TPE, and fits – slightly less tightly than I expected, it should be said – to the rear of the armtube. This arm has a quoted effective length of 230mm and effective mass of 13.5g, and offers both azimuth and height adjustment in addition to an equally 'classic' thread-and-weight bias correction. Its magnetic armrest is a nice idea, but the review deck's rest assembly was slightly wobbly, rather spoiling the slickness of the system.

At 46x131x351mm (whd) the plinth is a little larger than average, the deck weighing a total of 10.5kg. A clear dustcover is supplied that mates up to friction hinges fitted directly to the plinth, though I found that as with most turntables, the sound was better with it removed. Three TPE-damped alloy feet screw into the underside of the deck and offer height adjustment.

The package comes complete with the company's Connect-IT E phono RCA cables, which hook up easily at the back. The Classic Evo took me about 20 minutes to unpack and set up, but do remember to remove the three transit screws from the top plate before fitting the platter...

SCHOOL'S OUT

These 'old school' looks may hint at the sound of Pro-Ject's Classic Evo, but they don't quite tell the whole truth. Yes, this record deck is a little less tight and focused-sounding than modern market rivals from Rega and Technics, for example, yet it certainly doesn't deliver the warm sonic 'comfort blanket' you got from classic designs from Thorens and Ariston back in the day. It really seems that the Classic Evo has been 'voiced' as a halfway house between old and new, giving a pleasantly sweet rendition of the records its spins, without sounding obviously coloured.

ABOVE: Seen here in its satin walnut finish, the machined MDF plinth also comes in a eucalyptus veneer. The alloy/MDF top plate rests on six TPE balls inside the plinth, affording added isolation

For most listeners, what defines the deck will be its smooth tone. Although clearly not in the super-sumptuous territory, the Classic Evo takes hold of UB40's reggae classic 'Don't Let It Pass You By' [Signing Off; Graduate Records GRADLP 2] and delivers it with a fulsome and thick bass. The kick drum comes over with lots of energy and thump, and backed by a pile-driving bass guitar line that pushes the song along with gusto.

The Classic Evo served up serious amounts of heft here, giving a more rounded account of the instrument than expected. However, this turntable's sheer low-end grunt can make things seem a little leaden if there's already a lot of bass energy packed into those grooves. For example, it didn't sound quite as fleet of foot with Dire Straits 'Private Investigations' [Love Over Gold; Vertigo 6359 109] as perhaps it might.

GOING ORGANIC

Despite this, the Classic Evo's performance was never less than enjoyable, and typically underscored by a detailed and communicative midband. It has a naturally open and organic sound that's fairly transparent yet doesn't 'machine gun' detail at the listener.

I could easily discern the keyboard part playing right through the song; this can often get subsumed into the overall mix, but it remained clearly audible here.

At the same time, the deck threw out lots of little percussive flourishes from the rhythm guitar and tomtoms that kept my interest. I wouldn't claim it approaches

THE VINYL PHOENIX

This year will see the 30th anniversary of 'vinyl evangelist' Heinz Lichtenegger persuading the owners of the Tesla factory (SEV Litovel s.r.o) in the Czech Republic to continue manufacturing turntables. With his unshakable belief in vinyl eventually rising phoenix-like from the shadow of CD, he set about launching the Pro-Ject brand. Heinz's mantra 'to offer the best analogue experience for a very reasonable price' has now expanded beyond any reasonable expectation – UK importer Henley Audio's website revealing over 40 turntable solutions from the £175 Elemental to the £8000+ flagship Signature 12. A tour of Pro-Ject's new Mistelbach headquarters in 2018 also revealed its ability to ship any turntable direct from stock [see inset picture]. Export sales manager Günter Rathhammer has claimed that 'more than 40% of all turntables sold in the world over €200 are made by Pro-Ject.' If we include the OEM/rebranded models in this calculation then more than 50% of the world's 'real hi-fi' decks now seemingly originate from this one supplier. PM



TURNTABLE



ABOVE: The Classic Evo's tonearm 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 hold it open at any desired angle

an etched or forensic sound, but there's still a decent degree of clarity on offer here that's more than commensurate with the price.

This detailed midband certainly complements the turntable's admirably spacious nature. So while the Dire Straits recording is famously open and expansive, the Classic Evo wasn't shy about expressing this. It set up a big recorded acoustic with that delicate classical guitar work on one side and the piano panned far across to the other, while Mark Knopfler's vocals were set securely at centre stage.

I feel confident in declaring this infusion of air and space to the sound, and good stage depth, is rather better than you'd expect from a turntable of this price. For my part, it was all underlined by the Evo's treatment of 'Arabian Knights' by Siouxsie And The Banshees [*Once Upon A Time*; Polydor POLS 1056], which sounded more spacious than expected, with an airy ambience that gave the song a compelling, almost ethereal feel.

PERFECT PARTNER

This track also confirmed my suspicions that the Ortofon Quintet Red MC cartridge is a very good match for this deck. It is naturally balanced, albeit with a gentle touch of brightness in the upper midband that accents percussion and vocals. This lends the Classic Evo a slight fillip, perking its rhythmic performance up a notch.

Perhaps as a result, the Evo is particularly entertaining with electronica, old and new. For example, while The Pet Shop Boys' 'I'm Not Scared' [*Introspective*; Parlophone PCS 7325] has a complex and compressed mix with some deep, powerful bass, this still sounded lively and energetic as

the deck took a skillful swipe at the densely-packed musical layers.

Otherwise, I also found the Classic Evo happy playing lower paced, and perhaps slightly 'sparser' recordings such as Randy Crawford's 'Rio De Janeiro Blue' [*Secret Combination*; Warner Bros Records BSK 3541]. Here its charms really came to the fore – the deck/cartridge combination proving itself with an attractive and open sound, typically stepping out of the way and beckoning the listener into the performance at hand.

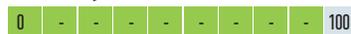
SWEET AND CREAMY

Meanwhile, the Classic Evo's resolution of dynamic light and shade also helped with the backing instrumentalists, contrasting the gently brushed snare with hard-hit bass drum on this occasion. So this classic jazz/soul song was conveyed with some sensitivity, the deck doing a fine job of rendering the singer's soaring vocals. Her voice came over as enjoyably sweet and creamy, yet still had all the tension of a coiled spring – able to surge from quiet and tender to all out thunder in a flash. 🎵

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Pro-Ject's new Classic Evo does what it says on the tin. It isn't a forensic retriever of detail, nor is it an ultra-grippy, taut and tight renderer of bass. Instead, it's aimed at mainstream buyers wanting something that sounds smooth, spacious and enjoyable – and in this it clearly succeeds. Factor in the fine build quality, ease of set-up and excellent bundled cartridge option, and it's an impressive package.

Sound Quality: 85%

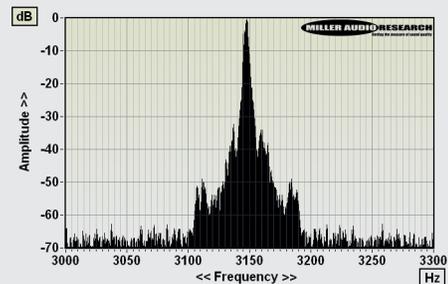


LAB REPORT

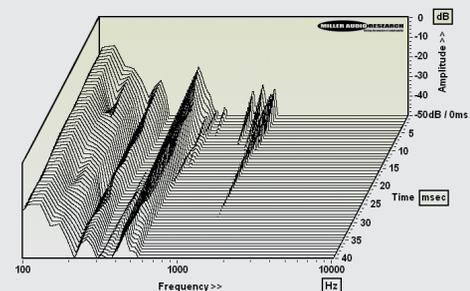
PRO-JECT CLASSIC EVO

Measured directly through its latest stainless steel/bronze/Teflon bearing, rumble is a little higher than measured with Pro-Ject's inaugural Classic [*HFN Aug '16*] at -68.7dB (DIN-B wtd), a figure that improves substantially to -72.3dB (through groove) thanks to the isolation afforded by the felt mat. We saw a similar trade-off between the X1 [*HFN Aug '19*] and X2 decks [*HFN Nov '19*] where a heavier sub-platter/platter was also employed. The Evo's start-up time is just a fraction of a second longer too but absolute speed is more accurate at -0.07% and drift and low-rate wow are reduced to just 0.02% [see Graph 1, below]. Flutter is a modest 0.05% with mild sidebands at $\pm 12\text{Hz}$ and $\pm 4\text{Hz}$, the latter also appearing as a very well-defined peak on the unwt'd rumble spectrum (-60dB re. $1\text{kHz}/5\text{cm}/\text{sec}$).

The tonearm fitted to Pro-Ject's original Classic deck was its answer to earlier *HFN* lab reports that revealed the high-Q resonances inherent in carbon tubes. Its solution was an alloy tube with an outer layer of carbon fibre, combining the stiffness of the latter with the improved damping of the former. A very similar 9in tube is used in the Evo, albeit mounted into a more substantial bearing block. The moderate 13g effective mass is unchanged but is better suited to the Ortofon Quintet Red MC than the higher compliance 2M Silver MM packaged with the Classic. The resonant modes of the tube and integral headshell are better defined in this version of the arm, the sub- 100Hz bending of the original now lifted to 120Hz with the harmonic/torsional mode up from 165Hz to 175Hz , along with distinct resonances at 245Hz and 450Hz [see Graph 2]. The 'Evo' Carbon arm is, from a resonance standpoint, simply less 'cluttered'. PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at $5\text{cm}/\text{sec}$ (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	33.31rpm (-0.065%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter (Peak wtd)	0.02% / 0.05%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-72.3dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-68.6dB
Hum & Noise (unwt'd, rel. to $5\text{cm}/\text{sec}$)	-60.6dB
Power Consumption	6W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	462x131x351mm / 10.5kg