



A grand day out

The foundation of Pro-Ject's vinyl-spinning dynasty, the Debut line of turntables has just been extended with a new flagship

Putting a number on how many turntables Pro-Ject has launched since its birth in 1991 is no easy feat, but you can always rely on a Debut deck being part of the lineup. The inaugural model did not mark the brand's beginning, but it was the turntable that allowed the Austrian company to fan the flames of analogue replay before the 'great vinyl revival'.

The Debut Reference 10 is the latest addition to the range, with a dollop of modern design language. This is a particularly ambitious flagship Debut, boasting a larger footprint than Pro-Ject's lower-tier Debuts and introducing a new 10in carbon-aluminium tonearm. On top of that, it adds a balanced output, acrylic platter and diamond-cut aluminium sub-platter. The minimalistic styling is familiar – the Satin Black finish and speed select toggle are reminiscent of the Debut PRO (HFC 487), and as with that model, initially there are no other colours currently available... yet. You don't expect the underside of a deck to be visually interesting, but

here there are three height-adjustable TPE-damped feet that serve to decouple the Debut Reference 10 from incoming vibration. Their shiny aluminium finish adds a touch of class to the design, too.

Made from MDF, the 25mm-thick plinth appears quite solid. And it is, as Pro-Ject only mills out the minimum required for the placement of motor and wiring, keeping the chassis infills well damped to minimise vibrations. This is distinct from many budget decks, which occasionally have more air than solid material inside.

The sturdy feel is further reinforced by the semi-transparent acrylic platter. It's a solid choice with surprising qualities – we often play discs without a mat on platters made of this material with good results. Some thought has gone into its implementation too. There's a slight circular depression in the middle, creating space for the label on the bottom of an LP. This is particularly useful when using the bundled 190g Record Puck E, flattening the disc without stressing it.

DETAILS
PRODUCT
Pro-Ject Debut Reference 10
ORIGIN
Austria
TYPE
Belt-drive turntable
WEIGHT
6kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
462 x 145 x 345mm
FEATURES
● 33 and 45rpm speed options
● 10in carbon-aluminium tonearm
● Balanced output
● Pick it PRO B cartridge
● Record Puck E
DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.
WEBSITE
project-audio.com
henleyaudio.co.uk

You will not need the manual to figure out how to operate this turntable. There's exactly one control, a toggle switch with three positions: '33', 'OFF', and '45'. Power is from an external 15V DC adapter, which Pro-Ject augments with an AC drive synthesiser inside the deck itself.

Against the plinth's black backdrop, the one-piece tonearm stands out with its polished aluminium elements. While it's not clear if the carbon-aluminium wand is new, Pro-Ject's 'premium' bearing block certainly is. The latter includes grub screws in the tonearm flange, allowing for VTA and azimuth adjustments – making the Debut Reference 10 upgradable with a wide range of carts. Pro-Ject is, of course, an advocate of fixed headshells, believing this offers a superior performance, so changing cartridges here requires a bit more work than on arms fitted with a detachable headshell.

The Reference 10's new tonearm has a rear screw thread for the counterweight, which is an improvement over the smooth finish of previous Debut arms. As it requires some force to mount and adjust it, you'll need to be careful not to accidentally shift the position of the arm and damage the stylus. On the upside, once set, the counterweight's TPE insert holds it securely and maintains the desired downforce.

Otherwise, setting up the Debut Reference 10 is about as easy as it can be while still retaining audiophile capabilities, such as the adjustable tonearm and decent sub-platter/platter construction. Over the past few years Pro-Ject has refined its packaging and manuals, adding little tweaks to ensure that getting the turntable ready to play is not a

challenge. Okay, it's just a small thing, but putting all the 'bits and bobs' in an envelope instead of secreting them within parts of the packing material means an end to time-wasting games of 'spot the anti-skating weight'.

Two belts come supplied: a flat one for regular 33/45 use and a glued round-section belt for anyone still hoarding 78rpm shellacs. The bundled Pick it PRO B cartridge is mounted and set up at the factory – a quick check with a protractor confirms it is good to go.

Sound quality

We use the Debut Reference 10 in a system way above its pay grade, with a Musical Fidelity M8x Vinyl phono stage between it and a Primare PRE35/A35.8 amp system, driving a pair of DALI Epikore 3 standmounts. The MF and Primare units have balanced connections so we don't use the Connect it Phono E RCA supplied with the deck, opting instead for our own dual-XLR Connect it DS cable.

The Debut Reference 10 delivers a lively and crisp sound, with relatively tight bass and no distractions from the hardware itself to hinder the depiction of fine details. It's not over delicate either, which makes it suited to both audiophile fare and less refined recordings. We enjoy how it showcases the plucked strings in *Blinding* from Florence + The Machine's *Lungs* album, giving them a distinct position in the soundstage without removing the focus on Florence Welch's vocals.

Dog Days Are Over and *Rabbit Heart* offer more of the same, the Debut

An excellent 'next step' for those in search of a deck with audiophile qualities

Reference 10 giving an exciting, rhythmically solid rendition of these 'baroque pop' compositions. The bass is perhaps slightly tauter than we prefer, but we appreciate how the new Debut turntable handles the layers of instrumentation and vocals – there's certainly no 'muddiness' here.

Ruins, from Sleater-Kinney's *The Center Won't Hold*, boasts distorted guitars and vocals, and the Debut Reference 10 strikes a fine balance between creating a wall of sound and delivering plenty of musical detail. This isn't easy with this kind of indie rock, where a lot of big, chunky sounds vie for your attention and blur into a whole – such a sound can be



enjoyable in its own way, but often falls flat on audiophile turntable/cartridge combinations.

The next track, *Love*, is arguably more up the Debut Reference 10's street, allowing it to create a wider soundstage within which synth and guitar appear perfectly placed. It's hard to say if this is due in part to the balanced connection, but the sense of bountiful resolution against a dark background is excellent.

While making hay with grand set pieces, the turntable also proves itself a strong, involving performer with the simple orchestrations on *Cunningham Bird*, a track-by-track homage to Lindsey Buckingham and Stevie Nicks. The instrumental *Stephanie* is a highlight, with its rich cello contrasted against nimble acoustic guitar, but it is *Without A Leg To Stand On* where the Debut Reference 10 really flaunts its audiophile upbringing. Here are delicate details galore, all part of a coherent picture that, tonally, finds the deck and cart hitting all the right notes. A hint of treble roll-off serves to keep the duet singing sweet, but doesn't deprive string instruments of their authentic character.

The 2023 Music On Vinyl pressing of Miles Davis' *Quiet Nights* is full of tonal and textural nuances. The Debut Reference 10's penchant for an energetic but detail-packed delivery is well suited here, ensuring the simple tick of percussion to the right of the soundstage in *Aos Pés Da Cruz* doesn't

get buried in the mix. Pro-Ject's deck gives us nothing to complain about, presenting his trumpet (and the supporting brass) in a powerful yet fluid manner, highlighting but never over stressing the highest notes. It's an enthralling listen, the Pro-Ject making more of this high-quality recording than almost any other £1k vinyl package.

Conclusion

The Debut Reference 10 is an excellent 'next step' for vinyl lovers in search of a turntable offering audiophile qualities – without making their discs with 'fun' music unpalatable. It's more than a simple upgrade, however. As the flagship Debut offering, it's a complete package with features you'd expect on more expensive models, making it something of a steal ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Easy setup; supreme build; fabulous sound

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: We're not sure there's a better way to spend a grand when it comes to vinyl replay