



X marks the spot

It's back to the future as Pro-Ject's latest pays homage to the company's first ever turntable. **David Price** listens to the new X1

As far as analogue addicts are concerned, 1991 was not a happy time. Had you resisted the urge to buy a compact disc player throughout the eighties – thinking that the reality didn't match the hype – it now felt like you were about to be forced to go digital anyway. This was due to two things; the number of new LPs in record shops was dropping like a stone and fewer turntables, tonearms and cartridges were being sold.

It seemed the worst time to launch a new turntable, but Pro-Ject's Heinz Lichtenegger didn't see things in quite these terms. Speaking to me recently in Antwerp, he explained that when mass market manufacturers move out of a market, "little guys" can move in and do well. Big corporates need large volumes to make money, and if these drop they get nervous very quickly. This left an opening for his new company to become a big fish in a smaller pond. The Pro-Ject 1 was his response, an unashamedly cheap and cheerful entry-level deck that went straight for the mass market. It was crude, but got

the balance right. Hand assembled in the former Soviet Czech Republic, it was inexpensive to make and had no frilleries. The upside of it being fully manual was its simplicity; it was the epitome of the "less is more" credo.

This now lives on with the new X1, which costs £699 as supplied here with matching cartridge or £599 without. Rather than simply tweaking the old product, however, the company has reimaged it, remaking it with better materials. Every facet of the deck's design has been improved, starting with the plinth. This uses a new denser MDF material that's less resonant than what was originally used. Lichtenegger says the air trapped inside lower grade particleboard contributes to a soggy bass sound, hence the change – despite it costing twice as much. The plinth then gets eight layers of paint with a hand-polished gloss finish. Better, height adjustable feet are fitted, with useful isolation properties. The 1.5kg platter is also improved, being a heavier, low-resonance acrylic design. The motor is better isolated and now gets its juice from a DC/AC generator

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Pro-Ject X1
- ORIGIN**
Austria
- TYPE**
Belt-drive turntable
- WEIGHT**
7kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
415 x 125 x 335mm
- FEATURES**
 - 33, 45 & 78rpm
 - Fitted with Pro-Ject Pick-IT S2 MM cartridge
 - Electronic speed control
 - Dustcover supplied
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Henley Audio Ltd.
- TELEPHONE**
01235 511166
- WEBSITE**
henleyaudio.co.uk

rather than being powered direct from the mains, and there's a push-button three-speed control.

The new 8.6in tonearm has been upgraded with carbon and aluminium sandwich construction, claimed to be light and stiff. It's a one-piece design and comes with Pro-Ject's TPE-damped counterweight; it can be easily set for azimuth and VTA adjustment from its sturdy aluminium base. It has a Kardan ultra-low friction four-pin point precision bearing, and the review sample comes pre-fitted with Pro-Ject's new Pick-IT S2 MM cartridge, voiced by Lichtenegger and manufactured by

The X1 is very much the master, rather than struggling to keep up the pace

Ortofon. The company's Connect-IT E shielded RCA cable is bundled. The X1 is available in a choice of walnut wood veneer and black or white gloss paint, and feels of decent quality at the price.

Setting it up is simple and just a case of taking it out of its tightly packed box, removing the packaging and placing the deck onto a level surface to fit the counterweight and set the tracking force. There's the dustcover to attach – although personally I think budget decks sound better without – and the signal and power supply leads to sort. This done you're up and running, because the cartridge comes pre-fitted and pre-aligned. Many purchasers won't be perturbed by this, but the good thing is that the arm's built-in adjustability makes it configurable for better cartridges should you so wish further down the line.

The mark of a great-value turntable is the ability to transcend all the horrors of low-cost vinyl playback, without letting the costs rise too much. That's what made Pro-Jects of yore so appealing; no one would ever call it the best, but it was better than it had any right to be at the price and the X1 is no different.

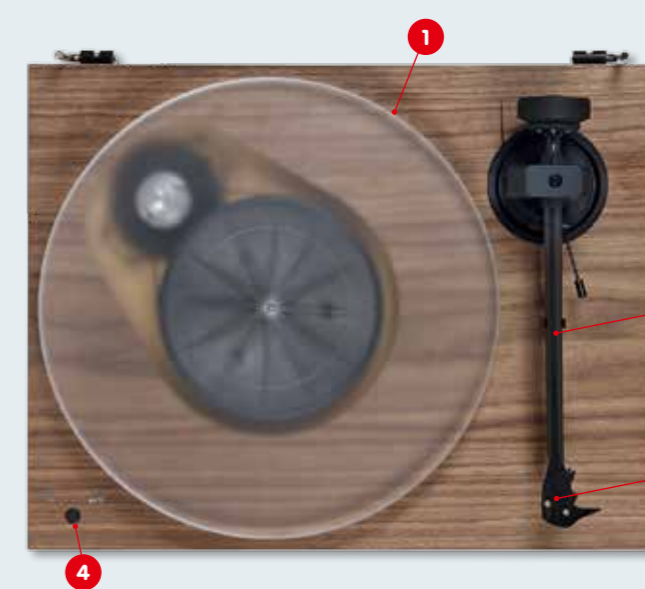
Sound quality

This is an affordable turntable that doesn't sound anything like one. Any shortcomings aren't such that they interfere with the enjoyment of the music; instead you're left focusing on just how good vinyl can sound when given half the chance.

The X1 gives a big, open and engulfing sound and recreates the recorded acoustic of a Deutsche Grammophon pressing of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* surprisingly well, locating all the different parts of the orchestra convincingly. Of course, being a low-cost turntable it doesn't focus right in on individual soloists as well as some more expensive designs, yet it still delivers an expansive soundstage.

Instrumental timbre is very good. Cheap record players can sound weedy and anaemic, but the X1 is impressive. It delivers a lovely, natural tone to the violins and cellos, rather than turning them into a thin, monochrome facsimile. This is all the more apparent with some classic electronic music; *Love Action* by The Human League is rendered in a surprisingly rich and vibrant way. Those old analogue synthesisers have a depth of tone and a sonorousness that I wasn't expecting from a turntable of this price. Lead vocals are very natural, and the deck shows no sign of mistracking, nervousness or instability – certainly considering its price. The only criticism is a slight opaqueness to the midband, but you have to spend a good deal more money to better this.

IN SIGHT



- 1 20mm thick acrylic platter
- 2 8.6in aluminium/carbon tonearm
- 3 Pro-Ject Pick-IT S2 MM cartridge
- 4 33, 45 and 78rpm speed selector

HOW IT COMPARES

Rega's Planar 3 (HFC 411) is now priced at £649 fitted with Rega's own Elys 2 moving-magnet cartridge. It's the latest in a line of decks stretching back to the mid-seventies, and the breeding shows. Build quality is excellent, design is beautiful and the latest RB330 tonearm is superb. It has a drier, more precise and detailed sound with a more accurate soundstage and superior speed stability, yet the X1 still sounds just as much – possibly even more – fun.

Speed stability is impressive, if not quite as good as its nearest Rega rival (see How It Compares), although it never sounds obviously wobbly. That big bass guitar line of Siouxsie and the Banshees' *Israel* is delivered clearly and with surprisingly good attack. At the same time, the snare and hi-hat work sound crisp and the ride cymbal clean and smear free. Indeed the X1 gives a surprisingly propulsive rendition that makes this classic new-wave track great fun to listen to. It slots all this together very well with the haunting lead rhythm guitar work and the careful phrasing of the vocals. The overall effect is lithe and bouncy, with the turntable very much the master rather than struggling to keep up with the pace.

Conclusion

Pro-Ject's X1 is an impressive turntable package for the price, but no shortcut to high-end analogue replay. It makes music in a happy, engaging and big-hearted way and

has no real weak points to spoil your enjoyment. You can get a cleaner, sharper and more precise sound from your records, but you'll have to spend more to do so. Don't be fooled by the similarities to that first Pro-Ject; this is worlds apart and shows just how far the turntable market has evolved, making it an essential audition for those on a tight budget ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Enjoyable and engaging sound; fitted cartridge
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks the precision and dynamics of some rivals
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent low-cost turntable package with an upbeat sound
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



BACK BEAT



- 1 Adjustable counterweight
- 2 Stereo RCA output
- 3 Isolating Alu/TPE sandwich foot
- 4 Dustcover hinge