



Keep it in the family

The latest Pro-Ject addition boasts the advantage of fully balanced operation. **Ed Selley** checks out how it sounds

Such is the depth and number of models in the Pro-Ject range, you might be forgiven for thinking that pretty much every evolutionary niche of turntable design has long since been covered. In reality, it still has a few more gaps to fill. The X8 is outwardly conventional, but has been developed to employ a specific feature rarely seen at this price point.

It is fully balanced in operation. This is rarer to encounter in analogue than it is in digital front ends, which is all the more puzzling considering all turntables are inherently balanced. The four-pin arrangement on the back of a phono cartridge, where each channel has its own ground, is a balanced audio out and it is only when this is recombined in an RCA connection that this ceases to be the case. The X8 avoids doing this and comes supplied with a five-pin DIN-to-XLR lead-out cable.

The turntable is unsuspended and combines a heavy aluminium platter deadened with a TPE inner lining. This

sits on an equally substantial 50mm-thick MDF plinth. Between them they contribute to the bulk of the X8's 15kg unboxed weight.

The tonearm is Pro-Ject's long-running but continuously evolving 9CC; here in its Evo form with large bearing housing and tapered carbon fibre tonearm tube and one-piece headshell. It's capable of supporting a range of cartridges. The package comes fitted with an Ortofon Quintet Blue (HFC 389) moving-coil design, which greatly simplifies initial setup.

While the turntable is unsuspended, the three feet provide excellent isolation and their threaded mounts help with levelling. The motor takes an AC feed created from a DC input being converted internally. The power supply is small, plastic and feels a little cheap, but Pro-Ject will happily sell you a Power Box RS2 Phono that provides a linear feed for both the turntable power input and a matching phono stage, albeit at an additional £700.

To make use of the turntable's XLR feed, Pro-Ject has developed a pair of

DETAILS

PRODUCT Pro-Ject X8
ORIGIN Austria/Czech Republic
TYPE Unsuspended, belt drive turntable
WEIGHT 15kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD) 465 x 150 x 350mm
FEATURES
 • 33 and 45rpm
 • 9in carbon fibre tonearm with Ortofon Quintet Blue
 • Balanced or unbalanced tonearm output
DISTRIBUTOR Henley Audio Ltd.
TELEPHONE 01235 511166
WEBSITE project-audio.com henleyaudio.co.uk

balanced phono stages of which the DS3 B is the more sophisticated of the two. Fitted for both moving magnet and coil operation – the latter with a useful spread of impedance and capacitance settings that will suit most cartridges – it is a fairly impressively specified device even without the XLR in and outputs (RCA in and outs are also supported and the X8 can have a standard RCA cable attached to the arm output too, although this brings it into contact with some particularly talented rivals).

This duo is a superb demonstration of a fully balanced analogue front-end

Both the X8 and the DS3 B pull off the neat trick of looking and feeling more expensive than they are. Some aspects of the turntable still strike me as a little basic; the thread-and-weight antiskate is fiddly and the separate switch and speed control arrangement feels fussy, but it is very well assembled and a pleasure to setup and use. The DS3 B is, if anything, even more impressive. The all-metal construction and the flexible loading and setup would be outstanding for the price, even without the balanced connections.

Sound quality

With a Cambridge Audio Edge A providing the required balanced input, the principle advantage of a balanced turntable is demonstrated before a record is even played. The duo is uncannily quiet at idle. Even

DETAILS

PRODUCT Pro-Ject Phono Box DS3 B
ORIGIN Austria/Czech Republic
TYPE Phono preamp
WEIGHT 1.5kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD) 206 x 72 x 194mm
FEATURES
 • Moving-magnet/moving-coil input
 • Balanced and unbalanced connections
 • Discrete output
DISTRIBUTOR Henley Audio Ltd.
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with the volume on the amp right up, there is barely a hint of hiss and no determinable hum. The amount of difference isn't huge; most £2,600 turntable and phono stage combos are pretty quiet, but the X8 starts everything it does from a position of being a little bit quieter.

The effect this has on how it performs is significant. The opening of Nils Frahm's *Spaces* is a much more tangible affair; the hushed but ever-present audience becoming a more defined part of what you hear. As Frahm begins, his location in the venue and the scale of the room around him is easier to pin down than on occasions when I've played this record on considerably more expensive devices. It would be wrong to describe the effect as purely down to detail retrieval – in part because I don't feel the Quintet Blue is a hugely detailed cartridge – but where the noise floor vacates, additional information is perceived.

This feeds into the X8 being a naturally spacious performer. It doesn't appear to struggle with any large-scale recordings because it possesses an effortless heft and airiness that combine to give it impressive authority. There is also the perception that the presentation has a wholly compelling flow. *Talking Timbuktu* by Ali Farke Toure and Ry Cooder sees the X8 and DS3 B combine in a way that plays to the strengths of the recording. Faster, more impactful music can sometimes feel less urgent than on some similarly priced designs, but this Pro-Ject pair never tips over into



The X8 and DS3 B come in at similar price to Rega's Planar 8 with Ania cart and Fono MC phono stage (HFC 443, 452 and 426). Used over RCA (there is no XLR on the Rega), the Pro-Ject has more bass extension and a warmer and fuller midrange while the Rega is more dynamic, exciting and manages to find more detail. If you have a balanced system, though, the X8 and DS3 B eke out advantages that the Rega can't. The low noise floor and superb three dimensionality tips the balance for many listeners. If you have an XLR input going spare, the Pro-Ject is a fine source for it.

sounding slow. This is helped by a bass response that is deep; at times positively subterranean, but controlled and defined enough to ensure that your attention isn't drawn to it but instead it effortlessly fills out recordings while being free of any sense of bloat and overhang.

Some tests around the balanced functionality do suggest that this is really how you will want to use the X8 and DS3 B and that they are greater than the sum of their parts when you do. The X8 is supplied with a conventional RCA output cable as well and running this into a Cyrus Phono Signature (HFC 408) is still very listenable (and actually a little more energetic), but that imperious space and airiness suffer. Likewise, the DS3 B is a good RCA phono stage at the price, but a great XLR one.

The good news is that the Pro-Ject duo has attributes beyond its XLR connections. The tonal realism, across an extended midrange in particular, is glorious. The manner in which it ensures that Emily King's heartfelt and passionate vocals in *Forgiveness* are the focus of your attention while giving the whole track the space it needs to breathe is highly impressive. It is decently forgiving too. The X8 takes in its stride my standard torture test of a first pressing of Placebo's *Meds* while going on to sound excellent with high-quality material.

Conclusion

The Pro-Ject duo is a superb real-world demonstration of what running a fully balanced analogue front end can do – the exceptionally

low levels of noise are superb and help this duo deliver one of the most airy and three-dimensional performances at the price. If you're looking to change your turntable and phono stage in one go and have the XLR input on your amp that they need to excel, this is one of the most compelling options at the price •

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: X8

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Effortlessly quiet, spacious and powerful sound; build; ease of use
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not always the most energetic; needs XLR to show its best
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Use the X8 over XLR and very little at the price can match its effortless and engaging performance
FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: DS3 B

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Sensational performance over XLR; well-made and flexible
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not as good over RCA
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** The natural partner to the X8, the DS3 B is a balanced bargain
FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL

