

# Mister Clean!



**Martin Pipe gives his records a new lease of life with the new VC-E from Pro-Ject.**

**M**any years ago, when every town had a hi-fi shop and public libraries stocked LPs, there was a mythical device known as the Keith Monks Record Cleaning Machine (RCM). For a nominal fee, said retailer would treat your scrunchily-noisy vinyl with the RCM - and your records would be returned to a state approaching their previous glory. These wonderful RCMs also kept clean the music you heard on the radio, and ensured that

the LP you borrowed on your library ticket wouldn't be spoiled by any sticky surprises. One was even presented to the Queen, to celebrate her Silver Jubilee. Although it was amazingly effective, the Keith Monks RCM was expensive, bulky and somewhat industrial in appearance. I don't doubt that some RCMs ended up in the hands of obsessive audiophiles, but they were never intended as a domestic proposition. RCMs - like turntables - began to fall out of favour when CDs displaced vinyl, although music archives (notably the

BBC's) and others with an interest in analogue discs kept them going. Keith Monks retired to Cornwall in the early 1990s, but continued to build RCMs on a small scale until his death. His eldest son Jonathan took over, and thanks to the vinyl revival those RCMs are now back in "full factory production". Indeed there are now Keith Monks models that will blend into domestic environments, but they ain't cheap...

Other companies have since recognised the difference that record-cleaning can make, and that

many analogue enthusiasts would like affordable machines of their own. Among them is Pro-Ject, who are well-placed to satisfy this market given that a vinyl-black seam runs through the company. Like the Keith Monks machines, and indeed some of Pro-Ject's previous models, the £299 VC-E is a 'wet' cleaner. The basic idea is that you apply a special solution to the record's surface; this fluid, along with the crud that gives you an earache, is then sucked up by an onboard vacuum cleaner and deposited in a tank that one must remember to empty periodically.

The 6.5kg VC-E is, like Pro-Ject's turntables, a very well-engineered and attractive piece of equipment that occupies not much more volume than, say, a bread-maker. The build quality inspires confidence, and I suspect that it will outlast a fair few of the turntables that benefit from the VC-E's sole function in life. Close to the edge of its aluminium top-panel is the disc motor, which spins at approximately 30rpm. Its spindle terminates in the bottom-half of a record clamp, which features a rubberised surface. Place the record over its spindle, and screw on the top clamp - which also has a rubberised surface. These surfaces help to prevent the cleaning fluid from contaminating the record label.

On which subject, the VC-E is intended for LPs, 12in. singles and 10in. records only. UK importer Henley Designs informed us that it is "not ready for 7in. singles, as their grooves can be nearer the centre hole than the VC-E arm currently reaches". However, the firm will "soon be releasing a 7in. kit, similar to the one sold for use with the older VC-S Mk. II".

Once a record is clamped into position the turntable is started, and diluted cleaning fluid applied. I find that working outward from the centre of the disc works best; the fine-bristled application brush supplied by Pro-Ject is used to evenly-spread the fluid (a total of 6-8ml should suffice) over the record surface. A 3-position side-mounted rocker switch brings the motor to life, and make it rotate in either direction - the fluid-application process benefits from the occasional reversal.

Let's talk more about the Pro-Ject fluid recommended for use with the VC-E. The "Wash-IT" formulation is claimed to be safe with all record materials (including shellac). Two

bottles are supplied with the unit, one of which is a 100ml 'starter' bottle of Wash-IT. The other is used to mix the concentrate with water, and is embossed with markings that will assist you when carrying out the operation. The ratio - somewhere between 10:1 and 20:1 - depends on the state of the record, and water

temperature. You can get away with lower concentrations of Wash-IT if warmer water is used. The type of water isn't specified, but I live in a hard-water area and the stuff from the tap was fine; I didn't try distilled water. 100ml of Wash-IT should be enough, reckons Pro-Ject, to treat 135 12in. records (i.e. 270 sides). Another 100ml bottle will set you back £15; if you plan to clean records on a larger scale, the £45 1-litre bottle may be a better buy.

The next part of the VC-E is an impeccably-constructed suction arm that slots into an aperture on

replaceable (and indeed a spare set is included). How long do they last? "The felt strips' lifespan," Henley told us, "is a bit like that of a stylus... it depends on how you treat them". The height of the arm cannot be adjusted to accommodate different record thicknesses; this is instead achieved by raising or lowering the

grubscrew-secured lower clamp. As supplied, it is suitable for 'standard' ("80 - 180g") records.

The vacuum motor is then switched on (with another side-mounted rocker switch) with the record still rotating, to suck the solution and contaminants from the record surface. Periodically-changing direction can help this process too. When the record is dry, the suction power is removed and the arm moved to its rest position. The turntable is then powered down, the upper clamp removed and the process repeated for the record's

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**Suction arm height is not adjustable, but the clamp can be raised or lowered to accommodate discs of non-standard thickness.**

**The robust rocker-switches that power up the vacuum-pump and set the disc-clamp motor revolving in either direction, are mounted on the side.**

the opposite end of the top panel. During use, it is swung onto the wet record surface; underneath the arm are soft felt pads to prevent scratching. These are themselves

flipside.

What happens to the spent solution? It is deposited in a reservoir; unfortunately, you can't see how full this is - and thus when



*On top of the main unit you can see the pivot for the suction arm, the lower disc-clamp and the reservoir drain hole. Arranged around the base are the upper clamp, the arm (with spare velvet pads) and the brush that's used to spread diluted cleaning fluid over the record. The latter is prepared by mixing concentrate from the smaller bottle with tap water in the larger one - embossed with horizontal lines to help ensure correct proportions.*

it needs to be emptied. The latter process requires you to, after removing the suction arm, place the machine into a larger container like a washing-up bowl, and tip it on its side so that the accumulated fluid pours out of the top-mounted drain hole (which doubles for ventilation). I can't help thinking that some kind of base-mounted tap would be better.

## PERFORMANCE AND CONCLUSION

The VC-E cleaning process sounds involved, but it rapidly becomes second-nature. You are probably best off experimenting, as I did, with some old valueless vinyl to become familiar with the machine.

If my experiences are anything to go by, you will be mightily-impressed with what the modestly-priced VC-E can achieve - especially if you routinely rummage

around in second-hand shops or car-boots for musical treasures of unknown provenance. If the records you buy have been well looked after, enclosed in high-grade sleeves and stored in meticulously clean environments, then the improvement is marginal - but tangible nevertheless.

But dirty records, such as 12in. singles that have been abused by mobile DJs, are transformed beyond all recognition. I have an early EMI stereo demonstration LP from the late 1950s. Dirt accumulated over the years had gradually rendered the record to the point of unlistenable - treble harshness descending into unbearable distortion, poorly-defined bass, a muddled stereo image and a cyclic 'crunch' sound as the stylus negotiated a patch of goodness-knows-what on the surface.

After the VC-E treatment, it was if a completely-different record had

been deposited on my Valhalla-LP12/Basik Plus/Ortofon 540. The sound was, literally, much cleaner - better definition and image-stability thrown into the bargain. Switching to a vintage Pioneer quadraphonic system with Technics SL1200 Mk3/AT-440MLb, I found that old CD-4 albums (the discrete ones that rely on ultrasonic subcarriers) cleaned with the VC-E were improved to the extent that the notorious 'sandpaper quad' effect disappeared completely.

Sure, the VC-E won't remove any of the clicks and pops that scratches are responsible for, but mistreated records can otherwise benefit quite dramatically. This modestly-priced Pro-Ject cleaning machine will help you to get the best from your records, whether you're digitising them or merely playing them. A few niggles there may be, but the VC-E is built to last a lifetime and performs impeccably. Recommended.

## PRO-JECT VC-E CLEANER



**OUTSTANDING** - amongst the best

**VALUE** - keenly priced

### VERDICT

The VC-E puts effective record-cleaning within the budgets of every analogue fan

### FOR

- very well made
- easy to use
- can transform your records

### AGAINST

- in current form, unsuitable for 7in. singles
- no means of confirming reservoir state

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