



► DETAILS
PRODUCT
 Pro-Ject Debut PRO
ORIGIN
 Austria
TYPE
 Belt-driven turntable system with electric speed control
WEIGHT
 6kg
DIMENSIONS
 (WxHxD)
 415 x 113 x 320mm
FEATURES
 • 33, 45 & 78rpm
 • Pick it PRO MM cartridge
 • 8.6in one-piece carbon-aluminium sandwich tonearm
DISTRIBUTOR
 Henley Audio Ltd.
WEBSITE
 project-audio.com
 henleyaudio.co.uk

The heart of the platter

Dubbed the 'most audiophile' Debut turntable yet, this deck/arm/cartridge solution takes over from last year's popular Debut Carbon with a host of new useful refinements

Like the Land Rover and Ray-Ban sunglasses, the Pro-Ject Debut comes in many different flavours. What started out as a pure entry-level product has been joined by enough siblings over the last 20 years that the latest Debut PRO reviewed here can be regarded as the range's flagship and crowning glory. The numerous improvements might elevate the price to £700, but even that has done little to undermine this turntable's bargain status. Pro-Ject CEO Heinz Lichtenegger maintains that the steps up the scale continue the mission statement of the most recent Debut, the Carbon EVO (HFC 468). Lichtenegger explains: "The Carbon EVO was designed to give people with a moderate budget a record deck with an 'entry audiophile' attitude. The idea of the PRO is to

further squeeze any compromises you'd expect in a budget turntable." This even extends to the name, which is particularly evocative for any product in the domestic sector. "PRO was chosen," he continues, "to motivate the people who may be considering digging deeper into real high-end turntable design, but who still do not want to spend crazy money." Accounting for the £250 uplift over the Debut Carbon EVO, Lichtenegger recites a list of features which starts with improved motor isolation, on to height adjustment achieved through TPE-damped metal feet, while VTA alignment has been added to make future cartridge upgrades possible further down the line. This flexibility is almost a mantra for Lichtenegger, as he mentions moving coils frequently. The

aluminium platter is more heavily damped, and anti-magnetic, which he says is a boon for upgrades to MC cartridges, rightly observing: "You almost never see a 1.6kg platter at this price point – usually it's 300g, glass and prone to ringing." "The tonearm is a sandwich of a central tube of aluminium surrounded by carbon fibre, for better damping and higher effective mass." He stresses that this, too, is important for any future moving-coil upgrades. "As you know, ultimately an MC is the heaven of analogue." The tonearm utilises massive gimbals and nickel coating, the latter said to increase the rigidity of the bearing for free and fluid movement as well as providing a longer-lasting finish. "After the passage of time, painted or anodised black surfaces will turn greyish."

Lichtenegger is passionate about the importance of the positioning of the Debut PRO in the Pro-Ject turntable lineup. He emphatically wants it to top the Debut line. "The Debut PRO is the ultimate manifestation of the Debut line. It is our 30th anniversary product, so we put in all that we could think about improving a Debut, taking it beyond the Debut Carbon EVO."

More more more
 "When you go to costlier high-end decks, if they're really better, you should experience greater quietness, less nervous behaviour and more authority" the CEO explains. "With the new Pick it PRO cartridge, the new heavy platter, the massive feet and, of course, the new tonearm design, it's all about more stability and greater subtlety, without sacrificing any retrieval of details." Pro-Ject co-designed the new moving-magnet cartridge with Ortofon's Leif Johanson in order: "to give a more substantial, more full-bodied sound," says Lichtenegger. "In Leif, we found a great partner who worked out exactly the sound balance we wanted for the Debut PRO. We intended to give it more body, very pleasant to hear, but still keep the refinement of the 2M cartridge line." Initial press pictures preceding the arrival of the deck showed a puck, but none is provided with the PRO. It turns out that this is an optional add-on and during testing we discover that the Debut PRO categorically benefits from a puck or clamp, so we employ one throughout the listening sessions. Lichtenegger explains that they have designed a dedicated puck, as seen in the preliminary literature: "which

HOW IT COMPARES
 With Pro-Ject all but dominating the 'affordable' turntable market, the brand is just as often competing with itself as with other vinyl stalwarts like Rega and Mo-Fi. Of the latter, Rega's Planar 3 (HFC 411) with RB330 tonearm and Audio-Technica AT-VM95E pick-up costs a very similar £700 (the factory-fitted Elys 2 MM is not currently offered). This package delivers a very tight, tuneful and insightful performance that should probably be heard against the Debut PRO before buying. Otherwise Thorens' £600 TD 202 is well worth checking out as a 'full solution' complete with AT-95E pick-up and built-in phono stage. It makes no claims to be a 'purist' product, but what it does, it does surprisingly well, offering an easy-to-set-up budget vinyl experience with cheery panache.

matches the Debut PRO perfectly, not too heavy for the type of bearing – for more weighty pucks, you also need bigger bearing assemblies." The new puck, a plated metal disc, will sell for around £40. Alternatively, you can use Pro-Ject's £75 Clamp it, which promises an even tighter grip and, at 120g, applies pressure to the record without stressing the bearing. There's no escaping the fact that the Debut PRO is easy to adore and even easier to set up. We have it up and running in under 15 minutes – and that's without a manual. Anyone who has ever set up a Debut before will recognise every element, by now aware, too, that there is also a spare belt for 78rpm usage. We decide to settle on 1.8g for the tracking force of the new cartridge, based on our previous experience with Ortofon's 2M Red (HFC 345). As the Pick it PRO is essentially a straightforward Ortofon 2M in so many ways – any differences to the cantilever, stylus, etc. being kept under wraps – it is an easy feed into the MM stages of four wildly differing phono stages we have to hand, ranging in price from under £400 to over £6,000. This package will cause you no worries whatsoever, for it's as close to plug and play as a turntable/arm/cartridge combo gets.

Sound quality
 In other words, just a *souçon* of experience and a helping of common sense will have this turntable fully optimised for your system in no time. The only proviso is that the gains of a puck are too great to ignore, the felt mat slipping around if not secured from above. With the classic edition of George Benson's *Breezin'* it is all too clear to hear the positive effects of a puck in nearly every area.

We stress this because the puck used is a £10 purchase from Amazon, so we are not talking about breaking the bank. While the PRO undoubtedly invites upgrades, and not just Lichtenegger's prediction that owners will court MCs, we use the supplied cables and felt mat. Just mentioning them, though, tells you that you can have a field day experimenting with tweaks – which is as it should be, when they don't cost the earth. In fighting form, the most staggering element of the Debut PRO is the solidity and extension of the bass.

Even in stock form, the Debut PRO joins the best sub-£1,000 front-end combos

This extracts all the weight of the Benson recording – ultra-expressive lower registers courtesy of the legendary Phil Upchurch. But a Benson LP is all about voice and guitar, and the Debut PRO is a more-than-competent deliverer of richness in all areas – a boon for Benson's honeyed tones. As for his guitar work, speed and attack are as much about the experience as the fluidity, however mutually exclusive the two might seem. The Debut PRO – and, for that matter, the Pick it PRO – manage to balance the two, so Lichtenegger is right: the PRO does indeed convey body and fatigue-free listening without any blatant loss of detail. Probably the only thing missing, which would be a reason to consider an MC, is a touch more air and space. Not that the sound is congested in any way – we're being brutal about this, having played with the Debut



- 1 Newly designed tonearm base allows easy adjustment of arm height/VTA
- 2 Gold-plated RCA analogue outputs and earthing post
- 3 Damped and height-adjustable aluminium feet
- 4 Bundled felt mat
- 5 TPE damped and non-magnetic 1.6kg platter

IN SIGHT



- 1** 8x hand-painted MDF plinth
- 2** Precision CNC milled and nickel coated bearing block
- 3** 8.6in one-piece carbon-aluminium sandwich tonearm
- 4** Pick it PRO MM cartridge
- 5** 33.3 and 45 rpm speed selector (78rpm belt is also provided)

DURABLE DEBUT

The Debut was born out of an idea formed in the summer of 1998 by long-time UK distributor of Pro-Ject Audio Systems, Laurence Armstrong, and company founder Heinz Lichtenegger. The two were together in Austria discussing ideas to develop the 'analogue market' and soon returned to Lichtenegger's original thinking behind the formative Pro-Ject 1 turntable launched in 1991. The brief was simple: a turntable that was affordable enough to be considered an 'add-on sale' in stores, but that could wow would-be purchasers with a convincing audiophile performance as soon as it was plugged in. Within a day of their new concept taking shape, a sample was produced in the company's Czech factory by Jiri Kroutil, Pro-Ject's original product manager, and within a matter of

months the Debut was flying off shelves and an audio icon was born...

In the early Noughties, the Debut II arrived with a variety of colour finishes and new features including a built-in speed controller and phono stage. This was swiftly followed by the Debut III, also among the first hi-fi turntables to include a USB output. The Debut's status was consolidated at its highest ever price point in 2012 with the Debut Carbon and its carbon fibre tonearm. In 2020, over 20 years since the original concept, the latest iteration – the £450 Debut Carbon EVO (HFC 468), was launched to the same generally high praise, suggesting, if we hadn't realised this before, that Armstrong and Lichtenegger really were on to something all that time ago!

PRO right after using a package costing ten times its price. But the gains you would realistically hope to achieve over this, when the time comes to upgrade, would be matters of scale, perhaps a touch more stage depth. Auditioned in context, the Debut PRO yields nothing, as is clearly demonstrated with William Bell's *The Soul Of A Bell*. This is more about voice than anything else, despite the usual peerless backing that all Stax releases employ.

His sublime composition *You Don't Miss Your Water* exhibits vocal textures so convincing we start to have second thoughts about MCs. The warmth in the voice defies the technology of the phono stages, vivid and apparent whether through all-valve or solid-state step ups. 'Coherent' replaces 'competent' in our summation as this deck certainly earns its suffix, 'PRO' being less of a

conceit and more a statement of intent. This is made even more evident when we turn the screw and subject it to a slightly knackered copy of *The Best Of The Lettermen*. Of course, we have no way of knowing how much high-frequency content has been shaved off over the years by abuse, but the Pick it PRO extracts each of the three voices in their own sonic turf, blending them with such authority that we end up digging out a copy on open-reel tape for comparison purposes. Miraculously we come to the conclusion that we no longer consider their takes of The Beatles' *Yesterday* or Victor Young and Edward Heyman's *When I Fall In Love* as exercises in schmaltz.

Even better, as harmonising is dominating the mood, is the sublime Analogue Productions release of The Beach Boys' *Smiley Smile*. Even the freaky weird numbers like *Vegetables*

and *Wind Chimes* are captivating, but the LP's two inarguable masterpieces – *Heroes And Villains* and *Good Vibrations* – provide further evidence that the retrieval of detail hasn't been compromised in any way. Both are studio creations of almost absurd complexity, on a par with The Beatles' releases of the same period – that heady year of 1967.

Whatever bizarre sounds Brian Wilson chose to employ, the Debut PRO handles with aplomb. And that includes the Theremin, the signature sound of *Good Vibrations* and a rare example of electronic sound that doesn't immediately suggest artifice. Throughout the album, though, are

The most staggering part of the Debut PRO is the solidity and extension of the bass

the harmonies of a group that ranks in the permanent Top 10, along with The Mills Brothers, The Ink Spots, The Hollies, The Everlys and the rest. As with The Lettermen (Capitol Records must have had a thing about harmony), the sound is ethereal yet palpable throughout. How's that for a superhuman juggling act?

Conclusion

Spinning over 30 LPs on the Debut PRO, we leave it convinced that it begs to be heard by the sort of audiophile-in-waiting Lichtenegger designed it for, just as it begs the use of a puck or clamp. We'd love to spend more time with it, if only to see just how far the various upgrades can take it – the easy swaps like trick cables, outré mats and whatever MC cartridge one cares to fit. But even in stock form, it joins the best of sub-£1,000 front-end combinations. 'Entry level' has a new champion ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Price; ease of use; simple setup; expansive sound; future upgrade options
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Nothing at the price
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Hard to better at entry level
FEATURES ★★★★★	
OVERALL ★★★★★	