

Pro-Ject Evo 9 CA Premium tonearm

Jason Kennedy



Back in the day when turntables were the be-all and end-all of high-fidelity sources, it was common practice to combine brand A's turntable with brand B's tonearm and, usually, brand C's cartridge. Dealers would specialise in knowing which combinations worked well and might even have been able to demonstrate the differences between the options they preferred. So, you got Alphason arms on LP12s, Helius arms on Pink Triangles, and maybe even a Mission arm on an Ariston; there was plenty of variety. Today, you'd be lucky to get a demonstration of different cartridges from all but the most committed record player salesman; most turntable brands supply their wares with a tonearm of their own making installed and ready to be balanced and biased. In many cases, you don't even have to fit a cartridge, which makes life easier for the dealer and end user, but it's not the only option.

Now that it has turntables at virtually every attainable price point and beyond, Pro-Ject has decided to offer its arms as separate items with a view to owners of their turntables making an upgrade and, dare I say it, owners of other brands' turntables. Pro-Ject has been building tonearms for quite some time now and has risen high above the budget options supplied in their more affordable turntables in the early days.

Arms dealer

Pro-Ject has offered separate tonearms for a while now, but this is the first time they have created an incentive for their customers to make such an upgrade. Now, when upgrading from a current Evo series tonearm, you can get a healthy discount on the step up to the Evo 9 CA Premium. Doing the same with non-Evo arms gets a slightly smaller discount, and even those with a tonearm made by another brand get money off the Evo 9 CA Premium price. If you're >>



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» the kind of arms dealer that wants to compete on price, check out Henley's website for the discount options.

The Pro-Ject Evo CA Premium is a refinement of the Evo CC. Both arms are available in 9, 10 and 12-inch variants and have a one-piece arm tube and headshell, with gimbal bearings in a chunky housing. However, the differences between the two arms are fundamental: the CC has a pure carbon-fibre tube, while the CA Premium has carbon-fibre wrapped around an aluminium core. The internal arm wiring is silver, not copper, and the bearings used are of a higher tolerance. Even the bearing housing differs, with the CC being aluminium and the CA stainless steel. The counterweight and stub are different, with a big thread on CA that allows a more precise downforce setting. Finally, the arm cable is of a higher quality and looks and feels much more appropriate to a tonearm at this price.

Vinyl platter

Henley Audio supplied two Pro-Ject Xtension 9 Evolution turntables to contrast the Evo 9 CC arm fitted to this model as standard, with the Evo 9 CA Premium. The Xtension 9 Evolution is the smallest of the Xtension models because it runs the shortest arm. It is built around a heavy MDF plinth that sits on opposing magnet feet and runs an alloy platter lined with elastomer for damping. It's finished with a top surface made of recycled vinyl records, and the platter sits on an inverted ceramic bearing that is magnetically supported. A weighty record clamp is provided while the drive is via a peripheral rubber belt with electronic speed control. The arms on both turntables were fitted with a Pro-Ject Pick-IT DS2 moving coil cartridge developed in cooperation with Ortofon and running at 2.2g downforce. Both turntables were set up with the same VTA, cartridge downforce and bias.

Playing Laura Marling's 'Soothing' (*Semper Femina*) and switching from the Evo 9 CC to the Evo 9 CA Premium brought about an apparent increase in vocal purity and projection, Marling's voice had more clarity and depth to it and seemed to stand in the room rather more solidly than it had on the standard arm. The overall sound was richer and fuller, each note having more shape and fine detail. Its contrast was not unlike going from a cartoon to a painting. You get plenty of detail with the Evo 9 CC, but the presentation feels like an outline compared to the three-dimensional sonic presence created with the Evo 9 CA Premium.

Timing the arm swap

Further listening revealed that the timing was improved by the arm change as well and that the tonal balance was a bit more even, sounding closer to that found with the digital version of this track. Digital may not be able to match all the qualities of good analogue, but it's consistently flatter in frequency response. In many respects, the change that this arm upgrade brought about came down to an increase in resolution; there is more detail, which reveals more of the characteristics of the recording. The reverb on the voice became clearer because backgrounds were less blurred, and the latter quality made the presentation more engaging.

The result was broadly similar on Herbie Hancock and Norah Jones's version of 'Court and Spark' (*River: The Joni Letters*), which is a better recording with less manipulation in the studio. But as the recording has more in the way of the genuine soundstage, that is the quality that the Evo 9 CA Premium brings out. It allows the voice and instruments to become more three-dimensional; they have body and palpability, which the standard arm fails to resolve. Beyond this, the melody is more effectively defined, and the way



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» the piece is played is more fluent and finessed; this is undoubtedly the case; Hancock and Co are nothing if not fine musicians.

With the far cruder ode to the blues that is 'Rollin' and Tumblin'' by Cream (*Fresh Cream*) the move to the Evo 9 CA Premium brings about a distinct opening up of the soundstage. Even though this is a raw recording, it does not turn out to be as grungy as the standard arm suggests. It still has the immediacy and intensity of a live performance, but you can hear more of what's going on as Clapton, Bruce and Baker hammer out the sound that inspired them to play in the first place.

I believe

Taken on its own terms, the Pro-Ject Xtension with Evo 9 CA Premium arm and Pick-IT DS2 cartridge delivers a nicely timed, coherent sound with decent image depth and plenty of detail alongside some serious low end. When you drop Stevie Wonder's 'I Believe' (*Talking Book*), you, er, wonder how he got such a 'phat' sound at a time when so many records lacked any deep bass. And you will easily be able to appreciate as much with this turntable. It is also good at a propulsive groove, drawing you in every time one comes

along, and revelling in dynamic rhythms. This was apparent with various records and seemed to happen regardless of how distracted the listener was. Reviewers are always focused one hundred per cent on the sound, one hundred per cent of the time, of course.

However, the beat-seeking missile that is the Pro-Ject Xtension 9 Evolution with Evo 9 CA Premium arm is not immune to the charms of music less rhythm-driven. I tried Chasing the Dragon's latest release; the direct-to-disc cut *Vivaldi in London*. I was bowled over by how gutsy the lead violin sounded and how incredibly open and spacious this recording is. Having come to terms with the enormity of presence, it also transpired that the melody was so powerful that my foot joined in, the sound so vital and alive with no loss of composure that you just had to move.

For owners of Pro-Ject turntables of Xtension quality, the Evo 9 CA Premium is a great upgrade, given that the change from a current tonearm comes with a very keen discount. Those looking to upgrade a non-Pro-Ject turntable will find a lot to like about this arm as well, and the discount here is very generous; this is a fine-sounding and well-made tonearm that will suit a wide range of turntables and cartridges. While it might be harder to find dealers that want to demonstrate tonearms today, there might be more of them in today's economic climate than you think. If all else fails, it's an easy DIY job requiring little more than a couple of Allen keys. +

Technical specifications

Type: Gimbal ball bearing-equipped phono pickup arm (All specifications are for the 9" arm version, as reviewed)

Tonearm Length: 230mm

Effective Tonearm Mass: 15.5g

Overhang: 18mm

Weight: 506g

Price: £1,249/\$1,649

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