

Pro-Ject Debut PRO

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

Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller

Like the Land Rover and Ray-Ban sunglasses, the Pro-Ject Debut comes in many flavours. What started as a pure entry-level product has been joined by enough siblings over the last 20 years [see PM's boxout, p75] that the new Debut PRO reviewed here can be regarded as the range's flagship and crowning glory. The numerous improvements elevate the price to £699, but even that hasn't undermined this record deck'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 [HFN Dec '20]. Lichtenegger says, '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'.

ON THE UP

This even extends to the name, which is particularly evocative for any product in the domestic sector. "PRO" was chosen, he explains, '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 adjustment has been added to fettle cartridge upgrades.

This flexibility is almost a mantra for Lichtenegger, as he mentions MCs frequently. The aluminium platter is more heavily damped, and anti-magnetic, which he says is a boon for upgrades to MC cartridges, noting, 'You almost never see a 1.6kg platter at this price point – usually it's 300g, glass and prone to ringing'.

RIGHT: With the 1.6kg non-magnetic alloy platter removed, the sub-platter, belt and AC motor are all revealed beneath. Flip the switch [lower left] right for 45rpm and left for 33.33rpm

He takes a breath and continues. '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 moving-coil upgrades. 'As you know, ultimately an MC is the heaven of analogue.' The new tonearm also utilises massive gimbals, and nickel coating, the latter said to provide improved damping and a longer-lasting finish. 'After the passage of time, painted or anodised black surfaces will turn greyish.'

Getting into his stride, Lichtenegger explains the importance of the positioning of the Debut PRO in the Pro-Ject turntable lineup. He emphatically wants it to top the Debut line, revealing that, 'Yes, 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'.

BODY LANGUAGE

'When you go to costlier high-end decks, if they're really better, you should experience greater quietness, less nervous behaviour,

and more authority', he explains further. '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 MM cartridge with Ortofon's Leif Johanson, '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

'It extracted each of the three voices in their own sonic turf'



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 was provided with the PRO. It turns out that this is an option, but I found the Debut PRO categorically benefits from a puck or clamp, so I used one throughout the listening sessions. Lichtenegger explained that they have designed a dedicated puck, as seen in the preliminary literature, 'which 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 €49. Or you could use the £75 'Clamp it', which promises an even tighter grip and, at 120g, applies pressure to the record without stressing the bearing.

PRO-FESSIONAL

There's no escaping it: the Debut PRO is easy to adore. I had it up and running in 15 minutes, and that's without a manual, as we were treated to the first production

sample, before the user guide was ready. Then again, anyone who has set up a Debut will recognise every element, by now aware, too, that there is also a spare belt for 78rpm usage [see PM's Lab Report, p77]. I settled on 1.8g for the tracking force of the new cartridge, based on my experience with a 2M Red for some years.

FIGHTING FORM

As the Pick it PRO is a straightforward Ortofon 2M in many ways – any differences to the cantilever, stylus, etc, being kept under wraps – it was an easy feed into the MM stages of four wildly differing phono stages I had to hand, ranging in price from under £400 to over £6000. This package will cause you no worries whatsoever, for it's as close to plug 'n' play as a turntable/arm/cartridge combo can be.

In other words, a *souçon* of experience and a load of common sense will have this optimised for your system. 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

ABOVE: A neat and compact, modern-looking turntable, the new Debut PRO has a hand-painted plinth, new one-piece alloy/carbon-fibre tonearm and nickel-plated bearing block

edition of George Benson's *Breezin'* [Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-011] dating from the label's West Coast days, it was easy to hear the effect of a puck in nearly every area.

I stress this because the puck I used was a £10 purchase from Amazon, so we are not talking about breaking the bank. While the PRO invites upgrades, and not just Lichtenegger's prediction that owners will court MCs, I used 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 to my ears was the solidity and extension of the bass. This extracted all the weight of the Benson recording, ultra-expressive lower registers courtesy of the legendary Phil Upchurch. But a Benson LP is about voice and guitar, and the Debut PRO was a more-than-competent deliverer of richness in all areas, a boon for Benson's honeyed tones.

STATEMENT OF INTENT

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 – managed to balance the two, so Lichtenegger was right: the PRO conveys 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 was congested – I am being brutal about this, having played with the Debut PRO right after using a package costing ten times its price. But the gains you would achieve over this, when the time comes to upgrade, would be matters of scale, perhaps a touch more stage depth. But auditioned in context, the

TURNTABLE PACKAGE



ABOVE: Stereo RCA sockets are mounted under the left of the plinth, PSU input to the right. Three machined feet screw into place for levelling and vibration control

Debut PRO yields nothing, as I heard with William Bell's *The Soul Of A Bell* [Speakers Corner STAX S719]. This is more about voice than anything else, despite the usual peerless backing all Stax releases employ.

His sublime composition 'You Don't Miss Your Water', exhibited vocal textures so convincing I was having second thoughts about MCs. The warmth in the voice defied the technology of the phono stages, vivid and apparent whether through all-valve or solid-state step-ups. 'Coherent' replaced 'competent' as this deck certainly earns its suffix, 'PRO' being less of a conceit and more a statement of intent.

JUGGLING ACT

This was made even more evident when I cruelly subjected it to a slightly knackered copy of *The Best Of The Lettermen* [Capitol ST2554]. I have no way of knowing how much HF content had been shaved off over the years by abuse, but the Pick it PRO extracted each of the three voices in their own sonic turf, blending them with such authority that I had to dig out my copy on open-reel tape for comparison purposes. I no longer felt their takes of 'Yesterday' or 'When I Fall In Love' were exercises in schmaltz.

Even better, as harmonising was dominating my mood, was the sublime Analogue Productions release of The Beach Boys' *Smiley Smile* [APPO68]. Even the weird numbers like 'Vegetables' and 'Wind Chimes' were captivating, but the LP's two masterpieces – 'Heroes And Villains' and 'Good Vibrations' – were further evidence that the retrieval of detail hadn't been compromised. 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 handled 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, were 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 was ethereal yet palpable. How's that for a juggling act?

Having spun over 30 LPs on the Debut PRO, I 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. I would love to have one just to see 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-£1000 front-end combinations. 'Entry level' has a new champion. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Having lost count of the Debuts I've tried, I'll confirm one thing: each new model delivered an advance on its predecessor. If, as CEO Heinz states, the PRO is the ultimate expression of the Debut concept, and further gains mean moving up to the next range in the catalogue, he couldn't have come up with a more fitting way to mark Pro-Ject's 30th anniversary. Simply stated, the Debut PRO is a knock-out.

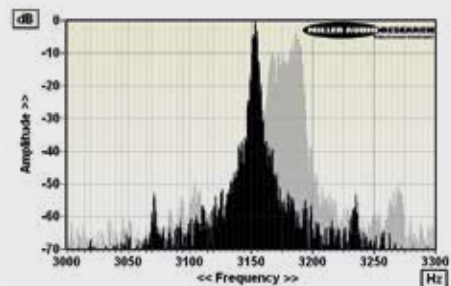
Sound Quality: 87%



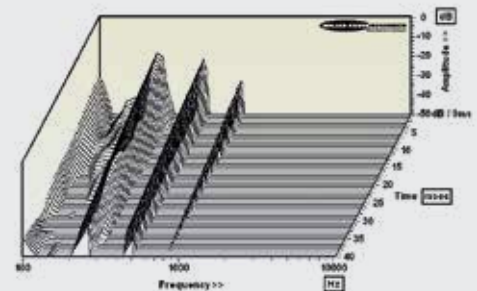
PRO-JECT AUDIO DEBUT PRO

Pro-Ject's Debut PRO turntable/arm/MM combination shares the same PSU, motor and MDF chassis as the earlier X1 [HFN Aug '19] and X2 [HFN Nov '19] models but there's a new nickel-plated bearing here, a new arm (bearing) and 1.6kg alloy platter with peripheral TPE damping. Once again, the deck is supplied with both glued round-section (78rpm) and continuous flat-section (33.3/45rpm) rubber belts but still I'll urge HFN readers to leave the former in the packaging and use the flat rubber drive. The round belt (with glob of adhesive) causes a marked deterioration in W&F [shaded spectrum, Graph 1], rumble and a speed error of +1% that some listeners might mistake for extra 'pace'! By contrast the flat belt delivers a very fine 0.02% peak-wtd wow [black spectrum, Graph 1] with a ±82Hz flutter that's also obvious on the unwtwd rumble spectra [not shown here]. We saw the same rumble component on the Pro-Ject X2, and while the bearing rumble here is a little below average at -63.8dB (DIN-B wtd) this improves to -66.2dB measured through-the-groove.

The partnering 8.6in tonearm features the same one-piece alloy/carbon tube seen in earlier Pro-Ject designs but is supported here in a new bearing yoke with a marginally under-hung and decoupled counterweight system. The main tube mode is lower than expected at 75Hz [off the X axis of Graph 2, below] and accompanied by a trio of high-Q and clearly-defined harmonic/twisting modes at 245Hz, 475Hz and 830Hz, the latter possibly associated with the carbon headshell fingerlift. The new arm bearing is well adjusted, free of play and offers low ~15mg friction, but the latest 'superstructure' is clearly livelier than we saw in the X2 model. PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ±150Hz; flat belt, black; round belt, grey)



ABOVE: Cumulative tonearm resonant decay spectrum, illustrating various bearing, pillar and 'tube' vibration modes spanning 100Hz-10kHz over 40msec

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.37rpm (+0.1%)
Time to audible stabilisation	3-4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter (Peak wtd)	0.02% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-66.2dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-63.8dB
Hum & Noise (unwtwd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-55.7dB
Power Consumption	6W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD, with lid) / Weight	415x113x320mm / 6kg