

Pro-Ject Audio Systems X8

Inspired by the longstanding Xtension 9 turntable, the new X8 features a 9cc EVO arm with balanced connections to better serve the 'bundled' Ortofon Quintet Blue MC
 Review: **Jamie Biesemanns** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Launched in 2022, the X8 is the new LP spinner that Austria's Pro-Ject is betting on to entice vinyl lovers onto that next step beyond the entry-level and midrange products that are the brand's bread and butter. To justify its higher price point, this sleek-looking deck borrows features from the company's top-tier Xtension turntables, making it Pro-Ject's most affordable 'mass-loaded' model to date. It's also fitted with a rigid 9cc Evolution carbon tonearm, which is an upgrade on the carbon-aluminium arms found on its lower-range offerings, including the X2 B [HFN Sep '22].

Par for the course, the belt-driven X8 is available in a £2099 'Superpack' which includes a pre-fitted Ortofon Quintet Blue MC cartridge. If you can't decide between Pro-Ject's X2 B, fitted with Ortofon's Quintet Red, and the X8, then the superior Blue is certainly one of the major points of difference to consider. More generally the X8 is a very different design, aside from the single speed control button and Pro-Ject's standard three colour options of gloss black, gloss white and an opulent 'real wood' walnut finish.

LEADING THE WAY

Under the plinth, there's more going on. The X8 is the latest deck in Pro-Ject's charge to convince hi-fi enthusiasts to make the switch to a balanced connection between turntable and phono preamp. The brand posits that the noise rejection offered by balanced connections makes them ideal for channelling very low-level (phono) signals in houses that are now typically filled with numerous CE devices.

Pro-Ject boss Heinz Lichtenegger [see p46] is leading from the front here by launching multiple products, all supporting balanced connections. Accompanying the X8 are the new balanced 'B' versions of the cheaper X1 and the aforementioned

RIGHT: An AC motor drives the X8's 5.1kg alloy platter via a round-section belt, with electronic speed selection provided [lower left]. The 9cc tonearm has been in service for over a decade

X2, together with a range of phono preamps with balanced inputs. A selection of suitable balanced cables hasn't been forgotten either, underpinned by strident marketing efforts to convince vinylistas that balanced is the way to go.

Which brings us neatly back to the X8. Contrary to the X1 B (which has a 'balanced' RCA connection) and the X2 B (fitted with both RCAs and a mini-XLR), the X8 offers a single connection only. And don't bother looking for this on the rear of the unit, as Pro-Ject is using an SME-like 5-pin DIN connection straight into the base of the tonearm.

However, even though the X8 is the poster child for balanced connections, it is delivered with a 'Connect it E 5P' DIN-to-RCA cable. So if you do own an amplifier with balanced inputs suited to a turntable or a capable phono preamp, you'll have to invest in another cable, such as Pro-Ject's

own Connect it CC, which is available with mini-XLR or dual full-sized XLR terminations.

HEAVY LIFTING

As the entry point into Pro-Ject's higher tier, the X8's MDF plinth and 5.1kg machined alloy platter contribute to the 15kg vibration-deadening 'mass loading' that's the hallmark of its £2000+ decks. The heavier, hinged dust cover is also part and parcel of this solution. Moreover, Pro-Ject says the platter is not only precision lathed, but also finely balanced and damped with a soft

polymer (TPE) material ring applied on the inside. Also inspired by those costlier Xtension decks, the stress on the X8's inverted ceramic bearing is reduced by partially supporting the massy platter via a powerful magnetic ring that's embedded into the top surface of the plinth around the stainless steel shaft.

'Bowie's last record is a celebration of a distinctive life'



This may assist in getting the belt-driven platter up to speed swiftly but it certainly reduces rumble noise through the bearing [see PM's Lab Report, p59]. PM has also reported that continuous round-section drive belts are usually preferable to ones that are glued into a loop out of cut lengths. The flat rubber belts that Pro-Ject employs on its other decks are one-piece items, so perhaps we'll see uninterrupted round-section belts in the future.

OLD FAITHFUL

Some may argue the X8 doesn't incorporate the newest technology, but that's all very relative. Continuous component upgrading is a necessity for mobile devices, for example, but not turntables. The electronic speed control and AC motor employed in the X8 have been around for a while and have proven very effective. So if it's not broken...

The turntable's trio of adjustable feet are not the magnetic supports found underneath both Pro-Ject's Xtension 9 [HFN

Jul '14] and Xtension 10 [HFN Aug '12], but they still feature polymer damping and are equally easy to adjust for levelling. In contrast with the Xtension 9's integral vinyl top surface, the X8's 'naked' alloy platter does, however, leave the door wide open for experimentation with different mats. The deck comes supplied with a lightweight felt mat, but trying out thicker alternatives, rubber mats and/or clamps might well prove fruitful.

A CUT ABOVE

The X8 was a strong performer straight out of the box, matching well with the Quintet Blue MC to deliver music in a grand and rousing manner. A silent background and clean, detailed presentation were a boon, but on top of that the scale of the performance was a bit of an eye-opener.

Pro-Ject's deck offers tangible stereo separation and lots of microdetail, outclassing the lower-tier X2 B on these fronts. This will partly be due to the progression from

ABOVE: Available in gloss black, white and walnut finishes, the plinth hosts an inverted ceramic bearing and peripheral magnet to partially 'lift' the platter. Ortofon's Quintet Blue MC completes the package [see boxout, below]

the Quintet Red cartridge of the X2 B to the far more capable Blue, but the deck itself introduces a more solid, confident feeling to the music.

To give it a chance to strut its stuff, I used the X8 with B&W 703 S3s [p48], and Primare's PRE35 [HFN Dec '19], multichannel A35.8 power amp [HFN May '22], and R15 phono stage. With a high-end deck like this, it's worth thinking about a capable phono stage to ensure you reap the benefits of your vinyl investment. Of course, Pro-Ject will be eager to point you in the direction of its 'True Balanced' models, including the EISA Award-winning Phono Box S3 B [HFN Sep '22].

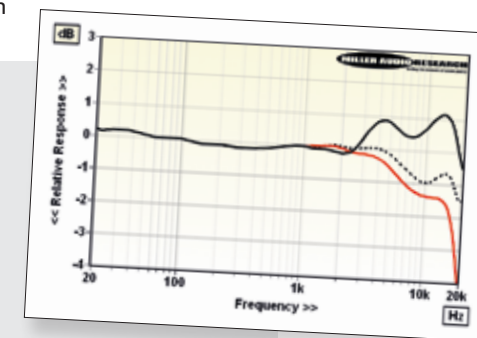
Unless you've been living under a rock for the last six decades or so, you only need to hear a few notes of the first track to know it's John Coltrane's 'Blue Train' spinning away. Heard it enough to last your whole lifetime? Well, you should give it another chance, as the jazz masterpiece was released in a superb 'Complete Masters' edition on Blue Note's Tone Poet Series last autumn [Blue Note BST 1577], celebrating the landmark album's 65th birthday.

ALL THAT JAZZ

The first disc features the original tracks, albeit remastered and in stereo. The mixes are very effective, retaining an intimate, late-at-night club vibe while giving each

QUINTET BLUE

Ortofon's Quintet Blue MC bests its 0.5mV specified output at 0.62mV/100ohm with a superb 0.1dB channel balance and >25dB separation through the midrange. Meanwhile, the relatively high 2.3g downforce secures its tracking up to a ~70µm groove modulation before letting go at the top +18dB (315Hz) test track. This is textbook stuff for a modern MC with a symmetrical 16/16cu (vertical/horizontal) compliance which, with a 9g bodyweight in a 10g effective mass arm, delivers a subsonic resonance at ~9Hz. So the Quintet Blue/9cc Evolution tonearm represents a good match just as the separate 'moving coils' inside the Blue's generator service the X8's genuinely balanced audio output connections. The Quintet Blue's HF distortion and response are both lifted with L+R cuts, reaching +1dB through the presence band and mid-treble [black trace, inset Graph] while the slight depression through this same region with L-R grooves [red trace] suggests some emphasis of strong central vocals, for example. The resulting stereo response [dashed trace] is smoothly extended to -1.5dB/20kHz. PM



TURNTABLE



ABOVE: A separate DIN-terminated audio cable is supplied that plugs into the base of the tonearm (not shown here, but this balanced output would serve Pro-Ject's Phono Box S3 B [HFN Sep '22], for example). Note outboard PSU input [lower right]

instrumentalist a distinct position, and they sounded lovely via the X8, Pro-Ject's turntable doing an excellent job of showcasing each of these jazz legends. Philly Joe Jones' drum solo on 'Locomotion' (or the one on 'Lazy Bird') arrived with bundles of energy and sounded like a real kit, including a lively bass drum thudding away.

This release also ups the presence of Paul Chambers' bass playing, particularly on 'Moment's Notice', although the combination of the X8 and Quintet Blue MC did put the midrange performance of the piano and trumpet more in the limelight. Yet this was without any annoying glare or harshness, even on the 'Alternate Take 8' of 'Blue Train', which sees the trumpet sounding a bit rawer and less polished than the final version on the album.

A STAR IS BORN

Strand Of Oaks' 2021 release *In Heaven* [Galacticana Records GAL 01] might not be the best pressing around (or I've fallen unlucky with my copy), which means playing it comes with risks attached. A lesser deck will often obfuscate the harsher points, but the X8 proved more revealing. That said, the performance was not over-critical either, and it still served up these dreamlike indie rock tracks in an engrossing way, with an organic touch and clear low extension.

Black Star [Sony Music/Columbia 88875173871] was David Bowie's final release, forming the conclusion to a diverse career encompassing 26 studio albums. Unavoidably it's a bit gloomy, but the record is equally a celebration of a distinctive life, a nuance which the X8 managed to convey by way of reproducing Bowie's tired voice with

considerable panache. It all follows on from the deck's combination of good clarity and separation, while pacing is outstanding. The X8 deck also handled 'Sue (Or In a Season of Crime)' near-perfectly – not the last word in tightness and control, but ensuring this frenzied, chaotic track didn't become muddy.

DEGREES OF SEPARATION

Album opener 'Black Star' is a wild ride too, but it's track three, 'Lazarus', that really made for a compelling listening on this system. The languid saxophone and horns, and reverberant guitar, formed a complex backdrop above which Bowie's voice floated. The deep background was remarkably quiet, leaving no distractions to take you out of the musical moment.

And at the end of the day, that's the star quality of this latest Pro-Ject deck. The X8 offers you more than a glimpse of high-end performance in a ready-to-enjoy package, avoiding the very high price, and potential complexity, that an uber-upgrade might entail. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

By distilling key features from the X9 and X10 models into the X8, Pro-Ject has built a sleek turntable that appears minimalistic but offers a sizeable step up in performance compared to its budget decks. The Quintet Blue MC plays an important part in this, but the match is entirely fortuitous. As a result, the X8 spins your vinyl with minimal distraction and maximum detail, immersing you in the music.

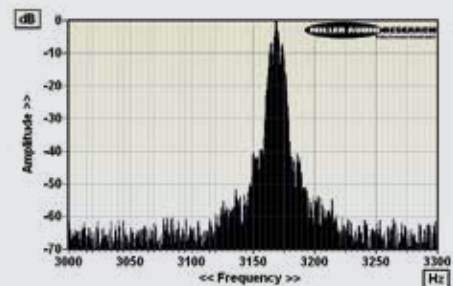
Sound Quality: 86%



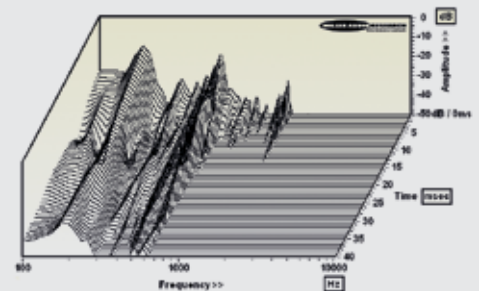
PRO-JECT AUDIO SYSTEMS X8

The bare bones of Pro-Ject's X8 turntable can be traced right back to the Xtension 9 Evolution [HFN Aug '14] – both decks featuring what looks like a very similar AC synchronous motor driving a heavy, TPE-damped alloy platter around its edge and supported on a 'magnetically assisted' inverted ceramic bearing. The Xtension's 5.4kg platter was a little heavier than the X8's 5.1kg version, but the former also included an extra surface of 'recycled vinyl', traded in the X8 for a traditional felt mat. Drilling into the detail, both decks have a glued (rather than continuous) round-section belt which is often associated with drift and slightly high peak-wtd wow, as is the case with both these decks at 0.07% [see Graph 1]. The X8 is also running about +0.6% fast and while this injection of 'pace' is unlikely to be audible, it's also likely to slow, and become more accurate, with age. Bearing rumble, however, is much improved in the X8 from –67.6dB (Xtension 9 Evo) to –68.5dB here, and to a very fine –72.2dB through-the-groove (20Hz-20kHz, DIN-B wtd re. 1kHz/5cm/sec).

The partnering Pro-Ject 9cc Evolution tonearm features a lightweight but very rigid, woven carbon fibre tube that defers its main beam resonance to a high 195Hz alongside harmonics and twisting modes up at 350Hz, 510Hz and 615Hz, the latter moderately high-Q but quickly damped on the CSD waterfall [Graph 2, below]. Effective mass is between 9-10g [see boxout, p57] while the four ABEC 7 tolerance ball races offer very low (<10mg) levels of stiction/friction. Tested with the supplied (TPE-damped) counterweight, the 9cc Evolution's downforce proves about 10% lower than the dialed-in value, so 2g on the 0-3.5g 'watchface' delivers closer to 1.8g. Better to err upwards. PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ±150Hz, 5Hz per minor division)



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	33.55rpm (+0.63%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5-6sec
Peak Wow/Flutter (Peak wtd)	0.07% / 0.05%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-72.2dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-68.5dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-61.5dB
Power Consumption	5W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD, with lid) / Weight	465x150x350mm / 15kg