

Living it large

PRO-JECT XTENSION TURNTABLE (£3250)

From the makers of excellent 'budget' decks comes this go-for-broke flagship model designed to accommodate 12in tonearms

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HIGHLY
COMMENDED

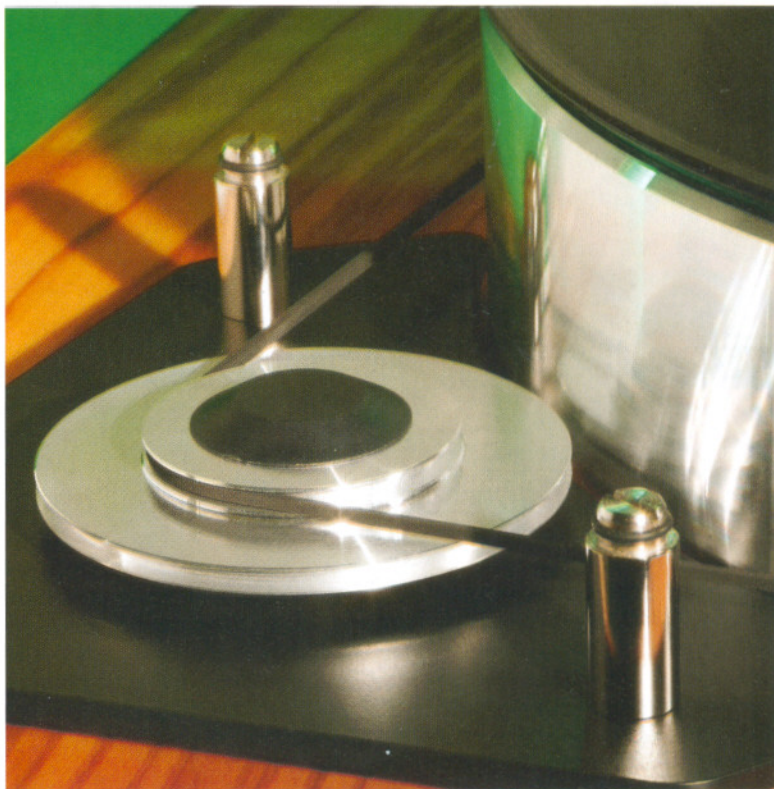


Before reading beyond this first paragraph, just pause for a moment to take a longer look at our photos of this gargantuan deck. Not for a long time has a product been the cause of so many 'oohs and aahs' in *HFN's* photographic studio. In the flesh Pro-Ject's latest turntable looks utterly gorgeous.

We first spotted Pro-Ject's new flagship, dubbed the Xtension, in January when it was unveiled at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. Prompt telephone calls to Henley Designs in Oxfordshire, Pro-Ject's UK distributor, ensured that our name was on the very first sample to arrive in this country from the Pro-Ject factory situated in Litovel, east of Prague. As the Xtension is designed to accommodate 12in tonearms Henley Designs supplied it with an Ortofon RS-309D fitted with an Ortofon Kontrapunkt B moving-coil cartridge [see 'Specifying your replay system', below].

With its high gloss lacquered real wood veneer and substantial acrylic hinged lid the Xtension is redolent of immaculate Japanese high-end turntables of a bygone age. It's impossible to fault the quality of finish, our sample featuring a highly-grained and distinctive olive wood veneer. Other options available are cherry, apple and piano black gloss.

What our photographs might not portray is the imposing scale of the Xtension. While it is not particularly heavy at 20kg (of which nearly 6kg is the platter), it's a truly massive deck measuring 550x250x450mm (whd) with the lid closed – and it will require a substantial equipment rack to accommodate it. Unfortunately it was way too big to sit on the top shelf of the standard-sized Seismic Sink Stand that



supports my 20 year-old Townshend Rock Reference turntable. Consequently I did the Pro-Ject no favours whatsoever in having to park it on top of a flimsy IKEA-style TV rack. Fortunately the Xtension's plinth rests on four height-adjustable 'magnetic field' suspension feet with integral Sorbothane damping that afford the deck a pretty good degree of vibration isolation.

Once the arm and cartridge are set up and the deck levelled there is no maintenance required. This is a 'fit and forget' player that is simple to use, with electronic speed switching and pitch adjustment built in.

SMOOTH OPERATOR

As the stylus of the ruby-cantilevered Kontrapunkt B cartridge dropped gently into an LP's run-in groove for the first time there was an immediate sense of calm about the way in which this record playing system goes

ABOVE: Square section belt drives the periphery of the 5.7kg aluminium platter. Speed change for 33/45rpm is electronic; manually moving the belt onto the larger diameter motor pulley is only required for 78rpm playback



SPECIFYING YOUR REPLAY SYSTEM

Our sample of the Xtension was fitted with Ortofon's 12in RS-309D dynamically balanced tonearm with an effective length of 326mm and 19° offset angle. At £1500 this is Ortofon's flagship arm, supplied with a detachable magnesium headshell together with an Ortofon DS-1 electronic stylus downforce gauge.

One of Pro-Ject's own tonearms could be specified at a considerable cost saving. For example, Pro-Ject's 12in '12cc Evolution' appears to offer good value at £1000, its armtube and headshell being fashioned from a single piece of carbon fibre. There's a 9in Evolution arm in Pro-Ject's portfolio, too – but fitting a 9in arm to the Xtension would surely be to miss the point, given that the reason for the extra-large plinth is to accommodate longer tonearms and hence benefit from reduced tracking error.

'Not for a long time has a product been the cause of so many 'oohs and aahs' in *HFN's* photographic studio'

about its business. Playing an original 1971 copy of *Moving Waves* by Focus [Blue Horizon 2931-002], an LP that I've owned since it was first released (it was one of the first albums I ever purchased in my early teens) demonstrated in an instant that here was a turntable/arm/cartridge combination that was uncommonly forgiving of surface imperfections. Despite having been massacred by a plethora of groove-gouging radiograms and portable record players during a mis-spent youth, the LP's myriad juvenile ticks and pops were surprisingly benign as the player dug deeply into the recording.

Suspecting that the sound might be overtly rolled off to be so immensely kind and easy-going, I was soon reverting to a familiar reference of the London Philharmonic Orchestra at full tilt: the opening of 'A Sussex Overture' from the two LP set *Arnold Overtures* [Reference Recordings RR-48]. I was reassured in hearing the brittle rasp of the LPO's brass section and the clatter and crashing of percussion that was far from over-smooth. Meanwhile the wallop of kettle drums ☞

AUDIO FILE

Three-speed, belt drive turntable

Price: £3250 (no arm)

Made by: Pro-Ject Audio Systems

Supplied by: Henley Designs

Telephone: 01235 511166

Web: www.project-audio.com



ABOVE: Adjustment of arm height is a breeze on Ortofon's beautifully-finished RS-309D 12-inch tonearm

and double basses demonstrated the Xtension's assured handling of all manner of musical hurdles.

A couple of days later, after many pleasureable hours spent plundering my record collection and discovering 'old treasures', I found myself listening to side four of Frank Zappa's 1979 *Sheik Yerbouti* album [CBS 88339]. As 'Wild Love' segues into 'Yo Mama' I braced myself for the load 'crack' that I've become used to ever since my European vinyl copy acquired some mysterious damage more than 20 years ago. Once again the 'crack' emerged from my speakers precisely where I expected it, only it was more a dull, recessed 'tick' as the groove damage was traversed with a minimum of fuss.

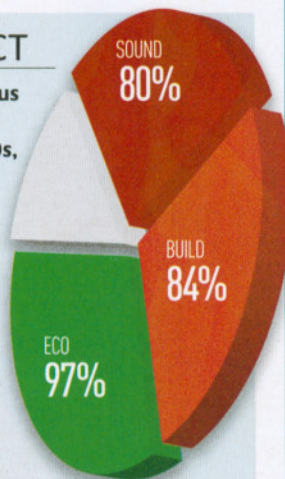
BRINGING IT ALL BACK

Owning a record player such as this Pro-Ject/Ortofon combo doubtless would have me scouring secondhand LP bargain bins once again, something I've not considered for many years since listening to digital formats for a quarter of a century has made me so utterly intolerant of noise in analogue replay.

Ortofon's RS-309D 12in arm is immaculately finished and fuss-free to use, nevertheless I'm sure it could be bettered by a fixed headshell design with more robust armtube. Still, I've not enjoyed playing records as much as this for many years – and before Pro-Ject's importers call to take it all away I'm looking forward to experimenting further with Ortofon's Kontrapunkt B cartridge in a variety of systems. I suspect this ruby-cantilevered transducer with Fritz Geiger stylus profile is something of a forgotten gem. ☺

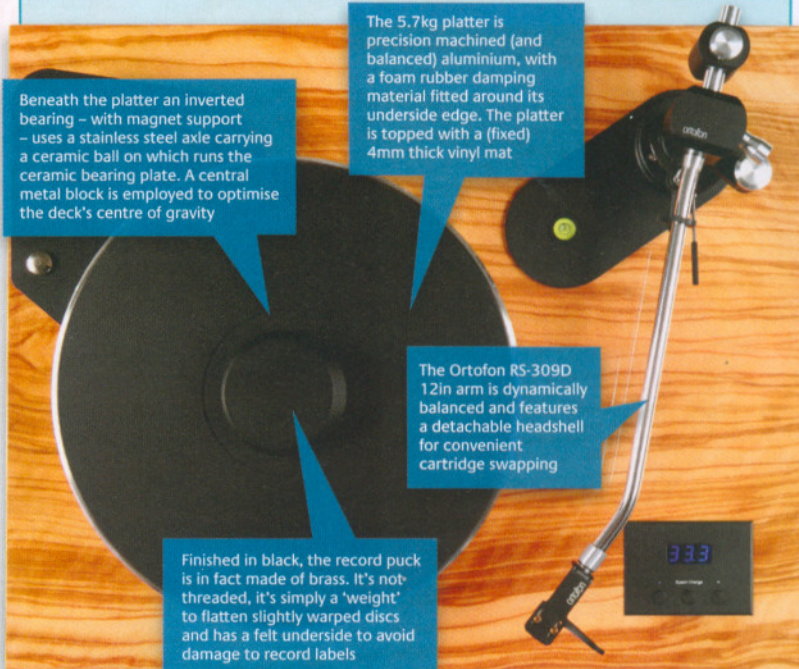
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Boasting the type of sumptuous finish common to high-end Japanese turntables of the '70s, Project's luxurious Xtension assures pride of ownership. Moreover it is completely straightforward to set up, requires no on-going adjustment and proves a pleasure to use. Given its delightful music making – velvety smooth and flowing in this incarnation – it can be highly recommended.



PRO-JECT XTENSION / £3250 (no arm)

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LAB
RESULTS



Beneath the platter an inverted bearing – with magnet support – uses a stainless steel axle carrying a ceramic ball on which runs the ceramic bearing plate. A central metal block is employed to optimise the deck's centre of gravity

The 5.7kg platter is precision machined (and balanced) aluminium, with a foam rubber damping material fitted around its underside edge. The platter is topped with a (fixed) 4mm thick vinyl mat

The Ortofon RS-309D 12in arm is dynamically balanced and features a detachable headshell for convenient cartridge swapping

Finished in black, the record puck is in fact made of brass. It's not-threaded, it's simply a 'weight' to flatten slightly warped discs and has a felt underside to avoid damage to record labels

HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

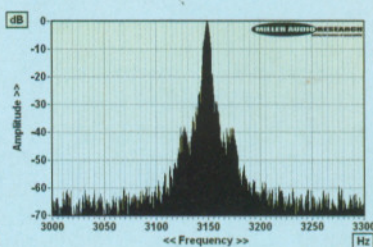
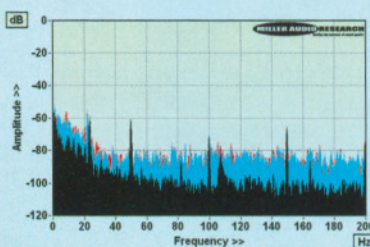
This beautifully finished deck has one key technical performance indicator in its favour – excellent speed stability. The relatively sharp main peak on the wow & flutter spectrogram [see graph, below right] is a visual indication of the low 0.02% peak wow, a figure second only to that achieved by the reference SME 30/12 reviewed in March '09. Anyone sensitive to the slightest pitch instability (or anyone brought up on a diet of digital audio) will certainly appreciate this facet of its performance.

Nevertheless, the Xtension is not entirely 'neutral'. The shoulders on the same graph betray a mild flutter speed variation, centred at little over 20Hz, and amounting to some 0.04%. This is still very mild but the same frequency components are also visible on the various superimposed rumble plots [see graph, below left].

Measured directly through the bearing itself (black trace), this peak transpires at about 23Hz and could be either a platter or chassis bending mode. There's another mode visible around 110Hz which might have more to do with the long tonearm than the deck itself. The spikes at 50Hz/100Hz/150Hz are likely derived from the synchronous motor, but hum is low at <-60dB below 1kHz at 5cm/sec.

The rumble plots also show an increase in noise below 5Hz which is very unusual, although the DIN B weighted figure of -71.6dB avoids this contribution. The subjective impact of this is uncertain.

Readers can view a full QC Suite report for Pro-Ject's Xtension turntable (with the Ortofon RS-309 tonearm) by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE LEFT: Bearing rumble (black infill) versus silent LP groove with/without clamp (red/blue infill) re. 5cm/sec; ABOVE RIGHT: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ± 150 Hz, 5Hz per minor division)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm | 33.34rpm (+0.03%) |
| Time to audible stabilisation | 10.0 sec |
| Peak Wow & Flutter | 0.02% / 0.03% |
| Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd) | -68.5dB |
| Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd) | -71.6dB |
| Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec) | -56.8dB |