

EQUIPMENT REPORT

Pro-Ject RPM 9 Carbon Turntable

Carbon Dating

Neil Gader



If you feel as if you've seen this turntable in a past life, fear not. For indeed, the new Pro-Ject RPM 9 Carbon bears a strikingly close resemblance to the well-regarded RM-9.2 belt-drive 'table that was reviewed by Wayne Garcia in Issue 206. It's the same handsome profile and its compact, open-chassis, outboard motor design is *déjà vu* familiar. And yes again, it's similarly equipped with the top-notch 9cc EVO tonearm—a traditional pivoted design. But oh boy, there are some major differences and not all of them visible to the naked eye. It's like they say in the hot-rodding world: It's what's under the hood that counts.

The \$3000 RPM 9 Carbon is Pro-Ject's "tuner" special and it's been kitted out with three significant upgrades over the stock RM-9.2. There's a new motor that's both quieter and uses the same quartz-lock technology derived from the firm's outboard Speed Box II. Also there's a new DC-driven power supply that features an improved AC generator for speed stability. The major takeaway is that the electronic speed control allows single-button selection between 33 and 45rpm, a handy improvement over the pulley switching required with the RM-9.2. Available in the near future will be a 33/78 pulley, as well.

Also hidden from view is the attention that's been paid to the newly upgraded chassis. The plinth is a mass-loaded design that incorporates a CNC-machined MDF plate that uses hard, resin-coated steel pellets to form the heavy sandwich construction. A special heat treatment and a woven-carbon-fiber surface-coating suggest low resonance levels. It also looks very cool and is, as they say, "track ready."

The platter is new, as well. Gone is the acrylic of the RM-9.2, replaced by a specially polished aluminum platter with internal TPE damping and a vinyl mat layer on top. The inverted ceramic main bearing offers stable turntable speed and extra-low levels of rumble. Effectively decoupling the chassis are a trio of height-adjustable magnetic footers that fit beneath the plinth and are designed for precise leveling. Beautifully constructed devices, the magnetic footers reportedly allow "for isolation and mass to work in tandem to help filter resonances out of the chassis." Speaking of mass,

included with the RPM 9 Carbon is a heavy brass record clamp capable of flattening even stubbornly bowed records.

Carried over from the RM-9.2 is the 9cc EVO arm, which uses a one-piece conical carbon-fiber armtube with integrated headshell and inverted bearing design. In its current iteration it incorporates a denser carbon-fiber weave to reduce resonances, plus a substantial C-collar for added rigidity in the bearing housing—an improvement which Sumiko (Pro-Ject's importer) says allows the 'arm and cartridge to have greater agility in the grooves. The 'arm's counterweight is Sorbothane-damped and taller and shallower than the previous version—changes that place it closer to the bearing's pivot-point for greater freedom of movement. All in all the EVO arm is a nicely crafted, highly adjustable component that permits cartridge tweekers a panoply of optimization options including overhang, azimuth, and VTA.

My review sample was also equipped with Sumiko's "hit the ground running" SuperPack that adds the Sumiko Blue Point Special EVO III (a 0.5mV moving coil and a \$549 value) and 5P Connect-it tonearm cable with a five-pin female DIN on one end and single-ended RCAs on the other (an XLR version is offered as an option). An optional dust cover is available and in my view, advisable. First, turntables attract dust like bees to honey. And second, a cover can protect a stylus from an inadvertent swipe of a Swiffer—especially in an open chassis design where the headshell end of the tonearm is essentially floating in free air and almost begging for the Stephen King treatment. This is just one reason why I like a dedicated base protecting the essentials of a turntable. I know the arguments against them, but I also know from experience that when properly executed—like my Sota Cosmos' Corian base—they make a table highly immune to airborne and mechanical resonances.

Setup was glitch-free. A handy template is provided for optimally positioning the motor vis-à-vis the edge of the platter, thus allowing proper tensioning of the belt. And operationally it's also a breeze. The one-touch motor gets the table up to 33 speed fairly quickly—45rpm is a little more on the languid side. To switch speeds from 33 to 45 merely press the button a second time and quickly release. To stop the table, hold the button down a few additional seconds. The

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damped cueing is commendably gentle on the stylus, but I was a little surprised at how powerfully the magnetized armrest seated the tonearm each time I returned it home. Clack. I kept thinking of the Starship Enterprise caught in a Klingon tractor beam.

If there was a system that could show up the Pro-Ject as a playback poseur it was the one it faced during this evaluation. One of the highest-resolution setups I've had in my room recently, it was composed of the Parasound JC 3+ phonostage, the Classe CP-800 preamp, CA-D200 amplifier, and TAD CE-1 loudspeakers (review forthcoming). Synergistic Research supplied its all-new Atmosphere Level 4 cabling (with red tuning modules). My own LP setup is the Sota Cosmos vacuum-hold-down 'table with SME V tonearm, Sumiko Palo Santos Presentation cartridge, and Audience Au24SE phono cable.

Just prior to actually dropping the stylus onto a record for the first time I have a particular (some might say peculiar) habit reserved for turntable evaluations. Given that they are the only components (excepting reel-to-reel) in audio chains with mostly visible, mechanically operated systems, I like to sit back and observe the 'table and tonearm behavior—the quality and control of its operation. How fluid and stable is the 'table in full motion? Does the platter/mat waver during rotation? Is there any vibrational noise, or motor noise? Long story short, the system should present a platform so placid and stable that at a glance the stylus/groove interface should appear as if there is nothing moving at all—frozen in time like a still photo. The RPM 9 Carbon passed this initial test so impressively it looked as if it were unplugged.

The sonic performance of the RPM 9 Carbon is devilishly good. Backgrounds are jet black and softly tinted to the warmer end of the tonal spectrum. Its character is one of overarching balance across all criteria, a trait that makes LP reproduction sound elegantly composed and well nigh effortless. Imaging and soundstage stability are excellent with a wide comfortable spread of images across the stage. String sections, winds, brass are all nicely differentiated from another and there's little to no image smearing.

On the classic Reference Recordings LP *Nojima Plays Liszt* my ears instantly go on red alert. If there is any hint of pitch instability or tonal warble it's going to raise its head during this recording's quietest passages—especially on long, sustained single notes. The Pro-Ject was rock-solid at these moments, each note decaying unwaveringly into the deepest corners of the sound-space. *Presto* arpeggios were liquid and articulate, as well. Plus, there was an impressive sense of air and lift in the upper octaves. And equally and literally striking were the artist's percussive keyboard stabs, which were deep and authoritative. As these aggressively played passages built in intensity, the harmonic aura enveloping the soundboard and rippling the air around the concert grand was superb.

When evaluating turntables I invariably return to the deep, widely spaced grooves of twelve-inch 45rpm pop remixes. They've been re-engineered and cut for maximum effect on the dance floor, and are usually overflowing with bass information and mixing board trickery. Although these can be a bear for cartridges to track I'm still amazed at the delights and oddities that I continue to discover in these old pressings—and way long after assuming I'd extracted every sonic treasure. Take for example, Lionel Richie's "All Night Long" (I hear groans). The depth and detail in this recording have evolved steadily upward with the im-

provements in LP playback equipment. In the case of the RPM 9 Carbon it was all about the detail exhibited from the dense crowd of background partyers. There was enough specificity and transient snap that I was ready to do a head count. (And then go find the party's bartender.) The vibes solo was also richer harmonically, more stable and articulate. And the blazing horn section could now be broken down into individual instruments, not just white sheets of sound. Similarly David Bowie's "Let's Dance," the Nile Rodgers-produced twelve-inch remix, sent chills down my spine with its percussive energy, smirking sax-play, and every searing note that exploded forth during Stevie Ray Vaughan's famous guitar solo.

Another example was Joan Baez's cover of "Let it Be" from her live concert LP *Diamonds and Rust in the Bullring*, a wonderful remastering and pressing from Analogue Productions. Accompanied by the gospel-inflected piano, organ, and backing chorus, this was the sort of emotionally open performance so filled with artistic conviction that I was whisked into the appreciative audience, where the sense of the live event was evident in the ambient immersiveness of the recording and the assuredness of Baez's terrific pitch control and lively vibrato.

There are no blatant weaknesses to this turntable, rather just some very minor subtractions. In subtler ways it lacks the final level of dark harmonic ripeness in the lower octaves of certain super-'tables. The palpability and the full palette of dynamic action and tonal color during Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* [Argo] seemed slightly attenuated. The low-level resolving power that finds spaces between notes was more apparent on my own front end. Finally, I could spot some general soundstage foreshortening and a modest hint of treble constriction from orchestral strings, cymbals, and tams, but to be fair, the choice of cartridge needs to be factored into this impression at least as much as the turntable/tonearm combination. Probably more. The Blue Point Special is a good one and a good value, but to be fair it's no Palo Santos Presentation.

The Pro-Ject RPM 9 Carbon continues the brand's outstanding run of sonic and technical improvements in affordable vinyl playback. In fact, throughout my evaluation it never seemed out of its league, even facing the heady heights of upper-crust setups, including my own much pricier kit. Interested parties should also know that the RPM 9 Carbon is a worthy addition for the *long term*—it's got enough resolution and sheer musicality to ensure that audio upgrades elsewhere in the chain can be confidently purchased without fear of outdating the Pro-Ject. Without qualification, the RPM 9 Carbon is a terrific package, certain to give a great many lucky owners years of vinyl-spinning thrills. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Belt-driven turntable
Dimension: 17.4" x 7" x 12.8"
Weight: 24 lbs. + motor 4.5 lbs.
Prices: \$3000 with SuperPack

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