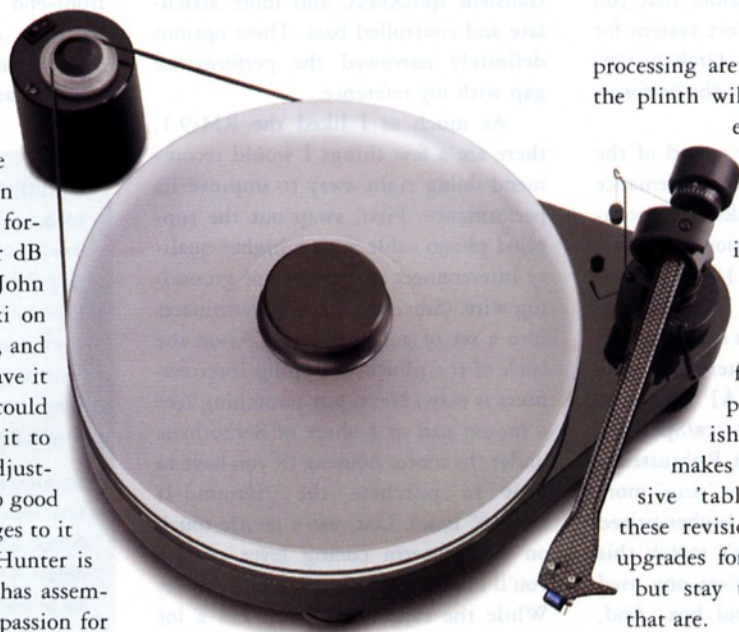


Pro-Ject RM-9.1 Turntable System

Jim Hannon

A very good turntable just got better— a look at the latest from Pro-Ject



Several years ago I purchased a Kiseki Purple Heart Sapphire cartridge (then distributed by Sumiko) from former Bay Area audio retailer dB Audio. Its set-up guy, John Hunter, mounted the Kiseki on my SOTA Star and ETII rig, and then recommended that I leave it with him for 24 hours so he could run the cartridge in, allow it to settle, and then make final adjustments. Hunter's setup was so good that I didn't make any changes to it for a few years. Now John Hunter is Sumiko's President, and he has assembled a team that shares his passion for all things analog.

Among Sumiko's latest imports is the \$1499 Pro-Ject RM-9.1, which is designed by Heinz Lichtenegger in Vienna and built at Pro-Ject's factory in the Czech Republic. A revised version of the RM-9 that was reviewed a few years ago in these pages, this mass-loaded, belt-driven turntable differs from the original in ways that are significant but not always obvious. The inverted bearing, tear-drop-shaped plinth, separate motor pod, acrylic platter, solid-brass record clamp, and tonearm-bearing structure are the same in both the RM-9 and the RM-9.1. So what's left? Well, enough that this new entry might instead have been called the RM-90. The single-piece arm tube is now molded from carbon fiber. It not

only dissipates energy better than the old version but is both lighter and stiffer, as well. The "jointless" armtube and headshell evoke memories of the SME V that I once owned, but the arm is actually closer to a Wilson Benesch design because of the carbon-fiber application. The old plinth's simple foot arrangement of rubber, plastic, and felt has given way to a more massive machined-aluminum cone that uses a Sorbothane layer between the plinth and the cone foot. And though the size and shape of the plinth remain the same, a steel plate has been added to the underside to significantly increase mass and to focus the dissipation of energy around a single point. Additionally, the MDF material and

processing are changed to insure that the plinth will not break due to the extra weight of the steel plate. These differences are said to reduce noise, resulting in blacker backgrounds and better bass articulation and extension. Due to improvements in the fabrication and painting processes, the fit and finish of this new version makes it *look* like a more expensive 'table, too. Unfortunately, these revisions are not available as upgrades for current RM-9 owners, but stay tuned—there are others that are.

So how does this new Pro-Ject sound? The short answer is that its performance is much closer to that of a costly rig than to an entry-level one. Coupled with the Sumiko Blackbird cartridge, a high-output moving-coil that is sold along with the RM-9.1 at a \$300 discount,¹ the sound is smooth yet detailed, the soundstage is wide, and the low end has authority. Massed strings lack the upper-midrange glare one hears with some moving-coils in this class, and can even sound lush. Voices and saxes are particularly seductive; images are stable; and transparency, transient quickness, and inner detail are all good. The RM-9.1 rivals the Rega P5/Exact combination in its surprising lack of groove and surface noise, and it's easy to listen to for hours with-

¹ Packages are also available with the Sumiko Blue Point No. 2 or the Blue Point Special EVO III.

out any aural fatigue, even with modest electronics like the Rotel and Outlaw receivers I review elsewhere in this issue. Yet because it doesn't really do anything wrong and is true to the music, the RM-9.1 wasn't out of place in my reference system. Admittedly, it fell short of the reference's performance, primarily in the areas of soundstage-depth, delicacy, air, and timbre. However, when you consider that you can buy the entire Pro-Ject system for less than the price of my Graham tonearm, I was surprised that the performance gap wasn't wider.

While I enjoyed the sound of the stock configuration, the performance of this Pro-Ject can be taken up another level with the addition of a few "options." The RM-9.1's inverted-bearing design produces speed stability that is quite good for a model in this class. On demanding material like the Chopin Ballades [RCA] and the *Carmen Fantaisie* [Decca/Speakers Corner], it allowed both Rubinstein's piano and Ricci's violin to "sing" more than "warble." Several higher-priced 'tables I've heard couldn't match this level of performance, unless one used an outboard speed-control box. And, yes, Pro-Ject offers an optional Speed Box SE (\$549), which adds a larger power supply, electronic speed regulation, and pitch control. Since I didn't

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have the Speed Box on hand, I used my VPI SDS with the RP-9.1 and the pitch became utterly stable, the bass more solid, and the soundstage better focused. I would definitely try out the Speed Box SE and see if it produces similar gains in your system.


Placing Pro-Ject's new base, the "Ground-It Deluxe," under the RM-9.1 tightened up the bass, lowered the overall noise floor, and improved both focus and clarity (pricing on the

"Ground-It Deluxe" is still being finalized, but should be under \$400). It matches the beautiful dark grey lacquer finish of the RM-9.1 and is filled with "granulate" (metal shavings). Just place it on a level surface and use either three or four of the supplied cones. In combination with a speed controller, it made the music emerge from a blacker background, with more rhythmic drive and transient quickness, and more articulate and controlled bass. These options definitely narrowed the performance gap with my reference.

As much as I liked the RM-9.1, there are a few things I would recommend doing right away to improve its performance. First, swap out the supplied phono cable with a higher-quality interconnect and a piece of grounding wire. (Since the tonearm terminates into a set of gold-plated RCAs on the back of the plinth, swapping interconnects is easy.) Next, put something like a mouse pad or a sheet of Sorbothane under the motor housing (if you have to wait to purchase the "Ground-It Deluxe" base). Last, use a gentle touch on the tonearm cueing lever or else you'll miss the first few notes on the LP. While the carbon-fiber arm has a lot going for it, with adjustable VTA (but not during play) and azimuth, its "hanging weight" anti-skate mechanism is not as refined as some you'll

find on more costly arms. But this is a minor quibble.

I am reminded of the 1980s when companies like SOTA, Linn, and Oracle continually refined their 'tables in order to leapfrog each other. With the RM-9.1, Pro-Ject has made an already good design much better, and without raising the price. Like some of its competitors, notably the Rega P5 and VPI Scout, it includes an arm that is far superior to the stock arms you'll find

on entry-level turntables, and the Sumiko Blackbird's performance comes close to that of some higher-priced and lower-output moving-coils. Better still, the sound of this combo can be taken to new heights by adding the "Ground-It Deluxe" base and a good external speed controller. The low noise of this RM-9.1 system might even fool you into thinking you're listening to a digital front-end until you notice how rich, natural, and engaging the music sounds, and how long your listening sessions last. 

SPECIFICATIONS

RM-9.1 turntable

Bearing: Inverted thrust

Type of drive: Belt

Tonearm: Pro-Ject 9cc with adjustable VTA and azimuth

Speeds: 33-1/3 and 45 rpm

Dimensions: 17.7" x 7.1" x 11.9"

Weight: 30 lbs.

Blackbird cartridge

Type: High-output MC

Output: 2.5mV

Weight: 9.6 grams

Recommended Tracking Force: 1.8 to 2.2 grams

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

MFA Venusian preamp (modified); VPI Aries (updated with TNT V platter/bearing); Graham 1.5 tonearm with 2.2 bearing; Koetsu Black cartridge; Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 21 DAC; Prima Luna Six power amplifiers; Eben X-3, Hyperion HPS-938, and Quad ESL-57s (PK modified) loudspeakers

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

SUMIKO

2431 Fifth Street

Berkeley, California 94710

(510) 843-4500

sumikoaudio.net

Prices: \$1499 (\$1999 as tested with

Sumiko Blackbird cartridge, which is

\$799 when sold separately)