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Pro-Ject Xtension 9 Super Pack

The Xtension 9 Evolution is the latest in Pro-Ject's highly prolific turntable range, and forms a constituent part of UK importer Henley Designs' latest 'Super Pack'

Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

One of the main concerns facing someone who may be a newcomer to vinyl, or even re-visiting it after a diversion to the digital dark side, is the same thing that made many breathe a sigh of relief when CD arrived over 30 years ago: namely, the whole rigmarole of pick-up cartridge setup and alignment.

At the budget end of the market, plug-and-play units are relatively common but as one ventures up the price and quality ladder, it is invariably expected that purchasers will source their cartridge themselves, or have their dealer install it for them. Not so for Henley Designs, as one of its chief selling points has always been the excellent value turntable, arm and cartridge packages that it puts together for its UK audience.

The latest of these is the Pro-Ject Xtension 9 Super Pack, mating the Xtension 9 Evolution turntable and 9CC Evolution arm to the new Ortofon Quintet Black MC.

The Pro-Ject line-up starts with the £159 Elemental and stretches through a wide variety of different models to the magnificent statement of intent that is the Signature 12, but its range is eminently sensible. Unlike some car manufacturers, for example, who spring forth new models left and right, appearing often to compete with no-one but themselves, Pro-Ject is rather more careful, and the new Xtension 9 Evolution is a perfect example of the company's forethought.

The Xtension range premiered in 2009 with the Xtension 12, a fine beast of a deck designed for 12in arms which sported a SpeedBox SE PSU integrated into its plinth but with, unfortunately, a footprint too large for many racks. This was followed by the Xtension 10, containing the same basic innards but shrinking the plinth for use with 10in arms. The Xtension 9 is therefore an obvious next step, being slightly smaller

still, and as the name suggests, configured for 9in tonearms. The plinth itself measures a nicely compact 465x350mm and so size-related rack placement is not an issue.

PUT THE RIGHT FOOT FORWARD

The plinth is made from MDF and filled with metal granulate to produce a non-resonant, high mass base all topped with a very swish paint finish in High Gloss Red or White. The deck stands on three aluminium feet that are damped with a Thermo-Plastic Elastomer [TPE] and these magnetically decouple the plinth from the surface on which it sits. All three are pre-adjusted for level at the factory and so care must be taken during installation to mate the correct foot to the right mounting location, but further fine adjustment of level is available by loosening the mounting threads with a screwdriver if required.

The platter consists of a non-resonant alloy that is internally damped close to its periphery with further TPE material and, although it is much thinner than that of

the Xtension 10, it is only around 300g lighter. The platter spins on an inverted ceramic bearing which is in turn aided by a magnetic suspension system to reduce the load seen by the bearing even further. The platter is topped with an interface layer made from recycled records and a heavy record puck is supplied – the use of further mats is not recommended.

The motor sits in the left hand rear corner of the plinth and is normally sheltered beneath a sturdy metal cover. A single push-button at the front of the plinth starts and stops the platter and also selects 33.3 or 45rpm; it contains a green LED to show when the deck is powered and in standby mode. During its start-up phase, the green LED in the switch extinguishes and the appropriate blue speed LED blinks to indicate that the motor has activated, subsequently changing to a steady glow once speed is attained, according to the instruction manual.

However, there is no rotational feedback from the platter or any kind of load



RIGHT: The recycled vinyl platter topping requires no further mat and is a carry-over from previous Xtension variants. The arm yoke is, however, increased in size for this model



detection built into the motor itself, so this is a nominal time delay pre-programmed into the control circuitry and should only be treated as an approximation.

Pre-fitted to the deck is the latest version of Pro-Ject's 9CC Evolution tonearm, which consists of a single piece, variable-thickness carbon fibre armtube and headshell, pivoting on high quality ABEC7 bearings. Four sorbothane-damped counterweights are available for cartridge matching and, unusually, all four are supplied as standard with the deck, which is a highly commendable touch. The arm is fully and easily adjustable for VTA (via arm height) and azimuth; the latter via a single screw that loosens the entire armtube for adjustment.

The bearing yoke on the latest model has grown even larger than before in order to better the arm's ability to sink vibrations away from the cartridge. Underneath, signal wires terminate in a standard 5-pin socket and Pro-Ject provides a 'Connect-It' lead that is manufactured in conjunction with Van den Hul cables. An unbalanced

lead terminating in twin phono plugs is standard, but a balanced version with XLR connectors can be provided as an option.

The Super Pack deal is completed by the addition of the range-topping Black variant of Ortofon's new Quintet cartridge range, which is a conventional low output MC design and retails for £649 on its own. This uses high quality coils of 'Aucurum' wire in conjunction with neodymium

magnets, all encased in a non-resonant ABS body and sporting a fine nude Shibata stylus.

For review, the deck was located on my Atacama Equinox Celebration LE rack and connected to an Anatek

MC1 phono stage, Naim Supernait amplifier and PMC twenty.24 loudspeakers.

SILENT BACKGROUND

With the deck fully set up, cartridge aligned and permitted a good few days of settling in, I was pleased to hear that the Xtension 9 Evolution Super Pack exhibits that certain indefinable sonic 'rightness' that generally characterises the upper reaches of the Pro-Ject range for me.

'The Super Pack has a certain indefinable sonic "rightness" to it'

ABOVE: The Xtension 9's plinth is compact enough to sit on a conventional rack and is available in gloss red or white. The Ortofon Quintet Black MC is a new, range-topping model

I have always found them to be designs that offer no short-term sonic fireworks or any kind of dubious superficial impressiveness that soon wears off. Rather, they make music in an understated and alluring manner that simply seems more and more enjoyable as different material is played. In the case of the Xtension 9 Evolution, I was immediately struck by the superbly low levels of groove noise and general background mush.

The reviewer's old favourite, the 'inky-black silence', has become a cliché but I couldn't stop it from springing to mind when the run-in groove of my first chosen LP was genuinely impressively quiet. The record in question was The Eagles' *Long Road Out Of Eden* [Universal 060251749243 1] and as the title track warmed up, I was pleased to hear that the Pro-Ject was also more than capable when it came to *music*, and not just silences!

The song starts with some quiet instrumental artefacts that stretch off into the soundstage on the left hand side and the Pro-Ject captured the scale and depth of these perfectly, sweeping the action dramatically and precisely from left to right when the full band began. I was also very pleased to hear Don Henley's vocals large, solid and locked perfectly in between my loudspeakers. The album is a good one and well recorded, so it takes a spectacularly inept turntable to ruin it, but the Xtension 9 Evolution lifted it that essential bit above the easily achievable norm to give a truly captivating result.

At the top end, no doubt aided by the highly capable Ortofon cartridge, the Pro-Ject managed to be detailed, smooth, 

HENLEY DESIGNS

Pro-Ject's UK importer, Henley Designs, recognised the abilities of the company's products early on and was quick to capture the potential market that resulted from the resurgence in vinyl over the last 10-15 years. As well as introducing UK-only special editions of some models, Henley has also become well known for its range of virtually plug-and-play turntable packages that occasionally add in an accessory of some sort, but nearly always feature an Ortofon cartridge at a consequent cost-saving. At the lower end of the range this generally means a high-output MC like the MC1-Turbo or a model from the 2M range; but as the turntable price increases, so does cartridge quality, right up to the older Rondo and now the new Quintet Series. In the case of the Xtension 9 Evolution, the deck is currently only offered in the UK as a component of the Super Pack.

LAB REPORT

PRO-JECT XTENSION 9 SUPER PACK



ABOVE: A socket at the rear accepts the 15V DC input from the supplied power pack. One of the deck's three magnetically-decoupled feet can also be seen here

crisp and yet mellow all in one. Some older Pro-Ject arm designs have tended to exhibit a certain fizziness across the upper midband and treble but, as suggested in the Lab Report, the new 9CC Evolution has successfully overcome these and the result is a clarity and insight that puts it right up there with the best of its contemporaries at the arm's price point.

As a result, Anita Baker's vocals on 'Caught Up In The Rapture' from her *Rapture* album [Elektra 960444-1] were beautifully clear – a very pleasant surprise given the rather average quality of this mid-'80s pressing. Equally, the drum strikes backing her were taut and well defined, helping to render the whole performance as a tightly cohesive whole. Better still was the Pro-Ject's fine sense of image stability that painted a vivid and expertly scaled sonic picture in my listening room.

SMOOTH AND ASSURED

With an equally aged copy of The The's *Soul Mining* [Epic EPC 25525] to hand I had no hesitation in cueing up the track 'Uncertain Smile'. Although my favourite track by the band, the original recording is something of a let-down, being splashy in the upper registers and lightweight down the bottom, but the Pro-Ject appeared to approach it with a calm and knowing 'stand aside – leave this to me' kind of attitude. So again I found myself easily listening through the recording's shortcomings and simply enjoying the music; in particular Jools Holland's superb and impactful piano solo.

A well designed arm and cartridge, plus a good quality drive system and heavy platter should also be a recipe for a good bass performance and so it generally proved to be with the Pro-Ject. As

per the rest of the frequency range, there was a pleasing sense of quiet competence in the way in which the deck approached the lower end of the frequency spectrum. Albums were underpinned by good weight and a rhythmically adroit guiding hand – although occasionally, I did feel that the Xtension 9 Evolution was approaching the limits of its comfort zone with more punchy, fast-paced material.

The most notable example I found of this was courtesy of Galaxy And Phil Fearon's 12in single mix of 'Dancing Tight' [Ensign 12ENY 501], a fine slice of early 1980s disco with a funky beat underpinning it. Here the Pro-Ject certainly never strayed as far as to sound wobbly or make the track lose its cohesiveness, but the low end was definitely slightly lacking its customary sense of spot-on timing and impact.

Fortunately, this only seemed to come to light with extreme examples such as this. Generally speaking, I found the Pro-Ject to be assured and smooth at the low end with fine levels of detail, no matter whether the instrument in question was acoustic or electronic. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

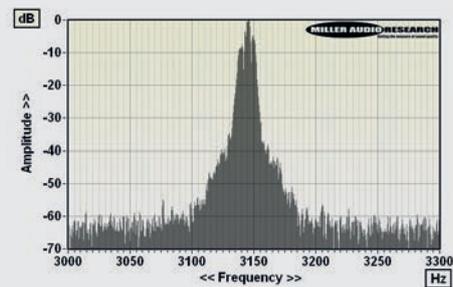
The Xtension 9 Evolution Super Pack is yet another combination of which Pro-Ject and Henley Designs can be proud. The careful downsizing of the original Xtension design, plus the addition of an updated tonearm that incorporates immediately obvious improvements, results in a turntable combination with few vices. Add in a superb cartridge at a discounted price and the result is a veritable bargain.

Sound Quality: 81%

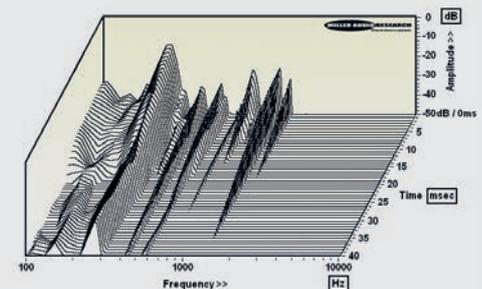


Inspired by Pro-Ject's earlier, and costlier, Xtension turntables [HFN May '09] the DNA of this Xtension 9 is clear for all to see. The 5.4kg platter is damped by a ring of soft elastomer that's poured and set into its underside, helping to reduce rumble from the inverted ceramic (ball) bearing from -67.6dB (through-bearing) to 68.7dB (through-groove). The platter damping is further assisted by its top surface of 'recycled vinyl', providing a good impedance match with the LP that's held firmly in place by Pro-Ject's record weight. Start-up time is a swift 5secs thanks to the torque motor although the deck's peak wow is a little higher than anticipated at 0.07% [see Graph 1, below] and certainly bested by other turntables, perhaps using the same synchronous motor, from the Pro-Ject stable.

The partnering 9CC Evolution tonearm features a one-piece carbon-fibre tube with integrated headshell and this rigid, lightweight structure not only confers a mere 9g effective mass but also pushes its primary beam resonance up to a high 270Hz. As we've witnessed with earlier Pro-Ject Evolution arms, the carbon-fibre tube also exhibits a series of higher frequency, high-Q modes, seen here at 440Hz, 580Hz, 925Hz and 1.37kHz, although the presence of lower-level resonant 'hash' through the presence and treble region is greatly diminished in this example [see Graph 2, below]. Whether this is due to the oversized 'anti-resonance' gimbal yoke is debatable although the combination of very low friction (<10mg in both planes) and no detectable play is very impressive indeed. Readers are invited to view full QC Suite reports for Pro-Ject's Xtension 9 turntable and 9CC Evolution tonearm by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ±150Hz, 5Hz per minor division). Wow is a little higher than typical for a Pro-Ject deck



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	33.27rpm (-0.18%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.07% / 0.02%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-68.2dB / -68.7dB (with clamp)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-67.6dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-61.1dB
Power Consumption	6W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	465x185x350mm / 16kg