



Primary schooling

Setting an impressive standard for the entry-level, this plug-and-play deck is perfectly pitched. **Ed Selley** spins his vinyl

It's almost 20 years since the introduction of the Pro-Ject Debut turntable – a low-cost design that was arguably highly instrumental in the success of the rebirth of the vinyl format back into the mainstream. Over the years the company has established a firm grip on the turntable market place to the point where the 48 models it now offers make up one of the most extensive lineups of any hi-fi company. Once the company's entry-level series, the Debut range has crept up in price with the introduction of more sophisticated decks, meaning that the entry-level rung is now taken up by its Essential and Primary models. The Primary E reviewed here is the latest model to be introduced and is priced at a jaw-dropping £149, complete with everything you need to get spinning vinyl, apart from a built-in phono stage.

The main difference between the Primary E and the outgoing Primary base deck centres around the motor

mounted to the MDF plinth. The E model dispenses with the wall-wart and block arrangement of the older design and substitutes a motor that works on a standard 230V AC mains feed and uses a fixed cable and plug, which reduces the cost and makes for a far tidier installation. As before, speed adjustment from 33 to 45rpm is achieved by manually moving the belt from one pulley to another.

As with the Debut turntable models and their Essential and Primary descendants, the tonearm is 8.6in long and made from aluminium and employs sapphire bearings for smooth travel. Where it differs from many other examples is that Pro-Ject has optimised it to work with the Ortofon OM series moving-magnet cartridge. This means that there's no anti-skate adjustment and that the tonearm ships with the counterweight already in place, set accurately for the correct tracking weight at the factory and making it straightforward to set up.

Extract the deck from its packaging, remove the cardboard lip under the

platter, plug the interconnects into a suitable dedicated phono preamp or integrated amplifier with a built-in MM stage and fit the belt, and you are good to go in just a few minutes. Fitting the rubber belt to the MDF platter is the only part of this process that is remotely involved, as it runs around the outer edge of the platter and can be a little fiddly to get it to sit perfectly in place. It's also easy to snag when lifting the acrylic lid too, which means some occasional annoyance at having to fit it again, but practice makes perfect.

Aesthetically, the Primary E isn't the prettiest model on the market and unlike its predecessor is only available finished in black, but there is a certain elegance to its simplicity. The sheen finish to the plinth looks a little drab and seems susceptible to fingerprints. The sharp corners and general lack of fripperies are a reminder of the requirements of building a turntable down to this price, but the Primary E still manages to feel well assembled. The tonearm moves with a reassuring action and there is no unwanted motor noise or gremlins. The inclusion of an acrylic lid, decent-quality lead out interconnect cable and some usefully compliant feet are also welcome touches and the Primary E feels like it has everything you need for the task of playing vinyl.

Sound quality

With setup completed and the deck initially connected to a Cambridge Audio CP2 MM/MC phono stage running into a Naim Uniti Star one-box system (HFC 433), the Primary E performs better than you might reasonably expect for the

asking price. There is no audible sign of pitch instability and background noise levels are commendably low, which ensures there is a reasonable and pleasing sense of dynamics to music. Christine And The Queens *iT* comes across with all the spaciousness and scale of the recording intact. Héloïse Letissier's sweet vocal turn is well separated from the deep electronic notes that form the bass and has a commendable level of fine detail.

The absolute bass extension on offer isn't as deep as with the same material played on more upmarket turntables, but there is sufficient

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weight to be convincing and it integrates well with mid-bass frequencies in what feels like an even response. No less importantly, the Pro-Ject defines low notes with a crispness and agility that ensures it never sounds sluggish or overly warm. Coupled with the decent pitch stability, the result is a sense of rhythmic assurance that means even high-tempo material retains a feeling of order and cohesion.

There is a sense of flow and timing to the Pro-Ject that does a good job of capturing the simple rhythmic appeal of vinyl as a format. The effortlessly funky nature of Little Feat's *Rock & Roll Doctor* is conveyed with a vigour that draws you into the music in such a way that you can



Rega's Planar 1 is better finished and offers fractionally higher performance, but costs £100 more and has the same fairly limited upgrade potential. Options from Thorens, Edwards Audio and the like are more expensive still. Only Audio-Technica's AT-LP3 is a serious challenger, but is a fully automatic design that can't match the Pro-Ject for outright performance. Up the price, and there are better performing options – not least Pro-Ject's Essential III A (HFC 420) now at £299. But for those that are on a tight budget, the Primary E is a serious starter deck and a bit of a bargain at the price.



33 and 45rpm are selected by swapping the belt between the two pulleys

forgive any lack of tonal richness or top-end refinement. I am absolutely confident that the Ortofon cartridge is aligned as well as it can be, but in comparison with some more advanced stylus profiles out there, it definitely sounds best at the outer edges of the record.

Where the Ortofon gives the Primary E an advantage is that it is able to keep poorer pressings listenable in a way that rivals often struggle to manage (see How It Compares). The rather congested and slightly dull pressing of Chvrches' *Love Is Dead* is handled in a way that allows it to deliver the musical content without concerning itself too much with the limitations of the record. This does mean that top-quality pressings won't always

show the high levels of performance they are really capable of, but the balance is well judged. It also does a decent job of handling well-worn LPs and it takes some fairly significant surface damage to provoke the tonearm into tracking errors. If you seek a turntable to play finds from record fairs and other less than pristine LPs, this is a solid bet.

Conclusion

The Primary E can be relied upon to play records long term without wearing them out – something of an issue with some similarly priced but non-hi-fi rival vinyl spinning designs – and has engineered out some of the flexibility of the older models in the pursuit of hitting a new low entry-level price point. But what is most surprising about the Primary E, is its ability to deliver a genuinely satisfying musical performance at such a very attractive price and make it an ideal turntable for any new or retuning fans to the format ●

IN SIGHT

- 1 Felt platter mat
- 2 Pre-fitted counterweight
- 3 8.6in aluminium tonearm
- 4 Pre-fitted Ortofon OM cartridge

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

<p>SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★</p> <p>VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★</p> <p>BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★</p> <p>FEATURES ★★★★★</p>	<p>LIKE: Energetic and rhythmically assured performance; build; ease of setup</p> <p>DISLIKE: Nothing at the price</p> <p>WE SAY: An impressive starter deck that delivers decent performance at an attractive asking price</p>
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OVERALL

★★★★★