



# BLACK ROOM TOYS

*A valve-powered phono stage and a budget turntable with a carbon fibre tonearm... intriguing!*

**PRODUCT** Pro-Ject 1 Xpression and Tube Box  
**TYPE** Turntable (with arm/cartridge) and phono stage  
**PRICE** £210 (turntable) and £300 (phono stage)  
**KEY FEATURES** Size (HxWxD): turntable 12x42x33cm (inc. lid), phono stage 12x42x33cm • Turntable includes carbon fibre arm and Ortofon OM10 cartridge • Phono stage has valve output stage, variable gain/impedance  
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**P**ro-Ject has shaken up the budget turntable scene quite severely in the UK. Its first product was an extremely idiosyncratic design that will undoubtedly be a collector's item in years to come, but since then the brand has declared all-out war on the competition. The latest weapon in its extensive armoury is the 1 Xpression, a replacement for the original 1, Pro-Ject's first regular record player. It's a slick looking deck with a nicely soft edged plinth, a carbon fibre tonearm and an Ortofon OM10 cartridge included in its £210 price tag – pretty staggering when you consider that carbon fibre arms were solely the preserve of the high end a few years ago.

Similarities with its predecessor extend to the cast alloy platter, rubber motor suspension

and choice of cartridge. Everything else is new – it has a better motor, higher density plinth and of course carbon fibre where there was previously aluminium in the arm, the latter featuring refined bearings to boot. What you end up with is a deck that has its guns aimed squarely at Rega's P2 – £198 but with a £35 cartridge. You do the sums.

The Xpression is built around an MDF plinth which sits on four compliant feet and supports a felt-covered platter on a belt-driven sub-platter. Changing speed requires the use of a little plunger device which you stick through a hole in the platter to pluck the belt from one pulley to the other. The belt is of the flat rubber variety and is driven by a motor that's suspended in the plinth – set-up requires the removal of transit screws to free the motor. To turn the motor on and off you need to feel under the front edge of the plinth for a little rocker switch.

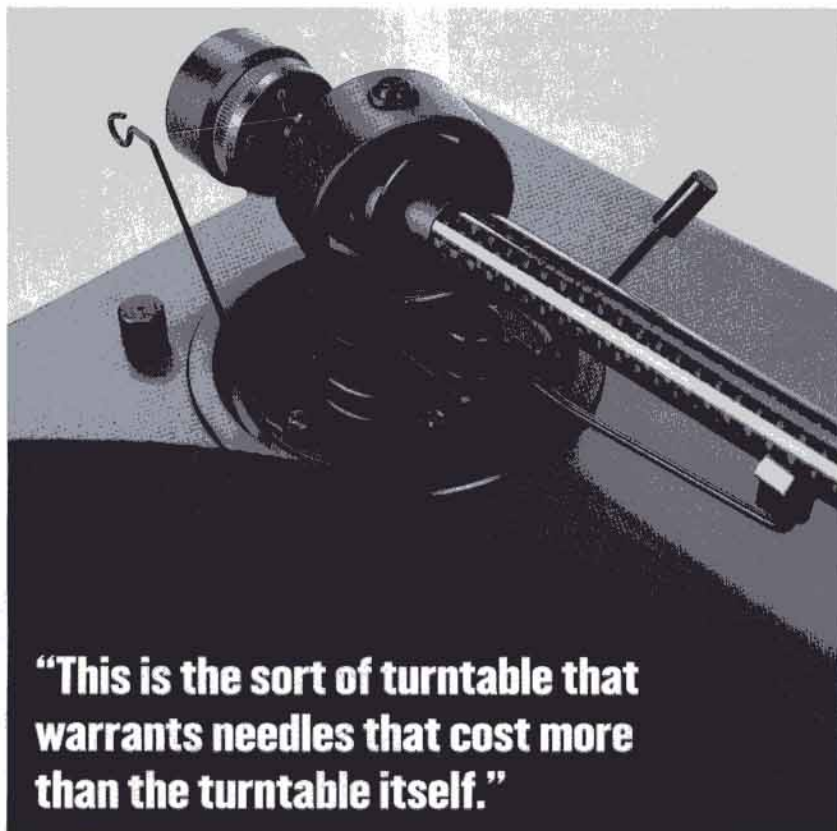
The tonearm uses gimbal-style bearings and a line and weight anti-skate system that can be a fiddle to get on but at least it won't fall off. Downforce can be set with the adjustable dial and the arm picked up with a lift/lower device or finger lift bolted to the cartridge and headshell. For dust-free pleasure, a lid is

also supplied but it's recommended that you remove it completely for serious listening.

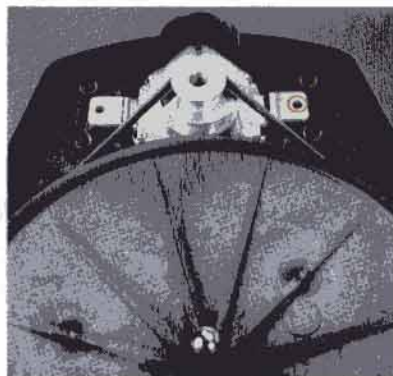
Alongside we have one of Pro-Ject's more ambitious components, a new £300 tube-powered phono stage – not a great deal for a tube component of any kind let alone a phono stage. Given its flexibility in terms of tailoring facilities I suspect that this is a solid state RIAA stage with valve output devices, rather than a pure tube stage which tend to be both rare and expensive – as in four-figure expensive.

The Tube Box features a range of switches on its underside which can be used to accommodate both moving magnet (MM) and moving coil (MC) cartridges. With MCs you can choose between three levels of impedance as well, which will help get the best out of these fine cartridges. Like the turntable it comes with a separate in-line mains transformer.

Combining these components might seem odd, and if the supplied cartridge is all you use it's not the best way to allocate budget, but it's not as crazy as you might think. Put a £100-plus MC on the Xpression and you'll need a stage of this quality to hear its potential, and even with the OM10 you'd be doing it a disservice with a basic phono stage.



**“This is the sort of turntable that warrants needles that cost more than the turntable itself.”**



**SOUND QUALITY**

On setting this turntable up we were a little concerned to find that cartridge alignment left a lot to be desired. Apparently dealers will check this with the decks they sell but we'd recommend investing in a Polaris Plus gauge or similar to make sure it's done right, because poor alignment means worn vinyl. In all other respects it's an easy deck to put together – just balance the cartridge, set downforce and away you go. Ditto the Tube Box – set the switches for your cartridge and plug the cables in. The only niggle is the tiny earth post, but I guess it does delay the earth lead on the Xpression without too much fiddling.

Slipping the Cinematic Orchestra's *Everyday* onto the felt mat and lowering the needle reveals a pretty together and weighty sound that is a good reflection of this album. The bass is full and fruity and while the scale may not be as substantial as it can be the sense of timing makes up for this, grabbing your ears and drawing you in. High frequencies are a bit restrained and you'd get a slightly more energetic, lively sound from a Rega, but this combo delivers most of the goods all of the time and has a smoother balance than one expects of a basic Rega deck and cartridge.

Elbow's excellent *Bitten By The Tailfly* is reproduced with decent resolution, dynamics and edge, the Pro-Ject combo conjuring up a good portion of the atmosphere on this fine track. It is sensitive to the variations in pace and energy even if the guitar breaks don't have quite the attack that is possible. Richard Thompson's voice and acoustic guitar sound great on *Old Kit Bag*, full of expression and

tonal richness. The sound could perhaps be a bit more substantial but has power and never threatens to grate on the nerves, however angular the music becomes.

Up against CD with the Peace Orchestra producing the sounds, the Xpression/Tube Box shuts out some of the reverb and softens the bass but produces a more musically coherent result despite such hi-fi shortcomings. Turntables nearly always better CD players in this respect because they usually have intrinsically better timing, and this is no exception. However, if it's ultimate resolution of detail you're after it's a closer call and at the frequency extremes a good CD player has the advantage over this particular record player/phono stage.

We like the way that it doesn't thrust things down your throat but lets the music ebb and flow in a natural, relaxed fashion. But we couldn't help wondering where the life and energy of the music was going – budget turntables are not inherently mellow things after all. Swapping in another £300 phono stage, the Trichord Dino, reveals that much of this laid-back style is a result of the amplification rather than the turntable and cartridge. The Dino delivers a significantly more lively and open sound from the Xpression and reveals that it is indeed extracting the reverb and space in the recording – it's just that the Tube Box isn't really making the most of it. It would appear that the Tube Box is the limiting factor in this particular combination.

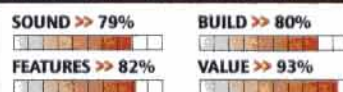
We tried the Tube Box with the van den Hul Grasshopper GLAIII MC cartridge on an SME

20A turntable and got a decent result – it's a little short of gain but revels in the timbre of instruments and delivers a smooth, clean sound that's very relaxing albeit not short on engaging qualities.

In the final analysis these two Pro-Jects are not perfect partners as they stand, but a different cartridge would undoubtedly bring them closer together. What's more, this is the sort of turntable that warrants needles costing more than the turntable does. You can tell by the detail levels revealed by the Trichord Dino that this is a surprisingly good deck for the money and it does space, light, energy and serious bass while keeping its finger firmly on the musical pulse. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

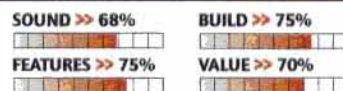
**VERDICT – Pro-Ject 1 Xpression**



**CONCLUSION**  
Well designed and executed budget deck with an entertaining and revealing sound that will keep you up way too late.

**HI-FI CHOICE**  
**OVERALL SCORE**  
**>> 86%**

**VERDICT – Pro-Ject Tube Box**



**CONCLUSION**  
A lack of transparency and high frequency resolve tends to limit this phono stage, its smoothness undermining thrill power.

**HI-FI CHOICE**  
**OVERALL SCORE**  
**>> 70%**