

TEST REPORTS



Pro-Ject

DEBUT CARBON TURNTABLE

\$399 BY BRENT BUTTERWORTH

Pro-Ject's low-cost Debut model gets a carbon-fiber upgrade.



CARBON FIBER IS included in all sorts of products, sometimes for absurd and cynical reasons. My Philips Arcitec electric razor, for example, has carbon fiber trim on its sides. The carbon fiber doesn't lighten or stiffen the razor, much less improve my shave. It merely adds cachet. Call me unromantic, but I don't need my razor to evoke images of F1 cars and high-tech jets.

So why should you care that Pro-Ject dolled up its new Debut Carbon turntable with a carbon fiber tonearm? A quick trip to the golf section of your local sporting goods store can tell you. Tap on the side of a metal golf club shaft and you'll hear it ring. Tap on the side of a carbon fiber golf club shaft and you'll hear nothing but a soft click. With this simple test, you can understand the advantages of the Debut Carbon over Pro-Ject's less expensive Debut III.

The slightly tapered carbon fiber tube that forms the Debut Carbon's tonearm is almost entirely non-resonant, so it doesn't substantially affect the turntable's sound. But the straight aluminum tube used on the Debut III's tonearm has some resonance, which can add its own sonic signature. The "deadness" of the Carbon's tonearm also damps vibration.

Pro-Ject didn't just splice a piece of carbon fiber tubing into the Debut III's tonearm. The designers really outdid themselves — the tube's woven fiber is pressed flat to form the cartridge mount, with a slim finger lift molded from the same piece of carbon fiber.

The Debut Carbon includes more upgrades from the Debut III. Most significant is an Ortofon 2M Red moving-magnet cartridge, which costs \$99 when purchased separately. That's a step up from the Debut III's stock \$59 Ortofon OM-5e cartridge. The Carbon also has a platter that's 20mm larger in diameter (and significantly heavier) than the Debut III's.

Plus, the Carbon has two RCA output jacks and a ground terminal on the rear, while the Debut III's cables are hard-wired into the plinth. Those who are into swapping cables in pursuit of better sound will rejoice. The rest of us will have the comfort of knowing we can easily change the cables if they malfunction.

The Debut Carbon is just \$399, while the Debut III now sells for \$329. Even the most parsimonious audiophile would cough up the extra \$70 for all those upgrades, but still, I wondered what affect said upgrades might have on the sound.

SETUP

Setup of any turntable is relatively complicated, but Pro-Ject makes it as easy as possible by shipping the Debut Carbon with the Ortofon 2M Red cartridge pre-installed. I checked the cartridge's azimuth (left-right tilt around the tonearm's axis) and alignment, and found that both were adjusted well enough that I didn't need to mess with them. Vertical tracking angle (VTA) — the angle at which the tonearm sits when it's resting on a record — isn't adjustable, which some could consider a downside. But VTA isn't adjustable on the Rega

KEY FEATURES



- + Carbon fiber tonearm
- + 33- and 45-rpm operation
- + Available in eight colors
- + Hinged transparent plastic dust cover included
- + 4.4 x 14.5 x 17.6 in (turntable)
- + 1.8 x 7.8 x 5.5 in (power supply)

RP6 I tested for the June/July/August issue, and the RP6 sounds awesome.

You do have to install the drive belt, the platter, and the felt mat, but those tasks are no tougher than snapping a jazzy new case onto your iPhone. You also have to install the counterweight at the end of the tonearm, then set the vertical tracking force (VTF). That's more complicated, but the manual deftly guides you through the steps. Using my Shure SFG-2 gauge, I set VTF at the required 17.5 millineutons (1.75 grams). I then installed the anti-skate weight and was ready to spin.

I used the Debut Carbon in a stereo system with a Krell S-300i integrated amp and Krell Resolution One tower speakers, and also auditioned it in a headphone rig with HiFiMan's HE-6 headphones and EF-6 headphone amp. I used an NAD PP-3 phono preamp. I didn't have a Debut III on hand for comparison, but I did have the next best thing: my Pro-Ject RM-1.3 turntable, which at \$499 is a modest step up from the Debut Carbon. In my review of the RM-1.3 on soundandvisionmag.com, I found it sounded much better than my OM-5e-equipped Pro-Ject One, the Debut III's barely different forebear.

PERFORMANCE

You don't have to listen real hard to hear the difference between the Debut Carbon and the RM-1.3. With the first tune I played, "Heaven Is 10 Zillion Light Years Away" from Stevie Wonder's *Fulfillingness' First Finale*, the difference was obvious — but it wasn't immediately apparent which was better. On the Carbon, "Heaven" sounded really, really clean. Wonder's vocal floated almost supernaturally in the center between the big Krells, clearly distinguished from the dense arrangement. The sound-



VERDICT

A low-cost turntable with high-end features and fantastic sound quality.

+ PLUS

- Cartridge comes pre-installed for easy setup
- Has RCA output jacks for quick cable swaps

- MINUS

- Bass lacks some oomph on rock tunes

stage spread evenly and naturally from right to left. On the RM-1.3, the midrange seemed comparatively de-emphasized, and the treble a little soft; Wonder's vocal wasn't quite as clear. Yet the instruments seemed to have more precise placement in the soundstage with the RM-1.3. The background vocals, which are in some cases panned far to the right or left, also seemed even more hard-panned. Overall, I preferred the sound of the Carbon.

The bass was another matter entirely. On the Carbon, the grooving synth-bass line sounded extremely precise, but on the RM-1.3, it sounded fuller and more satisfying, especially in the midbass, where most notes of the electric and upright basses lie.

This difference was even more apparent when I played *Velvet Darkness*, a 1976 record that dropped then up-and-coming fusion guitarist Allan Holdsworth incongruously in with a jazz-funk rhythm section. The guitars and keyboards were much more vivid and clear on the Carbon, but the RM-1.3 got the fat, funky '70s rhythm just right. I decided to get the bass out of the place by playing Steve Khan's *Evidence*, a reverb-heavy recording consisting mostly of multitracked acoustic guitars. Khan's take on "In a Silent Way" would sound gorgeous even as a 96-kbps MP3 played through \$10 earbuds, but on the Carbon it sounded mega-gorgeous. I wouldn't say the Carbon

reproduced more detail than the RM-1.3, but it definitely sounded livelier. And more coherent: It was easier to make out the individual guitars in the mix. I had to wonder how much of this difference in sound was due to the cartridges — the RM-1.3 comes fitted with a Sumiko Pearl, a moving-magnet unit in the same price range as the 2M Red — and how much was due to the 'tables. So I installed the Pearl on the Carbon to get an idea. These comparisons are tough because it takes several minutes to swap cartridges and readjust the tonearm. However, it appeared that more than half of the midrange and treble magic I heard with the Carbon could be credited to the 2M Red, while the differing bass characteristics originated in the turntables themselves.

BOTTOM LINE

With its stock Ortofon 2M Red cartridge, Pro-Ject's Debut Carbon gave me a clean, vibrant sound quality that reminded me quite a bit of the \$1,999 Rega RP6/Exact cartridge combo I recently reviewed. That the Debut Carbon can approach the RP6's performance at 20 percent of its price is remarkable, to say the least. Its sound isn't perfect — rock fans might want more oomph in the bass — but if I were buying a budget table tomorrow, this is the one. **SV**