

Blind-listening Group test

PJ 155

TURNTABLES £1,140-£1,400

How much for an audiophile turntable?

Well, says **Richard Black**, it's not as much as you think. In fact, just over £1,000 will secure you a deck that's big on both innovation and performance

TURNTABLE SALES ARE UP, LP sales are up – welcome to the second decade of the 21st century! There are all sorts of reasons for the continuing resurgence of analogue black discs, of course, with sound quality certainly one of them, but the whole general 'user experience' also playing a part.

Quite simply, it's more fun than a CD, the sleeve is more informative and easier to read, it more readily puts you in the right frame of mind than idly fiddling with a computer mouse and overall it somehow makes you feel more proactive and involved with the music.

What is absolutely clear is that sound quality is paramount. Even record shops can't shift scratchy, knackered old discs – we only recently heard of a load going in a skip in central London. Scratches, mistracking and distortion are no fun at all, but a well-made and cared-for disc is a thing of beauty and a good turntable is its obvious companion. We had very little trouble pulling together half-a-dozen such machines in the near neighbourhood of £1,200 and we thoroughly enjoyed them, too.

If you remember the peak of vinyl popularity, the current crop will have some familiar features. The basic operation and function is obviously the same and the business of loading a disc and cueing an arm is absolutely unchanged. But some design features are different. For instance, metal platters

“A cared-for disc is a thing of beauty and a good turntable is its obvious companion.”

used to be the norm, with glass an occasional finding and plastic a bizarre oddity. Here, five turntables have a plastic platter and the sixth glass. DC motors are far more common than they once were, while drive belts are more likely to be round- or square-section than flat.

Does any of this matter? In the smallest detail the answer would be yes, but in terms of comparing two products arguably not. What's important is what the designer has done with all the bits.



PRICING

On the face of it, these turntables are very closely grouped in pricing, though the business of arms and cartridges confuses the issue. As it happens, the cheapest here includes both items, while the dearest would be bumped up by a hundred pounds or so for a typical cartridge and the Michell and SRM turntables would have to add that as well as £120 for the ever-popular Rega RB250 arm. A lid/dustcover would add a few tenners to all but Pro-Ject. Even so, this is a pretty closely matched group.

ON TEST



Clearaudio Concept £1,100 P37
The central concept is fuss-free set up, a novelty in the world of turntables which often take a good hour to assemble and line up. Clearaudio's solution to this challenge involves some clever thinking, including the magnetic arm bearing. Simple construction hides attention to detail, especially in the way of damping resonances.



Michell Gyro SE £1,140 P39
Budget entry to the wonderful world of Michell, still futuristic-looking after all these years. The full company name includes the word 'engineering', which is amply illustrated by the beautiful fit and finish of every part, as well as details like the oil-pumping bearing. The suspension uses springs in tension, good for long-term reliability.



Pro-Ject 6 Perspex £1,280 P41
Sold as a unit with Pro-Ject's own carbon-fibre arm, this turntable is relatively mundane-looking. That's deceptive, though, as the magnetic suspension is unusual and the ceramic main bearing is a high-tech component. The arm is impressively featured for the price, too, with high-grade bearings and various measures against resonance.



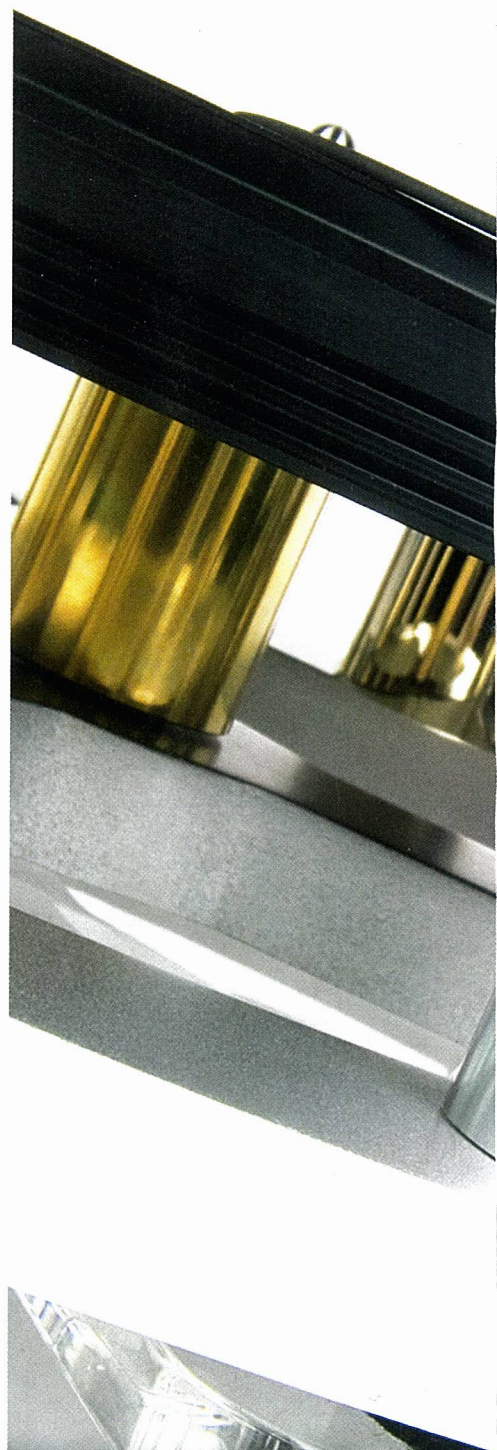
Roksan Radius 5.2 £1,399 P43
Like the Volkswagen Beetle, the Radius has stayed the same for many years while continuing to evolve. The latest version comes with a new bearing, revised feet, new drive belt, repositioned motor and changes to the included Nima arm, too. What's the same is the distinctive shape of the subchassis and the unipivot operation of the arm.



SRM Arezzo Kinetic £1,248 P45
The basic Arezzo can be had for £699, the Kinetic modification being based on the additional flywheel which is interposed between motor and platter. The multiple belts that link this to the platter make speed changing a palaver, but it's a very smart and unusually low-profile deck with a lot of clever design thinking in it.



Thorens 309 £1,250 P47
No relation whatsoever to the SME arm of similar name, this is a new and fashionably irregularly shaped addition to the venerable Thorens range. The feet conceal a full spring suspension and the arm and cartridge supplied with it make it a low-stress purchase, though it needs a little more setting up than the Clearaudio.





Pro-Ject 6 Perspex £1,280 (inc. arm)



Stylish-looking and fitted with a dust cover, the 6 Perspex promises a great deal with its performance

DETAILS

ORIGIN:
Austria/Hungary
WEIGHT: 10.5kg
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
460x160x365mm
FEATURES:

- Arm included
- 33, 45rpm
- External power supply
- Replaceable arm lead
- Lid included

DISTRIBUTOR:
Henley Designs
TELEPHONE:
01235 511166
WEBSITE:
project-audio.com

Joy of joys – a turntable with a lid, which even if it doesn't quite enclose the whole machine, will certainly reduce the dust problem considerably. Beneath it resides a suspended turntable with some interesting ideas built in. The Perspex of the name is hardly a surprise these days, but the subchassis is made of Corian, a material which Pro-Ject claims has 'no resonances at all'. We'd question that, but it does seem to be less resonant than the more common MDF and it looks smart, too. It's supported on a rather stiff suspension which turns out to rely on magnetic force rather than springs.

Magnetic suspension is not by any means a cure-all and is difficult to get right, but this implementation seems to work very well. It doesn't fix all the problems of conventional suspensions and, for instance, the subchassis of the 6 Perspex is very willing to yaw, or rotate about the spindle. However, if provoked externally it seems to bounce vertically rather than twisting, which is all to the good. An AC motor is used, fixed to the chassis and therefore not suspended, and it drives the edge of the platter via a square-section belt.

The 9cc Evolution arm fitted to this deck is something of a beauty. It's made of carbon fibre composite material and is conical, which helps reduce resonance. As our photo shows, it has a truly huge bearing yoke which contains precision ball races in a gimbal arrangement, which gives a great combination of structural rigidity and freedom of rotation, but does mean that the bearing axis is a little too high.

Flexible wires from the arm lead to a pair of phono sockets: Pro-Ject includes interconnects but does not supply a cartridge as standard.

Sound quality

The 6 Perspex was much enjoyed by two listeners but less so by the third, who identified a slight lack of bass as his main concern. The odd thing here is that the low bass is, according to our own listening, a touch on the over-full side, but higher bass and low midrange does seem a touch shy, if only by comparison. But the overall effect clearly pressed all the right buttons for the two who liked it.

Dynamics are a particularly strong point, wide-ranging but absolutely natural-sounding. We've all heard hi-fi components, particularly turntables, which have great dynamic extremes but seem oddly lacking in

the middle. This one is beautifully balanced across the board, with dynamic swings which happen smoothly and convincingly.

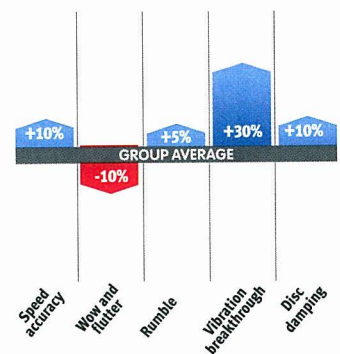
There's plenty of insight, too, aided by a tonal balance that's just a shade lifted in the highest treble, bringing out the best in well-made natural recordings. Imaging is wide and fairly deep and a hint of depth compression is one of the few weaknesses we could put a finger on.

TECH LABS

LAB REPORT

Generally a very good set of results here. Of particular note is the very good arm resonance test (not featured on our bar graphs because some decks don't include an arm as standard), which shows that the carbon-fibre arm really does its stuff in resisting resonance. There are two resonances visible, around 650Hz and 1050Hz, but they are well-damped and barely audible in the saved impulse. Rejection of external vibration is very good too, thanks to the magnetic suspension, while damping of the disc by the platter is a little better than the (very good) group average. Speed accuracy is fine. We wouldn't mind seeing wow and flutter just a little lower in level: there's an unusually high level of flutter (more rapid speed fluctuations), though evidently not high enough to be directly audible.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

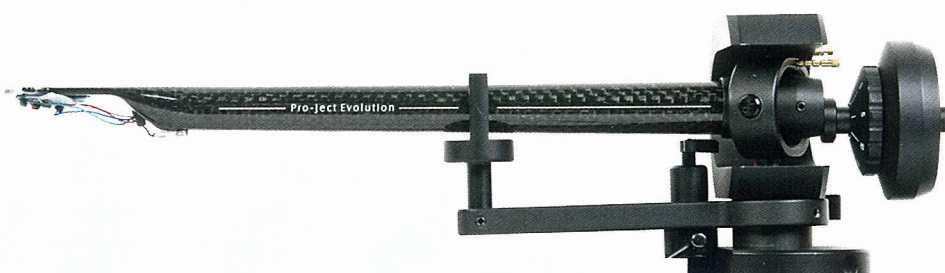
SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Plenty of detail and good rhythmic qualities: dynamics effortless and natural

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly uneven performance in the lowest bass can be a little disconcerting for some

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WESAY:** A very revealing turntable that's practical.

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL



Conclusions

It's official – serious sound quality is possible for under £1,500

ONE OF THE REALLY ENJOYABLE things about reviewing turntables is that they all seem to be very good. Maybe it's simply that with 60 years of LP to look back on, manufacturers have learned the mistakes to avoid. Anyway, we thought the standard of this group was really rather impressive and if some got praised more than others it doesn't mean there were any turkeys in the group.

Scoring lowest were the SRM and Thorens. They're still both fine turntables and they have their own strong points. The SRM is a high-energy performer which gets straight to the heart of the matter and we only missed a little of the detail that keeps one listening, enraptured, after the initial strong impression has worn off. The Thorens, ironically, is almost the dead opposite

– a little too civilised and in need of a touch more pace and excitement. But again, very capable and perhaps most appealing to lovers of classical music.

We rated the Roksan just one point higher in aggregate, just tipping the balance into formal recommendation. What really recommends it, of course, is its sound and we just loved the strong rhythmic qualities and also the good resolution imaging and bass solidity it achieves. The Michell Gyro scored identically but sounds quite distinct, though lower treble seemed to us a touch compromised in terms of detail.

Clearaudio's Concept is appealing for ease of set up and the sound offers plenty of life, detail and dynamics. The bass is sometimes on the shy side, but at its price the deck is good value. ●



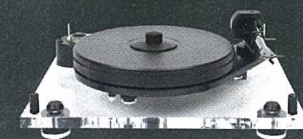
PHONO STAGE:
 Lehmann Black Cube Statement **£335**
 Particularly good with moving-magnet cartridges.

AMPLIFIER:
 Creek 5350 Evolution **£1,075**
 An amp that's full of life and energy – internal phono stage included!






LOUDSPEAKERS:
 PMC FB1i **£2,100**
 Sweet in the treble, strong in the bass, and not easily upset by a little subsonic rumble.

THE WINNER IS...

WE'VE HAD PLENTY of good experiences with Pro-Ject's turntables and the 6 Perspex continued the trend. It seems the most confident all-rounder in this group, its only weakness (and one not spotted by all the listeners) is occasional inconsistency in the lowest bass. It has tons of detail, great energy and a lovely open quality overall and we have no hesitation recommending it to listeners of all tastes.



RESULTS AT A GLANCE

						
Make/model	Clearaudio Concept	Michell Gyro SE	Pro-Ject 6 Perspex	Roksan Radius 5.2	SRM Arezzo Kinetic	Thorens 309
Price	£1,100	£1,140	£1,280	£1,399	£1,248	£1,250
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	A plug-and-play turntable that offers good value for money and a dynamic sound	Much less fussy about sitting than most, the Gyro suits small-scale music beautifully	Plenty of detail and good rhythmic quality. All in all, a very revealing turntable	The unipivot arm takes some getting used to but the sound and imaging is well-detailed	Forthright, no-nonsense music reproduction although detail in the treble is lacking	Very good tonal balance, although a little limited dynamically and too polite for recommendation

Key features

Arm included?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Cartridge included?	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Speeds	33/45/78	33/45	33/45	33/45	33/45	33/45
Electronic speed change?	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Motor type	DC	DC	AC	AC	AC	DC

Lab conclusions

E = Excellent | G = Good | A = average | P = poor

Speed accuracy	-0.3% G	+0.1% E	+0.2%	+0.05% E	-2.5% P	+1.1% A
Wow and flutter	0.03% E	0.06% G	0.07% G	0.06% G	0.08% A	0.03% E
Rumble	<-80dB E	<-80dB E	<-80dB E	-75dB G	<-80dB E	<-80dB E
Vibration breakthrough	-40%	+30%	+30%	-10%	-20%	+20%
Disc damping	+10%	+30%	+10%	-10%	0%	-20%