

AUDIO
FILE

Belt-driven turntable with balanced output
 Made by: Pro-Ject Audio Systems, Austria
 Supplied by: Henley Audio Ltd, UK
 Telephone: 01235 511166
 Web: www.project-audio.com; www.henleyaudio.co.uk
 Price: £1599 (inc. arm and cartridge)



Pro-Ject X2 B

One question is begged by the arrival of Pro-Ject's X2 B turntable: why did it take so long for the industry to simplify a balanced vinyl-playing front-end? It's not like balanced operation wasn't adopted by high-end listeners decades ago as superior to single-ended for both line-level sources and pre-to-power amp connections. MC cartridges are inherently balanced. So why has there been the wait?

Pro-Ject, ever eager to solve such problems at crowd-pleasing prices, has created a pairing which achieves balanced LP playback: the £1599 X2 B record deck and partnering £399 S3 B phono stage.

The X2 B turntable, an update on the earlier X2 [HFN Nov '19],

“‘Like A Rolling Stone’ sounded just that bit more vivid, more real’

arrives with Ortofon's superb Quintet Red moving-coil cartridge, worth £250-£270, and adds to the RCA phono sockets beneath the back of the plinth a single mini-XLR socket which handles both left and right channels in balanced mode. Otherwise, it's the familiar turntable with a choice of finishes, including gloss black, satin black or white, or the handsome wooden base of the review sample. Dimensions are 460x150x340mm (whd) and the

weight is 10kg, clearly the next level up from the much-loved Debut line. Speed control is electronic (including 78rpm with a dedicated belt), the 9in carbon/aluminium tonearm is fully adjustable for VTA and azimuth, and it sports a chunky 30mm-thick, 2kg acrylic platter.

Meanwhile, the S3 B phono stage adds that vital mini-XLR input to its single-ended RCAs, plus full-size XLR and RCA outputs. It also offers a full complement of loading and gain options for MM and MC cartridges.

ELEVATED LISTENING

If you're wondering how much of a difference the upgrade to balanced playback would make on Pro-Ject's already excellent X2 turntable, the answer is... plenty. Go for fully balanced operation all the way from stylus to preamp, and something magical happens.

What proved to be a real showstopper, because of both familiarity and sonic excellence, was Dusty

Springfield's lush 'Son Of A Preacher Man' from the 2020 re-issue of the *Dusty In Memphis* LP [Rhino/Run Out Groove ROGV089]. Fetishists are welcome to discuss which is the best-ever version but, suffice it to say, this one's superb.

It was the vocal which exhibited the most spectacular uplift, if that's the word. Dusty's voice was known for its smoky, breathy qualities, but who would have anticipated an even greater sense

of intimacy or authenticity? What the X2 B's balanced operation did – in conjunction with the S3 B phono stage – was give the voice greater prominence both in terms of its separation from the backing musicians and in three-dimensional terms, moving it slightly forward.

Something from leftfield, a mono reissue of Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* [Sundazed LP5-71], would minimise one of the main benefits of balanced LP playback, the openness, as soundstage is not a factor with mono. But what remained were gains in the lower registers, as well as an emphasis on the midband, primarily the vocals. The sheer majesty of 'Like A Rolling Stone', with the keyboard work of Al Kooper and Mike Bloomfield's guitar playing, sounded just that bit more vivid, more real. And as for Dylan's voice? Right in the room.

Many of you will remember the hysteria which accompanied assorted trends, some which turned out to be keepers with technical validity, others less so: bi-wiring, active speakers, polarity inversion, magic bricks, green pens on CDs, *ad nauseam*. The X2 B falls firmly into the first category and, just as most speaker brands now provide the option of bi-wiring or bi-amping, it would be nice if it forces every manufacturer of tonearms, phono preamps and turntables to emulate Pro-Ject's balanced approach.

VERDICT

The X2 B feels truly revolutionary – there are surely no excuses for not facilitating a simple balanced output from an MC cartridge if Pro-Ject can deliver it for under £2k. To paraphrase Jon Landau when he first saw Springsteen, we've heard the future of vinyl playback. ☺

ABOVE: A neat and compact, modern-looking turntable, the X2 B is based on the X2 but is fitted with a Quintet Red moving-coil pick-up and a balanced mini-XLR connection around the back. Here the supplied black felt mat is removed to fully reveal the CNC-machined acrylic platter

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.36rpm (+0.04%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter (Peak wtd)	0.02% / 0.07%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-67.5dB (-68.0dB with felt mat)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-66.1dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-52.5dB
Power Consumption	5W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	460x150x340mm / 10kg