

Project 1 Xpression

Pro-Ject 1 Xpression, \$749. Pro-Ject Speed Box, \$149.

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There is still a perception amongst the public (and even some experienced listeners) that good vinyl playback is like some exclusive club where satisfaction can only be achieved by spending up large.

While it is true the best analogue equipment can be expensive, many companies are making equipment that is both affordable and capable of good performance. Past issues of *AudioEnz* have looked at high value analogue products such as the Grado Gold phono cartridge, NAD PP2 phono preamp and Project Debut Phono and RPM-9 turntables.

Welcoming the new baby

Priced at \$749, the 1 Xpression sits at the lower end of the Project range between the Debut 2 starter unit and the RPM range.

In the best audiophile fashion, construction is simple and elegant. A solid, non-suspended MDF plinth sits on four stiff feet. The rubber isolated motor turns a stepped metal pulley which drives the plastic inner platter via a

flat rubber belt. Onto the polished steel spindle goes a hefty aluminium top platter that unfortunately rings like a bell, even with the felt mat in place.

Speed (33 1/3 or 45 rpm) is changed manually by shifting the drive belt with a supplied tool. A simple wallwart supplies the power. An optional Speed Box (\$149) provides quartz-generated high precision electronic speed regulation and electronic push button speed control.

Unprecedented in this price range is the inclusion of a carbon fibre tubed tonearm. This arm features excellent, bind-free bearings and unlike another popular affordable tonearm, is fully adjustable for vertical tracking force, vertical



tracking angle and arm azimuth. The tapered tube has an inscribed horizontal line to visually aid in VTA setup. And like some expensive arms there is an optional fingerlift attachment. Anti-skate is by the true and tested falling weight method. A captive arm cable of reasonable quality completes the package. All that's missing is a clip on the arm rest to lock the arm down when not in use.

Instant bliss

Unpacking and setting up was a quick no hassle job. The table was placed upon a dedicated turntable stand. The only tricky aspects being setting VTA (two set screws are involved) and stylus overhang (the cartridge mounting slots are a bit short of travel for the cartridges I used). I didn't have access to a low cost cartridge that might normally be used on this type of table so my retired Sumiko Blue Point Special was used.

Operating the Project was easy as pie. Place a record on the felt mat, reach under the left front edge for the hidden power switch, lower the arm and enjoy.

Music flowed with a naturalness and palpability that only good analogue replay can bring. With well looked after records the common complaint of noise was not a factor. Good recordings were reproduced with enough depth, dimensionality and vitality to satisfy even this fussy listener. There was a sense of scale and occasion rare in a budget piece of equipment. Properly sited the little Project was surprisingly well isolated from unwanted environmental influence.

Over the years I have found that the most enjoyable pieces of equipment have the ability to draw the listener into the music to the exclusion of almost all else, the Project succeeded in doing just that. Instead of taking listening notes, I ended up just listening to music. Yes, there

were shortcomings compared to more expensive turntables but they were relatively minor omissions rather than any gross additive distortions.

Next the Speed Box was sampled. In addition to providing easy speed switching, the sound took on greater stability, with greater focus, extended bandwidth, improved dynamics and a lower noise floor. In stock form the 1 Xpression is very good, with the Speed Box it's a giant killer.

Playing with the big boys

The importer says the Project arm is good enough for cartridges costing more than the table itself. To test this I replaced the Sumiko with an old Koetsu Red, a cartridge worth about five Projects. Insane? Of course, but the results were nothing short of amazing, the Project carbon fibre arm allowing the Koetsu to perform largely unfettered. In typical Koetsu fashion music took on a richer bloom, with greater dimensionality and tonal colour than the Sumiko, at the expense of losing some of the Sumiko's wider bandwidth and dynamic drive.

True value for money

Quality build, very good performance, a superb tonearm and ease of use marks the Project 1 Xpression as a value for money leader, more than worthy of comparison with established class leaders like the Rega P2 (\$800) and P3 (\$1000). Add a good cartridge and the Speed Box and you have all you could ask for in a reasonably priced turntable.

Why buy used when a little money can buy so much new turntable? —Michael Wong

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