

Project RPM9

Better by design By Brent Burmester

Project RPM9 turntable. \$2400

When do you review a turntable? A CD player, amp, or loudspeaker, can be set down, plugged in, revved up and auditioned. They are what they are, give or take. Vinyl spinners, on the other hand, are what you make them. Not only are they unbearably sensitive to placement, there's cartridge choice, tracking weight, belt tension, head-shell alignment, vertical tracking alignment, and anti-skate, to name not all. Any of these may be adjusted, tweaked, set and re-set until the cows have been and gone again. So, at any given moment a turntable represents only one possible state of too many to contemplate. And the question remains: which set of compromises should be reviewed?

In the case of the Project RPM 9, the answer turned out to be the one that fell out of the box. After 40 minutes assembling and installing the handsome devil, including fitment of my Goldring 1042 cartridge, I bunged the spindle-weight down on a record and let it twirl. And it sounded great. Having defied science so outrageously, I chanced my arm by making one small adjustment to the arm height, and it sounded greater. Since then, I've listened to dozens of discs over three weeks, and only in the last couple of days have I bothered to experiment with alternative settings, none of which constituted a worthwhile improvement.

Others might not be so lucky, but I suspect most users find the RPM 9 surprisingly ready to please. Everything needed to get it nicely sorted comes packaged with the parts of the player itself. Alignment protractor, spirit levels, even a special spacing template to ensure the outboard motor is the correct distance from the fat acrylic platter, it's all there. I simply screwed in the feet, put the platter on the sub-assembly, popped the motor down nearby, slung the rubber belt around the platter, bolted in and fettled my cartridge, and it was done.

Assembled and dressed the RPM 9 is visually striking, though not in the league of exotica from Clearaudio, SME, or Michell. Devoid of a cover, the tone-arm seems frighteningly exposed and I could never really relax in its proximity. The chunky little motor tower together with the matt-finished Perspex platter topped by the heavy spindle-weight look suave, but somehow the silver-grey chassis betrayed its origins as a slab of MDF.

Flat out

Normally I spin my LPs on a Garrard 401 mated to an antique SME tonearm. The music that emerged from the Project via my Plinius Jarrah phono-stage immediately impressed as more tangible, detailed, and dynamic. The leading edges of snare drum and plucked guitar were noticeably better defined, as was the separation of instrumental parts. However, a comparison between a spanking new \$2400 turntable and an op-shop refugee from the 1960s may strike you as something short of decisive.

It would mean more to measure the Project's performance against a respected CD player in a similar price bracket. I happened to have the Musical Fidelity A3.2 at hand. To make



the most accurate direct comparisons I lined up original vinyl pressings and CDs of Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*, Alan Parson Project's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, XTC's *Oranges and Lemons*, and Jeff Wayne's *War of the Worlds*.

Now, bear in mind that the RPM 9 and its sexy carbon-fibre tone-arm should properly be kitted out with an expensive moving-coil cartridge. Good though my Goldring is as a moving magnet design, it can certainly be bettered and the results of the back-to-back should be read in light of that fact.

In comparison to vinyl courtesy of the RPM 9, CDs sounded somewhat recessed, the performances less present, and ultimately, to use a cliché, less organic. The Musical Fidelity CD player should not be faulted, however, for the A3.2 rates well in these departments. The Project also distinguished itself with a more fluid and agile bass and a stronger understanding of pace, rhythm and timing.

A more accomplished CD player might peg the Project back here (see this month's review of the Arcam FMJ CD33),

but the RPM 9 also revealed bass textures that CDs replay is hard-pressed to match. Unexpectedly I couldn't pick a winner in terms of resolution, but,

more predictably, in the digital discs' favour was the total lack of tracking noise associated with dragging a small rock around a gritty plastic trench.

The RPM 9 didn't make a big deal of surface noise, but could not conceal it. Instead the music was communicated with enough immediacy to make the underlying crackle and occasional pop no more distracting than the sound of an appreciative audience at a live concert. In this respect, cartridge choice and disc condition will make a critical difference.

The verdict is plain enough. With its funky looks and accomplished handling of records placed in its care, the RPM 9 represents great material and sonic value for money. If you want a turntable that encourages the extra time and care vinyl playback demands, for no more than the price of mid-ranking CD player, look no further.

