



'We're the only company giving you a choice'

PRO-JECT FOUNDER HEINZ LICHTENEGGER BELIEVES IN OFFERING HIGH-VALUE PRODUCTS THAT SOUND GOOD, WITH 'BAUHAUS DESIGNS' AND A WIDER CHOICE. CHRIS FRANKLAND TALKS TO HIM ABOUT HOW IT ALL STARTED – AND WHERE HE SEES IT GOING

This year, Pro-Ject is celebrating its 30th anniversary. So it seemed like the ideal time to interview the founder of the company, which claims to be, and doubtless is, the world's largest turntable manufacturer. Its factory in the Czech Republic (SEV Litovel) churns out between 150,000 and 200,000 a year, for Pro-Ject and OEM for other brands too. Compare that with Rega's 48,000 to 60,000 - in itself no mean feat in a world dominated by streaming - and you see that Pro-Ject is clearly a very big hitter.

One of the first questions I have for chief executive and founder Heinz Lichtenegger is why Pro-Ject offers such a large range of turntables.

"That's easy," he retorts. "I come from an economics background, not technical. Hi-fi was my hobby, and I wanted to bring as many people as I could to that hobby and I realised that hi-fi has many problems, one of which is that it's too exclusive. Shops are too exclusive. Products are too exclusive. Sometimes you think you are among a certain religious group – which is totally wrong.

"Companies in the audio industry seem to have a reduced number of products. In the rest of the world, reducing your offer means becoming like McDonalds, where the choice is reduced to a very few items you can produce in huge volumes. The real quality industry offers you choices: look at the watch industry, or wine, or cars. In the heyday of audio, Sony had 10 integrated amps, eight CD players, six cassette machines – for every price range. Only our audio industry tries to make it convenient and simple - and that's not working.

"The reason we're way bigger than the other companies is not only that we are producing products at low cost, it's because we have the variety. In Scandinavia, they want to have matt black. In Italy, they want a high-gloss black. In Japan, they want mahogany, and an S-shaped arm, and so on. So the variety reflects what the customer wants."

The company's mantra has always been to offer a high-end sound at a low price, so can it offer that variety without compromising sound quality? Lichtenegger is adamant and says there's more than one way to skin a cat: "You have high-mass turntables, rigid-plinth turntables... we are the only company that has all the choices.

"Because when very close to a speaker, a subchassis turntable does a great job, but a subchassis turntable is awful when the support it is on is bad, because then the whole thing is wobbling like crazy. There, a mass-loaded turntable or rigid-plinth turntable does a much better job. So it depends. Everything has a sound character. We are giving the customer the different choices, finishes,