



Pro-Ject MaiA S3 £550



The latest version of the MaiA still isn't very big, but it is very clever indeed

▶ DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Pro-Ject MaiA S3
- ORIGIN**
Austria/Slovakia
- TYPE**
Integrated amplifier
- WEIGHT**
1.07kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
206 x 55 x 153mm
- FEATURES**
- Quoted power output: 2x 23W (8ohm)
 - Inputs: 3x RCA; MM phono; coaxial; 2x optical; aptX HD Bluetooth
 - Outputs: 1x RCA; 6.35mm headphone
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Henley Audio Ltd.

As the name suggests, the MaiA S3 is the third generation of Pro-Ject's compact integrated amplifier (the original being tested back in *HFC* 390) and, while some of the details have changed, the premise is the same as before; an affordable integrated, optimised to work with the company's turntable range but also able to handle other inputs that you might have without struggling. As the Pro-Ject has comfortably the most inputs in the group that should not be a problem.

The MaiA S3 has three RCA line inputs with a moving-magnet phono stage supporting those. There are three digital inputs; two optical and one coaxial and all capable of receiving a 24-bit/192kHz signal. There is then a Bluetooth input supporting aptX HD; the only amp here to do so. Finally, there is a full-size RCA pre out and a 6.35mm headphone socket.

The amplifier is a Class A/B unit that is, somewhat unusually at the price, constructed to a dual mono principle. Power is quoted at 23W

into 8ohm loads, rising to 40W into 4ohm and connection is via a small but sturdy set of binding posts on the rear. This is the only amplifier with an external block-type power supply, which contributes to the relatively small size of the chassis as a whole. It is, in fact, the largest MaiA yet – although still the smallest amplifier in the group. Small or not, it feels impressively sturdy in its all-metal casework. The tiny but pleasingly weighted volume control is a nice touch, too. There is no direct input selection, but you do get a perfectly functional remote control. Why Pro-Ject elects to use the left and right buttons for volume and up and down for input as the direct opposite of everyone else is a mystery it chooses to keep to itself, however.

Sound quality

Despite the lowest output in the test, the Pro-Ject has no trouble hitting the test level although this may be as much a reflection of the gearing on its volume pot as anything else. What is less subjective is the performance that the MaiA S3 puts in. Its take on Max

Richter's *Four Seasons* has an energy that seems to be beyond a number of amps here. Without sounding too bright or forward, Elena Urioste's violin is lively and vivid. The supporting orchestra opens out behind her, peppered with details that help to draw you in.

It's this ability to find and render detail that sets the Pro-Ject apart with *Dragons* too. Without losing the coherence of the track as a whole, the MaiA S3 works in details in the band and Holcomb's inflections that other amplifiers in the group miss and, as the track reaches its crescendo, the Pro-Ject captures the euphoria of the assembled musicians exceptionally well, producing something genuinely rousing. The calmer and more reflective *Dead Sea* presents no challenges either, with Paris Jackson sounding wholly convincing and the

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MaiA S3 digging out an impressive amount of low-end weight.

With the more rough-and-ready Sheepdogs recording, it is fractionally less assured. The performance is tremendously entertaining, but there's a very slight hardness to some high notes at times that can become wearing. In rather better news, though, the extended functionality of the MaiA S3 meets the same high standards set by those RCA inputs. The digital board is the best here, the Bluetooth sounds great and the phono stage is also very accomplished indeed. The headphone amplifier has to make do with merely being pretty good rather than great, but is certainly more than up to the task of some late-night listening from time to time ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Sounds great; comprehensive spec; solid build

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Can be fractionally bright with poor recordings

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A compact but brilliant amplifier that does an awful lot of things – most of them rather well

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL



Group test verdict

Six very different takes on the affordable amplifier concept, but there can only be one winner. **Ed Selley** breaks things down

THE STANDARD OF performance in this roundup is exceptionally high and I find myself talking about degrees of excellence rather than outright weakness. The NAD D 3020 V2 and Tangent Ampster BT II are capable devices that offer an excellent spread of connections.

The NAD doesn't always turn this capability into a truly exciting performance, though. The Tangent, on the other hand, is exciting and usefully refined but can struggle to deliver bass weight and scale in the manner of some of the other options here. It has to be seen as a bit of a

bargain, though, particularly at some of the prices it is available at.

The Yamaha R-S202D and Cambridge Audio AXA35 tie for third place. Given its low price, the Yamaha is a lot of amp (or indeed receiver) for the money. It sounds big, assured and refined if not truly exciting and – those unfortunate spring clip terminals aside – the connectivity is more than respectable too. The Cambridge Audio oozes assurance and capability that justifies its extra cost. Partnered with a pair of lively loudspeakers, it's likely to handle everything you throw at it while

being painless and easy to live with at the same time.

The io is even better still. The idea of taking the basic Rega philosophy and reducing it to all that you need and nothing more – all encased in a compact and well-made chassis – results in an amplifier that is both a joy to listen to and use. The presence of the excellent phono stage and decent headphone amp mean it's flexible and easy to use and, if you have a digital source already, it is arguably the best option of the entire group. It is a fine amplifier.



WINNER

Pro-Ject's MaiA S3 isn't decisively better than the io, but the additional things it can do more than justifies the extra cost. This is a great-sounding amp that does an impressive range of things. It's compact, well made and easy to use. The best budget amp you can buy, period.



| Make/model | Cambridge Audio AXA35 | NAD D 3020 V2 | Pro-Ject MaiA S3 | Rega io | Tangent Ampster BT II | Yamaha R-S202D |
|-----------------|--|---|---|--|--|--|
| Price | £350 | £400 | £550 | £420 | £180 | £230 |
| Sound | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Value | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Build | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Features | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Overall | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| | A capable amplifier that delivers a pleasing blend of refinement and drive | A clever and flexible amp that would benefit from a little more bite and attack | A compact but brilliant amplifier that does a lot of things very well | Simple, but extremely talented. If you have source equipment, it's a joy | A keenly priced little amp that sounds highly capable and engaging | A lot of amplifier that delivers a more than respectable performance |
| Website | cambridgeaudio.com | nadelectronics.com | project-audio.com/en | rega.co.uk | tangent-audio.com | europe.yamaha.com |

Key features

| | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|------|------------------------|------------------------|------|------------|--------|
| Power (into 8ohm) | 35W | 30W | 23W | 30W | 25W | 100W |
| Analogue inputs | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Digital inputs | None | 1x coaxial, 1x optical | 1x coaxial, 2x optical | None | 1x optical | None |
| Phono stage | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No |
| Tuner | No | No | No | No | No | DAB/FM |
| Bluetooth | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |

TRY WITH THESE

STREAMER:

iFi Audio ZEN Stream **£400 HFC 485**

A compact and capable streaming front end that will attach to any amplifier with a coaxial (or USB) input, the iFi is an instant all-in-one creator.



TURNTABLE:

Pro-Ject Debut Carbon EVO **£450 HFC 468**

The best turntable you can buy under £500 is a perfect match for the MaiA S3 and has enormous scope for further upgrades too.



LOUDSPEAKER:

Triangle Borea BRO3 **£400 HFC 489**

This quite superb standmount is easy to drive and balances scale, refinement and excitement in a way that makes it look easy. A genuine star.

