



Think inside the Box

Not content with having a turntable for every occasion, Pro-Ject has unveiled a new CD-fronted system. **Ed Selley** checks it out

Some companies have become so synonymous with a certain product category that it can obscure quite how prolific they are in other areas. Pro-Ject is so indelibly associated with turntables that it is easy to forget that it has also developed a complete range of partnering electronics at multiple price points. Initially this focused on supporting its turntables, but the CD Set E is a fairly emphatic demonstration that things have developed further than that.

The CD Set E is assembled from E Series components which all come in below £300 and provide options for vinyl playback, phono stages, a Bluetooth receiver and a CD player. They are both sold separately and bundled and packaged together to become the CD Set E that is £148

cheaper than buying the components individually and also includes all the cables you need to get up and running.

The CD Box E is a standalone CD player (rather than a transport). It uses a Relmon MS8413; a 192kHz-capable chipset that we don't recall encountering in any digital device we've previously tested before. This is partnered with a shock-mounted inhaler-type CD drive and placed in a compact but solid casework that takes power from an external 12V PSU. Outputs are limited to RCA and a single coaxial output.

This is partnered with the Stereo Box E – a stereo amplifier built to the same compact scale as the CD player. Power is quoted at 21W into 8ohm, which nearly doubles into 4. As well as a matching RCA input for the CD player, the Stereo Box E has a second analogue in via a 3.5mm connection,

DETAILS

PRODUCT

Pro-Ject CD Set E

ORIGIN

Austria/China

TYPE

Separates CD-based system

WEIGHT

CD: 1.43kg

Amp: 2kg

Speakers: 1.6kg (each)

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)

CD:

206 x 55 x 160mm

Amp:

206 x 51 x 186mm

Speakers:

119 x 175 x 152mm

FEATURES

• Quoted power: 2x 21W (8ohm)

• Optical and coaxial digital inputs

• 76mm carbon mid/bass driver and 19 soft dome tweeter

DISTRIBUTOR

Henley Audio

WEBSITE

project-audio.com

henleyaudio.co.uk

a moving-magnet phono stage, one coaxial, two optical inputs and an aptX HD-capable Bluetooth input on a V5.0 platform. Completing the connections is a subwoofer out, 6.35mm headphone jack and a USB port that can power 5V devices without needing another mains plug.

Completing the system is the Speaker Box 3 E Carbon bookshelf speaker – an improbably tiny two-way cabinet. It's just 175mm high and 119 wide, and is dwarfed by almost any other cabinet available on the market.

This diminutive system is far more flexible than it might look at first glance

It makes use of a 76mm carbon mid/bass driver combined with a 19mm soft dome tweeter. The LF roll is quoted at 80Hz, but there is no +/- dB figure given. The cabinet feels unexpectedly weighty given how small it is and details like the speaker terminals all feel sturdy and carefully assembled, but there is no getting around the fact that many more conventional rivals at similar money feel like more speaker.

It does little to dent the perception that the CD Set E is a lot of equipment for the financial outlay, however. At a price that isn't much more than some single-chassis wireless speakers, the Pro-Ject is a dedicated separates



system that can be developed and upgraded in a way that simply isn't possible with any other self-contained rival. The breadth of functionality in the amp is the real secret weapon here, meaning that adding streaming or vinyl to support your CDs is easy.

We can't argue with the build and finish either. As noted, the speakers are very sturdy indeed, but the electronics are also solid and confidence inspiring, leveraging their all-metal construction to feel like

'proper' hi-fi, albeit on a smaller scale. It's not perfect; the CD mech might be isolated, but it's not exactly whisper quiet with plenty of loading and some rotation noise – although this is not a problem a metre or so away. The amp's dinky volume control is a little sensitive to over adjustment and the input indicator is pretty much invisible at any distance. Both units also have block-type PSUs which mean that they aren't quite as compact as you might expect. There



Just how strong a value calculation the Pro-Ject is really hits home when you consider its rivals. Rega's formidable System One (HFC 487) costs £300 more and is the closest conceptual match to the CD Set E. You could add the very capable Pro-Ject T1 to the CD Set E (which has a phono stage in the amp to facilitate this) and still hit the same price point as the Rega. In the interests of fairness, it's worth pointing out that the Kyte speaker is more capable than the Speaker Box E Carbon, but both systems will support a bit of equipment stretch in the future, meaning that the Pro-Ject could have its speakers bolstered and deliver higher performance still. It's tremendous value for money.

is a system-driving remote, however, and this will handle all of the commonly requested functions across both the amp and the CD player.

Sound quality

A few design quirks are forgivable considering the decent performance on offer here. Integral to the CD Set E's appeal is an actual stereo soundstage. Not a DSP-engineered take on one, but two speakers placed together so that they create a believable space. This allows Arcade Fire's *Funeral* to unfold in a way that is genuinely immersive and enjoyable.

There is much to like about the performance itself. No speaker the size of the Speaker Box 3 E Carbon is ever going to rattle organs, but its presentation from 100Hz and up is hugely likeable. Vocals are rich and well defined against supporting instruments and the system strikes an excellent balance of energy and refinement that means that even less-than-perfectly mastered material can still be enjoyed.

If you ask for something more dependent on bass like Boards of Canada's *Telephasic Workshop*, there are unavoidable limits to the bass extension that will diminish your enjoyment somewhat, but here the Stereo Box E rides to the rescue with two possible solutions. The first is that the sub output can be employed ▶



to help the Speaker Box 3E Carbon deliver a little more low-end shove in a 2.1 setup. The second is that the amp is good enough to work with more expensive speakers should you want to upgrade. We use a pair of Q Acoustics 5020 (*HFC 502*) standmounts for a few days and thoroughly enjoy the results. That 21W output is more than sufficient to

The speaker pairs a 19mm soft dome tweeter with a 76mm carbon mid/bass driver



work with a decent number of different speaker options.

The more time we spend with the system, the more it becomes clear that the amp is the real star of the show. The phono stage is a genuinely good listen; working well with an AVID Ingenium Twin, SME M2-9 arm and Vertere Dark Sabre (*HFC 519*) cartridge and ensuring that *Boxer* by The National retains its emotion and fluency. All the basics are here; low

The amp is good enough to work with more expensive speaker upgrades

noise, respectable gain and limited overall colouration, but they're secondary to the performance being a fundamentally engaging one.

Similarly, the digital board is a more than respectable performer too. Some tests with a Bluesound Node Nano connected via the coaxial input suggest that the decoding neatly matches the overall presentation of the amp. That USB power socket proves able to power the Node as well. Even the performance of the Bluetooth input is very respectable. The aptX signal with an Oppo Find X5 Pro ensures that a Qobuz stream of Hayden Thorpe's *Ness* is something that genuinely warrants the term 'hi-fi.'

Conclusion

The more you look at the CD Set E, the cleverer it becomes. On a basic level, it's one of the most affordable ways of getting up and running with a format that is close to becoming cool again. The element that really seals the deal, though, is all the extra functionality packed into the amp. This ensures that this diminutive system is far more flexible than it might look at first glance. Not only does the amp do a great many things, it does them all extremely well. As a starter system, second room or desktop setup, this compact offering gets an awful lot more right than it does wrong. Pro-Ject's association with vinyl physical media certainly doesn't preclude it from solid achievements with Compact Disc ●

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OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Energetic yet refined performance; great spec; solid build

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Limits to bass extension; CD mech a little noisy

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A beautifully realised compact CD system that sounds decent with plenty of upgrade stretch

FEATURES



OVERALL

