

hardware review

Project Stereo Set E1 for instant vinyl action

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Project Audio Stereo Set E1 system

I have been listening to music via digital mediums exclusively since the mid-nineties. Prior to this, I was an avid record collector, albeit on a schoolboy budget. My migration to CD was forced by circumstances, namely that until recently I had neither the space nor suitable room in which to put a turntable on a solid enough platform to get the best from it. Having recently set up a small system in a second room the opportunity arose to set up just such a system. So when Project Audio asked if I would be interested in trying their Stereo Set E1 system I nearly bit their hands off.

I feel that this system, which includes a turntable, DAC-equipped amplifier, and bookshelf speakers from a reputable brand such as Project Audio, is highly relevant in 2024, with vinyl sales being so strong and the format becoming the most relevant physical medium for many. Whilst the argument that spending this amount on used equipment could provide both better value and results is both strong and relevant, newcomers to a 'separates' system of this type will likely lack the knowledge and, quite possibly, the time to research and seek out suitable used components and likely not bother. Therefore, a system such as this, with all of the groundwork done for such a buyer, will prove to be a draw for many music lovers.

I may not have owned a turntable for some time but that doesn't mean that I haven't enjoyed listening to those of friends and within the industry. To get the best out of vinyl, your records must be clean and well-maintained. My old record collection is not in the best of conditions, but thankfully, I have enough new and unplayed records that I could manage this review armed only with a Project Audio carbon record cleaning brush. Even new vinyl still benefits from wet cleaning, but it is unlikely that the average buyer for a system like this will begin their journey with a good wet cleaning system, so initially, I made do with the brush. It

became clear early on that this did not suffice for the older records, so I purchased a good but basic wet cleaning system.

The system

At the helm of the Stereo Set E1 system is the Project's E1 turntable, which is included here in standard form, sans the built-in phono stage or Bluetooth module. Whilst pretty lightweight and rudimentary, this belt-drive deck gets the basics right, albeit lacking niceties such as adjustable anti-skate and VTA. Tracking and counterweight are factory preset. Adjusting the latter requires it first to be loosened with the supplied Allen key, which is probably a good idea as it prevents



accidental adjustments in the hands of the unskilled. Captive phono and ground cables are included, as is a short pair of unterminated speaker cables. Speed control is via a toggle switch and, as you would expect, is limited to 45 and 33rpm. A basic cartridge alignment chart, a tracking force tool and a centre spindle for ex 'juke-box' singles are supplied in a bag. The Project E1 is a non-suspended design, but the feet are pretty flexible, so they should provide a rudimentary degree of isolation. The fitted cartridge is a moving magnet from Audio Technica called the AT3600L. Power is via a wall wart PSU, which is par for the course with this type of turntable. The E1 turntable is available separately for £279.

At the heart of this setup is Project's newly launched Stereo Box E amplifier. Features include an MM phono stage, line inputs for both RCA and 3.5mm minijack, Bluetooth 5.0 wireless and two S/PDIF optical inputs. Also included is a USB C socket marked 'service', which, as well as allowing updates, can be used as a 5v power output for basic streaming modules. Interestingly, there's also an output for a subwoofer. You even get a basic remote and a 6.3mm headphone output, so it is pretty well featured considering its £249 retail price. Power output is rated at 21W per channel into 8 Ohms. Having become accustomed to high-end gear,





I was initially alarmed to see the wall wart power supply, but I guess this helps keep the costs down. Overall, it is a pleasant enough unit to use and feels well put together for a budget amp.

Whilst comparatively tiny, the Speaker Box 5 E speakers feel reassuringly solid and weighty. Retailing for £299 they are the most expensive components in this system and do feel it. Despite being a ported design, the low-frequency response is limited to 68Hz, and they are not especially sensitive at 86dB (1w/1m). The tweeter is a one inch silk dome affair, and the fibreglass bass/mid is five inches in diameter. Both drivers look pretty decent for a speaker at the price point, and the cabinets feel reassuringly rigid. My review samples are finished in a walnut laminate, which matches the E1 turntable. The speaker grills are held in place by magnets that have a stronger pull than most, to the extent that I momentarily questioned if they were supposed to be removed.

Setting up the Stereo Set E1

Unboxing and setting up the turntable was a nostalgic experience and a simple affair. I merely had to slip the belt over the sub-platter and drive spindle, pop on the composite platter and felt mat, remove the protective foam, and we were ready to go. The supplied lid fits directly onto the hinges at the rear of the turntable. Whilst it adds protection for the turntable I removed it whilst listening to records as this generally helps sound quality. The tracking force and alignment are factory-set. I chose not to question Project's setup skills. The results suggest they were pretty close to perfect, however, with no noticeable end-of-side distortion or other signs of mistracking.

As you can see from the photo, I placed the Stereo Set E1 system upon the attractive Blok Stax 2G rack, which proved to be a solid and well-isolated support for this system. Initially, I did not have a pair of suitable stands for the Project 5E speakers, as floor-standing speakers are generally my preference. I considered begging/borrowing a pair of suitable stands but concluded that someone buying this kind of system is unlikely to invest three figures on speaker stands. My solution was to purchase a budget pair from a popular online retail site. They weren't the most solid of their ilk, but the 5E speakers sounded better on them than the bookshelf where I had initially placed them. Decent speaker stands are likely to make the 5Es sound even better.

As the Wiim Ultra streamer from our recent review was still with me, it seemed rude not to use it to help run in the amplifier and speakers. Indeed, it proved an ideal partner, and we often found ourselves using it to listen to the radio or streaming from Qobuz whilst the system was with us.

Performance

My expectation of a system at this price point is that it should at least produce clean and fun sounding music, and thankfully, the Project Stereo Set E1 achieves this with aplomb. In comparison to a high-end setup, bandwidth is obviously limited, and you do not get the open sound or imaging that you get from systems that cost well into four figures, but the music sounds lively and fun. Dynamics are portrayed well, if not felt in the same way as they do in a bigger setup.

The Project E1 turntable proved a better tool than the budget turntables I had access to in my youth, which suffered from audible effects of microphony, speed instability, and end-of-side distortion. Surface noise proved to be lower than expected, and there was no audible hum at

Project Stereo Set E1

normal listening levels. As long as the record was clean and well-kept, its performance was remarkably musical, if softer sounding than the equivalent track streamed using the accompanying streamer. The softness was accompanied by a smooth and even-handed quality, which was often lacking from the digital source. Despite missing some of the detail and ultimate clarity of digital, good vinyl pressings sounded fuller, richer and more natural through this system. This balance proved more engaging and relaxing to listen to than the streamed content. Feeding the streamer through the Denafrips Ares 12th/Iris combination redressed the



balance somewhat, but as this combination costs more than double that of the Stereo Set E1 system, this was an unfair comparison.

Before working through the boxes of LPs my wife and I had accumulated in younger years, it seemed timely to play the two Radiohead albums in my possession. Many may remember this band's pioneering move in initially releasing their album *In Rainbows* as a pay-what-you-want download back in 2007. To get the CD version I was so desperate to own required the purchase of the physical media pack, which included the double album 45rpm vinyl release. It seemed rude not to purchase the follow-up album *King Of Limbs* four years later in the same format, but this time on clear vinyl, which surprisingly sounded much better than the previous release on black vinyl. Back to back against the streamed digital version through the streamer, the LP sounded warmer, fuller and more expressive, if less detailed, via this entry-level turntable.

Initially, I had found the sound of this system could occasionally sound a little veiled and lifeless, but with the family out of the house for an afternoon, I discovered an idiosyncrasy with the Project Stereo Box E amplifier, in that it needed the volume knob winding up beyond eleven o'clock to bring it to life. Streaming the album *Lunar Love* from Italian artist Mop Mop, proved the system could generate some meaningful bass punch. I had first chosen this music to test the amplifier's Bluetooth connection from the Qobuz Android app on my phone. This connection proved stable and sounded better than I had expected, although the same tracks through streamer sounded more open, detailed and dynamic.

Despite her complaints that I had taken over yet another room in our house with an audio system, my wife brought home an LP of a classical piece she thought she liked: Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No.2 in C minor, with Cécile Ousset and Simon Rattle, purchased from a local charity shop. To my amusement, it turned out to be Concerto No.3 she was after, but her loss proved to be beneficial for this review as it sounded rather good through this system. I searched for and found the same version on Qobuz, which sounded brighter and more detailed via the

streamer, but the magic was lost. The piano and strings sounding more expressive, fuller and more involving via the ancient art of diamond on plastic.

Working my way through some of our old albums from the eighties proved less successful. Many of them sounded thin and lifeless, confirming that this was far from a golden age for the medium. The 45rpm releases, such as the twelve-inch version of Marillion's *Assassing*, fared better, with the CD version sounding harsh and thin by comparison.

The Stereo Box E amplifier's headphone stage turned out to be more than an afterthought but like the speaker output, it needed to be turned to at least eleven o'clock before it reached its performance potential. This headphone stage was more than up to the task of driving my Sindy Peacock planner magnetic headphones. It presented a three-dimensional image if fed with appropriate program material.

Can I recommend the Project Stereo Set E1 package?

I will answer the above question by saying that I have placed a good friend's money where my mouth is, having arranged to purchase the review sample on his behalf. Without making potentially risky used purchases, I cannot think of a better way to enter the world of high-quality vinyl replay at this price point. That this system's amplifier has a half-decent DAC included is a bonus, and I can see many buyers employing it to hook up a TV or streamer. If your budget is limited, I feel it better to spend a little less on the components within your first vinyl-based system to allow for the purchase of a good rack or shelf, along with a record and stylus cleaning kit. As well as being a great choice for new and returning vinyl enthusiasts, the Project Stereo Set E1 would make a wonderful Christmas present for a music-loving teenager, with the proviso that it could be the start of a lifetime obsession with audio candy.

