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REVIEW PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

Pro-Ject MaiA S3

This compact amplifier comes from a company best known for its record players but is part of an extensive range of hi-fi components in miniature. But don't think it's a toy ...

PRO-JECT MaiA S3

Type Integrated amplifier

Price £539

Analogue inputs MM phono, three line

Digital inputs Two optical, one coaxial, Bluetooth

Analogue outputs One pair of speakers, preamp-level outs, headphones

Output power 23Wpc into 8 ohms,

40Wpc into 4 ohms

Accessories supplied Remote handset,

Bluetooth antenna, power supply

Finishes Silver or black

Dimensions (W×H×D) 20.6×5.5×15.3

(17.6mm with sockets)

project-audio.com



As I mentioned in this month's Audio Essay, there seems to be a trend towards the downsizing of our hi-fi systems. Yes, there are still monster speakers and huge amplifiers out there, more or less demanding a separate room in which to listen simply because they don't mix well with family life and conventional furnishings. While there's every sign that this sector of the market, small though it may be in volume terms – but high in value to the industry – continues to thrive, for the generation brought up listening to music on their phones or through a small wireless speaker, it can all seem a bit big and cumbersome.

We're moving into an age where the expectation is of high standards of performance without filling the room with an 'oil-rig' rack of black boxes. Advances in technology – from the rise of streaming to the development of small, energy-efficient amplifier modules and the increased

integration of functionality on ever smaller pieces of silicon – have driven that expectation. After all, look at everything an iPhone can do in a housing fitting in the palm of one's hand, from fine music playback to exceptional photography. And then there's the continued development of the popular bookshelf/standmount loudspeaker: today's models are capable of a truly enthralling sound from very small enclosures, while in the TV arena slender soundbars can not only fill the room with exceptional sound but also create uncanny surround effects from everything from streamed films to music in Spatial Audio.

All these advances have made it possible to get exceptional sound without filling the room with electronics, which brings us to likes of the £539 Pro-Ject MaiA S3, the latest version of a product the company says is named to indicate that it is 'My Audiophile Integrated Amplifier'. It's part of an extended range of hi-fi

components from a brand built on its justifiably famous line-up of turntables for playing records, and it all started with a little phono preamplifier designed to be used between those record players and amplifiers, many of which at the time had long dispensed with the frippery of built-in phono provision.

From there, the range has extended to encompass products including CD players, digital-to-analogue converters, network audio products and amplifiers. What they all share is not only that they're beautifully put together but that they're truly tiny, enabling a complete system to take up no more space than a single conventionally sized component.

And the MaiA S3 is no exception. It's just 20.6cm wide, 5.5cm tall and 17.6cm deep, yet it has serious audiophile design thinking within. It delivers 40W per channel (into 4 ohms, the 8 ohm figure being 23Wpc) from an entirely

SUGGESTED PARTNERS

The MaiA S3 is an ideal way to build a compact system, especially when partnered with these ...

CD BOX S3 CD PLAYER

Part of the same system as the amplifier, this CD Box S3 CD player is an ideal partner, with its slot-loading mechanism and high-quality audio design.



WHARFEDALE EVO 4.1 SPEAKERS

Using technology trickled down from the company's more affordable designs, the Wharfedale Evo 4.1 speakers have a crisp yet weighty presentation.



conventional power-amplifier section featuring a dual-mono layout for optimal stereo separation and a low-noise design for clarity and detail. The volume control is all-analogue – albeit with motorised operation for remote control – and the amplifier has additional preamplifier outputs, so you could connect a subwoofer or even use it as a preamplifier into a power amp or active speakers, and a high-quality headphone output.

Advances have made it possible to get exceptional sound without filling the room with electronics

The front panel is kept simple, with just that volume control, headphone socket, a power switch and input selectors, but this is a surprisingly flexible little device. There's a moving magnet phono stage, based on the company's best-selling Phono Box, plus inputs for three more analogue sources, and three digital inputs – two optical and one coaxial. Completing the specification is the ability to stream music wirelessly from suitable devices using Bluetooth 5.0, with aptX HD capability: this will support up to 48kHz/24bit, while the physical digital inputs will handle up to 192kHz/24bit,

thanks to the Cirrus Logic CS4344 Multi-bit Delta Sigma digital-to-analogue conversion within the amplifier.

Made in Pro-Ject's European factory and powered by a 20V external power supply provided in the box, the MaiA S3 is available in high-quality silver or black finishes and comes complete with a remote-control handset. And though its weight isn't going to delight those who won't listen to any hi-fi that isn't at least a two-person lift, the Pro-Ject amp feels substantial and solid, enhancing that 'quality amplifier in miniature' impression.

PERFORMANCE

Small they may be, but there's also a feeling of real precision about the controls here. The volume adjustment is smooth and silky, making it easy to set at exactly the level you want, while the amplifier's response to commands from the remote handset is also well judged. And the same goes for the input selection, which is on two push-buttons – the right one doubling to pair the amplifier with Bluetooth devices – with little LEDs between the buttons indicating the selected input.

The MaiA S3 lives up to that sense of quality in the way it plays music, too. Yes, there are some qualifications, in that this is an amplifier best used with

speakers of reasonable sensitivity and ideally suited to use in small- to medium-size rooms, but within those limits this is a design capable of a warm, sweet yet highly revealing sound, with plenty of detail on offer to pull the listener into the music. With an intimately recorded piece such as the Staatskapelle Berlin String Quartet's reading of Puccini's *Crisantemi* (Linn, A/22), the Pro-Ject shows both its speed and its definition, with fine textures in the instruments and a good sense of the recorded acoustic. Meanwhile, with Paavo Järvi's Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra recording of John Adams's *My Father Knew Charles Ives* (Alpha, A/22), the amplifier's ability to sound delicate and refined, yet turn on the weight and power when required while keeping its balance and clarity, is mightily impressive. Even when used with quite demanding speakers such as the Q Acoustics Concept 300 standmounters, there's an excellent sense of control without ever restraining the music and, unless you push the levels too hard, no feeling that the amplifier is having to work hard to deliver the music.

That's the story throughout this little amplifier with a big heart. It may seem at first glance to be something of a niche product but it deserves much wider consideration than that might suggest. **G**

Or you could try ...

There's definitely a downsizing trend going on, although some of the contenders in this market sector admittedly hark back to the more compact hi-fi designs of the past.

Quad Vena II



Quad's Vena II, for example, has a look reminiscent of the classic Quad amplification of half a century ago, and comes in the company's very British Lancaster Grey finish, with the option of wood-veneered sleeves

for the full retro look. It offers an extra dose of power, with 45W per channel into 8 ohms. More information at quad-hifi.co.uk.

Cyrus One HD



The Cyrus One HD amplifier goes back to basics, with a very simple squared-off design at odds with the sculpted looks of the rest of the company's range. Yet for all its basic looks, this is a very powerful compact amplifier, delivering 100W per channel, and has both digital and analogue inputs,

including a USB Type B for computer audio. Details at cyrusaudio.com.

Chord Electronics Anni



If, however, you want a truly tiny amplifier, look no further than the Chord Electronics Anni. It's an all-analogue design, with just two inputs plus outputs for a pair of speakers and headphones, and delivers 10W per channel from casework just 16cm wide. Find out more at chordelectronics.com.