



Pro-Ject Phono Box S3 B £350



No surprise to find Pro-Ject with skin in this game and on paper the S3 B could well be the Phono Box to beat

the group with the coolest tonal palette. All relative, of course, but familiarity with the Acoustic Signature turntable, tonearm and cartridge and a £5k Tom Evans phono preamp suggests a warmer, fuller balance rather than the impression of pristine analysis given by the Pro-Ject. That said, there's a lot to admire and if you put transparency, polished-up detail and speed towards the top of your list, the Phono Box S3 B might well end up there too.

Trilogy doesn't sound nearly as fat 'n' fruity as it does via the Cambridge Duo but, boy, there's a lot going on. With no trace of muddle, smudge or pimped tonality, every element and strand of the track is super clean and precise if, arguably, a morsel too dry. There's a directness that gets straight down to business, a degree of responsive, spry athleticism

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more than capable of delivering thrills. Carl Palmer's powerhouse drumming, somewhat recessed in the mix with some of the warmer-sounding stages, seems to have more than its usual helping of cut, zest and zip – engaging for sure.

Shades Of Scarlett Conquering, which is all too easy to overdo in the rosy glow stakes, is also exposed to a more incisive and 'hear-through' treatment here. It sounds more open with terrific treble air, detail and finesse, Joni's presence the very soul of vocal sweetness and light. Is it all a little too honest and unfettered for the already skinned-back, taut and leading-edgy *Heroes*? Just a touch. But it sure does connect, sounding vital, tack-sharp and, structurally at least, dead funky throughout ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Pristine, transparent sonics; balanced connections; flexibility

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Tonally a little lean for some tastes

BUILD QUALITY



WESAY: For clarity and soundstage, it doesn't get any better

FEATURES



OVERALL



► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject
Phono Box S3 B

ORIGIN
Austria

TYPE
MM/MC
phono preamp

WEIGHT
930g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
206 x 55 x 153mm

FEATURES
● MM/MC input
● RCA input/output
● Fully balanced input/output

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

Pushing the boundaries of precisely what's possible at a specific price point in the analogue arena is largely how Pro-Ject rolls. The Austrian company's new Phono Box S3 B is a perfectly formulated case in point. It plants arguably the biggest 'wow' moment in this roundup, attributable chiefly to its combination of dual mono configuration, discrete circuitry in the gain stage (no op amps here) and providing a balanced input as well as output. This latter feature, practically unknown at the 'affordable' end of the market, comes under Pro-Ject's True Balanced Connections concept, the advertised advantages being outlined by the company as: 'increased dynamics' and improved signal-to-noise ratio". To facilitate this, Pro-Ject sells a range of RCA-to-XLR input cables to make the right connections. On paper at least, the 'high-end' vibe is far stronger here than on anything else in the group.

There are five impedance and four capacitance settings teamed with four selectable gain levels. This side of the

uber-exotic, it's unlikely that there's a cartridge the S3 B won't be able to accommodate. And, a particularly welcome bonus for this reviewer, it does so without a battalion of fiddly DIP switches to battle. Instead, the small buttons on the front panel are pressed repeatedly to cycle through the various settings, each flagged by a tiny, dim LED. Much easier.

As with most Pro-Ject phono preamps, function by far trumps fashion. With one of the larger chassis in the group, the S3 B's aluminium build feels solid and should provide good electrical isolation. It also means that the connections on the rear panel aren't too cramped, even with the space given over to the two balanced XLR outputs. Wall-wart PSU? Check.

Sound quality

The Pro-Ject's superpower? It sounds cleaner and clearer – especially in fully balanced mode. We could be looking at the Holy Grail here: nothing added, nothing taken away. But nothing hi-fi is ever quite that simple. The Phono Box S3 B is also the leanest-sounding phono stage in

