

Stage craft

Ed Selley takes the more affordable of two new arrivals in Pro-Ject's range of MM/MC phono stages for a spin to see how it fares

Replacing both existing DS and DS+ models with a smaller, simpler design, the Phono Box S2 Ultra has adjustable loading and impedance options to offer a useful degree of setup flexibility. But the most notable aspect of the new design is that it is fully discrete, with no op-amps in the circuit. Both of these features are rare but not unheard of at the price point and the intention with both aspects is the reduction of unwanted noise. Another design feature is the use of polystyrene capacitors in key parts of the circuit and a split RIAA circuit so that it adheres closely to the recognised equalisation curve.

The S2 Ultra uses an external wall-wart type PSU, which means there should be a reduction in noise levels in comparison with housing the PSU internally. Adjustments for loading and gain are on the underside of the chassis, and there's a decent range of adjustment for such an affordable design. The down side is that the dip switches to do this are really small and adjusting them is extremely fiddly. Compared with some more costly phono stage models, there are a few gaps in the settings for moving-coil cartridges, but generally speaking it's possible to get close to the recommendations for most cartridges.

The all-metal casework is extremely solid and feels of high quality for the price. I like some of the little details, like a power button and a grounding post that is large enough to handle the spade terminations from my tonearm cable. The rest of the socketry also feels solid and even though the unit itself is small, there is enough space to ensure that all but the most enormous of RCA plugs can be accommodated.

Sound quality

Connected to a Michell GyroDec turntable with SME M2-9 tonearm, I kick off proceedings with the moving-magnet operation using an Audio-Technica ATM-VM95SH cartridge (HFC 446). The phono stage is commendably quiet at idle and you need to raise the levels to bombastic for unwanted noise to creep in. This gives it the dynamic space it needs to shine and the results are extremely impressive. The heavyweight electronica of *Every Open Eye* by Chvrches is big and confident. The S2 Ultra provides the headroom to ensure that the punchy *Leave A Trace* has the necessary impact and scale it needs to shine. Lauren Mayberry's vocals are well defined and the ideal of a 'warm and harmonious' sound is achieved without the performance feeling soft or in any way sluggish.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject Phono Box S2 Ultra

ORIGIN
Austria

TYPE
MM/MC phono stage

WEIGHT
570g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
103 x 37 x 119mm

FEATURES
• Connections:
1x RCA's input;
1x RCA's output
• Switchable input
impedance,
capacitance
and gain

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Playing the comparatively slower and more considered Fink's *Sunday Night Blues Club Vol. 1* the results remain extremely impressive.

Instruments demonstrate a consistently believable tonal quality and decay to notes. It's commendably resistant to amplifying surface noise and these factors combine to ensure that you listen to the music that's been recorded onto the record rather than the record itself.

Switching to a Nagaoka MP-200 that's priced around £350 (HFC 434) suggests that the phono stage has the ability to work with moving-magnet designs that comfortably cost more than it does, while the lovely sweetness that the cartridge is capable of demonstrating is convincingly reproduced.

Moving up to Goldring's £895 Ethos moving coil (HFC 449) highlights some of the limitations of the S2 Ultra. The switch to the 60dB gain setting allows for some noise to creep in during idle and quiet passages and is sufficiently apparent that it can become a faint distraction with some music. The news isn't all bad, though. Its ability to convey the way the Ethos captures the emotional content of whatever vinyl is being spun is beautifully realised. Nick Drake's *Pink Moon* sounds wonderfully intimate and lifelike and is helped, once again, by the Pro-Ject's ability to make voices and instruments sound highly natural and convincing.

Conclusion

The Phono Box S2 Ultra puts in a respectable performance with MC cartridges, but judged predominantly as a moving-magnet option reveals itself to be very competitive indeed. With a consistently impressive performance and the ability to handle upmarket cartridges, this is a flexible and attractive phono stage that deserves to be high on any audition shortlist at the price •



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Flexibility; engaging moving-magnet performance

DISLIKE: Noise during idle sections with 60dB gain setting

WE SAY: Offering great performance with MM carts and the flexibility to handle MCs, this is a highly versatile option