



Rega's superb System One (HFC 487) is a class act. The differences in the two systems reflect the differing philosophies of their makers. Out of the box as a vinyl system, it's possible to argue that the Rega has the edge and the lo is a more powerful and capable amp than the Stereo Box E. The Pro-Ject has more connectivity on its amp and a turntable that has more potential upgrade stretch. It also comes in a wide selection of colours. The Rega remains a great system, but the Colourful Audio System E does have the edge over it.



Smart Es

The system-in-a-box concept clearly has legs. **Ed Selley** gets colourful with the latest offering from Pro-Ject

Affordable separates have staged something of a fightback in recent years over all-in-one and just-add-speaker alternatives. The system-in-a-box concept – where everything you need is sold as a single packaged unit – has played a small but important role in this resurgence. Such systems offer the flexibility and upgradeability of a traditional setup while removing the uncertainty of having all the parts and cabling needed to get up and running.

Pro-Ject's CD Set E (HFC 525) is a perfect example and the Colourful Audio System E is part of the same range and yet the two setups do not have a huge amount in common. The biggest difference is the Colourful Audio System swaps out the CD front end and moves to vinyl, while the turntable employed is unique to the system. The Debut E is a simplified take on the Debut platform in order to reduce costs (a version with a higher spec Debut is also available). The arm is still 8.6in, but is made of aluminium rather than carbon fibre and it uses an Ortofon OM5e moving-magnet cart rather than a Pro-Ject branded version of the 2M pattern carts found on the pricier

Debuts. The platter is aluminium but does without the TPE damping ring on the EVO 2. The plinth, power supply and feet remain the same. As well as the turntable, the speakers have also changed. The Speaker Box 5E Carbon is much larger than the Speaker Box 3E Carbon used in the CD system. It is a two-way bookshelf featuring a 25mm soft dome tweeter partnered with a 127mm carbon fibre composite mid/bass driver. It's still not an enormous box,

It delivers a level of performance that one-box rivals will struggle to get near

as hinted at by the lower frequency roll-off of 65Hz, but it's an altogether heftier speaker than the 3E. One very neat touch is that the speakers come with a set of Sorbothane feet. The only part of the system that stays the same is the Stereo Box E, which is no bad thing. It still disposes of 21W into 8ohm, which doubles into 4. Connectivity comprises two RCA inputs, a moving-magnet phono stage, one coaxial, two optical inputs

DETAILS
PRODUCT Pro-Ject Colourful Audio System E
ORIGIN Austria/Czech Republic/China
TYPE All-in-one system
WEIGHT Turntable: 5.5kg
Amp: 2kg
Speakers: 4.76kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
Turntable: 415 x 113 x 320mm
Amp: 206 x 51 x 186mm
Speakers: 165 x 270 x 220mm
FEATURES
• 21W per channel (8ohm)
• Moving magnet phono stage
• Bluetooth
DISTRIBUTOR Henley Audio
WEBSITE project-audio.com
henleyaudio.co.uk

and aptX HD-capable Bluetooth v5.0. Completing the connections is a subwoofer out, 6.35mm headphone socket and USB port that's capable of powering 5V devices.

As the name suggests, the Colourful Audio System E is available in Steel Blue, Black, Fir Green, White, Walnut and Golden Yellow finishes. The system leans into Pro-Ject's philosophy and beliefs – it's compact, well-finished and extremely easy to set up. It comes with the cables needed to get up and running and it compares very favourably with other examples of the breed. Build and finish are extremely good and the colour finishes give it a level of visual flair often lacking at this price point.

No less importantly, the Pro-Ject has all the flexibility of a traditional separates system. The amp has connectivity sufficient to allow other sources to be used (the CD Box E will connect every bit as happily to this system as it will the CD Set E) and while the Debut E is simpler than the other Debut models, many of the same upgrades can be applied to it. It's a very neat example of the best of both worlds.

Sound quality

Having set up the Colourful Audio System E, the first thing that becomes apparent is that the change in speakers makes more of a difference than the change in replay format. The Speaker Box 5E is altogether more forceful and convincing than the smaller 3E, so Seasick Steve's *Can't Teach An Old Dog New Tricks* has an authority to the low-end which underpins his distinctive vocals in a more believable way. The excellent

integration between the two drivers that the 3E demonstrated isn't affected by the move to the larger mid/bass either. It's still enjoyably cohesive from top to bottom.

The Debut E is also a fascinating performer. It arrives shortly after I test the T2 and, given the similarity in price, I expected the Debut E to be a similar performer. What surprises me is just how different it is and that, in some regards, it gives away very little to the pricier Debut EVO 2. *Signals* by Marconi Union is defined by the same effortless sense of flow that is present on the pricier Debuts. Though really ballistic music lacks the last ounce of drive and attack, with more considered material such as this, the Pro-Ject delivers an exceptionally compelling take on the presentation.

While I suspect that the absolute levels of performance you can achieve



from a Debut E will be lower than an EVO 2, the use of an upgraded clamp, sub platter and acrylic platter is still likely to yield good results. This has to be seen as one of the most interesting turntables doing the rounds at this sort of price and it's every inch a Debut even in this cutdown spec.

It is the Stereo Box E that remains the star turn in this trio, though. The presence of the Debut E gives it an opportunity to show that the phono stage really is an extraordinarily talented device for something in a £200 amplifier. Used with the matching speakers, the 21W output provides plenty of gain and even moving to a significantly larger and more expensive pair of Acoustic Energy AE309² floorstanders, I have to be unsympathetic for it to struggle.

The digital inputs are also very good. I use a Bluesound Node Nano

into both the RCA and coaxial inputs and the digital connections more than hold their own. Even if you have no spare budget left over from buying the Colourful Audio System E, the Bluetooth connection is good enough to have you listening happily and the Stereo Box E will even charge your phone as it streams from it.

Conclusion

The Colourful System E is one of a small selection of products I've tested over the years that arrives good and still has the scope to become even better further down the line. It delivers a level of performance that one-box rivals will struggle to get anywhere near and then has the scope to grow and evolve in the manner that you want it to. Pro-Ject's careful use of its considerable range and huge selection of turntable parts has resulted in a system that does all the things it does so well and that retains a charming identity of its own. It's a box that anyone should be happy to take delivery of ●

Hi-FiChoice
OUR VERDICT
SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Excellent performance; useful spec; attractive and well made
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Large amp PSU; some limits to absolute power
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A great take on the system-in-a-box concept that is likely to win over many users
FEATURES ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★