

Pro-Ject MaiA DS3

Nearly ten years on from its first 'My audiophile integrated Amplifier', or MaiA, Pro-Ject launches its latest compact, but feature-packed, phono/digital integrated amplifier
 Review: **Jamie Biesemans** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Mini hi-fi, very much 'a thing' in the 1980s, is still breathing today thanks to Heinz Lichtenegger's Pro-Ject brand. 'Small is better', according to Pro-Ject's head honcho, stating that modern music lovers want great sound without bulky hi-fi gear. Surprisingly, the MaiA DS3 integrated amplifier tested here is one of the larger of Pro-Ject's 'Boxes', being part of its DS line which, together with the RS line, trades some compactness for improved electronics. The company's budget E and more accomplished S series are the home of truly diminutive devices.

But make no mistake, the MaiA DS3 – 'MaiA' stands for 'My audiophile integrated Amplifier' – might only be the size of a fat George R.R. Martin novel, but it has a lot going for it. There are genuinely few equals sporting such a small footprint and wide-ranging feature set while boasting a substantial 2x80W/8ohm power output [see PM's Lab Report, p77].

The new amp is a third-generation DS product, launched alongside a cheaper MaiA S3 amplifier. The £1049 DS3 is the 'full ops' version, offering not only a new digital stage but also nine inputs, including a versatile MM/MC option – a rarity at this price point. Furthermore, while Bluetooth isn't unusual on today's amplifiers, a full aptX HD codec certainly is.

NOT ONE BOX, BUT TWO...

You can hardly accuse the MaiA DS3 of being flamboyant. It's all very no-nonsense, with a sturdy aluminium chassis available in matt black or silver, but its restrained aesthetic doesn't exude an air of cheapness. There's a solid feel to the DS3, making it easy to imagine the unit discreetly parked on a vintage sideboard. Of course, you'll have to find a place behind the furniture to hide the oversized

RIGHT: Packed PCB includes edgewise MM/MC phono card [bottom left], BT/wi-fi module [centre right], TI PCM1795 DAC [centre], headphone amp [top right], motorised volume [top] and Class D amplifier on heatsink [far right]

power supply. Relative to the MaiA DS3, it's gigantic [see PM's boxout, p75].

If you're feeling a bit more extravagant, Pro-Ject offers optional wooden panels that attach magnetically to the sides. There are three finishes, including a walnut that'll match nicely with the walnut versions of Pro-Ject turntables such as The Classic [HFN Aug '16] or the X2 B [HFN Sep '22].

PUSH THE BUTTON

The lack of a display, large buttons or backlit dials fits the minimalist concept, but a large motor-driven volume dial livens up the DS3's front panel. To the left is a headphone output, and to the right are four tiny push buttons. Two of these are used to advance through the inputs, the active input being indicated by a blue LED next to a barely legible label. Another selects +6dB preamp gain. More

control comes via the supplied remote [see p77], which feels bloated as only five keys are relevant, but you can add other DS boxes, such as the CD Box DS3 CD player, and control them with the same remote.

For this update to the DS3 there's a slightly upgraded DAC stage, based around a Burr-Brown PCM1795, and more powerful Class D amplification. This allows the compact amp to project – pardon the pun – a lot of power, something immediately noted when hooking it up to a pair of DALI Rubicon 2 standmounts, playing the latest release from New Zealand singer-songwriter Kimbra, and receiving some potent bass in return.

The layout of the rear panel is neat, letting you connect sources easily, such as a TV via Toslink optical or a computer via USB-B. This last port should be utilised to feed the digital stage the highest



LEFT: Available in matt black and silver finishes, the MaiA DS3 can be accented with optional wooden sidecheeks. Small buttons cycle through the available inputs while enabling BT pairing and an additional +6dB preamp gain

quality hi-res files, up to 192kHz/24-bit LPCM or DSD256. Handily, when you start streaming to a connected network transport, such as the iFi Audio NEO Stream [HFN Mar '23], this will wake the MaiA DS3 out of standby. Finally, the 4mm loudspeaker cable connectors look small, but the banana plugs of my QED and Tellurium cables fitted without issue.

A CLASS D ACT

You could say Pro-Ject's MaiA DS3 is a perfect example of the dangers of cognitive dissonance. It's small, says the brain, so it should sound small too. Or underpowered, at least. But the Flying Mole-sourced Class D modules provide the amplifier with ample reserves. It's very confident and authoritative at the low-end, driving both the Rubicon 2s and Canton's

Reference 7K floorstanders [HFN May '22] with little apparent effort. And even if it doesn't exhibit extreme bass control or extreme definition, that doesn't spoil the general sense of fun, as the MaiA DS3 adds both a touch of warmth and just a little bit of sparkle to make it interesting. Hearing it

'Playing live, they can induce cracks in concrete'

next to NAD's retro-styled C 3050 LE integrated amp [see p70], with the same speakers, revealed similarities but also stark differences, the MaiA DS3 sounding warmer but also with more 'forwardness' in the upper midrange.

In the past few years Texan trio Khruangbin have garnered a lot of praise for combining multiple genres into a laidback, airy sound, as witnessed on last year's *Texas Moon* EP and the earlier *The Universe Smiles Upon You*. Surprisingly,

their trademark style fits well with the compositions of Mali's musical grandee Ali Farka Touré. Khruangbin's *Ali* homage [Dead Oceans DOC274; 48kHz/24-bit] features his son, Vieux, and crosses over from traditional Mali riffs to more dub and reggae-infused territory. There's a languid feel to many tracks on this album, which suited the DS3 and DALI speakers nicely.

With 'Diarabi' and 'Alikarra', the MaiA DS3 was almost lazy, laying down a thick bass track backed up by the typical droning Malian guitar – like most contemporaries Touré uses a non-Western tuning. The chants and the chorus pedal-augmented guitar line on 'Tongo Barra' were presented with good separation and crisp definition across a decent-sized soundstage.

SCOTS ON THE ROCKS

The Roon Radio function took me from Khruangbin/Touré to *Where I'm Meant To Be* [Partisan Records PTKF3020-2; 48kHz/24-bit] from the UK's Ezra Collective. The track 'Welcome To My World' got off to a rousing start, with some fine trumpet playing, which the MaiA DS3 launched into the room with gusto. Yet while the organically portrayed brass grabbed my attention, it was the carefully defined funk bass guitar that illustrated this device's audiophile prowess.

The DS3 is well suited to less subtle work too. Glasgow's noise-merchants, Mogwai, generally play live at volume levels that induce cracks in concrete, a sensation that 'Like Herod' on the re-release of the landmark *Mogwai Young Team* album [Chemikal Underground CHEM-262; 48kHz/24-bit] lets you experience at home. 'Play very quietly, shift to very loud' is the band's



KEEPING IT COMPACT

Pro-Ject's original MaiA, or 'My audiophile integrated Amplifier' [HFN Nov '14], was the brand's first 'all-in-one' solution, incorporating MM phono, three line, three S/PDIF digital, USB-B and BT inputs into a very slim 206x36x165mm (whd) case. A small Class D module from Japan's Flying Mole, and outboard wall wart, ensured the amp (priced £399 for 2x25W/8ohm) was cool-running despite being super compact. Rated at 2x40W/8ohm, the £699 MaiA DS [HFN Mar '16] was an upgraded version of the original MaiA and the first to be squeezed into the squarer form factor of Pro-Ject's burgeoning 'Box' range of mini separates. The company's Box Control app, for both Android and iOS, was introduced at the same time, connecting to the MaiA DS via Bluetooth.

The MaiA DS still used Class D modules from Flying Mole but, fast forward to 2023, and the latest MaiA DS3 is rated at twice the power (2x80W/8ohm) courtesy of its beefier Class D modules and more substantial 36V outboard PSU brick [pictured]. The MaiA DS3 is assembled to a very high standard by Pro-Ject's 'partner' factory – Canor spol s.r.l in Slovakia [HFN Nov '22] – but its compact footprint belies the growing size and weight of that PSU. PM

PRO-JECT MAIA DS3



ABOVE: MM/MC phono and three line ins, plus a sub, fixed and variable pre outs are offered on RCAs alongside USB-B (192kHz/24-bit; DSD256), BT antenna and coaxial plus two optical S/PDIF (192kHz/24-bit) digital ins. Power connects via a 4-pin DIN while speaker outs are on insulated 4mm sockets (now better placed than before)

party trick, but one the Maia DS3 takes in its stride. Big dynamics really are no issue for this amplifier, although high volumes did expose a hint of higher midrange roughness on some tracks. Switching over to the Canton Reference 7Ks confirmed an ability to drive big set-pieces, the Maia DS3 satisfactorily blasting the 16-minute-long 'Mogwai Fear Satan' into the room, while not neglecting the finer detail in quieter parts.

PIZZA THE ACTION

Considering Pro-Ject is a prime mover in the vinyl business, you'd expect this amp's phono input to make a reasonable fist of things. And it did, although I still found discs played on its X2 B deck with an Ortofon Quintet Red MC cartridge sounded more dynamic and possessed a quieter background when using a separate Phono Box S3 [HFN Sep '23]. The Maia DS3 was more convincing with MM pick-ups.

Asking a traditionalist audiophile to stream via Bluetooth is not dissimilar to ordering a pineapple topping for your pizza while on holiday in Italy. As mentioned, Pro-Ject has included a very decent implementation of Bluetooth, with support for the aptX and aptX HD codecs, but critical listeners will doubtless appreciate the



LEFT: For the Maia DS3, Pro-Ject's universal system remote control accesses on/off, input selection and motorised volume

MaiA DS3's numerous other *physical* inputs to connect music sources. Nevertheless, sound quality via Bluetooth from a Samsung Galaxy S23 Ultra was surprisingly good, although this remains a lossy process at least until aptX Lossless arrives later in 2023. And that new codec will also require new gear...

Listening to *Streets Of Minarets* from Dhafer Youssef [Back Beat Edition E8720766721613; 96kHz/24-bit] felt far less of a compromise than expected – showing that one Bluetooth implementation can differ greatly from another. There was very little of the muddled, compressed character I've come to expect from BT streaming on various wireless speaker platforms. The Maia DS3 performed well, the astounding high-pitched voice of Youssef presented with clarity, and resounding without a trace of harshness on 'Flying Dervish Intro'.

It's all rather excellent, only slightly lacking in spaciousness compared to 'hard-wired' streaming via the USB-B port. This is fitting for an amp that wants to appeal to a younger, smartphone-centric music lover, while also opening the door to more audiophile excitement. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

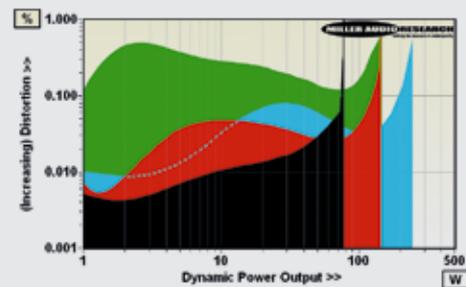
Traditional audiophiles might be tempted to discount Pro-Ject electronics, if only because the brand prioritises a compact build. But beefier Class D amplification and smart engineering has elevated the versatile Maia DS concept into a third-generation 'box' that's plays with authority and just enough finesse. Treating even Bluetooth streaming with respect, this is Pro-Ject's vision of 'hi-fi for the masses'.

Sound Quality: 84%

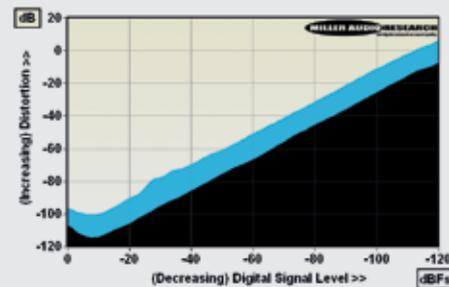


This latest MaiA amp is also the beefiest of the series, meeting its rated spec. at 2x79W/8ohm and 2x145W/4ohm and holding enough in reserve to support 250W and 146W into 2 and 1ohm, respectively, under dynamic conditions [see Graph 1]. With these 'traditional' Class D implementations, both the 'continuous' and dynamic outputs are typically identical while the treble response is sensitive to the attached speaker load. For example, into 8ohm the response lifts to +0.6dB/20kHz and +2.4dB/43kHz, while into 4ohm it falls to -0.7dB/20kHz and into 2ohm to -3.3dB/20kHz. So, if the Maia DS3 is paired with a speaker that has a rising HF impedance, it will sound brighter. Distortion, too, increases with frequency from 0.012%/1kHz to 0.65%/20kHz (re. 10W/8ohm), but the amp still has a good 86.7dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW).

Pro-Ject's implementation of the PCM1795 DAC is first-class, offering a 1.32V (fixed line) output from a 0dBFS digital input and with a wide 105dB A-wtd S/N ratio. Distortion climbs with frequency above the midband, from 0.00025-0.002% (1kHz-20kHz/0dBFS) and also increases linearly with decreasing digital level [see Graph 2]. Low-level resolution is good to within ±0.2dB over a 100dB range and jitter is fabulously low at ~12psec with 48kHz/24-bit data. A fairly standard, medium-tap linear FIR filter is employed with the PCM1795 DAC, combining a modest 65dB stopband rejection with a very flat response that reaches down below 5Hz up to 20kHz/+0.12dB (48kHz files), rolling off thereafter to 45kHz/-2.6dB (96kHz files) and 90kHz/-13.7dB (192kHz media). In practice, of course, it is the load-dependent response of the Class D amp modules that will define the 'tone' of this latest MaiA amplifier. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 12.1A



ABOVE: Distortion vs. 24-bit digital signal level over a 120dB range, fixed line out (1kHz, black; 20kHz, blue)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	79W / 145W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	79W / 145W / 250W / 146W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz)	0.082-1.2ohm / 9.7ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	0.1dB to +0.6dB/-6.6dB
Digital jitter (48kHz / 96kHz)	12psec / 35psec
A-wtd S/N ratio (DAC/Amp)	105.1dB (0dBFS) / 86.7dB (0dBW)
Distortion (DAC, 0dBFS/Amp, 10W)	0.00025-0.002% / 0.012-0.65%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	11W / 179W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	206x71x252mm / 1.9kg