

IN SIGHT

- 1 USB-A port (for external DAC)
- 2 USB-A port (for drive or stick)
- 3 Ethernet port
- 4 HDMI digital output
- 5 Micro USB bypass port (for PC)



Pro-Ject Stream Box S2 Ultra £600

Offering the lowest price tag and the smallest dimensions, this is so much more than it first appears

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject Stream Box S2 Ultra

ORIGIN
Austria

TYPE
USB/Ethernet Bridge

WEIGHT
375g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
105 x 37 x 105mm

FEATURES

• Inputs: USB-A; Ethernet

• Output: USB-A; HDMI

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
henleyaudio.co.uk

Everything the hugely flexible Novafidelity X50D is, the Stream Box S2 Ultra isn't: in fact, you may be wondering what this tiny box is doing in this group. Look a little deeper, and you may find yourself asking how Pro-Ject justifies the modest price of this unit, given that inside is basically a Raspberry Pi mini-computer board – the quad-core CM3 version – running open-source Volumio streaming software, all wrapped in the same case Pro-Ject uses for so many of its Box Design components

The answer is that Pro-Ject has opted for the logical strategy of not trying to reinvent the wheel, instead spending its budget on optimising and improving the basic platform. In this case, that means employing the services of renowned digital designer John Westlake.

Westlake explains that, having set the parameters for the streaming design here – bit-perfect, DSD

capability and the ability to use the connected DAC as the master clock – he went back and worked with Volumio to create a custom version of the software to work on the chosen platform. Then he addressed any weaknesses (in audio terms) of the Raspberry Pi, notably clocking, power supply regulation and 'detoxing' the USB connections to remove noise and jitter. In other words, this is a very long way from a bog-standard RPi running free software.

What we have here, then, is a little box able to take digital datastreams over an Ethernet connection or play music stored on USB devices, and then output to a suitable DAC via USB. It is controlled using a web browser on any device on the same network; via Pro-Ject's Play app for Android; using a Bluetooth keyboard and mouse, with a screen connected to the S2 Ultra's HDMI port; or Roon.

It will play services such as Spotify and Tidal – the latter with MQA

pass-through to a suitable DAC – as well as handling PCM files up to 24-bit/384kHz and DSD256, subject to the DAC you use it with. Additionally, as a neat trick the USB input can be used when the S2 Ultra is between a computer and DAC, allowing that path to be 'detoxed', too.

Performance

This may be a simple-looking little box, powered by a plug-top 18V transformer and with just two controls (a power button and another to switch between USB connection and that PC bypass function), but under that minimalist chassis it's highly sophisticated and heavily optimised for audio quality. And that's readily apparent with it in use, whether streaming music from network sources or playing from USB storage. Dispel any thoughts that a product has to be big to deliver a full-scale sound: the Pro-Ject pairs with a good DAC to sound powerful, gutsy and beautifully refined, with everything from large-scale orchestral works to the most intimate of singer-songwriter tracks. It's sharply focused, generously weighted and capable of an open, fast sound that drips with detail while at the same time majoring on musical flow. You may have to rearrange your thinking a bit to accept so much sound can come from something so small, but that done you won't be disappointed ●

**Hi-Fi Choice****OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Simplicity; integrity of audio engineering; price

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No storage as standard; some will find it hard to fathom

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A slick little unit, it might look tiny but it's capable of delivering great sound

FEATURES
★★★★☆

OVERALL