

hi-fi news

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& Record Review

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Exclusive – MBL's Corona C31 CD player



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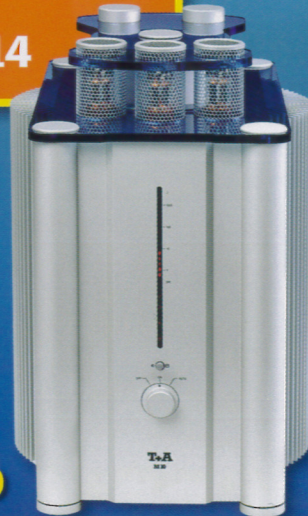
HFN goes behind the scenes of the movie, p14

T+A M10 monoblocks

Warm to these tube hybrid power amps

Chord QuteHD

USB DAC that does DSD



Integrated amps

Group Test of the £300-£2k favourites

Dali Epicon 8

Stunning Danish floorstander

Vintage Test

Marantz TT1000

'Cut out the rock 'n' roll!'

The Cavern Club, p74



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hi-finews GROUP TEST

Considering investing in a new integrated amp? Is it features, size or price that matter most to you? This month we've picked six solid-state examples to suit a wide range of budgets

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS £299-£2020

TESTED THIS MONTH

SANSUI SAP-201	£299
CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 651A	£450
REGA BRIO-R	£498
MARANTZ PM-KI PEARL LITE	£919
CYRUS 8a	£1200
HEED OBELISK SI + X2	£1290/£730



Cutting-edge gear, cherry-picked by the *Hi-Fi News* editor



The pinnacle of sound quality within its peer group



Great sound, great value and a cut above its rivals

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Whether you're a hi-fi 'newby' just starting out on your journey to audio nirvana, or a seasoned audiophile considering your next upgrade, a decent amplifier is paramount to making sure *all* your system sings, for it lies at its very heart.

Thankfully, the integrated amp market is as diverse as ever, and buyers can carefully choose a model tailored to their needs. As well as hankering after greater levels of sound quality, maybe your choice is governed by form as well as function, and size matters?

Perhaps you now need an amp that can handle computer audio, or the option to connect a turntable is still a key requirement? Whatever your checklist, a good old solid-state Class A/B design certainly makes a fine choice if you want sensible levels of power combined with years of fuss-free ownership.

Despite being the cheapest of the group, Sansui's SAP-201 is packed with features, including an internal DAC, phono stage, digital screen and headphone socket, although it's the only amp on test with no remote

control. For £150 extra, Cambridge Audio's 651A does offer a remote, along with an extra pair of speaker outputs for bi-wiring and a pre-out option, allowing you to add a power amp. A little extra more buys you the minimalist Rega Brio-R, which is bound to add style to any listening room. This may be from 'the last major hi-fi manufacturer to produce a CD player' (says Rega's website!), but a phono stage is still included.

If subtle tonal tweaking is important, then Ken Ishiwata's improved Marantz will be right up your street, with its raft of controls. And thanks to its pre/power amplifier outputs it's also very versatile. The small-boxed Cyrus takes the user experience to the next level, thanks to its sophisticated interface. It also offers plenty of factory-upgrade options, although it doesn't include a phono stage.

Finally, for users who don't want the hassle of endless button pressing and knob twiddling there's the Heed combo, with its stylish looks, simple controls and selection of upgrades.

The amps on test were auditioning by way of differently ordered back-to-back comparisons,

using a CD player as source and Avalon NP2 speakers.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Music examples chosen to reveal each amp's sonic heart were Dire Straits' 'Telegraph Road' and 'Private Investigations' from a re-master of their 1982 album *Love Over Gold* [Vertigo 800 088-2]. These expertly recorded tracks are packed full of atmospheric instrumental passages, with a strong bass and straightforward vocals that allowed me to get the best out of each amp.

I also used Jeff Buckley's 'Lover, You Should've Come Over' from a 2004 legacy edition reissue of his 1994 *Grace* album [Columbia 517460 3], to hear how each model coped with Jeff's vocal gymnastics and the slow-building shift from softly sung ballad to frenzied rock. Finally, a few select tracks from Sandy Denny's album *Gold Dust* [Island 252 524493-2], recorded back in Nov 1977, allowed me to test how well each amp could take me to a live performance.

REVIEWS BY ANDREW SIMPSON
LAB TESTS BY PAUL MILLER

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Cyrus 8a (£1200)

Today's sleek looking generation of Cyrus kit has a loyal fan base, which has allowed the Huntingdon company to develop a range of separates with dedicated equipment racks, for those wanting complete Cyrus systems.

Despite looking almost identical, Cyrus products fall into three distinct ranges: the entry level 6 series, middle level 8 series and highest performance X series, with CD players, standalone DACs, music streamers and amps spread across the hierarchy. The 8a promises more power than its £700 6a integrated sibling and offers the option to connect Cyrus's PSX-R external power supply. You also have the option to fit a DAC board.

The amp's rock solid inverted chassis case forms its top, front and sides (with moulded heatsinks) from a single piece of die-cast alloy. All the electronics, including the two separate transformers which feed the digital and analogue sections, are bolted to the top panel's underside and hang upside down inside. The Cyrus's interface is by far the most advanced of the amps on test, with options to change the look of the display, name inputs and adjust their pre-set volume.

CLEAN PAIR OF HEELS

The 8a sounded exceptionally clean; at low volume I noted similarities to other amps in the group, especially the Rega, in terms of scale. But increasing the levels revealed just how clean this amplifier is.

Everything was kept in check and remained measured and even across

RIGHT: 'Set-up' accesses interface menu with options selectable via the volume control. 'Phones' mutes the speakers and 'Zone 2' assigns a source as a fixed output



the frequency band. Through the 8a, drums, especially on the Denny album, were the tightest and most forceful sounding of the amps on test, and gave the music real pace. The piano on 'Telegraph Road' sounded equally pure through the Cyrus, which seemed to add nothing and allowed the quality of the original recording to shine through.

The Cyrus also did an impressive job of creating a sizeable wall of sound, although the instruments within it might have lacked the body developed by the Cambridge and Marantz amps.

Equally, its polished presentation had a tendency to sound dry with some of my chosen source music. The Sandy Denny – perhaps the weakest sounding of my test albums – appeared more sterile compared to the richer aspect of the Marantz and Cambridge amps. Perhaps the Cyrus is less forgiving of poor source material, but it's still a belter!

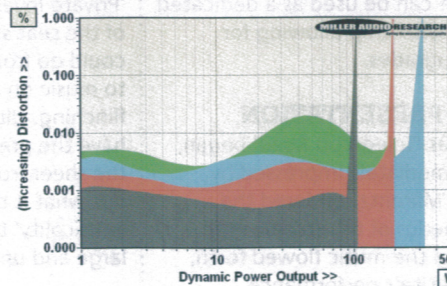
Sound Quality: 82%



ABOVE: Busy rear panel includes six line inputs, two pre-outs, headphone socket and PSU upgrade input. The amp comes with plugs for its BFA type speaker outputs

HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Don't be fooled by the 8a's compact form factor because, like the diminutive Rega Brio-R, it's a very beefy performer. Rated at 70W, it delivers closer to 90W with 105W, 200W and 325W under dynamic conditions into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads, suggesting great tolerance of difficult speaker loads. Nevertheless, its limited heatsinking can get very hot indeed – during my 30min burn-in test (no more than 10W/8ohm) the rear of the Cyrus 8a max'd out at 60°C, although distortion increased only slightly from 0.0004% (cool) to 0.0008% (hot). Neither does the 'Standby' mode adhere to the 1W standard – it's closer to 8W here but just 12W when 'switched on'. Otherwise all is very well: its 87dB A-wtd S/N (re. 0dBW) is well judged, distortion is very low (0.00015-0.01%, 20Hz-20kHz), the output impedance low and constant at ~0.045ohm (20Hz-20kHz) and the response positively subterranean with a near-DC bass extension! **PM**



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	86W 140W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	106W 198W 325W 200W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.042-0.048ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.0 to -3.2dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/70W)	27mV 230mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/70W)	87.5dB 106.0dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.00015-0.010%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	12W/230W (8W 'standby')
Dimensions (WHD)	215x73x360mm

GROUP TEST VERDICT

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Having owned an original Ion Obelisk back when I was in short trousers, I was genuinely excited to be reviewing this re-imagined model. But while some of the original Obelisk's traits have been retained, the Heed is outclassed today and needs to offer more in the sonic stakes to compete at its price point.

An amp loaded with audiophile goodies including a DAC, phono stage and headphone amp as part of a £300 package seems an absolute bargain, and the Sansui is certainly an attractive proposition for those on a limited budget. It makes a decent introduction to hi-fi, and if matched with sources and speakers at similar price levels its shortcomings might be easier to ignore. But the obvious truth is that the Cambridge Audio 651A costs relatively little more and is a better amplifier. If you can beg/borrow/steal the extra £150, buy it. You'll be rewarded with a substantially better built, superior sounding product.

BELIES ITS SIZE

The solid little Rega seems to have been voiced to give more oomph to relatively bass-shy speakers, like Rega's own budget models. The soundstage it lays out also belies its demure proportions and it seemed to have plenty of power on tap. Compared to the competition in this test, however, it ultimately lacked the sophistication of our

medal winners – especially in the upper bass which had a tendency to overwhelm some of the music.

Don't take the Cyrus's 'bronze medal' position as an indication that the 8a is a poor performer: it's actually very good. Its high-tech (yet easy to use) interface and raft of options are commendable. And if the clean, crisp Cyrus sound is for you, this amp could grow into the centrepiece of a larger Cyrus system thanks to the company's accommodating upgrade path. It won't suffer fools gladly, so make sure your partnering kit is up to the job and you'll be rewarded with a detailed, fast and controlled sound.

EFFORTLESS PERFORMER

Which leaves the two final contenders. It could be argued that the Cambridge Audio *looks* like a £450 amplifier, and while in terms of features it's got most

bases covered (except that it lacks a phono stage), well, so have lots of other amps for similar money. What sets the Cambridge apart, however, is its *sound* quality, which makes it exceptional value for money. Spending more might seem hard to justify once you'd heard it.

So why doesn't it quite get the top spot? Because despite costing twice the price of the Cambridge, the Marantz represents *greater* value for money given how good it sounds. The effortless three-dimensionality it brings to the music

is at another level compared to the other amps on test this month.

To illustrate the point, with the Sandy Denny live album the Marantz really pulled me into the music, placing me in the venue to experience her unique talent. Hearing this last concert through the PM-KI Pearl Lite made me wish even more that I had been one of the lucky few that saw her. ⏻

'What sets the Cambridge Audio 651A apart is its sound'



ABOVE: £450 is a small outlay for an amp of the Cambridge Audio's class while the diminutive Cyrus 8a punches well above its weight. With a recent price reduction, the exquisite sounding Marantz PM-KI Pearl Lite (above) can be yours for under £1k

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