

# Hi-Fi

APRIL 1990 £1.70



**review**

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# Semi-Precious Jewel

Ian Rankin takes a look at the latest incarnation  
of a product we have always liked,  
the OA21 — now OA21S — integrated amplifier from Onix

Small manufacturers come and go. So, for that matter, do large ones, becoming history. This is perhaps truer of the hi-fi industry than of many other industries. Fashions change: last year's "name" can become this year's forgotten man. Reputations fall by the wayside. The constant seeking after "the perfect reproduction of sound" can mean some companies, unable to compete in the R&D arena, call it a day.

A glance through one of the older issues of Hi-Fi Review is like stepping back several generations. Companies still in existence were advertising models or designs now superannuated. Some manufacturers no longer exist, or have changed name, status, or hands.

In one of our older issues, that dating from May/June 1987, we looked at integrated amplifiers in our main test. One of the amplifiers was the Onix OA21, then retailing at £279 and singled out as a "powerful" amp with a "good all-round performance". Time may have passed, but the OA21 is still with us, and still looks much as it did back in '87. Onix was never a company to equivocate over matters of styling and purpose when it came to their modest range of products, and the fact that they have maintained a small stable of successful designs may go a long way towards explaining the company's continuing good health.

## External Criteria

Onix's uncompromising stance regarding the look of their products means that today's OA21S (the "S" doesn't stand for any particular attribute, but is merely indicative of changes made to the original OA21) is less informative than the OA21 of yesteryear — not less musically informative, you understand, just less... well, informative. By which I mean that the "various" (a total of two) knobs and switches (switch singular in reality) are no longer identified on the top edge of the amplifier's front panel. This lack of markings gives the OA21 an extraordinarily minimalist look.

The left hand rotary knob is the function select, allowing for (from left to right) CD, Disc, Tuner, Tape, and (new to the OA21S) VCR. Regarding the phono stage, potential OA21S owners can choose between moving coil or moving magnet models, these being identified on the rear panel by either a red dot (mc) or yellow dot (mm). For the current review, we had the moving magnet model — but did use Empire transformers for a quick listen to the OA21S with some moving coil cartridges.

The right hand knob controls volume. The OA21S is rated at a hefty 45 Watts per channel RMS, though in the past I have found

such figures to be less than revealing. Each of the large knobs comes with a silver pinpoint mark, from which one can just about tell what source one is using and how loud it's being played at! In use, the lack of markings for source proved initially irritating but eventually ceased to be a problem. It is either a matter of memorising the order (which is more or less alphabetical — C, D, Tu, Ta, V) or trusting to luck. Onix say that the lack of printing on the case is "for cosmetic reasons", and I can see that this would appeal to some potential buyers at the same time as it would deter others. Such is life.

The two knobs have good weight, instilling confidence in the user, and the volume pot is nicely scaled so that things don't suddenly get raucous and full play (more or less) of the volume knob is a possibility. Between the knobs sits a small rotary switch for power on/off. The ONIX legend sits beneath this, as does a small red LED to indicate when the amplifier is in operational mode. Fascia, knobs and switch have a heavy brushed finish, and the amplifier as a whole has a rugged and confident feel to it. Large allen bolts are used to secure the casing, and an ingenious design means no screws or screwholes are to be seen on either the sides or the front of the amplifier case. The case itself rang like a bell when tapped on its top plate, but switched on, the amp was quiet, eliciting little by way of a switch-on/switch-off thump from the speakers, and little by way of speaker hiss until the volume was cranked up to the hilt.

The Onix OA21S retails at £299, only twenty notes more than its predecessor, as reviewed back in 1987. In terms of measurements, the Onix belongs to that category of amplifiers whose depth is greater than their width. The Onix measures 240mm (w) x 360mm (d) x 80mm (h). To the rear, the amplifier has few surprises. There's an IEC socket (connecting lead supplied), and four millimetre speaker sockets accepting banana plugs only. Gold plated RCA phono-type sockets are used for all functions: VCR, Tape In, Tape Out, CD, Tuner, and Disc. There's also an earth terminal, and a curious looking socket which will connect the amplifier to either a SOAP (Onix Power Supply) or an Onix tuner.

The OA21S boasts a redesign from the original OA21. The board has been completely redesigned, and there is now a trip board rather than having fuses on the output stages. So would the OA21S impress as much as the original OA21 had done? There was only one way to find out.

## Listening Notes

Integrated amplifiers often have a problem with supplying enough "juice" to purportedly "difficult-to-drive" loudspeakers. The OA21S had guts enough to suffice. During the course of the ensuing test I wired the amp up to speakers ranging from Linn Kans, Epos ES14s, and Ruark Talismans to "budget" models such as the Monitor Audio Monitor 9, the Celestion 3 and the AR Red Box — all with rewarding results.

No problem then with the loudspeakers, but what about the sources? For this test, I had to hand a varied range of turntables, including Pink Triangle PT TOO (fitted with Linn Ittok II arm), Linn LP12 (with Ittok LVIII arm), Manticore Mantra (with Manticore's own Musician arm), and Rega Planar 3 (with Rega RB300 arm). A range of cartridges was also available, including Linn K5 and Nagaoka TS11 moving magnet models and Audio Technica AT-F5 and AT-OC7 (the latter Stilton Bodied) moving coils. Lucky me, you may think, but then you weren't there to see the various decks sprawled across my listening room.

For tests with compact disc format, I used two players, the bargain basement Denon DCD-620 (£200), and the more esoteric Arcam Delta 70.2 (£550). Tuner was NAD's excellent 4225, while the cassette deck used was a Denon DRM-400. The Onix OA21S took a while really to warm up. The sound from cold was not quite "cool" and "distant" but certainly as time passed, the sound grew fuller and the amplifier began to provide a more intimate portrayal of the music. But what about the competition? Well, at £299 there are plenty of contenders. The Ion Obelisk 2 retails at around £270, and the spanking brand new NVA AP35 at £350 (replacing the superb AP30 at £300). The OA21S sits neatly between these models, yet finds itself in something of a no-man's-land at £300. So, for those listeners looking for a powerful amplifier, and prepared to pay up to £300 for a no-frills design where function is placed before functions, the OA21S is a bona fide contender.

In the end, I decided to pit it against the Obelisk 2 and the more expensive Exposure Ten (£400). Both these models are functional, no-frills designs with the emphasis on quality of sound rather than quantity of buttons and knobs. But as this review is primarily concerned with the OA21S, some comments should perhaps be directed towards it before any A/B tests take place.

Having let the amp warm up over a period of forty-eight hours, I sat down with pen and pad

in hand and a fistful of new releases besides. First onto the turntable was the Everything But the Girl album *The Language of Life* and the track *Imagining America*. The Onix amp gave a good sense of atmosphere to this track, and vocals especially benefitted from the OA21's confident and forward presentation. The soundstage was expansive, and did not lack depth. Everything was in its place, but there was a nice sense of everything being out-of-the-box, especially on the more expensive speakers (Kans, Talismans, Epos).

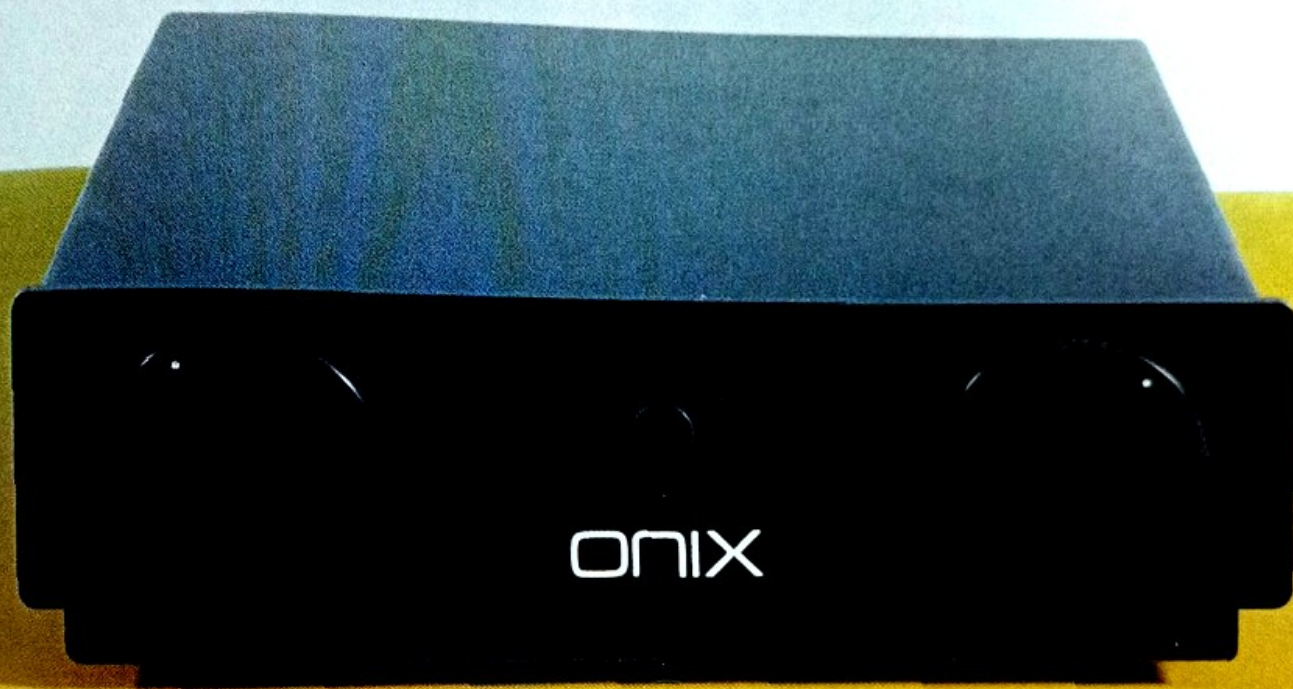
The Onix gave a velvet punch from its metal glove. Certainly it suited the cocktail bar sound

sort of thing which could only come to light given the amount of other equipment available at the time of testing.

Moving to compact disc, courtesy of the latest Christians album *Colour*, the Onix proved itself free of "nasties" and capable of dealing with the medium's "spitty", brash and over-bright qualities. I found that it resembled the Obelisk 2 in its ability to "civilise" compact disc. Not that *The Christians* CD is among the more gruesome examples of the genre. In fact, it is a nicely rounded recording. One of the highlights for me is *Greenbank Drive*: the OA21S did not disappoint. The song held my attention

formed with more insight and confidence, though I still felt it lagged behind its more expensive rival. When the volume was well and truly wicked up, male voices became almost unbearably shrill on the Onix — less so on the Exposure Ten. And on this occasion, the Obelisk fell somewhere between the two.

The Onix proved fine with the NAD tuner, though such a pairing may seem a mite unfair, since Onix manufacture their own tuner, intended for use with the OA21S or the cheaper OA20. The sound from live broadcasts was warm, coherent, and vivid, while that from recorded music was just as coherent.



of EB TG. The temptation was to put on another smooth, well-balanced album, so I went straight to *The Mission*. *Carved in Sand*, the band's latest and greatest outing, has a few full-throttle moments on it, and the opening number *Amelia*, is as crisp and pungent as burnt bacon. The Onix took things in its stride. Again, vocals were superb: Hussey's voice was throaty, urgent, pleading. Bass was deep and full, while the opening guitar was kept vivid but full of omens. The Onix, in short, let very little get between the recording and the listener. The typical *Mission* sound was allowed room to breathe.

There were, however, certain holes in the overall performance — pinprick-sized holes, to be sure, but holes nevertheless. Bass could at times be slightly too warm for my own taste, while individual notes (eg. on the ballad *Butterfly on a Wheel*) were not as clearly delineated as on the more expensive Exposure Ten. And while the Onix had plenty of power at its command, this was not always tempered by cohesion and articulacy. As said, though, these were criticisms the size of pin-heads, and the

throughout. It was involving and above all natural. Again, the Exposure Ten had rather a large edge, retaining more of a sense of coherence and involvement and being a touch more dynamic to boot — but then it does cost a cool £100 more than the Onix amplifier.

Classics on compact disc, including Vivaldi's *Cello Sonatas* and Pachelbel's *Canon* (et al) were finely etched. The Onix gave real expansiveness to orchestral works, yet retained the more intimate elements of chamber music when these were required. In fact, it seemed to suit classical music down to the ground.

It fared less well with cassettes, however, although again the flaws were only obvious through protracted listening and careful A/B comparisons. A preview cassette of the new Lloyd Cole album seemed muted, the instruments not entirely escaping a box-bound environment. The Exposure Ten was clearly the more superior amplifier here, though the Onix was a hairs-breadth ahead of the Obelisk 2. On a prerecorded tape of Michael Nyman's music for Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, the Onix per-

though giving not quite so solid a picture.

#### Coda

All in all, this was a very fine integrated amplifier indeed. Uncompromising in appearance, the Onix OA21S had for the most part a fairly neutral and lively sound. It partnered the LP-12 more comfortably than it did the PT TOQ, and brought the best out of a medium-priced moving magnet cartridge, though by no means shamed either by cheaper moving magnets or by expensive moving coils. Naturally, for moving coil systems, the OA21S with mc input should be considered *de rigueur*.

The OA21S had no trouble with any of the pairs of speakers I asked it to drive. I liked its looks, thought it well-made and well-designed, and moreover, thought it sensibly priced for its given performance. Some will find it enigmatic in conception; others may find that it lacks the functions they require. For the confirmed audiophile, interested only in sound quality and nothing *but* sound quality, the OA21S may be just the concert ticket!