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DNA-50: first impressions

First impressions can make lasting impressions and not always good ones – even before plugging in. However, lifting this surprising heavy unit from its packaging is very encouraging. Beautifully constructed casework which is rigid, no doubt tough (we didn't attempt to scratch the surface) that inspires confidence and design minimalism taken to, well, pretty much the absolute minimum. A great start.

This has to be the thinnest integrated amp we have ever encountered being just 45mm tall. How have they achieved this feat? Well, by using a very slim toroidal transformer rather than a switching power supply. Heat dissipation is via the casework because the output transistors are connected directly to the case. Even driven hard through our Vandersteen 2C Signature speakers the casework was barely warm.

No spades here!

Speaker terminations are the rather uncommon BFA type. This means you can't use bare wire or spades. Fortunately, our EWA speaker cable comes with 'Z' plugs which provide a firm fit. Nevertheless we were puzzled and so we asked them; 'No doubt there was at least one technologically valid reason for doing this; possibly more than one. Care to enlighten us?' Here is what they said.

Our ability to upgrade, improve and update all of our products is a design criteria for an extended product lifecycle. These terminations are good for the UK and other key markets. The design of the DNA-50 and DNA-45 can at anytime have different terminations with relative ease and may be included with future upgrades. If anyone requires different terminations, we are happy to accommodate and upgrade at any time.

Not quite the answer we were expecting but in any event, this shouldn't prove to be an issue. We have no idea if there is any noticeable and consistent sound quality reduction or improvement between BFA and 4mm posts.

Avoiding a misapprehension

The fact that the unit is named DNA-50 should not lead you to believe that this is a 'mere' 50 watts per channel. Despite the diminutive size, advanced engineering design means this is a proper 100 watts per channel; and it sounds like it. At no

point did we come even close to generating clipping. The performance was unrestrained with that characteristic effortless feeling of unlimited dynamics which is so, so seductive.

So anyway

How did it perform? What were the faults if any? Did it 'engage' and if so, to what extent? Would we pay the asking price, and if so, why?

All of these, and more, will be answered here. But first, let's start with the power supply. Clearly, clever engineering work here, which means that they must know a thing or two about coping with the varying UK mains quality – right? Well, rather than work on assumptions we decided to ask them.

When developing your designs, in the lab and final voicing outside the lab, do you rely on standard mains purity or do you use mains regeneration (your design or third party) and/or mains filtering of any description?

They told us:

'We typically use raw mains as would be used in a household, and develop the product over five different locations for final listening tests in two/three countries. We have had users notice our Toroidal transformer mechanically humming in certain locations. In this situation, as it is primarily caused by DC on the mains, from switch mode chargers of power supplies used in the home these days, we recommend a mains filter of the customer's choice typically resolves the issue. Of course the sound may be impacted but the compromise is a choice the customer can make.'

An interesting approach we feel, especially field-testing in varying locations.

We aren't sure if it is a general characteristic of British amp designers to engineer casework to not only be cost-effective and aesthetically pleasing but to avoid it diluting the sound quality too. The casework here is magnificent in fit and finish, detailing, rigidity and imparting a sense of confidence. That said, was this capital expense (probably considerable) influenced by sonics/ rather than speculate, we asked.

To what extent, if any, do your designs take into account the negative consequence of (a) airborne microphony and (b) footfall vibration?

Resulting effects of this nature, we prefer local isolation. Whenever we have created a design, we have always minimise these effects on the sound at the design stage in preference to a reactive solution of later isolation. The level of isolation is once again a customer choice.

Hmm. Okay, we'll take that as two yeses then. At this point we realised that the phraseology used in the responses was not quite as unambiguous as we initially and possibly unrealistically had hoped. Nevertheless, the overall experience of listening via this unit got better and better. So now is the time to focus on that aspect of the review.

Digital only

For various reasons too boring to go into (poor admin on our part), we didn't use vinyl. Instead, the now discontinued high value and rare Swedish XTZ Mk2 CD player using its competent on-board DAC was our source. Interconnects were from the newly emergent brand Nuffink Special. I'm kidding of course.

We used mid-priced LFD Audio interconnects, Elsdon Wonfor speakers cables and an Elsdon Wonfor power cord. Why? Because we are familiar with what those ancillaries do and don't contribute to the holistic sound which means that their effects can be taken into account.

Speakers included a pair of vintage battered JPW Minim bookshelf speakers (we love these old-timers) and then the Vandersteens. The ONIX was a killer with both! With a speaker rated at more than 100dB sensitivity, the DA-50 is likely to rock like a 500W amp.

Now then, talking of rock – you may recall that the acronym PRaT (Pace, Rhythm and Timing) was banded about like it was some binary litmus test of sonic superiority inasmuch as 'most' amps simply didn't have it and consequently, only the tiny remainder did, these being members of an elite cabal.

The self-anointed in fact.

You know the names.

The point being that according to those in the know (or at least claiming to be in-the-know) stated and no-doubt believed that (a) no amp can 'rock' without PRaT and (b) those that don't believe this are only kidding themselves. So, we needed to check with ONIX main-man Adam Worsfold, he having been in this industry over 30 years. He was in operation during that mad time when seemingly, common sense flew out of the window. So who better to ask about PRaT; reality or falsehood?

So Adam, PRaT used to be a buzz word and for many, a misunderstood term. NAIM evangelists swear by it and non-believers are, at best, skeptical. Have you ever experienced it and could you define it in simple terms? And finally on this topic, if you are a 'believer', to what extent does that influence your design ethos?

I believe that defining music with specific definitions of instruments or vocals within it, defeats the object of musicality. I'm sure you are aware various musical tastes quite often have inadequate recordings and even more so less than perfect artists in their presentation.

However, the control of PRaT is by definition defined by quality of the products replaying the music. Once again, good design by any knowledgeable designer, along with tight tolerances, quality components and assembly – ultimately takes care of PRaT or what is might represent to the audio fraternity.

Well, that's a skillful answer if ever we read one.

Halfway through our time with the DNA-50 Integrated

We already thought of it as one of the best affordable-perfectionist amplifiers we've heard: direct, punchy, and musical. If we may be forgiven for saying so, the sort of performance anyone would expect from a good circuit that isn't built with the finest or rarest of parts, but that isn't freighted with a lot of unnecessary bullshit, either. It was as honest as they come.

The DNA-50 is, in many ways, the most impressive affordable amp we've heard in years.

Not the best, per se, but the one that did the most to win us over, with its excellent build quality, its musically incisive and involving performance, and its attractive level of value.

It seems entirely possible that one could pay thousands of pounds to an industrial-design firm and still fail to achieve the clean and altogether classy appearance of understated quality that the makers have hit on here. The amp's casework is pleasant to behold, touch, and use, while avoiding altogether the ridiculousness of so many thickly faceplated and overpriced competitors.

That Jacques Loussier album

I still remember when, a few months ago, we borrowed a current sample of the another British amplifier designer, that unit retailing at £5k. Play Bach No.1 was the first recording we played through it, and we were knocked out by a level of subtle impact that we'd never heard before from the recording. The DNA-50 duplicated that experience. It didn't quite have the expensive rival's timbral color or 'psychedelic' flow (at over twice the price!), but it allowed the music the same level of excitement and impact, which is at least half the game, in our book.

Maybe yours, too.

Product range

Here in the cosy(ish) editorial office it's all too easy to jump to conclusions, make assumptions and to get those assumptions wrong. We mention this inasmuch as on the face of it, ONIX are currently a 'one trick pony'. Incorrect though; they are working to a plan. This quote from their site explains:

“Perfection of performance and manufacture take time. Development of any quality product cannot be done quickly. If it is, cost-cutting or integrity of what you buy must have taken place. Our range will grow, but only when it's worthy of the ONIX name and when we've done our job properly (ONIX is not a badge, it's a value)”

Remote control

You get a well-engineered remote unit, elegant and simple that controls both volume and input selection. Rather unusual in the price band. In operation, not without a few initial idiosyncrasies but we got used to it very quickly and welcomed its inclusion. Nevertheless, RC is in some areas a contentious issue. No point speculating and, so, back to Mr. Worsfold.

Remote control volume devices do get some designers rather agitated, believing that they impede / constrict the sound characteristics and therefore point-blank refuse to implement them. What is the ONIX philosophy about this?

Technology is determined by availability of components that a small company can use, as finances don't allow bespoke design of a majority of used components. Therefore, compromise is often forced upon small manufacturers by available supply of components. We have used, and continue to use a mechanically driven analogue device to control volume and mechanical input switching methods. We are however open to progress in technology, and in particular demands of convenience. Currently, we prefer traditional methods of achieving remote control use of sound paths or control of the product. We do use a bespoke upgradable CPU to carry out the switching but sound is a pure signal along the whole path.

Okay, got that? Good.

Design ethos

Adam, we note your emphatic statement 'This is the new digital world, but we still have analogue ears and we never forgot it.' Would you care to expand on this and, what motivated you to say this?

We are aware we are in a digital era, and the resulting degrade in music quality is now widely accepted as the normal by far too many. MP3 and other compressed formats have degraded sound. We do not accept that compression of any musical source is to the benefit of the listener, but serves only to make life easier generally. We do accept that demands and convenience dictate it so. If we had a say we would not choose those methods for listening to music. We do however acknowledge demands of the buying public and the resulting sad

demise of people's ability by lack exposure to knowledge or demonstration, not to enjoy a better sound created by quality design and products .

Availability

These are hand-build, meticulously crafted masterpieces which means that they are rare. So Adam why don't more dealers sell your stuff ?

Ford motor company have 30,000 dealers worldwide and make 6.5 million cars a year. Rolls Royce motor company have 130 dealers worldwide and make 3,000 cars a year. Perfection of manufacture takes time. We just can't make enough and we choose who sells it - that's how we like it. Quality and service over quantity. Just remember, not all retailers have your interest at heart.

Quite so. So what about warranty?

Warranty

We have never charged for a repair or service for over 30 years (excluding carriage). If it doesn't work, we'll fix it. The only fee is a simple thank you when we resolve the issue, which credits any charge.

As far as we know, this is unprecedented. Why don't other makers behave like this we wondered.

In conclusion

You can forget the audiophile bullshit. The Integrated DNA-50 just sounds right. It breathes light and life into all kinds of music. Harmonics are spot on. Each voice, each instrument has its distinctive tonal color.

"Call it coloration or non-coloration," we said to each other "but the amp sounds this way with all types of speakers."

That's pretty much all we're going to say about the sound. It hit the harmonics just right. When an amplifier does that, everything else falls into place: delicacy, definition, detail, rhythm, and pace. The soundstage and imaging were first-rate but there we go, talking like audiophiles.

- A one-word summary? Certainly. Superb.
- Value? In its price band, despite serious and copious competition, excellent
- Cons? Nothing at all

If we were designers and/or builders, this is how we would undertake this task.
If we were buying in this price range, this is the one we'd choose. Strongly recommended

Useful additional information

ONIX News @ <http://www.onixdna.com/news>

ONIX P/ex offers @ <http://www.onixdna.com/p-x-offers>

Videos about ONIX evolution, A video confirming you get what you pay for... and more @ <http://www.onixdna.com/videos>