



Opera Audio Consonance Cyber 10 Signature Integrated Amp

by Jimmy Hughes

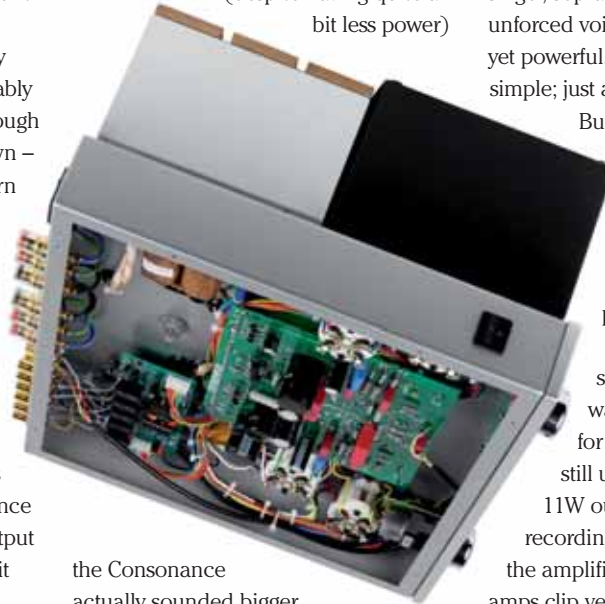
There's something distinctly appealing about low-power amplifiers that produce a big sound. It's probably got something to do with the way some amplifier manufacturers bang on about the need for at least half a Giga Watt just to reproduce the dynamics of a mandolin playing quietly at the back of a large hall. No one doubts the need for power and headroom, but at times the amount called for seems almost obscene.

There's also something distinctly satisfying when a hi-fi friend – preferably one who owns a mega amp with enough current delivery to power a small town – pops by to hear your new toy. You turn it on and the sound all but pins your friend to the back wall. 'Jesus Christ!' he says 'That's Powerful! 'Yup' you reply 'It's a full Eleven Watts...' A look of confusion crosses his face. He clearly heard you say Eleven Watts, but can't reconcile what you said with the sound being produced. Mind you, I too was fooled; I did not realise the Consonance Cyber 10 Signature only had 11W output when I first began using it. I thought it was at least 30W or more...

It meant I came to the Cyber 10 Signature with a clean slate - no prejudices - and could therefore listen to the amp with no agenda. And the point of this somewhat pointless preamble? To emphasise the fact that there's little if any sonic clue as to this amp's low power output in its sound – for the most part you simply can't tell. Certainly, the initial impression was of a big full sound with plenty of weight and drive. The tonal balance was rich and warm, yet open and clear, with excellent fine detail and good dynamics. I went over to the Consonance immediately after the Melody SP-3 integrated amp. I'd really

enjoyed using the little Melody. It was another small amp with a big sound. But there the similarities ended; the Melody and Consonance sounded quite different.

Tonally, the Consonance was noticeably sweeter and fuller compared to the Melody's leaner brighter presentation. Both amps had their plus points, but (despite having quite a bit less power)



the Consonance actually sounded bigger and more refined. It had a broader fuller bottom-end too, with greater depth and amplitude. In this sense the Consonance sounded more valve-like – rich, honeyed, smooth – without seeming like a caricature. It had that big effortless ease you tend to get from tubes, sounding relaxed and unfazed no matter how loud and busy the music seemed to get. There seemed to be plenty of power available. Not having any prejudices about the lack of Wattage on paper, I just enjoyed the sound – playing all sorts of different types of music to get a feel for things.

The first hint that the amp might

not have unlimited power reserves came while playing a CD of female vocal – *Russian Romantic Songs* on Harmonia Mundi. This is one of those extremely natural and real-sounding HM recordings that has an enormous soundstage and huge dynamic range. It's all the more potent because the songs are of the most part quiet and reflective; the singer, soprano Kaia Urb, has a natural unforced voice that's pure and smooth, yet powerful. The ingredients were simple; just a solo voice and guitar.

But the loud passages

expanded enormously, giving the impression of a real singer present in the room.

During these peak passages, there was a degree of break-up – the sound hard-clipped. As I was playing a new recording for the first time (and was still unaware of the Cyber 10's 11W output), I wondered if the recording was distorting. But it was the amplifier. Now, some low-powered amps clip very smoothly and gracefully – so much so, you hardly realise you've reached their limits. Push EAR's 859 for example and the peaks soften and compress, but don't break-up. The Cyber 10 is not like that. It roughens considerably once you pass its power limits. Yet in fairness I should say that the CD of *Russian Romantic Songs* was the only disc that gave any real trouble. With virtually all other recordings I was able to play the amp as loud as I wanted without problems. Of course, if you really crank up the volume, the amp will eventually clip and make some decidedly nasty noises. But that's true of any amplifier. ▶

► The question is – can you play music at satisfying volume levels without running into break-up? Using Impulse H1 horns, the answer was an emphatic – yes. With virtually all types of music there was no apparent struggle. Naturally, much depends on your taste in music and the sensitivity of your speakers. I like to listen at reasonably loud but not overbearing volume levels but, despite being horn-loaded, my old Impulse H-1s are not mega efficient – they're only around the 93dB mark. So, anything with this sort of efficiency or higher should be fine. I find simply-miked uncompressed solo vocal recordings to be the most testing, followed by choral. Strangely, 'loud' aggressive music like rock and pop recordings lack dynamic extremes – they're just loud loud loud. By heavily compressing the sound during recording, it's possible to create the subjective impression of power and immediacy

Sometimes, one of (say) four or five otherwise identical line inputs has a slightly shorter signal path which results in slightly better sound. I also give the tape output a try as an input, because (with passive pre-amps) this by-passes the main selector switch and therefore sounds a bit cleaner. With amplifiers that allow the tape output to be used as an input, the improvement in sound quality over the regular switched line inputs is not usually huge. But it's noticeable and worth having. The downside of this arrangement is – you can only have one source connected to the amp at any given time.

When I tried using the Cyber 10's tape output as an input, the sound changed dramatically. There was a significant increase in gain – at least 20dB, possibly more. Rather than listening with the volume control set at about 11.30 I had to lower it to about 8.30. The net result was a noticeably sharper and subjectively more dynamic

and assertive sound, with increased immediacy and transient attack. Subtle it wasn't.

Clearly, the Cyber 10 has an 'active' tape output stage. However, quite why it allows itself to be used as an input is unclear. Nor do I understand why there's such a big increase in sensitivity. But the difference is very noticeable, and it utterly changes the sonic presentation of the amplifier. During a test period that extended over a couple of months, I did



quite a bit of listening via the tape output/input, and initially I have to say I greatly preferred it to the normal line inputs.

With more extensive listening I came to realise it was a *Horses For Courses* sort of difference. If you like an assertive highly detailed and dynamic sort of presentation, the higher-gain tape-output/input is better. But the normal line input produces a smoother more balanced result that's nicer to listen to and a lot easier on the ear. The former tends to make each recording bristle with detail; the latter sounds sweeter and more homogenous.

One of the first CDs I tried using the tape output/input was a mid '60s recording of Chopin piano music on Deutsche Grammophon played

by Tamas Vasary. I'd known these performances for 30+ years on LP, but had never regarded them as being more than average/good sonically – the sound had always seemed clear, but tonally a bit shallow and 'small' in scale. Suddenly, the recordings sounded amazingly detailed and articulate, with stunning presence and immediacy.

Naturally, I mentioned my findings to the UK importers who relayed them to Consonance. Alas, Consonance seemed unwilling to enter into a dialogue, saying that using the amp in this way

could (or would) lead to damage. I asked for elucidation on this point, but apparently that was it – matter closed. To be honest, I can't see how or why using the amp in this way might cause damage – to me, if it works, it works.

However, because of the massive increase in gain, you do have to be careful. Play a loud pop CD with the volume set above 10 O'Clock and the amp will be extremely stressed. With my set up, I could never play much above 9 O'Clock – and even then, only with CDs transferred at a lowish level. For my own personal listening, ►

► I continued to use the amp via both inputs – albeit with a preference for the higher gain tape output/input.

Incidentally, when I had clipping problems with the *Russian Romantic Songs* CD, I was still using the standard line input – I didn't initially try the tape output/input until I'd spent a few weeks with the amp. Later, I played the disc again, but this time via the tape output as an input. The result was an even bigger and more forward presentation that really filled the room.

However, paradoxically, there was no clipping during peaks.

Indeed, I now found I could play the disc at what seemed like a subjectively higher volume level without break-up. Why? I think it's got something to do with the music subjectively seeming more dynamic and forward. As a result, you actually play at a slightly reduced volume level. And this, I feel, is the key to getting the best from low-powered amps like this. You have to try and create the impression of dynamics and scale through quality of sound rather than quantity.

Increasing the gain of the system helps foster this impression. I did it via the back door, so to speak, by using the wrong input. But you could do it in other ways. For example, by using a CD player with a higher than average output level, or a set of loudspeakers that are extremely efficient. By using the 'wrong' input on the Cyber 10 Signature, you get a huge increase in gain – which makes everything sound bigger and more alive.

Subjectively, this means you can play music at what is (in electrical terms) a lower volume level, but have it sound louder and more room filling.

Most engineers will tell you that what I've just said is wrong – and that once you've equalised the volume levels to take into account the added gain, everything is as it was before. But, as the bank Manager in the TV ad says; 'It Doesn't Work Like That'. Subjectively, you hear a more dynamic and assertive sound.



Having happily used the Cyber 10 Signature for a few months, I went upmarket - replacing it with the much more expensive Reference 1.3 transformer coupled preamp and Cyber 300b monoblock power amps. The latter sounded noticeably more finely shaded, with subtler tonal colours and a presentation that was highly detailed yet delicate and very refined and smooth. I'd have to say it was better (and so it should be at the price) yet the smaller integrated amp wasn't disgraced.

Indeed, hearing the more expensive Consonance amplifier made me appreciate just how consistent the Cyber 10 Signature was. On virtually every piece of music the integrated amp gave a very convincing account

of itself. In comparison, the Reference 1.3/Cyber 300b combination was more variable – sounding fabulous on some things, and disappointing on others. While the bigger amp undoubtedly reveals more, the integrated never gives the impression it's hiding anything.

Certainly, I could happily live with the Cyber 10 Signature. I think it's one of the nicest-sounding amplifiers I've ever had the pleasure of listening to.

I found I very quickly 'forgot' I was listening to it – it has a way of drawing your attention to things in the music, rather than drawing attention to itself. Used via its normal line inputs, it produces a very smooth cultivated sort of sound. But, when you use the tape output as an input, the Beast within is revealed! Two sounds for the price of one - Buy One Get One Free....



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Push/pull valve integrated
Valve Complement:	2 x 6SL7 2 x 12AX7 4 x 2A3
Inputs:	5 x line-level
Input Sensitivity:	180mV
Outputs:	1 x tape out 4 Ohm + 8 Ohm binding posts
Rated Power:	11 Wpc
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 180 x 320mm
Weight:	25 kg
Price:	£1350

UK Distributor:

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