

GROUP TEST & LAB REPORTS: RICHARD BLACK

AMPS: 1 OR 2?

Thinking of buying a new amp? Three integrations challenge three hot pre/powers...

ON TEST



Arcam DiVA A90
£850



Consonance Tristan
£995



Flying Mole CA-S10
£995



Musical Fidelity X-T100/Triple-X170
£1,100



Rega Cursa 3/Maia 3
£1,546



Russ Andrews HP-1/PA-1
£1,198

We've opted for a wider price range among the amplifiers on test this month. This is largely due to what's available at the £1,000 mark. Here, upmarket integrated amps start to give way to cheaper pre/power combinations, but the latter generally cost a bit more to put together, so there's usually a price gap in the majority of manufacturers' product ranges around that figure.

Even at a higher price, pre/power systems can end up being better value than an integrated because of the easier upgrade path. Then again, most modern integrated amps can also be used as a preamp, or beefed up with an additional power amp for bi-amping. It can look like a bit of a minefield if one wants to ensure that a purchase is 'future-proofed', but in the end the only sensible way to proceed is to buy something that suits you now and not worry about the future. In this regard, hi-fi is far less frustrating than computers, which are usually out of date the day after they're commissioned!

Most people who are planning to spend £1,000 on a new amplifier will be doing so as a means of upgrading their system. They will also probably have a fairly high expectation of what to expect for their money. Yet, for the budget-conscious there's also a large number of amplifiers available under the thousand-pound mark (including the Arcam DiVA A90 in this month's group test). It will be interesting to see how well it competes against the more expensive amps on offer. But go any further down the price scale and all notions of an 'upgrade' become academic. In fact, there really

ought to be more high-end virtues in the mid-priced amplifier range. It's an expectation that's in line with our long experience of what's available at various prices.

We weren't so fussy a few years ago, but manufacturers are now building more amplifier for less money. That's primarily down to a combination of cunning design and cost reductions in manufacture; everything from more highly automated production processes to full-scale offshore assembly. In the following pages you'll find out how we got on with some of the latest entries in this highly competitive market. **HFC**

EQUIPMENT USED

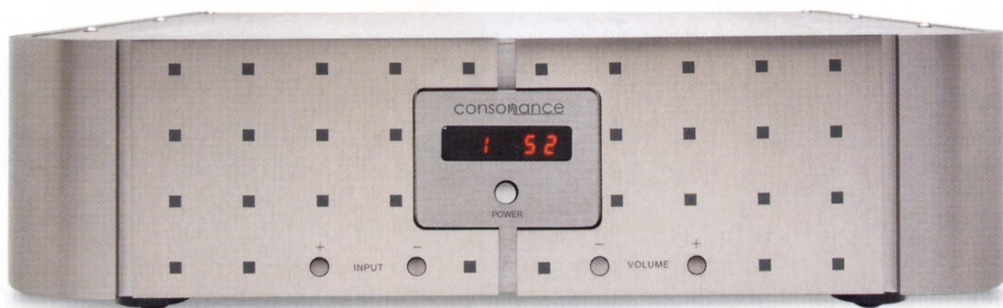
- ⊕ ATC SCM20 loudspeakers
- ⊕ Pioneer PDR-609 CD recorder (as CD transport)
- ⊕ dCS Elgar D/A converter
- ⊕ Chord DAC64
- ⊕ Wireworld, Audioquest, Kimber and Bespoke Audio cables

MUSIC USED

- ⊕ Michael Jackson *Thriller*
- ⊕ Miles Davis *Kind of Blue*
- ⊕ Rachmaninov *Symphonic Dances*
- ⊕ Grainger *Shepherd's Hey*

EARS USED

- Yet again, we are immensely grateful to the kind souls from within the industry who gladly come and listen, 'blind', to the amplifiers with the benefit of their highly-trained ears, tempted by nothing more than cake and coffee – this time round we thank:
- ⊕ Phil Hansen (Red Sheep Marketing)
 - ⊕ Steve Harris (Audioplus)
 - ⊕ Geoff Meads (Arcam)



£995 ☎ 01273 325901 🌐 www.opera-consonance.com

CONSONANCE TRISTAN

Opera lovers will appreciate this amp's Wagnerian performance

Opera Audio, a.k.a. Consonance, certainly has one of the widest ranges of audio electronics on the planet. This new model is part of the 'Forbidden City' range, which comes under the 'Stylist' heading on the company's website. It's a nice touch that all the models in the range are named after opera characters, in this case Tristan, the tragic lover from Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*.

Many Consonance models feature valves, but this one is resolutely solid-state, with a transistor output stage driven by more transistors. Construction is partly dual mono, principally for practical reasons, with a separate output circuit board for each channel mounted on the appropriate side of the chassis with an internal heatsink. The preamp board is separate and is mounted at the rear, right up against the input sockets, while the mains transformer and power supply board are towards the front.

Unusually, for an integrated amp in this class, the Tristan features a phono stage as standard and it's quite a generous offering. It's built around one of the lowest-noise op-amp chips available and is actually better suited to moving coil duty than moving magnet. But as an overall compromise Consonance could have done a lot worse. Alongside the phono are three line level inputs, which pretty much conclude the list of features. Volume control is electronic and so is input selection. The + and - buttons for selecting input seem to be labelled incorrectly, but with only four inputs to cycle through it's hardly a big deal.

SOUND QUALITY

'Impressive' would probably be the best summation of our listeners' comments on this amp, with both 'good' and 'bad' connotations of the word. Good, in that there's plenty of drama at the start of a Michael Jackson track and in the heavy-duty sawing of the double basses in the Rachmaninov. Bad, in that the violins and other bright instruments quickly



became overbearing, with the fine line between treble clarity and over-brightness frequently being seen from the latter side.

This kind of sound has its place and with dull loudspeakers (in dull rooms) it could be just the thing to spice up a hi-fi system. Placed side-by-side with more neutral amps, however, it drew distinctly tempered praise in all the varied musical selections. In other aspects, the Tristan seems generally competent, indeed very assured in some. Imaging is good, for instance, with clearly defined instruments playing in clear, stable acoustical space, space that extends well beyond the loudspeakers.

Detail is also good, with differentiation between sounds and players. But what this amp truly excels at is bop and 'fun factor'. It's not even notably rhythmic because in the end the rhythm is just a tiny bit untidy. But it is clearly audible and with the right kind of music there's an exciting level of energy and enthusiasm that makes the amp a very entertaining listen. The phono stage is unusually good, particularly with moving coil cartridges, and is quiet and detailed. Our overall view, though, is that for a grand there's not quite the kind of all-round achievement we're looking for and our recommendation is distinctly qualified. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >>> 81%



FEATURES >>> 75%



BUILD >>> 88%



VALUE >>> 85%



Remarkably well built and well specified internally, this amp majors on excitement rather than the expense, it seems, of tonal neutrality and rhythmic precision. Features are limited, but then price is an issue here.

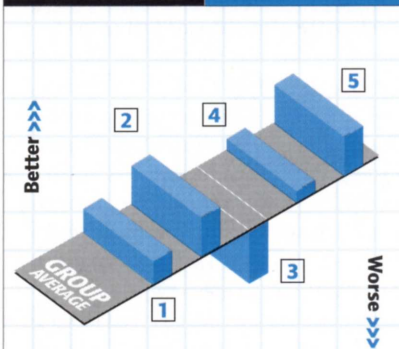
HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE **83%**



LAB REPORT

To be strictly accurate, Consonance's claim of 100 watts per channel is not quite met, but the shortfall is a fraction of a dB and if just one channel is tested the output comfortably exceeds that figure. A 4-ohm load is driven confidently too. In its literature, Consonance makes some rather vague claims about 'Class A' which certainly don't relate to the amp running in Class A. In fact, it is distinctly Class B, running cooler than most thanks to near-zero standing current. Despite that, distortion is perfectly respectable. There is a little crossover distortion in evidence and levels rise at high frequencies, but the worst we could find was only around 0.2%, which is a decent enough result. Noise isn't marvellous by current standards, but is unlikely to be audible through any but the highest sensitivity speakers. Power consumption when idle is quite low. When playing music it's the highest in the group, but only by a small margin.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic power >>> +10%
- 2] Frequency response >>> +20%
- 3] Dynamic range >>> -30%
- 4] Distortion >>> +5%
- 5] Output impedance >>> +25%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	100W	95W
Distortion (1kHz/ 8 ohms)	0.02%	0.01%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	±0.5dB	±0.15dB

CONCLUSIONS

There's a winner from both camps – pre/powers and integratseds

In some group tests there's an obvious winner, and so it was this time. At least, Russ Andrews' headphone/preamp and power amp is a winner if you don't need more than two inputs, won't miss a remote control, have no need to drive a second set of speakers and don't want your hi-fi to look bulky and impressive. We're talking seriously minimalist here, but the musical qualities of the amps are well worth considering even if you do need some extra flexibility: if you can't stand the idea of a little replugging

to listen to some seldom-used source component, then there are such things as switch boxes.

There is a loss of quality with extra switches, of course, and it's extra hassle. And apart from the added flexibility, all the other amps in this test have other qualities of their own. The Flying Mole is even smaller than the Russ Andrews and – thanks to its adoption of switching technology for both power supply and amplification – packs a punch and delivers plenty of detail with good recordings of acoustic music. We felt

it could do with a little more abandon at times to make a success of pop discs, but do give it a go.

The Mole hardly offers any more flexibility than Andrews, but Arcam is in a whole different league in that respect. Plenty of inputs, twin outputs, phono option, remote control and considerably more – it's a wonder they had any budget left for the actual amplifying! But they did and they achieve it in style. Understated style, of course. Don't attempt to evaluate the A90 in a quick demonstration, as its qualities

take a little while to register. If you don't want your hi-fi to make a show of itself, this is a good place to look.

Rega's amp, a classic pre/power combo, seemed to lack some solidity but does have plenty of redeeming features, which includes good detail. Both the Musical Fidelity and Consonance units were disappointing on this outing, but the former makes an attractive system with its matching CD player and tuner, while the latter has plenty of excitement going for it. And there is room for taste in this. **HFC**

TRY THEM WITH THESE

CD PLAYERS

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 740C £500
Hi-tech and flexible, with sound quality well above expectation.

MERIDIAN G06

£1695
A classy combination of detail, refinement and sheer musicality.

LOUDSPEAKERS

ATC SCM11 £750
Maximum output isn't huge, but offers refinement and energy. Small!

MONITOR AUDIO PL300

£5000
Wideband floorstanding model with power, refinement and imaging.

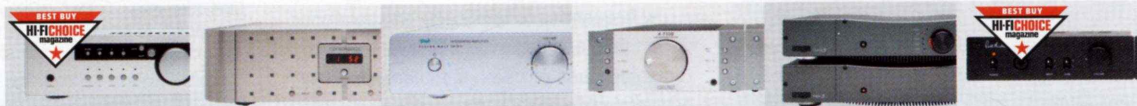
HINTS AND TIPS

» Amps generate heat! In a rack, allow at least three inches above any amplifier to allow the heat to dissipate.

» Use decent cables in and out, and if your speaker cable has bare ends be careful to avoid short circuits from frayed ends. Tighten terminals occasionally.

» It's 'greener' to switch amps off at the mains than use standby: switch it on 30-60 minutes before listening, if possible, to allow it to warm-up.
» Routing cables neatly together does more than just look good – it helps to reduce interference.

CD PLAYERS AT A GLANCE



MAKE	Arcam	Consonance	Flying Mole	Musical Fidelity	Rega	Russ Andrews
MODEL	Diva A90	Tristan	CA-S10	X-T100/ Triple-X170	Cursa3/ Maia3	HP-1/ PA-1
PRICE	£850	£995	£995	£1100	£1546	£1198
SOUND						
FEATURES						
BUILD						
VALUE						
OVERALL						
CONCLUSION	If you like a laid-back approach, this practical, affordable and impressively flexible amp could be just your thing.	Well-built, but majors on excitement at the expense of tonal neutrality and rhythmic precision.	Refined, controlled character may suit naturally micc'ed recordings. For highly produced pop, it lacks get-up-and-go.	A practical system with matching X-Series components, this failed to impress our listeners with its mellow and non rhythmic sound.	Doesn't quite seem to tie everything together to make a convincing whole. At its best with voices.	Simply featured, but sounds appealingly realistic and solid. Highly capable in all areas.
KEY FEATURES						
LINE INPUTS	7	3	3	3	6	2
TAPE OUTPUTS	2	0	0	1	2	0
PHONO INPUT OPTIONAL	Yes	(MM/ MC)	No	(MM)	Optional	No
SIZE (WXHXD)	43.5x10x34cm	43x11x39cm	28x5.5x25cm	22x9x36cm	43.5x9x29cm	21.2x5.5x29cm
WEIGHT	10.5kg	22kg	4kg	4+6.4kg	5+7kg	3.5+4.5kg
REMOTE CONTROL	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
BALANCED INPUT	No	No	No	No	No	No
LAB CONCLUSIONS E = EXCELLENT • G = GOOD • A = AVERAGE • P = POOR						
CLIP POINT	29V G	27.5V G	28V G	24V A	26.5V G	19.5V A
FREQUENCY RESPONSE	±0.2dB E	±0.15dB E	±0.5dB G	±0.3dB G	±0.3dB G	±0.3dB G
DYNAMIC RANGE	102dB G	98dB G	96dB A	100dB G	106dB E	101dB G
OUTPUT IMPEDANCE	0.1 ohm G	0.04 ohm E	0.1ohm G	0.12 ohm G	0.05 ohm G	0.3ohm A
POWER CONSUMPTION	20W/3W	18W/-	12W/-	27W/-	17W/-	20W/-