

audition

equipment review

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Plessis Audio S1 Integrated 2-Channel Amplifier



There are a few theories being put forward why 2-channel hi-fi equipment is once more all the rage. In a day and age of

newly emerging formats and multichannel, high definition audio and video, stereo and stereo hi-fi gear is still doing very nicely, thank you very much. This no doubt keeps the audio 'purists' happy but it's not necessarily the die hards that are keeping the 2-channel ball rolling. If not they, then who?

One theory that I heard lately was that it's thanks to the iPod. Surely 'proper' hi-fi's sworn enemy can't be responsible for increased sales in stereo audio equipment, but believe me, in this industry, stranger things have happened. Just look at vinyl, which is enjoying a healthy revival, over 20 years after CD was meant to kill and bury it. DVD was to do the

same for VHS, but one of the best-selling machines at the moment are the DVD/VHS combos.

Whatever the reason, the underlying factor behind this popularity and resurgence is simply because when it comes to listening to music, two channels are enough. That's the crux of the iPod theory, and that when iPoders take their headphones off they are hooking up the little white devices to component hi-fi systems to listen to music in the home.

And you could happily plug your iPod into an amplifier such as this, although I have a feeling this particular integrated stereo amp will appeal more to the audio 'purist' than typical iPod wearer. The Plessis Audio S1 is one of a relatively new breed of hi-fi product - audiophile grade products that are made in China. Despite the nation's ability to mass-produce, it's also fast gaining international recognition for the

**2-channel
stereo hi-fi
music is
definitely back
in a big way**

By Nic Tatham

Vital Statistics

Dimensions:

430 x 80 x 330mm

Weight:

10kg

Price:

\$1,599

Distributor:

Plessis Audio

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quality and also value of certain products - especially hi-fi.

This particular amplifier is one of currently just two models from Plessis Audio. Charl Du Plessis is the man responsible for its design and the other Plessis amp - the valve integrated Model A has already picked up our Best Buy award this year. The S1 is a transistor-based design, line-level and no frills, at least on the outside. Like it's valve-studded partner, the S1 came about as a joint effort between Charl Du Plessis and his manufacturing partner in China. The design brief was to come up with an amplifier that delivered great sound quality at a really good price. During its design and development the S1 was compared to see how it stacked up against several other amplifiers from both Chinese and Western manufacturers.

Much thought and emphasis was placed on the quality of the individual components that make up the S1 and it contains a large number of Japanese-made components, many of them military-grade spec. The main transformer, for example, is a large oval-shaped device which is encased in ceramic and the entire power supply has been kept separate from the preamp stages and printed circuit boards (PCB) to help reduce the risk of any interference to the audio signal. I popped the lid off and had a look at the internal layout and it's obviously been done with a lot of thought paid to the topology between the various components. The volume

control and input selector, for example, have been directly coupled to the PCBs which shortens the signal path and minimises loss.

The S1's specs suggest a healthy output and it's rated to deliver 80 watts RMS into 8 ohms and 130 watts into a 4 ohm load. The frequency response is stated at the extremes of the spectrum also covering a full bandwidth from just 5Hz to a sky-high 110kHz. These figures are well beyond the range of the human ear but with formats encoded with such wide frequency bandwidths, such as Super Audio CD, it's definitely beneficial to performance if the hardware can handle them. There are just four line-level inputs, all unbalanced and true to any minimalist design, no tone controls. The S1 only has the one pair of loudspeaker terminals, which are large, high quality 4mm binding posts and sockets. The front controls are a rotating power switch, headphone/speaker switch, large volume control, input selector and a mute flick switch. There is some armchair friendliness provided by a small slim remote control that provides volume, mute and stand-by controls. Each S1 also comes with a Plessis Audio T-shirt so you can wear the fact that you're a proud owner.

I spared no time in hooking the S1 up to my hi-fi system so it had a few days of running and burning in before getting down to any serious listening. I always take note of how a product sounds straight out of the box because it not only forms a telltale initial impression of what's in store, plus you can gauge how much the equipment improves with use. The early signs from the S1 were very encouraging. Part of its design was to be able to cope with tricky or demanding speaker loads and this amp's stated to be able to handle between 4 and 16 ohm impedance. I still had the big PMC IB1S studio monitors in place (see page 54) so I figured an accurate speaker and 4 ohm load such as these would be a great place to start testing these claims. Let me just point out that this as a \$1,600 amplifier coupled with an \$11,200 pair of professional loudspeakers. It's not the sort of amplifier these 500 watt PMCs would normally be driven by, but I wanted to see how the S1 coped. It's a gutsy

little amplifier and the 4 ohm PMCs didn't stress it out in the slightest. In fact I was quite surprised at how effortlessly it drove the big PMCs, pushing them to substantial volume levels without any hint or sign of duress. Speakers such as these are normally partnered with some hefty amplification but credit where it's due, the S1's 130 watts at this impedance were doing the job nicely.

Switching to more conventional speakers and the sort that do partner this amplifier well, the S1 was more at home with my Quad 11Ls and KEF iQ9s. First up, the little Quads which thrive on the end of decent amplification. These speakers never cease to amaze me and they can sound superb with the right amplifier in control. My initial impression was of a forthright and quite revealing sound and there's a definite balance achieved between musicality and involvement. Given the price, the S1 may not have the finesse or sheer transparency of dearer pre/power amplification but it puts the asking price where it counts the most - into the sound coming out of the speakers.

I also have an excellent 50 watt integrated amplifier from an English

Technotalk

Product Type:

Integrated stereo amplifier

Number of Inputs:

4 x unbalanced, line-level

Power Output:

80 watts RMS (8 ohms)

130 watts RMS (4 ohms)

Total Harmonic Distortion:

0.066% (1kHz, 80W, 8 ohms)

0.066% (10kHz, 80W, 8 ohms)

Gain:

38.3dB

Signal To Noise Ratio:

97dB (without weight)

Frequency Response:

5Hz-110kHz (-3dB, 80W)

Loudspeaker Load Impedance:

4-16 ohms

Input Sensitivity:

300mV (line-level)

Input Impedance:

73 kohm (line-level)

Technotalk specifications and recommended retail prices are supplied by the manufacturer

“Switching to large-scale classical works and the S1 continues to impress. It delivers pieces such as Nielsen’s *Symphony No.6* with enough power and scale to do the dramatic music justice. The quieter passages are relayed with fine detail and you receive all the passion and intensity of the piece, powered along with snarling brass, shimmering strings and majestic scale.”



Not the most feature-laden of amplifiers the S1 boasts just four line-level inputs and a single set of loudspeaker terminals. What it lacks in facilities though it more than makes it up in sound quality.

brand that is sadly no more - Audiolink, and this amp has served me very well over the years. Compared to this the Plessis S1 is a far more enjoyable listen and provides a great deal more music than the chrome-plated Audiolink could ever dream of. This 80-watter sounds as substantial as its impressive build quality. What’s more it never sounds overblown or biased towards any particular sound characteristic - it’s revealing without being dry, detailed without sounding too obvious and neutral without sounding weak. In a nutshell, it sounds as pleasant as your choice of music.

Heavily processed pop and rock tracks still sound edgy but the S1’s bass warmth counteracts even the harshest recordings to an appreciable degree. It doesn’t mind a challenge either such as Soundgarden’s *No Attention* with its full-bodied bass and Chris Cornell’s growling vocals, the amp has no trouble unravelling it all, keeping the voice in focus without holding the bass in check. Another striking feature is the openness and airiness of the sound evident with discs such as Beck’s *Guero*. There’s an excellent sense of space and ambience and the instruments have both natural timbre and superb bite, adding to the album’s Hispanic musical flavour.

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This is a music-lover’s amplifier but just make sure you don’t have too many sources as the S1 isn’t the best equipped. With limited inputs this is the sort of amplifier for someone

wanting to listen to CD or Super Audio CD music in stereo with the minimum of fuss. Partner it with quality source and speakers and enjoy the music. **AVL**

Ancillary Equipment: Teac VRDS-10 CD player, Musical Fidelity X-DAC, Quad 11L loudspeakers, KEF iQ9 floorstanding loudspeakers, PMC IB1S loudspeakers, SAP Relaxa 1 isolation platform, Wasatch Cable Works interconnects, Nordost Silver Flatline loudspeaker cables, Concorde and U-Build equipment supports, Black Box mains conditioner

O p i n i o n

The ‘Opinion’ expressed here is that of the reviewer, summarised in the form of a 5-star rating system, and should be considered as an integral part of the full contents of this Audition Equipment Review. As such, each category should be judged on its own merits and not necessarily used as a comparison with other equipment reviews in this, or other editions of Audio & Video Lifestyle magazine.

- ★ Shocker
- ★★ Average
- ★★★ Good
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★★★ Perfection

“... the underlying factor behind this popularity and resurgence is simply because when it comes to listening to music, two channels are enough.”

Performance

★★★★

Build Quality

★★★★

Compatibility

★★★

Value For Money

★★★★