

HIFICRITIC

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DESIGNING OUT THE ROOM

The very complex and radical BeoLab 90 might well be a major step in room-proofing loudspeakers

REQUEST THE BEAST

An SSD audiophile server/DAC/pre-amp, conceived in the USA and built in Switzerland.

BOWERS & WILKINS 803 D3

Andrew Everard reports on an all-new model that joins a re-invented flagship speaker range

A NEW WORLD ORDER?

Julian Musgrave's polemic suggests that the very nature of change in high end audio has changed.

NAIM NAP 300 DR

Chris Binns tries one of Naim's recently revised power amplifiers

MUSIC & MORE

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Audio Note KegoN Balanced
ReQuest The Beast
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Naim NAP 300 DR
Bowers & Wilkins 803 D3
Constellation Inspiration
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Chord Mojo
Ophidian Mambo
Ophidian Minimo
Ophidian Mojo
G9 Audio NERO MkII





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I think we at *HIFICRITIC* may well have a little local difficulty, which probably comes down to our various and sometimes very different lifestyle choices. I recently purchased a Naim *NAC S1*, as I've always used Naim's top pre-amp. Now that it's installed I'm well pleased with the sound quality, but find myself a trifle discombobulated by a couple of its features.

When I looked back at MC's review I found that he described the fact that the *NAC S1* has eight line-level inputs of various kinds, but failed to mention that only five of the eight are actually available at any one time. My previous *NAC 552* (and its '52 predecessor) had six inputs and even then I found myself struggling (and could happily have used seven). I then discovered that the new pre-amp didn't have any form of 'record out' option (the '552 had three!), which is a feature that I occasionally find useful too (admittedly usually when reviewing amps without remote control!).

The third demerit concerned the handset, which MC described as: "a superbly engineered, illuminated milled alloy remote control". Although I like the button illumination, I would have described it as pretentious, too heavy and too bulky. My ultimate handset is the dinky little device used to control Apple TV. It measures just 120x30x5mm (LxWxD), weighs next to nothing, and has just seven buttons (arguably only five are really needed for a pre-amp).

Don't get me wrong. I'm not in the least unhappy with the new pre-amp. It sounds quite lovely, but its arrival does mean that I'll have to make some adjustments to my lifestyle. I reckon I can live with the lack of 'rec out'; I may well be able to find a way round the handset problem too; and the acquisition of a couple of leads will probably sort out the input limitations.

However, the latter has drawn attention to a point that I've been pondering since I reviewed the excellent Audio Music *R-T1* two-box valve pre-amplifier (distributed by LW Audio) for another magazine a year or two back. That device certainly sounded very good indeed, but because it had just three line inputs it was quite impractical from my point of view.

But not from everybody else's perspectives it would seem. A couple of our contributors tend to use just one input on their pre-amps, at least partly I believe because they have a dedicated 'music room' which is separate from the rest of the house. One even told me that a single connected input is the route to the finest sound quality, which may indeed be the case, but is it real-world relevant?

Now that tone controls have lost their audiophile credibility, the only real point of having a pre-amp (or one that's built into an integrated amplifier) is to change volume and switch between inputs. I guess we'd all like to be able to have a separate music room in our lives, but to omit one of these functions purely for audiophile reasons does seem uncomfortably close to suffering from an OCD.

Paul Messenger
Editor

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Gryphon Diablo 300

IS THIS INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER JUST AN EXAMPLE OF BRUTE FORCE INDUSTRIAL DESIGN OR DOES IT REALLY DELIVER £12,000 WORTH OF SOUND? JOSÉ VICTOR HENRIQUES REPORTS

JOSE HENRIQUES

This all-black Gryphon *Diablo 300* integrated amplifier is the latest iteration of the *Diablo*, Gryphon's best-selling product, improving upon it in many ways, and not just fire power and wide bandwidth. Weighing 38.1 kilos it's more like an imposing monoblock than an all-in-one solution, but it doesn't look particularly heavy.

The high feet; the front and side panel heatsinks that double as design discontinuities; the flared corners; and the elegantly protruding front bar that houses the vacuum fluorescent display give an unexpected lightness of being. The latter has adjustable brightness with back-lit touch-sensitive controls, while the remote handset is a work of modern art and a joy to use – simplicity and beauty in a small, lightweight package.

Don't let this Diablo devil fool you: it's a powerful, quick and agile Viking warrior preparing to invade your listening room and beat the hell out of your loudspeakers with its 300W into 8ohms (600W into 4ohms, and allegedly 950W into 2ohms). This power is generated by a discrete single-ended Class A input buffer driving a class-AB dual-mono power output circuit topology. This is backed

by a mighty dual-mono Holmgren toroidal vacuum-treated transformer, and with a mighty reservoir capacitance of 64,000uF per channel.

The basic offer comprises a line-level pre-amplifier section with two balanced inputs, one unbalanced input, a tape input, an optional phono input, a tape output, and a full bandwidth output named Sub-Out. Accordingly this has a fixed level throughput for integration with AV systems. The power amplifier outputs have large, high current binding posts, and accept bare wires, spades or banana plugs.

Gryphon also offers two optional modules, which will add to the flexibility and universal appeal of the *Diablo 300*. The MM/MC phono stage is based on the legendary *Legato Legacy* design. The other is a PCM/DSD-native DAC with one USB input, two S/PDIFs, one AES/EBU, and one TosLink input. Via USB it can process PCM up to 32-bit/384 kHz as well as DSD (Windows OS up to DSD512, Mac OS up to DSD128, Linux OS up to DSD128 DoP). (It can handle PCM up to 24-bit/192 kHz.)

Interviewing Gryphon's founder and CEO Flemming E. Rasmussen recently, he was candid enough to admit Gryphon did not lightheartedly

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AUDIO EXCELLENCE



“this is one beast of an amplifier: you have been warned!”

face the challenge of replacing the original *Diablo*. After all it was their greatest success ever, had been on the market for ten years, and was still selling well. This new *Diablo 300* therefore had to be something rather special.

In celebration of Gryphon’s 30th Anniversary, the new *300* benefits from the latest concepts, components and technologies. Most of its new power supply is actually inspired by the *Mephisto* flagship amplifier, while the DAC module is basically a stripped down *Kalliope*. The fully balanced microprocessor-controlled 43-step relay volume attenuator is based on the *Pandora* top-of-the-line pre-amplifier, and uses only two ultra-precision resistors at a time in the signal path for best sonic performance. Indeed, the fact that you can hear a faint clicking through the loudspeakers when shifting volume is a small price to pay for the level of resolution and transparency provided. To quote Rasmussen: “the *Diablo 300* is a lot of Gryphon for a lot less money”.

It is also a good thing that “*Diablo 300* can be configured for automatic sensitivity matching of inputs and equipment when switching between sources with varying output levels, and the volume control is linked to the ‘mute’ to prevent increasing volume while the muting circuit is active to eliminate the risk of loudspeaker damage through accidental overpowering”. That’s because this is one beast of an amplifier: you have been warned!

Sound Quality

The *Diablo 300* is not for the faint-hearted. As the name implies it can play havoc with the air pressure in the listening room, provided the loudspeakers can cope with its massive power. But it can also deliver finesse and delicacy on demand, even at low level listening, aided by its high inherent resolution.

Once you listen to a drum kit at near-live levels, or a tenor soaring in the acoustics of an opera hall, whose placement in the reproduced stage is as specific as it is focused, standing right in front of the curved wall of a chorus, the sound stretching wide and digging deep (though there’s a slight foreshortening of the sense of depth); a big band blowing its heart out; or a rock gig blasting away as if you were on stage among the musicians. You might get hooked on the resulting adrenalin (or is it testosterone!)

The *Diablo 300* is an amplifier of the ‘up-close’ persuasion, hence its overwhelming sense of aliveness. Yet it also depicts front-to-back soundstage images with accuracy. It provides a front row perspective that emphasises foreground clarity rather than the more relaxed, dark and distant view

that some audiophiles prefer. This is the kind of amplifier that takes no prisoners and keeps you on the edge of your seat begging for more. Listening to this devil can thus be an exciting experience emotionally and physically.

The more I listened, the more I felt that the *Diablo 300* was less the fabled straight wire with gain, but more like an open sluice letting the music flow without any congestion, as if there were no limits to its clean power reserves. Bass was authoritative, informative and articulate, with well-defined lines, while midrange projection never failed to impress, and maintained good intelligibility. Instrument timbres were neutral, if a little dry and sometimes verging on hardness, depending on the program material, and I noted that all aspects of the sound improved with high resolution files. That said, I also heard an underlying sense of a ‘whitish’ coloration on cymbals in the low treble.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. After a first meeting to get acquainted with the *Diablo*, at my request the dealer allowed me to occupy two of its dedicated rooms for some extended listening tests. Without having to knock Heaven’s door opened, and I was severely tempted by many of the audio riches of the world. I had a half million plus euros of equipment at my disposal!

The first room offered a pair of Gryphon *Pantheon* loudspeakers and an EMM Labs *XDS-1* CD-player/DAC, plus the Aurender *W20* as sources. Interconnects were *Elation* by Kubala-Sosna, while the loudspeaker cables were by artisan Spanish brand Mamba Audio.

The system as a whole sounded generally fast, tight, powerful and engaging, although it could be a little sterile at times, perhaps due to the ribbon tweeter. Images were extremely well focused anywhere I ‘looked’ in the soundfield, which I consider a trade mark of the driver configuration. The superbly wide and transparent soundstage was populated with individual sources rather than an indistinct mass. Height was reproduced with amazing realism, contradicting those who maintain that you need a ceiling loudspeaker in a surround setup to achieve that most elusive of hi-fi dimensions.

I felt that the *Diablo 300* delivered upbeat and unrestrained dynamics, uncanny presence, aided by an accentuated foreground clarity bought at the cost of some reduction in dynamic contrast. Abundant detail left little to the imagination. I felt that the illusion of depth suffered somewhat, though I do think that depth reproduction is often overrated and is sometimes an illusion wrought by phase manipulation at the recording session or mixing

console. With an audio system such as this you feel as if you're driving a fast car on a highway, so you are tempted to step on it! And so I did...

I continued with a drum solo by Dick Sengolla, from the KSJ demo 8, which sounded astonishing for all aspects of percussion transients, audience whistling, clapping and cheering, followed by the atmospheric (artificial reverb) soundstage, and bigger-than-life delivery of 'No sanctuary here' by Chris Jones (an audiophile demo favourite). Ladysmith Black Mambazo's isicathamiya (acapella zulu male vocal harmonies) singing *Hello, My Baby* sounded positively spooky, and the kiss so utterly real and focused you could almost feel it hitting you, as it was thrown across the room by the singer.

The same went for Archie Shepp's spoken introduction to *Go Down Moses (Let my People Go)*, from the album *I Didn't Know About You*. I could swear the man was there standing in front of me, followed by his full-bodied sax harmonic overtones with reedy ornaments, developing into Shepp's characteristic breathy tonal weight and melodic chromatic and textural variations founded on a natural pentatonic scale. All the while Horace Parlan's eloquent and clearly defined piano notes decayed like slowly falling bubbles, to a rhythmic substrate of bass and drums.

And guess what? The Archie Shepp/Horace Parlan *Goin' Home* album, recorded in Denmark in 1977, features as assistant engineer a certain Mr. Flemming E. Rasmussen. So his job as a sound engineer endowed him with an important live reference that he has been trying to recreate at Gryphon for the last 30 years. I humbly contend he might be right all along.

If there is a musical piece that best illustrates the many virtues and the few quirks of this spectacular system, that would be Fritz Reiner's Chicago Symphony Orchestra *Scheherazade Op.35 IV- Festival at Bagdad* (recorded 60 years ago). A powerful and physically exciting experience, as befits a dramatic event like a shipwreck, it includes some energetic cymbal crashes, explosive percussion, spectacular brass and wind section performances, and sweet strings to boot. All is played with frenetic rhythmic speed and virtuosity, ending with the breathtakingly beautiful timbre of a solo violin dying away.

Second Round

It was time to take the devil into the second room and try a different kind of temptation: same sources but a new pair of speakers, the TAD *Reference One*, connected to the *Diablo 300* with Stealth *Dream Royal* cables. This is a larger room so a lot more air must be moved, which the system did with ease and aplomb.

Le temp passé (by Michell Jonasz) has some of the

most vicious synthesizer bass lines ever recorded. At 00.22, 00.42 and 01.06 the bass escapes from the loudspeakers, crawls like a snake towards the listener across the carpeted floor, and enters through flapping trouser legs, massaging one's body from the feet up to the hair roots. Good grief!

Next I tried some of the tracks I had played in the other room. I missed the sheer transparency, clarity, speed, soundstage specificity and tight focus of the Gryphon *Pantheon* loudspeaker, I must admit. However, the TAD's sound is, er, a tad more natural, tonally ripe, with a less sterile top end, albeit somewhat dynamically restrained in comparison. Gone too was the controversially more realistic 'in-your-face' *Pantheon* presentation; the TADs sounded more laid-back and consequently delivered a better illusion of stage depth.

Substituting a Trinity DAC for the EMM Labs *XDS-1*, improved the treble and bass information at the cost of some unexpected mild congestion in the midrange, hence less air and transparency. So much for testing such an amplifier at home in an acoustically handicapped room with just one set of loudspeakers and cables. To widen the soundstage you must first widen your horizons.....

Conclusions

Gryphon's *Diablo 300* is a fine solid state integrated amplifier, and probably one of the most powerful available at the price. I reckon it's capable of driving any loudspeaker system to insane sound pressure levels, and has an unbeatable Euro/W ratio of clean power, with the extra flexibility of DAC and phono stage modular upgrading (not tested). It joins some of the best I've evaluated at various levels of performance and cost. Well done Flemming!

Manufacturer's Specifications

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Power Output | 2 x 300W (8ohms), 2 x 600W (4ohms), 2 x 950W (2ohms) |
| Output Impedance | 0.019ohms |
| Design | Zero loop negative feedback |
| Frequency Bandwidth (-3 dB) | 0.1Hz – 350kHz |
| Power Supply | 2 x 68,000uF |
| Gain | +38 dB |
| Input Impedance, balanced | 40kohm |
| Input Impedance, single-ended | 20kohm |
| Size (WxHxD) | 48 x 23.5 x 46 cm |
| Weight | 38.1 kg |
| UK Price | £11,995 |
| Install Options | |
| Phono Stage | £1,495 |
| DAC | £4,250 |

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Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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It says Thöress on the fascia, with an *umlaut* over the 'ö', hardening it but suggesting the British spelling should be Thoeress. However you want it, this German brand is named after founder and principal Reinhardt Thöress, and is based in Aachen, on the Western border of that country.

I'd not encountered the brand before, but it was brought to my attention by Greg Drygala, our Jazz music reviewer of Polish extraction who runs an import operation called G Point Audio. Since we only live about 30 miles apart, Drygala does have a habit of dumping stuff for me to try, and so it was with the Thöress equipment: a phono stage (which I love); an integrated amplifier (which I never got to try) and a pair of speakers (which I also got to like a lot, even though they were unusually ugly and were actually labelled *Genuin Schallwandler* rather than Thöress).

I therefore wrote to Reinhardt Thöress to find out more about the speakers. It turns out that Genuin Audio is a German distributor, and the speaker was originally intended to be badged and sold that way. Plans have changed, however, and what used to be a *Genuin Schallwandler* will now become a *THÖ 1D8*. At around £6,000/pair they're never going to be cheap (or indeed pretty), but these speakers are amongst the best all round performers I've encountered.

I'm not able to give the *1D8*s a full review right now, as they have gone off to do a show somewhere. However I did spend some weeks listening to them, and also took the trouble to make my usual measurements. As I recall, the *1D8* combined a 200mm main driver (from established German maker LPG) with a 25mm Morel soft dome tweeter, within a rather bulky but quite low mass floorstanding enclosure. The bass/mid driver was apparently 'double transmission line loaded', with an exit through the speaker's base.

Measurements under far-field in-room conditions reveal an unusual combination of a generous sensitivity (around 93dB) alongside a reasonably decent amplifier load that stays above 6ohms at low frequencies, and 4.5ohms above 1kHz. The bad news is that the bass and lower midrange (below 500Hz) is distinctly uneven, and the low bass (below 45Hz) is largely absent (indicating quarter-wave rather than TL line loading perhaps?); the good news is that the output is much smoother and flatter above 500Hz.

What this means in practice is that the *1D8* has a sensitivity that's sufficiently high to give the speaker real dynamic expression and grip, yet it manages to do so alongside decent bass extension and an unusually good overall balance. In fact I'd go so far as to state that it has many of the advantages of a speaker system based on a single full range drive unit, yet manages to avoid most of the pitfalls of that breed. It is, in short, an excellent allrounder (which makes its rather unprepossessing appearance all the more galling).

My system is set up to make loudspeaker listening and comparisons relatively easy, but I was also very taken by the performance of a very elaborate valve-based Thöress phono stage, known as an *Enhancer* (*Entzerrer* in German). I never got around to exploring the numerous equalisation options, which I'll try when it returns, but even with all three set to RIAA it sounded truly excellent, which is the main reason I want it back! (The bad news is a pricetag equivalent to around £6,500.) What is certain is that the Thöress brand is capable of delivering a very serious standard of performance indeed.