



Classé Audio CA-M600 Monoblock Power Amplifier

Punching Outside Its Weight Class

Jacob Heilbrunn

As a plethora of new products hit the stereo market each year, it can become easy to get jaded about the extravagant claims often made by manufacturers about their respective accomplishments. How much more really can be extracted from an amplifier, short of paying Mt. Everest-like prices? Well, as the Classé CA-M600 suggests, a lot.

This is a product that I inserted into my system out of sheer curiosity and, within minutes, regarded with a mixture of reverence and incredulity. And at no point have those feelings abated. With some pieces of equipment you may be initially impressed, then sort of sink into a psychic easy chair of bland approval. With the Classé CA-M600, however, nothing of the kind has occurred. Instead, its tremendous grip, rock-solid pacing, gorgeous tonal colors, and above all, utter transparency have never failed to impress. This is a superb amplifier, one that can compete with any model up to \$30,000, and then some. To paraphrase Samuel Johnson, the audiophile who gets tired of this amplifier is tired of life.

The reason that I regarded the \$14,000-per-pair CA-M600 with initial caution was that it represents a radical change in technology for Classé Audio. Classé has garnered respect over the years but never been viewed as a cutting-edge company. That may be about to change. In this case, the move to incorporating new technology has not compromised, but significantly enhanced the sound of Classé products. Classé has now completely revamped its Delta series of amplifiers, offering a variety of new products. What's more, Alan Clark, who designed the Linn CD12, now works for Classé. He oversaw the design of the CA-M600, and it

shows. The CA-M600 has the virtues of a switching amplifier—which fellow audiophiles assumed it was when they heard how much power it boasts and how coolly it runs—with none of the sonic drawbacks.

Indeed, any apprehensions that I might have harbored about deploying the most modern technology in this amplifier were misplaced. The two most distinctive features of the CA-M600 are 1) the entire amplification takes place on one board before it hits the output stage, so that signal loss is kept to an absolute minimum; and 2) a convection tunnel, based on laser technology derived from the medical industry, that uses a passive fan to ensure that the amplifier runs at a constant temperature. It has oodles of tiny heat fins running along the tunnel. The result is that the amplifier possesses, so Classé maintains, an optimal working environment for its internal circuitry. I can testify that the amplifier never became hot, no matter how hard I ran it or what loudspeaker it drove. Classé doesn't make a big deal about it, but this has to ensure increased longevity for the amplifier's capacitors and other heat-sensitive parts. The fan is virtually noiseless and so I could never hear it become intrusive or audible while playing music. Run in balanced mode—it is a balanced amplifier—the CA-M600 didn't seem to produce any hiss or hum, either. In all, the CA-M600 drove the Verity Lohengrin, the Magnepan 20.1, and the Wilson Alexandria X-2, Series 2 loudspeakers.

If the amplifier always remained cool to the touch, its sound was not. One of the most impressive aspects of the CA-M600 is its extremely high signal-to-noise ratio of 120dB. This is instantly

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and most pleausurably apparent. No amplifier that I have used has reached as deeply into the soundstage as the Classé. TAS editor Robert Harley has in the past written about the increased verisimilitude that tiny musical cues can provide and the CA-M600, it must be said, is a champion at extracting such low-level detail. In playing back Schubert lieder, for example, the CA-M600 seemed to provide an extra cushion of air simply by projecting the sound of the recording studio walls more fully into my listening space.

At the same time, musical cues were also enhanced by the rapidity of the CA-M600's dynamic swings. Perhaps because of its extremely impressive signal-to-noise ratio, it seemed to operate at a lightning-fast pace. This amplifier offers a wealth of microgradations in dynamics—not simply one big bang, but a series of escalating sonic thrills on the way to the ultimate volcanic eruption.

On a recording of Fritz Reiner conducting the Chicago Symphony playing the *Nutcracker* Suite, I was thus mesmerized by the sheer velocity with which the various sections of the orchestra almost seemed to hurl themselves against each other. It was almost breathtaking, for example, to hear the vast sonic space from which the harp emerged out of the orchestra, almost iridescent in its tonal colors, unfurled like a peacock's tail. This was the closest that I have ever heard an orchestra rendered with the proper lustrous sheen to the sound. One of the first things that I notice when listening to a live orchestra is the sheer sumptuousness of the sound, something that stereo systems often sacrifice in the pursuit of fidelity, in its most banal form, which is to say the mere reproduction of detail for its own sake.

Similarly, on a prized Deutsche Grammophon recording of Herbert von Karajan conducting Mendelssohn's lovely *Italian* Symphony, it was riveting to hear the interchange, in the first movement, between the woodwind sections and the strings. Everything was so precisely delineated that it almost gave the feeling as though the orchestra was laid out in front of you. It was simplicity itself to detect the differences in pitch and timbre between the oboe and clarinet. Then swooshing in with brio come the strings. All the while each section of the orchestra can be perfectly located in its own space. Ditto for piano, one of the toughest instruments to reproduce. On Angela Hewitt's performance of *Couperin's Keyboard Music* [Hyperion], each line can be heard distinctly, the felt of the hammers almost audible as they strike the strings.

Which brings me to another notable feature of the CA-M600. Right from the outset, its stability in reproducing the soundstage was evident. Singers are firmly planted, trumpets precisely located, and so on. There is simply less of that sense of haze and uncertainty when it comes to where the instrumentalists are actually located. Some audiophiles like to scoff at soundstaging, but for me, at least, it helps lend some credibility to the affair.

For all its finesse, the CA-M600 also proved a champ at belting it out on the big numbers, whether it was rock or rhythm and blues. On Pink Martini's CD "Hang on Little Tomato" [Heinz Records], the percussion section emerged with concussive force. On a number of jazz recordings, the percussion really opened up on top as well. The amount of ambient air that the CA-M600 delivers is really quite exceptional.

Much of the magic of the CA-M600 is attributable to its cutting edge technology. But ironically enough, the virtues of that

technology came most home to me in listening to an old format—vinyl—on what now almost seems like a prehistoric recording. To wit, I pulled off the shelf a 10" RCA pressing called "X" with the title "vault originals." It was Duke Ellington recordings from 1927-28, featuring his early band—James "Bubber" Miley, "Tricky Sam" Nanton, Harry Carney, and Barney Bigard, not to mention the Duke himself. One of the most intriguing aspects of this LP is the so-called "jungle sound" it features, which was prized in Harlem clubs of the day. Now, it's all well and good for a stereo system using the latest pressings or CDs to capture the growls and wah-wah mutes of trumpets. But on a recording from 1927? I'd say that's pretty nifty. And it was.

The superlatively low noise floor of the Classé amplifier meant that it was a snap to follow Bubber Miley's solos. Perhaps the spookiest part was listening to the singer Adelaide Hall, who doesn't so much sing as moan and wail on cuts like "Creole Love Call"—one of my favorite Ellington numbers, by the way. It wouldn't be right to call Hall a sophisticated lady on these numbers, but an impassioned one. Regardless, the CA-M600 shone on these cuts, which, in some ways, are the most difficult to reproduce of all.

It shone in the sense that it simply seemed to get out of the way of the signal path. If you want to pick nits with this amplifier you can. It does not have as refulgent sound in the midrange as tube amplifiers and doesn't add any artificial bloom to recordings. It's pretty much the naked truth with this amplifier. But having listened to this amplifier for several months, I could endlessly extol its performance. I can only urge anyone contemplating the purchase of a solid-state amplifier to audition the CA-M600. To some extent, I am simply mystified by the CA-M600's performance. It almost doesn't seem fair to get this much performance at its price. But the benefits of new technology are patently apparent in the CA-M600.

Obviously, at \$14,000 for a pair of these babies, it would be laughable to call the Classé an inexpensive amplifier. At \$35,000 the Classé Omega monoblocks, which I have previously reviewed in TAS, remain the company's flagship. The Omega boasts a thunderous power that even the CA-M600 cannot match. But it would be quite surprising to hear another amplifier in its price and weight class that would offer even remotely similar performance. Classé Audio has set a new bar with the CA-M600. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

Frequency response: 1Hz-100kHz, -3dB

Output power: 600W RMS into 8 Ω (27.8 dBW); 1200W RMS into 4 Ω (27.8 dBW)

Input impedance: 50k ohms balanced / single-ended

Signal-to-noise ratio: 120dB at peak output into 8 ohms

Output impedance: 0.03 ohms @ 1kHz

Dimensions: 17.5" x 17.5" x 8.7"

Weight: 88 lbs.

Price: \$7000 each

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