

WIN! MERIDIAN'S £2000
G08 CD PLAYER! page 99

THE TURNTABLE 2 XPERIENCE
Acrylic good looks from Pro-Ject: page 34

EAR VALVE INTEGRATED AMP
Tim de Paravicini's hot 899: page 30

**BIGGER
AND BETTER!
16 MORE PAGES!**

Hi-Fi News

www.hifinews.co.uk

PURE AUDIO EXCELLENCE

May 2005

£3.80

Classé Curves

Touch-screen
amp magic
page 18

PLUS:
DIY valves,
Avalon,
Marantz,
Ruark,
Musical
Fidelity

HOME ENTERTAINMENT
starts page 63

PIONEER
new gen plasma

KRELL
processor

DENON
high-end DVD

CLASSIC KIT
The SME 3009 arm
page 58

INTERVIEW
Jean Michel Jarre: why CD sucks, DVD and the future



AOL Keyword: Hi-Fi News
US \$ 9.00 Canada \$ 9.75 Aus \$ 10.25





Classé CP-500

PRICE £2950

Classé CA-2100

PRICE £2950

More obviously than any hardware range I can think of, styling and performance play an equal part in the success (or otherwise) of the Classé Delta range. You could see it as a kind of thinking man's B&O, though to avoid the lawsuits I should add that Classé has resolutely avoided describing Delta in such inflammatory terms. The lifestyle concept is also clearly a key part of the Delta thinking, but again there is none of the 'now you see me, now you don't' matchbox presentation of Bose.

But the intention is clear enough. Without attempting to compromise functionality, Delta is a range of easy to use and visually integrated hardware that belongs in a design-conscious home. With previous models from Classé, visual presentation varied from component to

component, and they often used different displays. There was not the same overarching vision. With Delta, the Classé design team, under the tutelage of industrial designer Morton Warren (long associated with Classé's parent company B&W), set out to redress a somewhat US-centric set of design priorities.

Two key design features are central to the range. One, found on each component apart from the power amplifiers, is a 4:3 touch-screen VGA resolution backlit colour TFT display (electrically quieter than LED dot-matrix displays, says Classé).

TOUCH-SCREEN FUNCTIONS

The display provides status information to the user and its menus act as a means of setting up the system defaults. It can also be used to monitor equipment status, for example the internal firmware and hardware versions, serial number, the number of hours in use, also operating temperature, mains voltage and phase, the presence of a ground and, with a dealer's help, fault status. The most

Classé

Delta CP-500/ CA-2100

Styling worthy of the sound – that was the aim behind the Delta range, which Classé spent three years developing. Alvin Gold hears the ‘starter’ pre and power amps from this new high-end series

important function of the touch screen, associated control keys (never more than two per component) and the volume control, however, is to provide access to user features needed for day-to-day use – volume and balance settings, input selection and so on – in a natural and intuitive way. Of course, the pre-amp can also be operated by the remote control, a completely new design that usefully can be stood on its heel. Although the display is a full-colour device, it is programmed here to a single colour (shades of blue) for visual unity. AV processors in the range will be able to show programme material in full colour.

Set-up parameters include selecting a law for the rotary volume control (adjustable all the way from one turn per decibel to one that approximates that of a single turn ALPS volume pot), a speed limit (how much the volume can increase if the control is spun freely), and includes the ability to name or lock out individual inputs and normalise volume levels between inputs. Display brightness and timeout delay can also be set. It is also possible to set profiles for individual users with settings

for each that suit his or her preferred mode of use. There is nothing difficult about programming these variables, but the intention is that the dealer will be responsible for customising the equipment on the user's behalf. The Delta components also include 12V triggers and inputs for external IR repeaters along with RS232 sockets which can

“This is an amp of real subtlety and grip, that can relax, but which is dynamic, refined and expressive”

be used for updating internal firmware, again by the installing dealer using a laptop computer. One last point is that the RS232s can be used with external Crestron or AMX compatible touch-screen controllers.

The power amplifiers have fewer set-up options than the pre-amp, so the TFT display is replaced by simple



LEDs. A button-accessed set-up routine determines whether the single-ended or balanced inputs are selected, and allows the wake-up sequence for a system linked by the RJ45 control bus or 12V triggers from the pre-amp.

The other very distinctive feature of the Delta components is the fascia design, which is an alloy extrusion shaped under heat into the enveloping wrap you see in the photos. As well as being visually striking, the extrusions turn out to be massively strong, and double as mechanical earths to which the other components are fixed. The feet have also received special attention, being made of a specialised synthetic rubber whose compliance is adjusted to suit the weight of each component. Dedicated equipment racks are available.

SOUND QUALITY

Hardware used for this listening included a Classé Delta CDP-100 CD player, a Denon DVD-A1XV universal player, along with B&W 800D, Revel Performa F32 and various other loudspeakers besides. A pair of Classé Delta CA-2200 monoblocks and a Boulder 1010 pre-amplifier were also on hand. Note that the alternative amplification listed cost more than the test components.

Cabling used was Nordost Valhalla (a match made in heaven), for some of the time, with the extraordinary

Volume control [above left] is beautifully engineered; on the power amp, the TFT display of the pre-amp is replaced by simple LEDs [above]. Conveniently, Classé's remote [right] can stand on its heel if required



“The comfortable way they present the most difficult material is unequalled in my experience”

Nordost Thor mains distribution box. (Yes, it's a perfectly ridiculous product, but yes it works, dammit.)

Although the Delta pre- and stereo power amp were not brand new, I cannot recall an amplifier that improved so radically over the early weeks, much of the time having been spent in standby. Presumably it would have taken longer still if plucked fresh from the box, and there is an obvious potential pratfall here for those interested in a shop demonstration. The unusual resolving ability of the combination on test makes these running-in symptoms

very obvious, and from prior experience I'd say the JFET front-end is the likeliest culprit. When new, the combination sounds flat and uncommunicative. Fully run in it sings. It's as simple – and as dramatic – as that.

And the simple idea that this is an amplifier that sings comes closer I believe to encapsulating the appeal of the Classé than any other. More than most, this is a design that goes about its business in a manner that doesn't draw attention to the way it works. You don't hear the cogs turning. Yet the final output of the host system has an expansive, yet well-defined soundstage, a subjectively broad frequency response. (Many amplifiers offer a narrow perceived response, which may have nothing to do with measured responses, and more to do with the consistency with which dynamics are handled across the

audio frequency band.) It has a light touch. And yes, as promised it sounds very responsive and very quick.

But you mustn't mistake this for a lack of true grit, as I quickly found out. The prodigiously dark and powerful opening of Franz Biber's *Missa Salisburgensis* (a superb Archiv SACD) made this aspect all too apparent, while the frenzied Rondo Burlesque from the Ricardo Chailly/Concertgebouw Mahler 9 [Decca SACD] was fully committed and vital to its core. Yet with more intimate touchie-feelie material, for example Patricia Barber's live recording of 'Gotcha' that opens the excellent *A Fortnight in France* (Blue Note CD) the music is so gracefully presented that any memory of the preceding drama was simply wiped clean. This is an amplifier that isn't limited to expressing music in a single, monolithic voice. It is an amplifier of real subtlety and also grip, that can relax, but which is clearly dynamic, and which can simultaneously be refined and expressive. But it wasn't good enough to draw out the best of what the B&W 800D loudspeaker (a challenging load in more way than one) can do.

OK, so the two products under the microscope don't have quite the grip or the ability of bringing scale to the musical landscape of the more expensive, higher power Delta 2200 monoblocks, the devastating authority and presence of a Krell FPB or the subtle analysis of a Halcro dm68, and the Boulder 2020 pre-amplifier offers still greater image scale and refinement than its Classé Delta series counterpart.

Yet the Delta pre- and power amplifier are more fluid and valve-like than the alternatives available. At their much more modest prices, and within their narrower power margins, their lightning reflexes, poise, easy transparency and above all the consummately comfortable way they present the most difficult programme material, is unequalled in my experience.

“The CP-500 and CA-2100 make a remarkable package, not readily challenged at or near the price”

This review cannot be wrapped up without reference to the touch screen and the beautifully-engineered volume control, which together provide a brilliantly simple and tactile user interface which is genuinely easy to use, and yet still provides rich set of facilities as well as feedback about internal status. The styling is both radical and attractive, while the characteristic two-tone colour

Curved casework parts form a rigid structure which provides excellent mechanical grounding



A Classé tale

The story starts back in the '70s with a Greek born Canadian music-loving entrepreneur with a passion for the high-end, Mike Viglas. Then, as now to an extent, amplifiers were divided into two categories – solid-state (powerful drive, solid bass, but all too often harsh mids and highs) and valves (subtle, refined, smooth, but unable to cope with big bass).

Mike's predilection at the time was for valves until one fine day when the amplifier he was using at a party embarrassingly took the opportunity to blow up – literally. So he went in search of a bullet-proof transistor amplifier that sounded like valves.

He found what he wanted in a 25-watt design from a company called Ellison. To cut a long story short, Mike had his Victor Kyam moment and ended up investing in the company. The name was changed to Classé – a play on words: classy and French sounding, appropriate enough for a company based in Quebec, the French speaking part of Canada.

Classé made good amplifiers, and eventually other components too, and the new company prospered, especially in the North American market which appreciated the unerring musicality of the range. This takes us up to

around 2000, at which point Mike Viglas was approaching retirement age, and looking to the future of the brand. Right then B&W was looking for an electronics brand to complement its high-end loudspeakers. Coincidentally B&W's CEO, Joe Atkins (also based in Canada) met Mike and apparently the two got on like a house on fire. The brand synergy was obvious to both parties, and a deal was consummated when the equity relationship between B&W and Classé was finalised in 2003.

B&W soon found that what it had was in many ways a typical North American high-end brand. The styling was somewhat agricultural and, while some products were extremely good, there was a degree of inconsistency between models typical of a range that had grown piecemeal over a long period.

Another factor driving the Delta range design team was that the profile of Classé's distribution was changing, as smaller stockists

made way for B&W's existing distribution channel. It quickly became apparent that the typical customer of the brand was enthusiastic about the sound, but less enamoured of the styling and presentation. This is where the Delta range comes in. It includes (or soon will) an integrated amplifier, two pre-amps, five power amps, three AV processors, three disc players and an FM-RDS/DAB tuner.

Classé of 2002: this older, squarer-looking combination was the CP-65/CA-201



scheme underlines the association with the Classé family. Together with the high-resolution yet thoroughly engaging sound, and the self-evident ability to cope with difficult loads (even if the B&W 800D is a step too far), this makes the CP-500 and CA-12100 combination a remarkable package, one easily beaten by senior members of the Delta family, but not readily challenged at or near the price.

In North America these products, and the range to which they belong, will consolidate an already impressive reputation. In Europe and the UK, they will finally and irrevocably put Classé on the map. ■



The pre-amp's touch-screen [above] provides an elegant user interface: on the rear of both units, XLR connectors allow balanced operation

Supplier

B&W Group Ltd
01908 221500
www.classeaudio.com

Hi-FiNews verdict

Classé comes up trumps with a stylish, transparent and yet thoroughly engaging-sounding combination that's not readily challenged at, or near, the price. Refined and expressive yet with no lack of grip.

The Delta designs

Well-proportioned at 445 x 121 x 419mm (whd) and heavy (15kg), the CP-500 pre-amp has four single-ended line inputs (one can be converted for m-m/m-c phono use with optional plug-in boards that will enter production shortly), and two balanced-mode (XLR-based) inputs. Single-ended main and tape outputs are supplemented by balanced mode outputs.

Internally, the CP-500 is fully balanced from input through to output, and yes, this will include the phono stage. The CP-2100 power amplifier and most other Delta series components are similarly full balanced-mode components. Single-ended inputs are also treated internally as though they are balanced, and single-ended and balanced outputs are available simultaneously.

The CP-2100 power amplifier is packaged like the pre-amplifier, with identical external dimensions but this time with an all-up weight of 23kg. The words 'outhouse' and 'brick' spring to mind, not necessarily in that order.

Internally, the designs could be described as enhanced variants of earlier Classé products. The pre-amplifier has a large and sophisticated power supply, with a shielded, highly regulated toroidal transformer equipped with low-noise rectifiers and low-ESR bypass capacitors, a total of nine regulated supplies being available for the various circuit blocks.

The volume control is executed with two fully buffered constant impedance Burr Brown PGA2100 stereo volume control ICs operating back to back to maintain balanced mode operation, further improving common mode noise rejection (the key benefit of balanced operation). In common with the power amp, the

pre-amp is a dual-mono design, laid out in laterally symmetric mirror image fashion (reflected in the rear panel design) with the two channels electrically isolated. Internal design and layout are to the highest standards, using high-grade components, all the way from the choice of passive components down to the PC board and copper tracking.

The CP-2100 power amplifier uses JFETs and the input stage is consequently largely impervious to the input impedance of the source (and the contribution from the looped wiring). This eliminates the need for coupling capacitors while still ensuring low DC offsets. The voltage driver stage is executed with MOSFETs, and the output stage is bipolar.

In usual Classé fashion, the power supply transformer is a massive toroid (which accounts for much of the weight) with separate windings for each channel. This drives a reservoir bank consisting of multiple small value capacitors, which are inherently quick to charge and discharge. This is a key part of a 'fast' power supply design which in essence forces the amplifier to react to rapidly changing programme power levels. The power supply is said to be powerful enough to ensure that claimed output power doubles from 100 watts to 200 watts per channel when the speaker load impedance is

dropped from 8 to 4 ohms. The power amplifier operates in an enriched form of Class A/B biasing, with the quiescent current set so that the changeover from Class A to Class B, and the consequent appearance of crossover artefacts on the output, happens at about 30% of maximum output (around the 30 watt level) where it will in any case be well and truly masked by the volume level. 30 watts is very loud in virtually any system and in practice this level will not often be breached.

The amplifier is convection-cooled by massive external heatsinks on each side of the housing. Extensive output protection is handled by a dedicated processor, driven by its own independent power supply, which controls the DC servo system (used in lieu of coupling capacitors), and which takes input from a number of temperature and other sensors, switching the amplifier off if necessary. This never happened on test. The physical structure of both components is a mixture of aluminium and steel, and is designed to be a substantially stable and non-microphonic platform.

