

Sonneteer Orton Integrated Amplifier

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Sonneteer may not be a familiar company to many of my American compatriots, but they've been in business since 1994 and have a line of audio products receiving favorable reviews worldwide. There's something quintessentially British about the Sonneteer name, so when Arcadia Audio Marketing, Sonneteer's U.S. distributor, asked if I would like to review Sonneteer's flagship integrated, how could I refuse? The Sonneteer Orton integrated amplifier makes a fine first impression. Its solid steel and aluminum chassis is sleek and stylish, featuring an uncluttered fascia and anchored by a large volume knob located front and center. The anodized aluminum and stainless steel remote add to its attractive appearance. The review sample came in silver, but I am especially taken with the ruby color option shown on the website (other color options available).



Despite first-hand experience, I still conceive of Britain as a place of pubs and Guy Ritchie characters, where talking toads race sporty MG's in alleyways crowded with headmasters and dowagers. I pictured the Sonneteer Orton being designed by clever professors sporting Oxford tweeds and meticulously assembled by blokes in white BBC lab coats. Moreover, the Sonneteer website does nothing to dispel my illusions, describing the artisanal merits of its amplifiers thusly: "All Sonneteer products are assembled by hand with one person taking responsibility for each unit made. Not one single Sonneteer music playing product leaves the workshop without being listened to by one of the founders." In my mind's eye, I imagine pints of Samuel Smith Nut Brown Ale being raised while strains of "Rule Britannia" are sung in honor of each Sonneteer Orton being shipped out to represent Queen and country. Hey, plenty of German turntables and Japanese phono cartridges are sold here in the U.S., while a ton of gigantic American amps are sold abroad, so never discount the power of cultural stereotypes to pave the way for audio sales. Please, sir, I want some more!

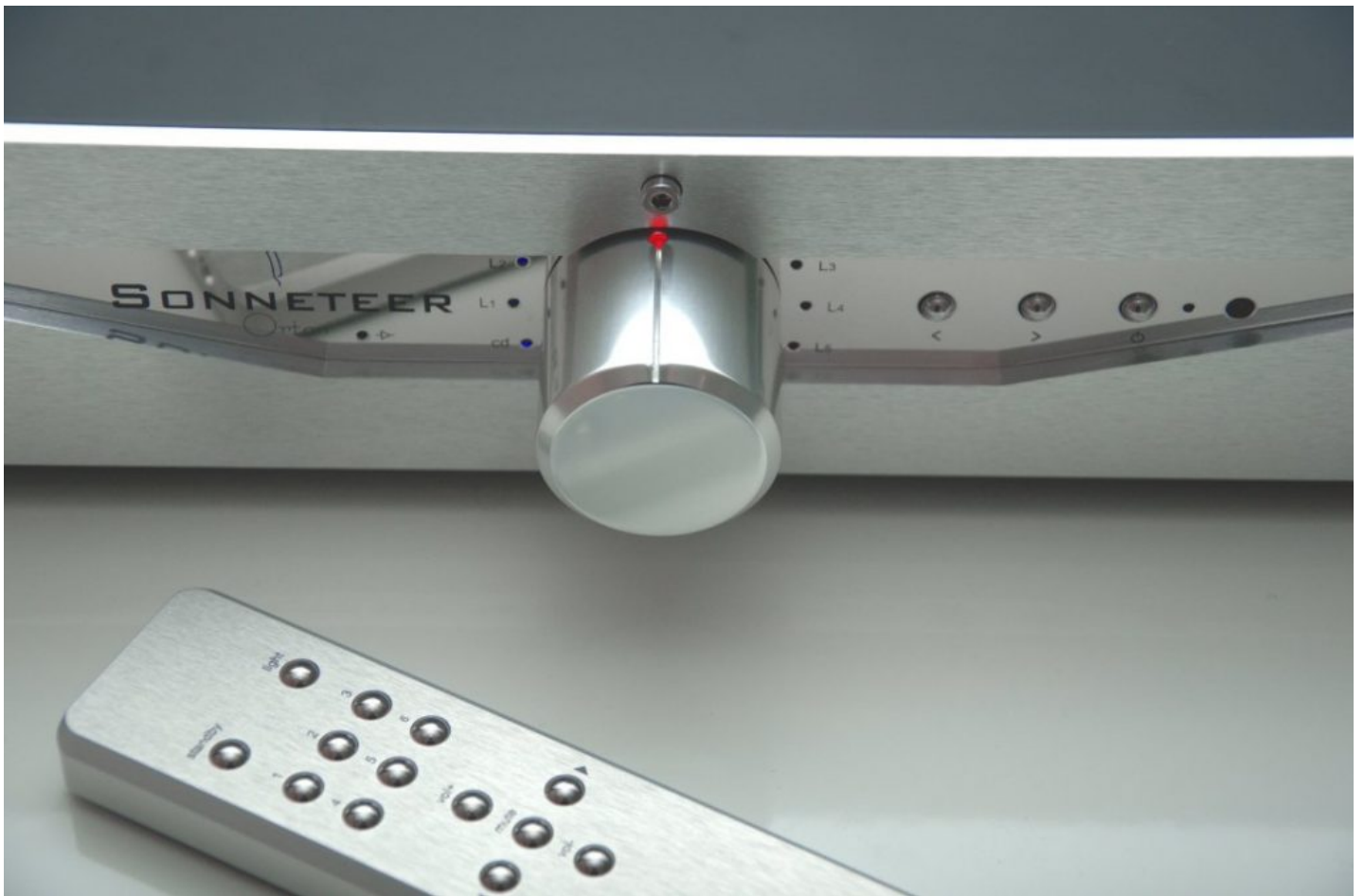
Sonneteer is more than a posh accent though, as demonstrated by the Orton's feature set, including a dual mono amplifier and a trio of power supplies to suppress noise and improve control. At 33 watts per channel into 8 ohms, I was a little unsure if the Orton would be well matched with either my Nola Contender or Triangle Antal loudspeakers. Turns out, the Orton had no problem driving either speakers; quite the opposite, actually. The fact that the Orton essentially houses two separate amplifiers inside its stylishly svelte chassis ensures that the Sonneteer is well-suited to all but the most demanding loudspeakers. Arcadia Audio's Scott Wylde adds that the Orton, "Has a reserve supply of 160VA per channel with a cascade capacitor set up which means juice is on tap whenever needed without delay and across the spectrum. It is a class A/B configuration with high biasing into A. Its power also doubles in 4ohm." Clearly, the Orton's design is focused on providing high quality amplification first, but still offering enough power to suit most needs.

The sophisticated polish of the Sonneteer Orton's appearance mirrors its sonic attributes. The Orton is firmly of the "Do no harm" school, in that, music flows with a seeming effortlessness that rarely has you concentrating on the amp itself. These virtues are evidenced when spinning "Don't Be Alone" by the self-described "folktronica" band, Spaceships are Cool. The tune, a melange of acoustic guitars and vocals, punctuated by an assortment of sputtering electronic splorks and quarks, could be unsettling in a system designed for pinpoint accuracy and precision timing. The Orton, however, conveys this traveling musical caravan with an ease that can only be

termed eminently natural. Yes, I get it, some folks prefer amplifier products that work hard to always remind you that they're working hard, but straining to wring out every audiophile cliché is a taxing experience for the listener. Plenty of exorbitantly priced amplifiers and speakers are tuned to produce goosebumps on every song from "Haffner" to "Happy Birthday." The astounding accuracy that makes you a willing listener to a reference recording of "One Tin Soldier" played on a wooden flute is rarely approximated in downmarket products. Too often, the attempt to capture that high end sheen results in an integrated that is super quick, super detailed, and super annoying. The Orton is none of those things, thankfully.

The Orton eschews flash and hews to the musical path, bundled up a little for warmth, but certainly not rushing headlong into wild sonic adventures. The Orton has no extraneous background noise that I can reliably discern, and its precision is one of greater control of notes across the speaker's range, as opposed to finding some undiscovered sonic nuance on say, the zils of a tambourine buried deep in the mix. Joao Gilberto's "Tin Tin Por Tin" contains plenty of low key vocal rhythmic counterpoints that works in time to the plucked guitar chords and string arrangement accents and keeps everything swinging. The Orton never missed a beat, so neither did Gilberto and crew.

Some well-known British companies (and a ton of American ones) make integrated amps that instantly impress you with the illusion of liveliness, but this is not the Orton's forte. Writing about gear requires a lot of critical listening, and I've found that it's not much fun to review products intent on making every song seem like an audiophile final exam. The Orton makes hearing the *Live at the El Mocambo* version of Elvis Costello's "I Don't Want to Go to Chelsea" a rollicking moped ride of New Wave rock 'n roll. I didn't feel shortchanged, and I felt just as satisfied listening to a better recorded tune like Stan Getz's "Blood Count." Sure, the Orton lives for a lovely jazz cut like this Getz classic, and there's no doubt that this is an integrated for those who prefer Norah over Nugent, but the Sonneteer still has another card to play. One thing that makes the Sonneteer Orton stand out is its impressive linearity. You get quite a lot at low volume levels, but the amazing thing about the Orton is how music continues to be cohesive and undistorted very near full volume. This is all the more amazing when you consider the Orton's relatively modest power rating. It should be noted here that my idea of loud might not be the same as someone cranking amps the size of steamer trunks to power a Monsters-of-Metal-sized speaker array. No doubt, you can go louder, but the Orton can teach plenty of amps of all sizes and at all price points a thing or two about the virtues of usable volume. If you're playing speaker-crunching orchestral pieces on your vintage Quads, well, the Orton's probably not the call, but if your speakers are reasonably efficient, you should be more than happy.



In case you're wondering when I'm going to roll out a suitcase of audio reviewer clichés to parse the Sonneteer Orton's sound, you'll be happy to know that it's unnecessary. Other than the aforementioned linearity, the best part of the Orton's overall sound is that it does everything very well. Soundstage, timing, tonal balance—none of it comes to mind during listening sessions because none of it calls attention to itself. Just music. The Orton is an extremely accomplished integrated, and should delight all who want to hear music, and not music gear.

The Sonneteer Orton Integrated High Fidelity Audio Amplifier

Retail \$3799

Sonneteer

<http://sonneteer.co.uk>

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