



Sonneteer Alabaster integrated amplifier with phono stage Audible luxury

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What explains the British ear? How is it that this people have produced such innovative music and so much consistently engaging audio gear? Genetics, education, the weather, or perhaps it's something in the tea? I'll keep looking for the answer, but in the meantime, allow me to present another audio company born from the

irrepressible musical talent of the British, and an integrated amplifier that may well be the last one you'll ever need.

Based in Guildford, England, Sonneteer maintains a low profile, preferring that its products speak for themselves. The company, established in 1994 by Haider Bahrani and Remo Casadei, two electronic design engineers, music lovers and



organizers of musical events in their spare time, grew out of a co-operation started when the two were university students. Dissatisfied with audio equipment available on the market at the time, Haider and Remo began building their own audio components. In Haider's final year of university, he designed a high-fidelity amplifier, in part to satisfy graduation requirements but also to assess the quality of his own music recordings. The prototype was so musical that his colleague undertook to transform it into a commercial product. Sonneteer went on to take the lead in developing a high-fidelity digital amplifier, the Bronte, and was the first company to adopt wireless transmission of high-quality audio, with the Bard line of products. As for vinyl, Sonneteer has kept their reference Sedley phono stage relevant by adding a USB input for recording vinyl in high resolution.

The Sonneteer brand has been on my radar for some time and, as chance would have it, the editor of this magazine asked if I would be interested in reviewing the Alabaster integrated amplifier. How could I refuse?

POWER AND MINIMALISM

Built entirely by hand in England, the Alabaster has been in production for well over fifteen years. The design approach is truly minimalist, optimized for its sole function of amplifying music in the most direct way possible. To this end, forget tone or balance controls, digital inputs or remote control. In their place, the Alabaster offers a solid 55 watts into 8 ohms and 100 watts into 4 ohms, derived from a 300 VA toroidal transformer. Add to that a phono

stage and a choice of passive and active inputs, a feature rarely seen on amplifiers, and you have the beating heart of a top-flight system. Intrigued by the passive inputs, I asked Haider about them and he explained that they were originally provided to offer different sensitivities when magnetic tape was an important source. The configuration remains relevant today because it will accommodate external phono stages with their substantially lower output levels than those of CD players or DACs. The Alabaster's five inputs are set at 11 k ohms impedance. Sensitivity of the active inputs (Tp and L1) is rated at 250 mVrms, while the passive inputs (DIR and CD) are rated at 470 mVrms. The fifth input (phono, L2) provides for moving magnet cartridges and offers a 1000-fold gain (47K @ 47pF).

The Alabaster's construction exudes strength and solidity. The elegant and understated front panel sports three substantial aluminum control knobs and a blue LED that indicates — with passion — that the amplifier is operational. On the rear panel, it's all business, with the IEC power receptacle, five nickel-plated RCA inputs, one RCA line output, a terminal block for grounding a turntable, and the beefy speaker terminals. These accept denuded wires or 4 mm connectors. No ventilation is provided in the Alabaster's casework to allow airflow through the chassis because Sonneteer believes that dust is electronics's worst enemy.

GETTING WARM

The Alabaster amplifies the input signal via bipolar junction transistors operating in complementary mode. Sonneteer prefers this configuration, considering it to be the simplest to manage and control in a circuit and less vulnerable to variability caused by heavy loads. According to Sonneteer, the amp doesn't need to be left on, as it achieves optimal performance after 15 minutes of warm-up. And does it warm up! While the amp is biased in class A/B, the lateral panels, which double as heat-sinks for the transistors, becomes almost hot to the touch. Haider explained to me that he prefers this arrangement as it maintains a constant thermal environment for the transistors, thus ensuring their longevity. Another benefit is greater stability of the amplifier's internal temperature and, therefore, less drift in the bias of the output stage. The result is a consistent sound quality.

The Alabaster's volume control is entrusted to a high-quality Alps potentiometer. Remember that a volume control is always in the signal path and that *increasing* the volume is in reality *reducing* the attenuation. Even with the best potentiometers, there can be a loss of resolution and accuracy in channel tracking when attenuation is high, i.e., when the volume is low. For this reason, Sonneteer suggests using one of the lower-gain passive inputs (CD or DIR), which allows use of the volume control in the range where its resolution and tracking are optimal.

As for matching with speakers, Sonneteer recommends a minimum sensitivity of 82 dB/W. Driving speakers that present a difficult load is not an issue here, as all Sonneteer amplifiers are designed to power speakers of very low impedance, even loads as difficult as 2 ohms.



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THE LISTENING EXPERIENCE

For the review, the Alabaster took the place of my reference integrated amp, the Naim SuperNait2. As a digital source, I opted for the Creek Audio Evo 50CD player/converter, a device that never fails to engage me in the music. I wish that I could tell you about the performance of the Alabaster's phono stage, but at the moment my LP12 is in need of a good tune-up... As for speakers, I hooked up the highly revealing Graham Audio's LS5/9s, reviewed in the previous issue of this magazine. Cabling was entrusted to the BIS Audio Vivat series, with a small detour to Naim's Super Lumina speaker cables. To power the Alabaster, I used either Naim's PowerLine cable or the cryogenically treated "Copper/Copper" power cable from Ice Age Audio. To compare the passive and active modes of the Alabaster, I ran several listening tests between the L1 and the DIR inputs. Although the active mode provided a little more punch, the benefits of the passive mode (using the DIR input) won me over, because I found real gains in listening ease and a better sense of communication with the musicians. I'll summarize the findings using six criteria that I've found meaningful. I generally avoid descriptions of sound, as I don't find them very useful indicators of involvement with music.

- **Immediate engagement with music ("Do I want to listen? Does the music speak to me?")**

Devoid of aggressiveness, the Alabaster does not impose itself on the listener, nor impart any particular character to the music. The Alabaster approaches the listener with a velvet glove. And you know what that usually hides. In his album *The Duke*, Joe Jackson pays tribute to the genius of Duke Ellington, a musical giant and one of the key figures in the invention of jazz. Of all musical genres, jazz provides the richest arena for combining and playing with different time signatures. The medley "I'm Beginning To See The Light/Take The 'A' Train/Cotton Tail" is reproduced here with stunning accuracy of the different signatures and a total control of dynamics. Normally I'm not a big fan of this form of jazz, but I truly rediscovered this disc that I had summarily filed away several years ago. The Alabaster has an uncanny ability to track rhythm, in the same calibre as Naim electronics, but with a touch of sweetness. This is a winning combination that digs out the musical message of many discs that can otherwise be difficult listening. While the amp doesn't gloss over bad recordings, it doesn't attract attention to a recording's faults, instead maintaining its focus, and the listener's, on the music.

- **Depth of the musical experience ("Does the amplifier let me understand why the artist plays the note the way he does?")**

In the review of the Graham Audio LS5/9s in the previous issue, I discovered the dark world created by Alan Wilder in



his Recoil project, where he skilfully mixes electronic music, voice and soundtracks. Returning to Recoil's *Unsound Methods*, the Alabaster takes me further into this music than my reference amplifier. The high level of definition, clarity and punch that the Alabaster provides render the black atmosphere of this disc even more powerful and malevolent. It's cinematic, grandiose and without confusion. The track "Luscious Apparatus" is delivered in all its unbearable splendour. Some music to calm the spirits is in order and I turn to Fat Freddy's Drop and the dub track "The Raft". The music simply grooves and soars, as I join the musicians on stage in this infectious music.

THIS AMPLIFIER HAS A REAL TALENT TO DRAW THE LISTENER INTO THE MUSIC. THE NATURALNESS OF THE PRESENTATION IS UNCANNY.

- **Listening ease ("No, surely I haven't been listening for three hours already?!")**

If we measure listening ease by length of the listening sessions, the Alabaster garnered very high marks. Frankly, I can't recall a disk that I couldn't listen to during the review period. Inevitably, each track that I cued up to test the different registers of the amp usually ended up leading to the entire disc, because the Alabaster systematically draws attention to the music and not the sound. If, on the

other hand, we measure listening ease by sound quality alone, the Alabaster has the warmth of a Class A amplifier with an alluring portrayal of fine detail. This type of presentation can be less impressive at first when in "analytical audiophile" mode, where the focus is purely on the sound. In my experience with the Alabaster, this phase passes quickly, because the amplifier has a real talent to draw the listener into the music. The naturalness of the presentation is uncanny: a phone rings in the recording and my wife gets up to answer it... A detail perhaps, but when reproduced sound is so easily confused with reality, we're definitely on the right track.

- **Ability to play at low volume and maintain interest (out of respect for family harmony, neighbours and our hearing faculties!)**

The Alabaster succeeds very well in maintaining interest at low listening levels, preserving its richness and its strong sense of rhythm. Many hours glided by with baroque music playing softly in the background, the bass very present and in balance with the music. The Alabaster preserves the feeling of tranquility, the silence that allows music to be born and to breathe in subtlety. While the amp kept my interest when listening at low volumes, its irrepressible musicality inevitably led me to stop working and devote myself completely to listening, so addictive was the music.

- **Ability to play at high volume effortlessly (feeling that the amplifier still has reserves, that dynamics do**

not suffer and that the musical discourse is preserved.)

The first track “Numb” from Andy Stott’s *Luxury Problems* starts with a looped sample of Alison Skidmore repeating the word “Touch”. After a few bars, Stott launches a huge looped wash of synthesized bass, like a machine trying to start up, then adds another, raising the tension notch by notch. I raise the volume again and again but the amp doesn’t flinch. The Alabaster not only maintains tight control of the bass, but also brings a welcome definition to the lower registers that reveals the rhythm of the bass synths intersecting and overlapping, perfectly setting the techno-industrial atmosphere of this disk. During my escapades into electronic music, rock, reggae and dub, I detected no hardening or compression. The reactivity of this amp is simply amazing, with an immediacy of attack that can be quite surprising at the transitions between quiet and muscular passages.



• **Realistic representation of music’s scale (While scale depends greatly on the speakers and the listening room, electronics also play their part.)**

Since setting up the Graham Audio LS 5/9s in my listening room, sound staging has grown substantially in all directions. In this context, the contribution of an amplifier to the realistic representation of scale is less marked in this system. Moving from my reference amplifier to the Alabaster, I could not detect any shrinkage of the sound stage. As for the differentiation of various layers of sound in the acoustic space—depth of staging if you prefer—again, no significant difference. As long as the recording provides for it, it is very easy to clearly picture the musicians, and the acoustic space surrounding them. Who better than the quirky (and very talented) Edgar Bori to illustrate this.

In the track “C’est mon métier” from his *Incontournable* album, Bori deploys his full sonic and musical arsenal for us to hear and virtually see this hilarious story of a “great repeat offender”. The Alabaster perfectly recreates the grandiose proportions of this track’s acoustic space within which Bori paints his sonic pictures. The rendition is completely effective, layered and separated just as it should be. At the end of the track, the marching bass drum enters from stage right, builds to a huge climax and exits stage left, portrayed here with the requisite impact and huge presence. As the sound echoes and dies away in the acoustic space, I’m left fulfilled and wondering just how things could get any better than this.

VERDICT

Never a false step, the Alabaster manages every time to transport the listener into the music with ease, grace and resolution. This integrated amp does not impose its presence, but convinces with a natural and insightful approach and a level of transparency unseen at this price point. Its rhythmic tracking is spot on and captures the pulse of any type of music without fault. Whether you need to immerse yourself in the splendour of classical music, the intimacy of baroque, the reverie of psychedelia, the calm introspection of meditation music, or any other musical space for that matter, the Alabaster will guide you with a sure hand. If

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the absence of a remote control gives you pause, I can heartily recommend rearranging your sound system to place the Alabaster within reach, allowing you to enjoy its tactility and its warmth! That’s what I’m doing, as the Alabaster is staying in my listening room. Besides, I need to investigate its phono stage, the presence of which, I should add, is a nice touch in an integrated amp of this price. If I had to summarize this amplifier in one statement, it would be its utterly reliable ability to draw me into music regardless of my mood. That is a rare talent and one that usually requires spending considerably larger sums of money. I can give it no higher recommendation.

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