

# Sonneteer Alabaster

Reviewed 5/18/2016 by Taylor Paul Deaton of Ember Audio + Video, Winston-Salem, NC.

We at Ember Audio + Video were very pleased to have some quality time with a truly wonderful product: The Alabaster integrated amplifier from Sonneteer. Sonneteer, meaning one who composes sonnets, is an apt name for this small company out of the UK which has since 1994 pursued a passion for crafting handmade audio electronics with an aim to achieve sonic excellence through careful engineering and beauty in simplicity. Rated at 55 watts into 8 ohms and 100 watts into 4 ohms, it delivers pure current along the simplest signal path possible, forgoing modern digital inputs and even a remote control (gasp!). However, what remains is an audiophile's dream - a hardy machine well-built and purposeful to its task of delivering all the crisp nuances in music without interrupting the signal path. Thus, one of the first words that springs to mind when turning on the Alabaster is presence. Presence. As in, this amp doesn't just take you to the concert, it puts you on the front row...maybe even a seat on the stage! The soundstage is grand and upfront, almost engulfing the listener. However, not without lack of depth, as the tones do indeed swell from a deep blackness extending back into the distance.

For this audition, I went with our Rega Saturn-R CD/DAC for the disk-spinner, and our newly acquired Rega RP6 with a Rega Exact 2 cartridge for our turntable. While initially the speaker choice were Dynaudio x18's, the highs were a bit too sharp once I put on an Ellington/Coltrane album on vinyl, and switched to Triangle Cometes, which were a great match for the Alabaster, sweetening out the high-end with their sublime horn tweeter while also providing ample clarity and detail. Excelling at bringing

out microdynamics, the Alabaster makes instruments and voices come to life. On a chamber music recording of Antonio Meneses and Maria Joao Pires at Wigmore Hall on CD, the complex resonance and decay of Pires' piano is deftly produced by the Alabaster, while Meneses' cello rings with harmonics and the textured bite of horsehair on strings. Within a few more classical and jazz recordings, it became very apparent that the Alabaster is truly an expressive and capable amplifier, bringing out superb details while also presenting each range and musical element in a balanced and separated package.



After spending some lovely time with my favorite classical and jazz recordings here at the shop, I was curious to find out how the Alabaster performed on the other end of the spectrum. Upon playing a newly re-issued vinyl addition of The Cars' Greatest Hits, the first thing that grabbed me were the wonderfully realistic percussion elements. Brilliantly timed and dynamic, the snares and high-hats were bold yet never overbearing, commanding the rhythm and breathing life into the upbeat tracks. Switching to another re-issue, this time

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Joy Division's seminal *Unknown Pleasures*, I was once again pleasantly surprised by how well the Alabaster handled modern rock. The Alabaster had already proven itself as a crisp and detailed conveyor of tone and microdynamics, and this was all too apparent from the first electric guitar note. The brilliant midrange and upper-mid control of the Alabaster delivered a lively and complex presentation of the rhythm and lead guitars, full of rich tone and true to the original production. The Pace Rhythm and Timing (or PRAT) through all frequencies was quite impressive, the Alabaster proved to be nimble enough to handle the racing drum, bass and piano on "Footprints" from Ahmad Jamal's *Live at the Montreal Jazz Festival 1985*, keeping the fast-paced track sounding distinct and musical.

The Alabaster is certainly an impressive sub-\$3,000 amplifier, and one that any listener seeking a great value in a well-built chassis should consider. Excelling in microdynamics, presence, and detail, the Alabaster will make your music upfront and lively, showing hidden gems in your recording and presenting them in a grand and dramatic soundstage. The machine is built from quality materials, with simplicity and perfection in mind, as is easily seen from the hefty dials on the face to the solid binding posts and inputs on the rear. With over 20 years of production under its belt for this specific amplifier, Sonneteer has devoted endless passion, ingenuity, and engineering mastery to making the Alabaster a rare and valuable product. Find a way to hear one yourself and discover why the best sound is always found when companies strive for manufacturing purpose-built electronics using only the highest quality materials and designs.