



Rolled Gold

Alvin Gold finds that beneath the smooth surfacing of Aurum's new A5, there's an integrated amplifier of glittering ability...

It may not be a household name, although the company seems intent on changing this as quickly as possible – Quadral hi-fi and home cinema speakers have been around now for about forty years, albeit in a fairly low key way in the UK as a dealer network has only recently been established following Quadral's UK relaunch at the Bristol show in early 2011. They have a better established following in other parts of continental Europe; the brand is designed and made in Germany, and has an upmarket reputation. Aurum is a parallel brand, also part of the Quadral group which specialises in loudspeakers and more recently elec-

tronics, specifically CD players and amplifiers, including the flagship A5 amplifier reviewed here. Once again these products are designed and built in Germany rather than being factored in the Far East, which is more common these days.

If you're wondering what this means in practice, just look at the numbers. Power output of this two channel integrated amplifier is nominally 100 Watts per channel – a little less in practice, the review sample topping out at just 78 Watts into 8 Ohms in the lab, and 115 Watts into 4, which is significantly less than the 3dB boost you can usually count on when halving load impedance. The price is firmly at the

other end of the scale at £2,875, plus £195 (a total of £3,070) if you want to include the optional remote control, a real surprise here considering that usually these days the remote handset is included as standard. The family to which the amplifier belongs includes a couple of matching CD players, the C3 and the previously mentioned C5, which can at least share a single remote control with the amplifier.

Trying to put a finger on the thinking that underpins the A5 is not entirely straightforward, as the literature provided is heavy on hyperbole, and light on straightforward facts. So the amplifier is described as a dual mono design,



with independent power supplies for each channel. Straightforward enough, but the amplifier has a “full scientific spectrum of circuit technology” resulting in an “enjoyable, outstanding listening experience” – make of that what you will! Input switching uses premium signal relays with gold plated contacts, which is standard practice at this end of the market, while the output stage uses a discrete output stage, which by the way has been virtually standard across the Marantz amplifier range for many years. The input stage is built around BI-FET op amps. The volume control is described as studio quality for improved channel matching.

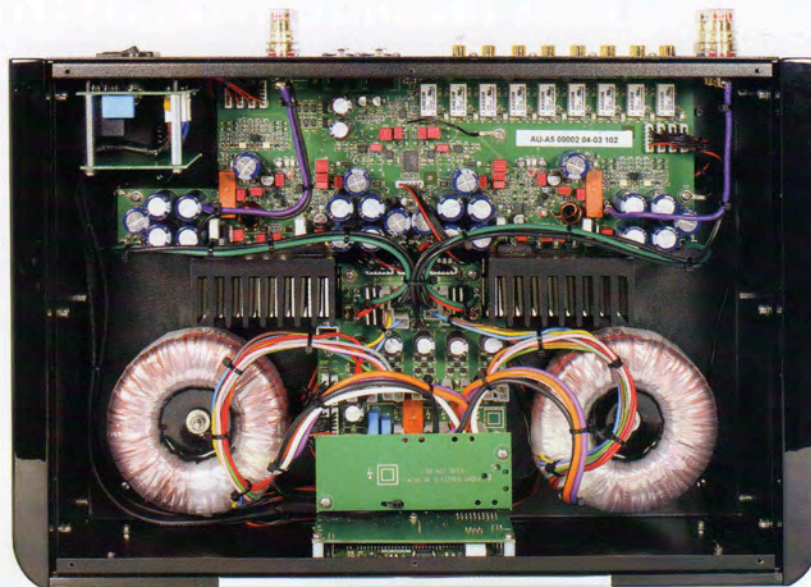
Other design highlights include surface mount technology, used to reduce signal path lengths, and for the audio signal path polypropylene films caps are specified rather than electrolytics, except of course in the power supply reservoir section and the output protection circuits are not allowed to impinge on the audio circuit path. The large, twin toroidal transformers have apparently been developed especially for Aurum Electronics, and use innovative spot welding technology and minimise electromagnetic fields. Broadband power filtering is used, whilst another special filter prevents annoying hum

from the transformers, the company says.

One strength of the Aurum A5 is that it is well endowed with inputs, including six line inputs (one labelled as a PC inputs though it used standard coaxial socketry, not USB), and a stereo-only coaxial DVD input. There is also an XLR based balanced input. There is no standard onboard phono input, though a phono stage can be connected of course. The range of user features is minimalist, though the player has a balance control, a mute switch, a means of

equalising gain through the various inputs, and another control to adjust display brightness. There's nothing important missing, but is it worth noting that Arcam among others offer almost identical features on almost their entire range.

In the flesh, the Aurum A5 is extremely solid and exceptionally well made – akin to some of the nicest Japanese super-integrateds, I'd say. It has an 'engineered feel' that gives confidence in its longevity. Vital statistics are 453x130x345mm, and it weighs 13.3kg.



SOUND QUALITY

Sonically, although subsonic performance is slightly curtailed [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE], there was nothing I could identify in the sound that pointed to this conclusion. Indeed the bass can only be fairly described deep, powerful and muscular. The A5 is a bold, authoritative sounding amplifier, with spacious stereo imagery with powerful orchestral material, and also with chamber music, which accounts for a substantial proportion of this writer's listening. The balanced



of an integrated. I found vocal quality to be especially graceful and open, imagery being solid and spacious, and this quality held up across a broad range of musical genres. The Aurum proved perfectly able to impart the delicacy of Jennifer Warnes' brittle

rather costly mainstream amplifier. It sounds punchy and dynamic, and it can be driven quite hard, though it is not the most powerful amplifier in its class, either on paper or in practice, though it never sounded weak. Although expensive, this is an amplifier that is capable of real subtlety and grace when required, perhaps a little ahead of expectations.

"an ideal one stop solution for those wanting a high level of performance without going down the more life-encroaching pre-power route..."

input was appreciated, the amplifier sounding a little more dynamic and powerful using this method of connection, with no obvious noise intrusion, which after all is what balanced operation is all about.

Highlights from my time with the Aurum included the following three examples. First, Mahler Symphony No 3, in particular the exquisite song-like fourth movement which is scored for an unusual combination of alto, a boys choir and orchestra, and the perfect riposte to anyone who say that you can't leave a Mahler concert humming the tunes. Next was Jennifer Warnes' Leonard Cohen tribute 'Joan of Arc' (from 'Famous Blur Raincoat', and accompanied by Leonard Cohen on this track), and finally a rather obscure Schoenberg String Quartet No 2 which features, yes, a string quartet (the LaSalle Quartet, and in the final two movements a soprano – Margaret Price in this case, in an attractive but striking modern piece.

Although our measurements indicate that there was some evidence of crossover distortion, its consistent distortion signature meant this wasn't intrusive in practice, bar a little harshness at very high levels. Indeed, the A5 was capable of real subtlety and grace when the occasion demanded – actually more than I'd expected from a big bruiser

voice, and the majesty of massed orchestra strings, for example. It seemed happy to swing from gentle, subtle, quiet programme material to swingeing orchestral crescendos, without ever sounding wrong footed. It all made for a safe, surefooted sound, but never a bland one.

The bottom line is that the Aurum A5 is a decently specified, if

CONCLUSION

In the new Aurum A5, here we have a beautifully made, lavishly finished 'super integrated' amplifier rather in the idiom of those you'd expect to see from Denon and Esoteric in Japan, or Musical Fidelity in the UK. It's precisely the sort of product that would appeal to those repelled by the idea of vast numbers of boxes in their listening room, yet want the sort of authority and poise normally offered by high end amplifier separates. Think of it as an ideal one stop solution for those wanting a high level of performance, without going down the rather more fiddly and life-encroaching pre-power separates route.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Aurum A5 produced 78 Watts into 8 Ohms under test and 115 Watts into 4 Ohms. With a high damping factor of 78 it possesses both power and control at low frequencies, so will likely sound quite tight and punchy.

Distortion levels were low in the midband but rose toward high frequencies in normal fashion, although this characteristic is becoming less common nowadays as transistor gain bandwidths increase allowing feedback to be maintained. The A5, however, exhibited classic crossover distortion at 10kHz that reached 0.12% at 1 Watt output. This isn't much though, and as signal level was increased from zero to full output that distortion pattern (i.e. transfer characteristic) remained reasonably stable, a good sign.

Input sensitivity was quite high via the phono inputs, measuring 270mV, but lower via the XLR inputs, likely to equalise for the high output from CD players. Overload occurred at 7V in so there's plenty of headroom in the balanced-to-unbalanced input buffer used.

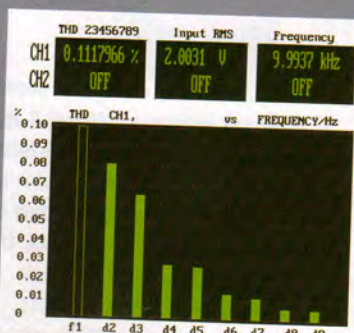
Frequency response was flat and wide, although subsonic response has been curtailed a little, but that is not

necessarily a bad thing if it ensures good d.c.stability.

The Aurum A5 measured well in every area. It is a competent modern design, if a little below what is possible. NK

Power	78 Watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	8Hz-50kHz
Separation	92dB
Noise	-96dB
Distortion	0.12%
Sensitivity	270mV
Damping factor	78

DISTORTION



VERDICT Highly capable and unerringly competent large integrated with superb build and finish.

AURUM A5 £2,875
Quadral
 +44 (0)1785 748 446
 www.quadralgb-ie.co.uk

- FOR**
- strong bass
 - dynamic headroom
 - spacious soundstaging
 - midband subtlety
 - build, finish

AGAINST
 - price