

Duel?

Integrated amplifiers in the higher price range without a RIAA stage is one of the best buys out there. With a built-in RIAA this should turn out to be an even better buy!

Integrated amplifiers are almost invariably put together from much more expensive preamps and power amps with only tiny compromises in sound quality and flexibility of use. That they also are far easier to place in your living room is hardly a disadvantage either. In addition, you save the expense of a set of signal cables and a power cord which by no means are cheap if you want to give your sound system optimum working conditions. In this price range, reasonable signal and power cables can easily set you back between 5000 and 15000 Kroner (650 and 1900 EUR – ed.).

In this issue of Fidelity we have chosen two of the most interesting integrated high-end amplifiers on the market, both with roots in Denmark even if one of them is assembled this side of the Great Belt Bridge (the bridge between Funen and Zealand in Denmark – ed.). Funnily enough it is the most moderately priced amp that uses tube technology – and even has a seriously expensive RIAA tube stage built-in – while the twice as expensive transistor-based amp is a rare bird that has the simplicity of the tube construction in common inasmuch as it only uses two output transistors per balanced channel. This means one single transistor for the plus signal and one for the minus.

The reviewers Jan Myrvold and Haakon Rognlien are both avid admirers of tube sound, but none of them are fanatic and both have various transistor amps among their personal possessions. Both were extremely happy with their test objects, but while Haakon had to choose between a limited selection of speakers that could function optimally with the completely new 50 watt tube amp from Copland, then the even more elegant GamuT will simply drive anything you attach to it.

Even though it was Haakon who first time round was most ecstatic about his test object; after all, he did get tubes, RIAA stage and a stylish amplifier at half the price of the competing transistor amplifier, then the GamuT showed a heady mix of dynamic contrast, smoothness and crystal clear transparency on our reference system in a way that no integrated amplifier before it has been able to achieve. Not to mention the incredibly beautiful design too.

Declaring a winner would in any case be meaningless... but we can do the next best thing: let both the writers make a "second opinion" about the other amplifier without knowing what the original reviewer wrote. This should leave a sufficient amount of subjective information from different sources to allow YOU to choose your own favourite...



Great Dane!

Danish GamuT Audio is ready to fight for the well-heeled audience with real integrated integrity. DI150 is in fact a direct descendant from the highly acclaimed D3 and D200 models. Best in show?

How do they manage to pull such a stunt off, our good neighbours on the other side of Kattegat (the water dividing the Scandinavian countries – ed.). I mean, being able to deliver a beast of a 180W integrated dual-mono stereo amplifier with a birth weight of a not inconsiderate 31kgs and still not come up with a result easily mistaken for a medium-sized heavy-duty welding unit or other space-craving artifacts with logos like Atlas Copco or Caterpillar?

GamuT has this time come up with a product on the heavier side of hi-fi spectrum which still ought to stand a good chance of obtaining a fully approved immigration visa from the self-proclaimed authorities within the household ministry of interior. In any case, shoe-horning such a considerable number of well-dimensioned electronic components inside a cabinet which ultimately doesn't take up more living room space than for example an Electrocompaniet CD-player is in my opinion both an impressive and a well executed effort. And it must be said that the Danes have for so many years mastered the art of discretion when it comes to interior design. However, let's continue with the case in question.

Direct descendant

Some time ago, GamuT's boss Poul Rossing persuaded Frederik Johansen – ex-head of production at Holmi and later Thule Audio – to join the company and lead both R&D as well as production. One of the first serious tasks was to construct an integrated amplifier with the least possible number of compromises solidly based on the company's sound philosophy and tradition. Johansen approached the assignment according to the "you take what you've got" principle. No bad idea at all when you consider the fact that GamuT

has received the highest acclaim across the world for both the preamplifier D3 as well as the D200 power amplifier. The challenge obviously lay in coupling the input board from the D3 with the output modules of the D200 in one single cabinet without having to revert to larger compromises in sound terms. At the same time, the exterior clothing needed to look living room-friendly modern yet with timeless appeal to ensure a vast dose of WAF (Wife Approval Factor – ed.).

Therefore, this was no small challenge for GamuT, and it turned out to take the better part of one year's hard work before Mr. Johansen and his gang of dedicated colleagues decided they were satisfied with what they saw on the drawing board. With the ancestors' relatively conservative and stocky design in memory, one must conclude they so obviously have succeeded.

Product of its time and also a classic

Truth be told, an amplifier of this size will never be able to become the definition of the term discrete. After all, the various componentry does take up ample space in order to deliver the specs that any GamuT DI150 boasts of. We're talking a power source that the constructor claims is capable of yielding two times 180W at an 8 Ohm load which is doubled to 360W at 4 Ohms. Presumably, this is a conservative estimate in true GamuT style, and I know that the Norwegian distributor has until now measured every single unit they have received so far, and all have shown around 220W per channel at 8 Ohms load.

Equally full-bodied in physical presence but in no way brash or dominating, I have found a place for it on the extremely solid bottom shelf of my Pagoda rack from Finite. It definitely does have visible presence but not to a degree that should



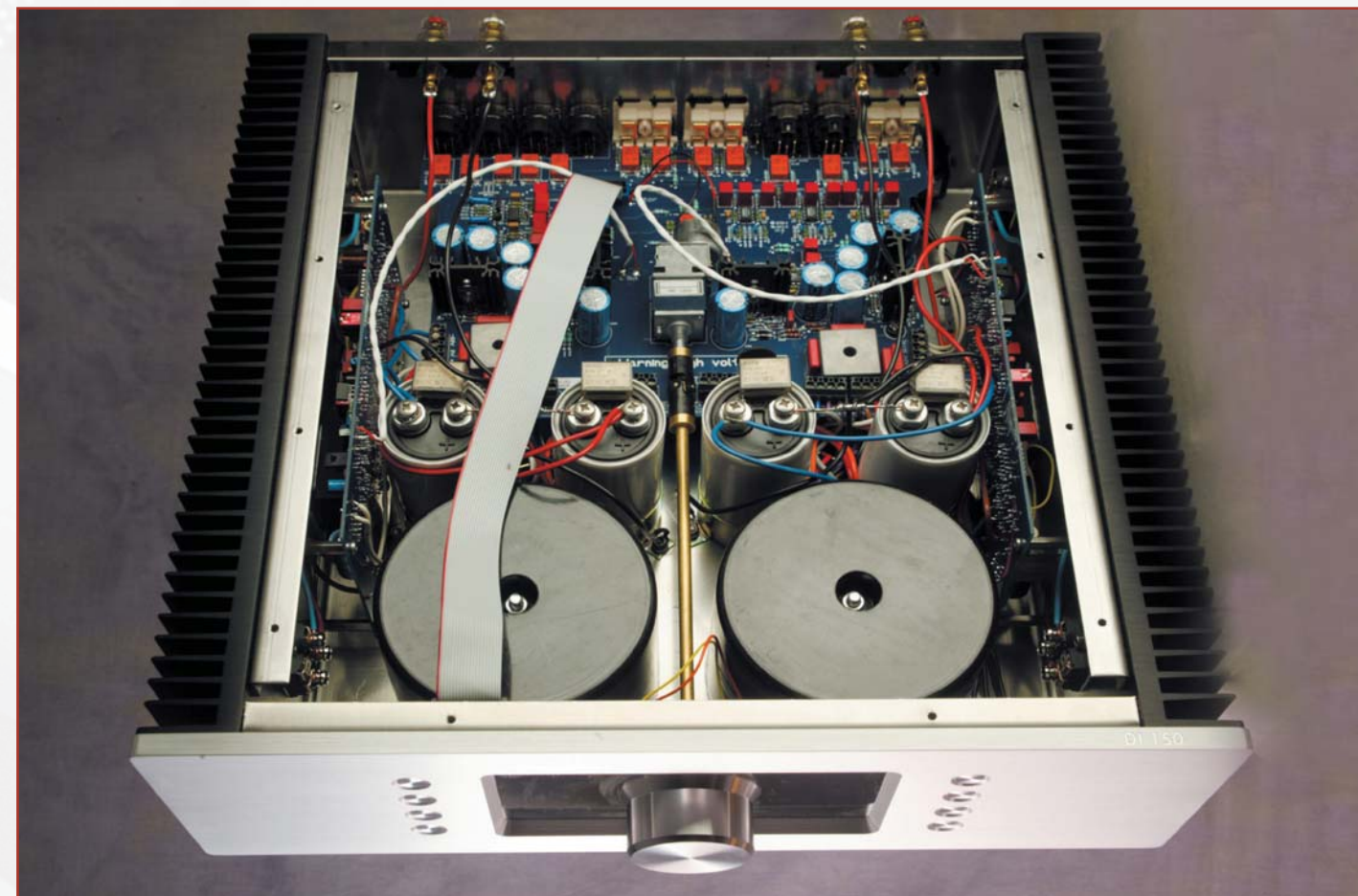
By Jan Myrvold

cause any disturbance worth mentioning. I find it distinctly photogenic and even without looking over the shoulder of the heavy price tag, you have this more than sneaking suspicion that this is a thoroughbred animal of high pedigree.

A huge volume wheel-knob is placed in the middle between two vertical rows of blue diodes marking input selection and amp mode respectively. The mentioned diodes are mounted behind a silver mirror screen which again is set inside the front plate itself. Incidentally, I can reassure any persons toting their personal Elvis-bag of recreational goodies who might shy away at the merest hint of any kind of blue luminance in the near vicinity: the display can be dimmed either by a button on the front panel or via the included remote control.

The input selection can be performed either with the aid of the mentioned electronic magic wand or by activating the lavishly embedded and symmetrically arranged pushbuttons on the amplifier's front. The entire unit rests safely, softly and calmly on four solid feet cushioned with vibration-dampening material. Let it be mentioned for the sake of good order that the assembly quality just like the exterior finish appears to be of formidable quality both inside and outside. The front plate, like the whole unit itself, absolutely conveys the impression of following classical high-end traditions of not wanting to allocate space for non-essential details of any kind. The mains power switch is located neatly and tidily on the chassis itself, almost too discreetly hidden behind the front plate, and it actually took this journalist quite a while before everything was figured out. Allow me to defend myself by explaining the amplifier was delivered late in the evening at my home with neither packaging material of any kind (I constantly wonder what my neighbours may think about this and many similar suspicious episodes), nor user manual or any other relevant information. Regardless, this is one stylish, sober, elegant and functional piece of work.

You can control all the amplifier's various functions with the included remote control and apparently also the company's various digital source products. In stark contrast to the amplifier itself, the remote control is small, light, and quaint. It bonds well with your hand, and the various command buttons are ergonomically and sensibly laid out. It functions well too with one notable exception: volume adjustment. The test unit could not in any way be persuaded to travel past the ten o'clock setting! It stopped there – every single time. Fortunate for my neighbours, of course, but surely this cannot be thus designed on purpose? If this is the new continental standard, then I for one will cast a sure vote against Norwegian member-



ship of the European Union at the next election.

Plenty of options

If there is ample space on the front, the opposite is naturally the case on the rear panel. Unavoidable when the constructor wishes to offer the user plenty of connectivity options. The white-coats at GamuT have found room for a respectable six inputs. Two of these are in fact fully balanced circuits with XLR connectors. The remaining four are single-ended RCA's. These latter four are marked CD, tuner, tape, and HTH. A fairly blonde member from the more peripheral end of my society circle was a little confused to learn that the moniker HTH had not the slightest thing to do with a Scandinavian kitchen interior manufacturer of the same name, but in fact was a widely accepted abbreviation for the term "Home Theatre". Owners of multi-channel processors may therefore in temporary glimpses of clear-sightedness enjoy the opportunity of listening to their favourite music through a good old-fashioned stereo setup. But I sincerely permit myself to doubt that many such devices exist that can compete with DI150 in pure sound terms without costing considerably more than this saucy and very tasty tidbit.

It is also possible to use the DI150 as a pre-amplifier alone. This enables the user to lead a fully balanced signal through the XLR outputs into an external power amplifier. Among the other outputs available, there are single-ended outputs as well as a standard tape out. For the speaker outputs, you will find screw terminals of very high standard, namely fully insulated WBT's. So far so good, right?

Well, almost, but there are a couple of irritating points that offhand could have been avoided through negligible compromises. More specifically, this concerns the quality of the speaker output terminals. There is absolutely nothing wrong with the quality of the components themselves, but due to the massive amount of plastic insulation involved when using stiffer types of speaker cables, it will undoubtedly cause uncomfortable fitting when used in combination with normal spade type connectors. On a GamuT DI150, this means that the right-hand speaker cable somehow needs to be bent sharply around the mains cable and the pre-out terminals, whilst the left speaker cable in most cases will block access to one of the balanced inputs. However, none of this is an issue if you use a banana type plug, so these softly muttered grumbles are in reality no more than idle nitpicking. But it always feels so incurably great for a review critic to fume and then fume some more over products in this price range no matter how insignificant the "problem" may be!

Setting up

My rectangularly shaped listening room is about four metres wide and six metres long, fairly moderately furnished with heavy velour curtains in front of the window area that makes up the rear wall. The room is relatively well dampened with different types of carpets on the walls and the floor. Here, The GamuT DI150 was set up resting on its solid chassis inside my Finite Pagoda Signature rack and furthermore equipped with Cerapuck dampening feet. As program source I have exclusively used Electrocompaniet EMC1

with a 24-bit/192kHz upsampling DAC on top of a dampening platform from Base Technology. The loudspeakers used were Amphion Xenon. Power cables were mainly Kimber PowerKord 10 Gold, and T+A Speaker 8 loudspeaker cables. On the signal side, I used WireWorld Equinox III+ and T+A Silver F (single-ended RCA). The balanced cables were Black Magic and Kaleidoscope Phase II Xseries with active screen.

From a personal preferential point of view, I feel I got the best results with the latter signal cables but the difference from Black Magic to T+A is in no way very dramatic. Especially when we bear in mind that the two last mentioned cables only cost around a quarter of the Synergistic's price. All did a fine job, but I feel that Synergistic had a little more control and at the same time had more air and resolution in the higher end of the sound picture. With WireWorld you get a little warmth, body and richness as a trade-off against extreme resolution.

During the entire test period the GamuT DI150 has behaved flawlessly and has in no way embarrassed itself with problems or neurotic behaviour of any kind. All in all, it appears extremely dependable mechanically as well as in construction design.

Beautiful sound

Despite the gripes concerning the speaker cable connection, when everything is hooked up and the GamuT DI150 is in operational mode, fully run in and warmed up, you quickly tend to forget any annoying factors in its constructional layout. This is quite literally beautiful sound! In front of the lis-





tener a huge panorama is conjured up traversing the whole width and height of the room – and not least depth! This listener cannot anywhere in his subjective supremacy and cognitive poverty even remember having heard any integrated amplifier offer such space and holographic reproduction of music.

The preamplifier part of GamuT DI150 is designed as a hybrid between FET and op-amp, which very probably is the explanation behind the quite frankly heavenly resolution and the glass-clear transparency dyed into the sound imagery. Using true dual-mono principles with separate power supplies for each channel probably hasn't hurt the aforementioned parameters in any way, because in sound terms this is qualitatively all the way up there in the same class as mono-blocks or separate pre-/power solutions from the more esoteric price ranges.

And it is more than simply the GamuT DI150's soundstage dimensions that impress. The music is presented with both raw power and eloquent elegance. The base tones physically hit you in the solar plexus region with weighty conviction as well as a clear articulation, but you still can't help sitting there with a feeling of something soft and lovable. An amplifier like Krell 400i may well kick harder and might possibly display a smidgeon of faster base tone transient speed, but it definitely

lacks part of the GamuT DI150's refinement in return. (Haakon Rognlien had the opportunity to make a direct side-by-side comparison, so please read his second opinion)

I perceive GamuT as being an amplifier that presents itself with an air of aristocratic sophistication on a very high level. As far as I know, all GamuT power amplifiers are constructed from one single monstrously sized MOSFET between the power supply and the speaker output, so I believe that some of the reason for this silky reproduction lies here. The GamuT DI150 comes across completely without edginess in any part of the frequency scale and reproduces the music smoothly and naturally with seamless transitions whilst maintaining fabulous control all the time. Everything in the music is contained precisely within its framework and nothing is allowed to run off in a wrong direction, and between the transients you find absolute silence.

In addition, airiness and resolution in the mid-range is simply remarkable with this amplifier. Soundstage and depth quality have already been mentioned here, and the music is opened up for the listener layer by layer. When listening to Jackie Leven's fantastic album "Elegy for Johnny Cash" it seems several times as if the music frees itself completely from the speakers and floats out to embrace the listener from all sides. This is an

album that also reveals that GamuT DI150 can deliver both voluminous box resonance and impressive micro-details in close-up recordings like feather-light touches during the playing of string instruments. The recording room is sketched up in front of us and can be sensed with almost visual realism.

In every single case, the musicians in the various phonograms are given ample arms' space while at the same time they are placed with millimetric precision in their respective places. We're therefore talking superb micro-detailing and a finely polished almost frictionless overtone structure here.

Also the critical presence range around 2 kHz is experienced without accentuation or uncomfortable harshness. The great resolution and airiness combined with the ever so slightly warm tonal balance makes the GamuT DI150 an excellent purveyor of human voices. The impression of broken glass never gets on your nerves and presents most of the libretto with clear and clean articulation, obviously dependent on the recording quality. However, it can definitely be ruthless and revealing, and even though it generally is perceived as being rather soft-spoken, it definitely doesn't conceal any problems under the carpet. If the recording is of inferior quality, it will definitely tell you so. Exactly like our spandex-clad hero from

the Skull Cave – hard against the hard!

There is in fact a lot in the midrange reproduction that may remind you of tube amplifiers of exceptional quality, but when truth be told may have to surrender on singular parameters under the given physical circumstances and in direct comparison to my personal setup consisting of an EAR/Yoshino 864 preamplifier and a Conrad Johnson Premier 140 power amplifier, which both contrary to the DI10 are tube constructions. GamuT DI150 need not in any way feel ashamed of itself, because this particular setup costs around forty thousand Norwegian Kroner more (about 5000 EUR – ed.).

In this case, it might seem more relevant to compare with other transistor-based designs like Dynamic Precision C1b/A1b, Musical Fidelity NU-Vista M3 or kW 500, Chord CPM 2600, just to mention a few from approximately the same price range.

And finally, a few words on the treble reproduction. Yet again with the GamuT DI150, we are exposed to a formidable resolution with outstanding outspokenness with an insanely glittering and soft-as-a-kitten attitude. When Ed Thigpen makes use of his apparently digitally controlled ball-bearing wrists to whisk his snare drum or lazily tap his cymbals, the ears of this ecstatic audio scribe are tickled playfully and sensually. The brass sounds

so newly polished, ringing and jingly clear that it almost brings a bout of nickel allergy long solely through the disturbing associations that force themselves forward. Friendly on the ear to the end of the world and back but does not in any way sound dampened or typically rounded off. Just soft and serene exactly like the rest of the sound imagery.

Conclusion

GamuT DI150 is one of those products that with its elegant design, uncompromising build quality and specifications, plus not least its pleasant and harmonic music reproduction and lovely tonal

characteristics, is capable of bringing forth lighter cases of delirious euphoria with die-hard HiFi- and music enthusiasts. Clearly, this is a seriously sharp competitor to anything and everything on the market today in the price range from fifty to a hundred thousand Kroner (6000 to 12000 EUR – ed.)

The only type of uneasiness you might risk feeling is your bad conscience when your desperate piggy-bank in a thrashing wild state of panic is trying to phone both the local RSPCA office and the mental crisis centre! The more I listen to a GamuT DI150, the more I want to own one.

GamuT, a second opinion?

Heavy and solid, elegant and well built, can the GamuT impress me in sound terms too, I wonder?

By Haakon Rognlien

I'll come straight to the point: Yes, it can! It impresses me right to the point of euphoria; it shows me with all possible clarity that more and more understand what good HiFi is all about. GamuT has with its eye-wateringly expensive integrated amplifier actually put a few markers on the map that depressingly few other units can measure up to, and this is the first time I hear an integrated amplifier do what this one is capable of.

I hear a silky smooth amplifier with enormous power in the nether regions, and especially in the lowest octaves it has an unrelenting and brutal power at its disposal that makes the wholeness of the experience so very alluring. I will try to describe this through some of my regular music examples. On live jazz from Opus 3 (The Talk of the Town, Erskine) we are gifted with a very open and airy reproduction; a minute tendency towards energetic exaggeration in the higher octaves is literally so easily forgiven because it is so silkily smooth.

Lower down, we get a unique insight into the midrange; tendencies towards a little coolness are detectable, but this is well within the boundaries of normality. This makes saxophones sound harmonic and very detailed; soundstage and presence are simply top of the class regardless of price comparison. And the bass.

Mid-bass is a fraction refrained, whilst the deep bass is absolutely in a class of its own for an integrated amplifier. This doesn't show up so clearly on the above-mentioned recording, but on "I play bass" we experience a completely new dimension when the am-

plifier takes control over the lemmings and brutally shoves them down into the deepest ravine. Awesome!

Equally, the Rainbows' "Insatiable" is completely transformed by this deep bass; it feels almost so threatening that it becomes a mix of pleasure and downright fear and I am completely lost in awe. That's how rock should be!

Now it's time for those difficult female voices, and yet again GamuT excels with its fabulous openness and midrange control. I have to admit it doesn't quite have the intensity and nerve that the best tube amplifiers can show, but on the other hand it displays such elegance and openness that it in some ways elevates itself above these petty trivialities that our hobby-world consists of. The mentioned control is at its best when it comes to larger orchestras; one thing is that a piano sounds so real that you hardly believe your ears, but furthermore the continuation of this is the absolute control over positioning, dynamics and tonal coloration from an entire symphonic orchestra. Unsurpassed by any other integrated amplifier.

Another important aspect is that this amplifier never becomes harsh or tiring to listen to despite the mentioned fact that it is slightly enthusiastic in the treble frequencies and (in contrast to a Krell KAV 400 xi) a somewhat restrained mid-bass. Actually, because of this, it does some things better than any other amplifier I have ever listened to. With only a smidgeon of doubt, I think I will have to announce this integrated amplifier to be the best rocker the audio business has to offer. And if that wasn't enough in itself, I will any day of the week admit that this is by far the best integrated amplifier I have heard to this day. If I were to exchange the Krell KAV 400 xi for something new, then I think my savings would end in Denmark. This is HiFi of the absolute highest caliber, no less!