



Power Play

Old fashioned analogue or new swanky digital? Tony Bolton listens to two 60 W amplifiers that look alike but do it all very differently.

Here we have two amplifiers from respected and established manufacturers that, on paper at least, seem quite similar. Both claim 60 Watts per channel into an 8 Ohm load, and come in similarly sized boxes available in either silver, or the black of these examples. However a closer look reveals that is where any similarity ends. This is not a comparative review, price differences meaning the amps are not in direct competition with each other. What we're looking at here is how two units with similar claimed power outputs, but at different price points, do their respective jobs – that of reproducing music.

First up is the Audiolab 8200A, priced at £729.95. This is the latest incarnation of the well known 8000 model which dates back to 1983. This new model certainly has a family resemblance to its predecessor but comes with a variety of features that bring it into the 21st century.

The internals have been reworked somewhat and now include a DC Servo and hand matched J-FETS on the output stage, which are also isolated from the main power supply. The pre-amp section is totally discrete, and the input and mode

switches are operated via gold plated and bi-furcated contacts of high quality relays.

It offers good connectivity with six line level inputs and three record level outputs from the two tape and the video connections (although these are not full tape loops, so monitoring of an actual recording is not possible) and the ability to listen to one source while recording another via the separate Record and Listen controls on the front. A rotary

"I should be curled up on a rug in front of an open fire with a glass of wine and someone cute beside me to listen with"

switch on the front allows the unit to operate as either a pre-amp or a power amp, or it can be incorporated into a multi-channel A/V system. It can also be run as a conventional integrated amp as was done here. The instructions covering this are clearly laid out in the enclosed handbook. Two pairs of pre-out sockets and a power-in pair are located at the back. Headphone users will appreciate the

socket located on the front panel.

The remote control is a multifunction unit which will also control any other Audiolab equipment. It proved responsive, allowing small changes in volume (controlled by an Alps motorised volume control) to be made accurately.

Moving a bit further up the price scale to £1350, we come to the Densen B110 Plus. This Class D amplifier hails from Denmark

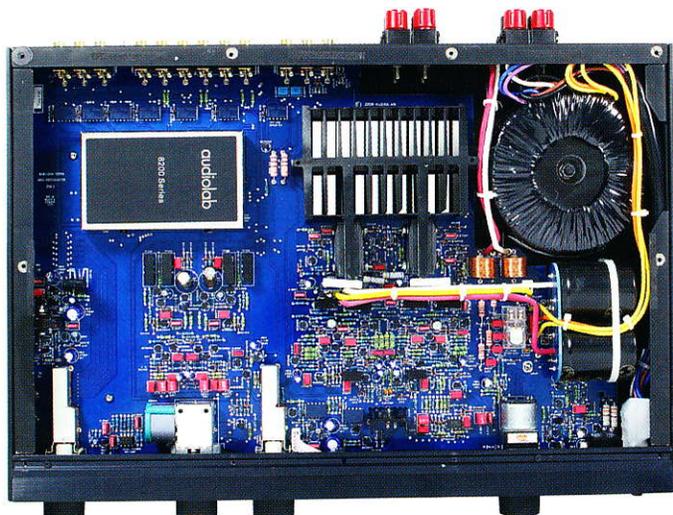
and is the entry level model in the company's range. The B110 has been in production for nine years, but was upgraded to Plus format only a year ago. This model features an attenuator for the volume control, made from 0.1% Vishay metal film resistors, which operates over 200 (0.5dB) steps allowing for extremely precise setting of the level.

Again, flexibility is the order of

the day with the options of either MM (£150) or MM and MC (£225) phono stages being built in. Other options include extra circuit boards which allow for up to 7.1 surround sound usage, should you so require.

This example came in standard form, with the only extra being the 'Gizmo' remote control which costs an extra £150. Again this proved a practical device to use, with good response to the volume buttons, and also having the advantage of not needing to be aimed at the amplifier to make it work. It comes with rechargeable batteries, and like the amplifier carries Densen's 'Lifetime Guarantee' which is valid to the initial purchaser, but not transferable to second hand buys.

The facia controls are minimalist, being a series of silver buttons to select source, volume and various options including equalising the relative volume levels from different components.



Audiolab 8200A boasts Alps Blue motorised volume control (right).

Although the two boxes are similarly sized, measuring 445 x 335 x 74mm (Audiolab) and 444 x 310 x 64mm (Densen), the former is made of steel whilst the latter's casework is aluminium.

Inside the BI 10, the circuit boards are made of Teflon with surface mounted components. Alongside are custom wound transformers and a power supply with 60,000µF of capacitance. There is also the option of the DNRG external power supply (£550) which takes over powering the pre-amp section, leaving the onboard PSU to deal with the power-amp section alone.

Following my usual running-in process I settled down to some comparative listening to see where spending £730 and £1500 (including remote) took me musically.

Listening to the Audiolab first,



Both Audiolab (top) and Densen have plenty of inputs, but the Audiolab has provision for bi-wire loudspeaker connection.

I was surprised at the size of the sound. It seemed big and quite bold, with a very deep and floor shaking bass performance. Playing the Stravinsky piece, I found the rhythmically bowed strings near the start had a satisfying degree of attack, and the whole performance had a certain intensity which suited the music.

Moving onto Sinatra's 'Songs

and big open soundstage more suited to this style of music. The same also applied when I played a CD of Danish progressive trance group Antix and their 2003 album 'Null'. With the bass cones of my Chario loudspeakers merrily bouncing, it took very little increase in volume to provide that big, all enveloping "club" sound that suits this sort of music.

Moving over to the Densen provided a totally different take on these tracks. The Stravinsky was reproduced on a somewhat smaller scale, which did not detract from the music but caused me to listen into it rather more. This time there was less emphasis upon the lower notes and rather more focus on the midrange and higher frequencies.

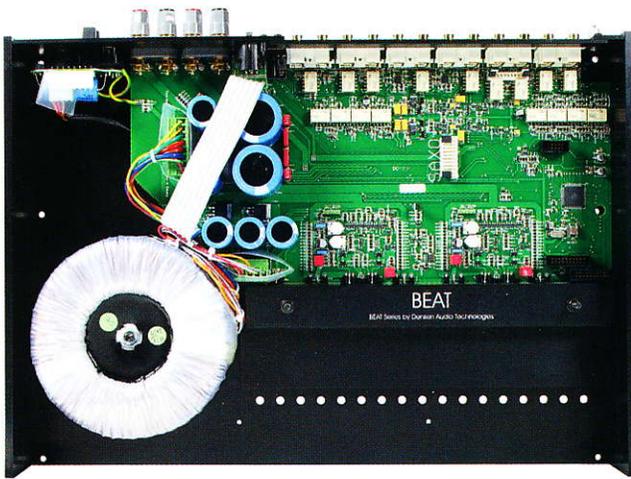
Violins had a slight edge to them, which could provoke slightly uncouth sounds if this amp was used with more forward sounding speakers, such as the Piega Premium 1s which I reviewed a couple of months ago.

Again 'Le Sacre du Printemps' proved an intense ride, conjuring up images of pagan rites in a foreign and intriguing world. The soundstage was a bit more compact than the open cavern provided by the Audiolab, but I felt that there was greater stage depth in this sound, that displayed the orchestra as a combined unit, rather than distinctive groups of musicians.

This perceived sense of intimacy worked well with the Sinatra LP, leaving me with the feeling that I should be curled up on a rug in front of an open fire with a glass of wine and someone cute beside me to listen with. The timing had an easy, relaxed flow that was both subtle and beguiling, and the increased high frequency detailing provided by this amp allowed little details in Nelson Riddle's orchestral accompaniment to be examined more clearly. The downside of this being the inevitable intrusion of some surface noise from a moderately worn disc.

The Hendrix LP and Antix CD sounded detailed and quite intense in their presentation, although the latter





Densen B110 Plus uses efficient Class D, so lacks large heat sinks.

certainly seemed a little constrained by the smaller soundstage and less bass driven presentation. Both were enjoyable though, and the greater intimacy of the sound again made me more aware of smaller details in the mix that the Audiolab occasionally glossed over.

CONCLUSION

Each amplifier will win friends in the marketplace. I felt that the Audiolab would suit slightly bass light systems, and could add a sensation of power and energy to rock and dance music that will please fans of these genres. It felt a little bold in its presentation of smoother, less punchy music, and would not

be my first choice for something gentle such as chamber music or folk. But then Audiolabs were always known for their big, bold sound and the 8200A continues the tradition...

With chamber music and suchlike the Densen came into it's own. It proved adept and detailed with classical and displayed an excellent ability to get into the swing of rhythms, but when called upon to deal with the driving excesses of modern dance music or large

REVIEW SYSTEM
 Clearaudio Master Solution/ Magnify/ Benz Wood SL
 Leema Acoustics Agena phonostage
 Antilla IIS Eco CD player
 Chario Ursa Major loudspeakers

scale classical pieces seemed a little too concerned with the minutiae of detail to really provide the scale and impact needed for such music. Unlike a number of Class D amplifiers it was eminently 'listenable' and enjoyable, with little sign of digital 'screech' or hardness common with such amplifiers, although its textural richness could possibly be a Class D quality.

So here we have two radically different ways of presenting sound from two 60 Watt amplifiers. Each will have their own fans, based upon musical preference. As always, time spent auditioning will pay dividends in the final choice.

VERDICT £
 Big, powerful sound great for Rock music, but less so classical.

AUDIOLAB 8200A AMPLIFIER £729.95
www.audiolab.co.uk

FOR
 - clean and defined sound.
 - expansive soundstage.
 - ample bass output

AGAINST
 - can be a bit lacking in emotion.

VERDICT
 Rhythmic and focussed, but lacking in low end drive and boogie factor.

DENSEN B110 PLUS AMPLIFIER £1350.00
 Kog Audio
 ☎ +44 (0) 24 7722 0650
www.kogaudio.com

FOR
 - good sense of rhythm
 - focussed soundstage
 - friendly musicality

AGAINST
 - remote control costs extra

MUSIC USED:

Columbia Symphony Orch. Condt. Igor Stravinsky 'Le Sacre du Printemps' Stravinsky
 CBS Records 72054 1960

Frank Sinatra 'Songs for Swingin' Lovers' Capitol Records LCT 6106 1956

The Jimi Hendrix Experience 'Electric Ladyland' Polydor Records SPDLP 3 1968

Antix 'Lull' Ibooga Records IBOGA CD15 2003

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

AUDIOLAB 8200A

The Audiolab 8200A produces 72 Watts into 8 Ohms and 121 Watts into 4 Ohms – a relatively large increase due to a beefy power supply. As loudspeakers nowadays hover around 4-6 Ohms that means a true 100 Watts is available. With good current delivery and a damping factor of 54 the 8200A is likely to have the strong bass of its predecessors.

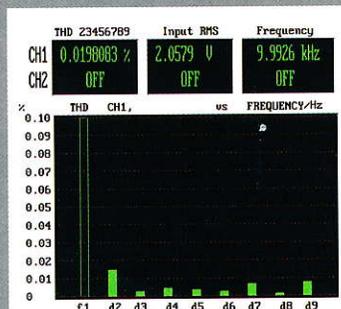
Again like previous Audiolabs this one goes down low, frequency response reaching down to 1Hz. A sensible upper limit is 43kHz is used.

Input sensitivity was a useful 310mV, enough to accommodate most external phono stages. Distortion was also low at all frequencies and power levels, measuring just 0.013% at the critical 1Watt, 10kHz output level where crossover distortion will make itself known, but the Audiolab is linear here and relatively distortion free.

The 8200A measured well in all areas. It is very well developed and should give a smooth punchy sound like previous Audiolabs. NK

Power	72watts
Frequency response	1Hz-43kHz
Separation	89dB
Noise	-88dB
Distortion	0.013%
Sensitivity	310mV
Damping factor	54

DISTORTION



DENSEN B-110

The Densen B-110 produces 78 Watts into 8 Ohms and 144 Watts into 4 Ohms - and runs cool whilst doing so, like most Class D amplifiers. A strongly varying distortion pattern with level and frequency existed and some of the values were far outside that expected from a conventional hi-fi amplifier, such as 0.4% when delivering 1 Watt into 4 Ohm load at 10kHz. Although the midband distortion figures were acceptably low the distortion pattern and the way its extended harmonic structure constantly changed did not look promising. Class D amplifiers rarely have a mild or neutral sound; brightness or hardness are qualities that can prevail. Unlike some Class Ds its frequency response is not limited, extending up to 74kHz. Damping factor measured a low 16, much

like that of Naim amplifiers, and bass may be a bit more fulsome than usual, but with plenty of slam because current delivery from the power supply is good. Sensitivity was good at 270mV but separation on the low side at 60dB.

The B-110 is a compact high power amplifier that runs cool. The poor distortion performance of Class D will likely give it a distinctive sound though. NK

Power	78watts
Frequency response	4Hz-74kHz
Separation	61dB
Noise	-94dB
Distortion	0.4%
Sensitivity	270mV
Damping factor	16

DISTORTION

