

Avid Integra amplifier is in control

Monday, April 15, 2024
Chris Baillie



Avid Integra integrated amplifier

Avid Hifi made its name with turntables, solidly engineered and superbly finished examples of the breed. Having built models to suit a wide range of pockets the Huntingdon-based company started building a range of electronics and speakers in order to be able to offer full systems to its customers around the globe. The Integra tested here represents the middle model in Avid's three-strong line-up of integrated amplifiers and is priced at £9,300. Each amplifier has a similar design, featuring phono and headphone stages. No DAC stages are offered, which some may argue is a good thing, as digital stages tend to become outdated long before the rest of the product and Avid is very much a manufacturer of analogue equipment. Each amplifier contains comparatively large transformers and power supplies, especially considering their rated power outputs, which appear to be surprisingly conservative. I picked the Integra to review as it sits at a price point that suggests it should fit nicely into my system. It will be one of four integrated amplifiers I'll have enjoyed at home within the same number of months by the time this review is published.

Design and build

The first thing I noticed was this amplifier's sheer weight and solidity. My sample has a silver, brushed aluminium front panel, black being the alternative. Compared to my usual Moon 600i amplifier, I'd have to describe it as having a solid, purposeful, rather than luxurious finish, with the Avid and Integra hole patterning on the top of the casework catching the eye. There are just two knobs, one for the Alps volume pot and the other for inputs, of which there are four line and one phono. The phono stage is called Pellar and is compatible with MM and MC cartridges. You can adjust the load sensitivity via switches at the rear of the unit. Here is where I confess to not owning a turntable, so I could not test this side of the amplifier. This phono stage does have a

good reputation and offers plenty of gain for low-output MC cartridges. The chassis is built from heavy gauge steel, which, as well as contributing to this amplifier's solid feel, helps screen the electronic components from external interference. Weighing in at 23kg, the Integra means business.

At the heart of the Integra is a 750VA mains transformer, this comparatively massive component explains why this amplifier's quoted power output of 90 watts per channel seems so conservative. The Integra only has single-ended inputs, which naturally are via RCA sockets. I fully understand why Avid has opted to avoid the added cost of XLR inputs in what is a scaled-down version of the brand's top-of-the-range Sigsum model, especially in a non-balanced



design. However, this meant I could not use my preferred Townshend XLR cables. I like the dual speaker output terminals, which make bi-wiring easy and applaud Avid for fitting a quality headphone stage to the Integra, which saves adding a separate headphone amp. While a dedicated headphone amp may bring sonic benefits, if you only have the occasional need to use headphones with your main system, a headphone socket on the amp makes sense. The mono switch on the front panel is also great for vinyl users with older recordings. There's also a mute button which is duplicated on the remote. As usual, I attempted to set up this amplifier without referring to the manual, but on this occasion, I gave up once I realised there must be a hidden power switch. This there was, and to save others the same issue, it is located under the front panel.





The latest version of the Integra includes a remote which has just three buttons: the top one for mute, and the other two control the volume. The volume steps seemed very large, especially compared to the fine steps of a Moon 600i volume control. This will be of little consequence for most vinyl users, who can set the volume via the dial on the amplifier after changing records. However, it may be less convenient for those who stream music, especially if they tend to listen to playlists with tracks mastered at significantly varying levels. The remote unit is satisfyingly heavy and feels strong enough to be the first thing you would grab to fend off an intruder.

Explosive performance

It is fair to say that this amplifier had no issues driving and controlling my Totem Forest Signature speakers. Indeed, it is so muscular that it could probably shake a forest to the ground. On paper, Integra is far from the most powerful amplifier I have used at home, but in use, it sounds rather different. The dynamics, grip, and control provided are immense. The Integra delivers an enormous soundstage in which performers appear almost larger than life. The soundstage extends well beyond the width of the speakers and, with many recordings, well beyond the sidewalls of my room. Music is delivered with a strong sense of presence, which makes the soundstage extremely believable, and studio effects often appear so strikingly realistic that with unfamiliar recordings I was unsure if they were coming from my speakers rather than from outside or elsewhere in the room. The soundstage, in my room and setup at least, does not extend much behind the speakers, but it projects well into the room.

Whilst the music always sounded exceptionally clean and open, it would be fair to say that I initially found the Integra a little too forward and upfront for my tastes. As part of a review that I was carrying out for another publication, I was swapping between my usual Townshend [Isolda](#) speaker cables and a pair of solid silver cables from a boutique cable builder called AF Audio. Whereas these cables did not work particularly well between my usual Moon 600i and Totem Forest Signature speakers, between the Avid Integra and these speakers, the AF Audio cables worked really nicely. There was a little less leading-edge definition, and whilst the bass was pegged back a little, I preferred this sweeter, more airy balance. The Integra's fine soundstaging abilities were preserved and whilst the sense of drive was slightly diminished, the music felt more natural and integrated. These cables also removed the slight hardness I was experiencing from, for example, Paul Desmond's alto saxophone on Dave Brubeck's *Take Five* or the horn section on Curtis Mayfield's *Move on Up*. With this issue remedied, I could enjoy Integra's masterful sense of drive and its timing qualities, especially during the drum sections on both of these classics.

If I am ever asked to define the term PRAT (pace, rhythm and timing), I will suggest listening to a system based around this amplifier as a good place to start – its performance defines the term. AC/DC's *Highway To Hell* would be a great track to kick off that hypothetical

Avid Integra

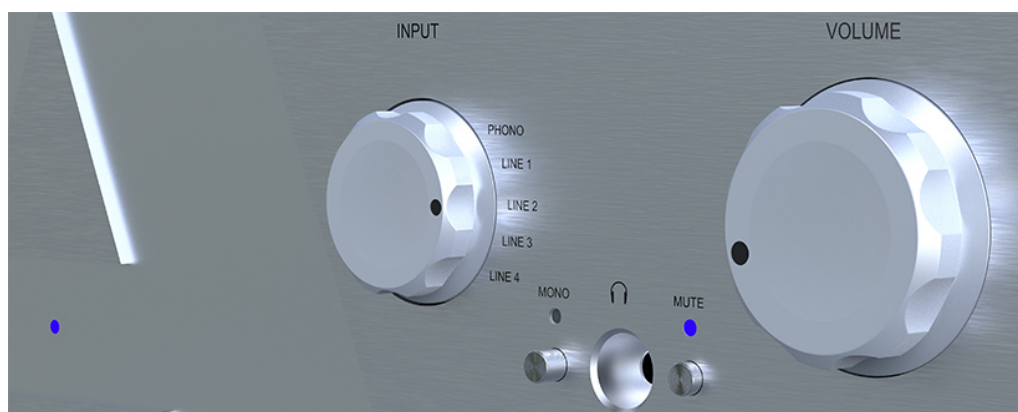
listening session. This track streamed from Qobuz in 24/96 via my Moon 780D, possessed such drive and energy that it was hard not to hark back to my head-banging days. So powerful were the drums, so defined the bass, and so solid were the Young brother's guitars, which flanked the soundstage well to the left and right of my speakers; I really can't think of an amplifier that I'd rather listen to this track with.

At the other end of the scale, Dead Can Dance's *Into The Labyrinth* faired almost as well. This SACD rip, stored on my Melco N1, possibly gets mentioned too much in my reviews. Still, it



is a great system tester due to its naturally recorded acoustic, three-dimensional soundstage and full frequency range. The Integra did a fine job with the more upbeat numbers and, conversely, had the required delicacy for more subtle tracks. However, I did find its balance here relatively dry. Dare I suggest that an amplifier from a turntable manufacturer best suits a warmer, analogue source than my digital front end? Whenever I have heard Avid amplifiers at shows, they have always been fed by one of their beautiful turntables and sounded well-balanced, and of course analogue still has the edge on digital when a system is really transparent.

Whilst the Integra was in my system, I tended to play more upbeat music, particularly recordings based around well-recorded drums and bass guitars. David Torn's *Polytown* is a perfect example of this, especially the track *Snail Hair Dune*. The Integra presented Terry Bozzio's drums further forward in the soundstage than usual, but with such power and solidity, they sounded very realistic. Here, Mick Karn's fretless bass was halfway into the room, whilst David Torn's guitar heroics cut through the area on either side of my head; the Integra made the track an especially involving and intoxicating experience.



Another well-recorded and musically brilliant album that showcased Integra's talents was GoGo Penguin's *A Humdrum Star*. The combination of weight, speed, and dynamics had my eyes on stalks. The bass performance was as good as I've heard from my Totems. The control and depth of bass that this amplifier extracted from these compact, floorstanding speakers was staggering.

A lifetime of musical enjoyment

The Avid Integra certainly made its presence felt during its stay. Whilst its delivery is upfront, its timing and soundstage are well resolved, and, with careful system matching, it can deliver thoroughly entertaining music. It may not be the ideal amplifier for those who like smooth or laid-back sound. But if you love your music delivered with all the speed, energy and passion of a live performance, it could be right up your musical street. Despite its quoted 90 watt output, it will drive almost any real-world speaker to high levels and do so with astonishing grip and control. The build quality suggests it should last a lifetime, and having a phono-stage rather



Specifications

Type: Integrated stereo amplifier with phono stage

Analogue inputs: 4x RCA

Phono input: moving magne, moving coil

Digital inputs: none

Analogue outputs: pre-out RCA

Bluetooth: N/A

Headphone output: 3.5mm jack

Speaker outputs: 5-way binding posts

Power Output: 90W into 8 ohms

Dimensions (HxWxD): 155 x 470 x 495mm

Weight: 22.9kg

Warranty: 2 years