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P r o d u c t R e v i e w

Audio Research DSi200 Integrated Amplifier

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There was a time, in the not-too-distant past, when audiophiles believed that top-shelf sound could be achieved only with separate components – that is, a separate preamp and power amp. They believed that the humble integrated amplifier was too compromised a product to achieve the top-quality sound desired by any self-respecting audiophile. And class-D switching amps were only for subwoofers, or those who would accept a compromised sound.

Since then, the integrated amplifier has made the leap from convenient afterthought to main showpiece – and not only for the frugal or the budget-constrained. Most makers of high-end electronics now wouldn't be caught dead without an ambitious integrated in their product line, for customers who want it all sonically while simplifying their systems. Audio Research Corporation has a long and storied history of making high-quality amplifiers, and beginning in 1997, with the introduction of the CA50, also has made some pretty good integrated amps. Now ARC has created its new Definition series, which will run parallel to the Reference line but will concentrate on emerging green technologies that can meet the excellent sonic standard that has been a hallmark of ARC products through the years. The class-D DSi200 is the first component in the new line – as well as being ARC's first all-solid-state integrated amplifier.

But does the DSi200 live up to its legendary heritage, or does it prove that audiophiles were right all along: that separates are still the only way to reach sonic nirvana?

Build quality

Audio Research calls the DSi200 (\$5995 USD) a fully balanced "hybrid solid-state" design. By "hybrid," ARC means what they describe as a "massive, highly regulated, linear analog power supply" combined with a "truly 'green' discrete analog switching-MOSFET output stage for highly efficient power conversion and low power consumption." This configuration helps the DSi200 consume few enough watts to earn it an Energy Star rating – it's claimed to burn only 38W at idle, so leaving it on 24/7 shouldn't be a problem. While ARC claims that doing so will make the DSi200 ready to sonically respond immediately, it requires about 30 minutes to come up to speed from a cold start, and its sound will slightly improve

over the next hour or so. I found that the DSi200 sounded good whether I had the power on 24/7 or not. The design of all power-supply components and MOSFETs are by ARC; they don't come prepackaged from some other, OEM firm. And while ARC tends to shy away from calling the DSi200 a class-D amp, preferring instead the phrase *switching amplifier*, they admit that it *is* class-D... but with their own unique take on the technology.

The DSi200's preamplifier stage is purely passive; there are no outputs for connecting a separate power amp (or outboard headphone amp). The DSi200 is rated to offer 200Wpc into 8 ohms or 300W into 4 ohms, with dynamic outputs of 400Wpc into 8 ohms or a whopping 800W into 4 ohms. These power specifications are no doubt aided by the 160,000µF of capacitance in the amply specified power supply. Output power is of little concern; the DSi200 can drive even the most power-hungry speakers.

As noted, the DSi200 is fully balanced. It has two balanced and three single-ended inputs (one of which can be configured as a home-theater pass-through), heavy-duty five-way binding posts, and an IEC socket for the supplied power cord (or one of your choice) and the fuse holder. That's all there is in back. A word of caution: When you hook up your components and speakers, pay close attention to the jacks and speaker binding posts. Likely because of the DSi200's dual-mono design, these connections are mirror-imaged; it's all too easy to hook things up wrong, something I learned the hard way.

At 19"W x 5.25"H x 14.25"D and weighing 37.2 pounds, the DSi200 is a substantial piece of gear with the classic Audio Research good looks, especially in silver with rack handles – and therein lies the biggest outward difference. Instead of making the handles black, as has long been ARC's wont, these are now the same color as the faceplate (the DSi200 is also available in black). My review sample came in silver with silver handles.

The display looks very much like that of ARC's LS26 preamp. Out front, from left to right, are the volume knob, a teal-green fluorescent display (it can be dimmed or turned off completely), and the input selector knob. Below the display are four buttons: Power, Mute, and two that you seldom see these days but should: Mono and Invert (polarity, which I

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found made a small but noticeable difference with certain discs). All in all, a simple but effective, and visually appealing, design.

The slim, comfortable remote control – it looks like any other from ARC – has all the features found on the amp itself, with the welcome additions of controls for balance and for dimming the display.

System

From front end to back, the components used for this review were a VPI HW-19 Mk.IV turntable, SME 309 tonearm, Lyra Argo phono cartridge, Furutech AG-12 phono cable, Audio Research PH5 phono stage, and Oppo DV-981HD universal player. Speakers were Paradigm Reference Studio 100 v.3s. Everything was hooked up with Analysis Plus Solo Crystal wire: Oval interconnects and Oval 8 biwire speaker cables. All stock power cords were replaced with Harmonic Technologies Pro AC-11s, except for an Analysis Plus Power Oval 10 for the power amp.

Also used were Salamander Archetype racks, Furutech deStat LP treatment, Blue Circle Audio BC6000 power conditioner, VPI 16.5 record-cleaning machine, Hunt EDA carbon-fiber record brush, Zerodust stylus cleaner, and lots of accessories from Symposium Acoustics: Roller Blocks Series 2+, Roller Block Jr.s, Fat Padz, Pod Points, Ultra Platform, Svelte Shelves, and Isis Shelf.

Sound

After I'd given the DSi200 some run-in time, the first thing that struck me was how relaxed yet involving the sound was – a rare combination. There was an enticing subtlety to the sound of the DSi200. I found myself being drawn into the music, hearing the ample spatial information, subtle musical cues, and low-level information that makes music come alive, as if it's the real thing. This made the DSi200 all the more remarkable given its relatively reasonable price. There were generous amounts of detail and air in the sound. That feeling of being "right there" with the musicians emerged from one of the quietest backgrounds it's been my privilege to hear – when it needed to be, the DSi200 was dead silent. Those black backgrounds didn't obscure information, but allowed ambient cues to bloom as naturally as they do live, which is what a good component should do.

Music played though the DSi200 was never thrust in my face, nor was it ever subdued. Yet, with the best recordings, there was more than enough definition to create the illusion of live music. No matter what else I might have been thinking of doing, its sound drew me in. Taking notes while the DSi200 was playing was almost an exercise in futility.

Almost. The DSi200 was not one of those amplifiers that make great recordings sound great and poor recordings sound horrible. It did better than that. While it made the super-

recordings in my library sound like the demo material they are, it also made poor recordings – usually the music I like best – sound better than I expected them to. No, it didn't turn a sow's ear into a silk purse, but it did bring out the best from whatever I fed it. That neat trick went a long way toward making the time I spent with the DSi200 a real pleasure.

One of the DSi200's strong points was its reproduction of bass. Sure, this integrated has plenty of power – but I've heard many powerful amps that don't have the DSi200's combination of bass control and bass definition. Each note in the bass line that helps open "Help Me Through the Night," from Joe Walsh's *So What* (LP, ABC Dunhill DSD-50171), was cleanly rendered, from the initial transient through to the harmonic. Each strum had that purr that marks a well-recorded electric bass guitar. Yet the bass never stood out from the rest of the music – it was just there, to be savored if I wanted to pay particular attention to it, or enjoyed as an equal part of the performance.

But no section of the audioband was pushed ahead of the rest – the ARC offered each a fair shake. This point was brought home to me when I listened to a recording of Mozart's Violin Concerto No.3, by violinist Marianne Thorsen and the Trondheimsolistene (SACD, 2L38). The orchestra was spread out from wall to wall, with good depth, and the tone and timbre of each instrumental section was reproduced as realistically as I've ever heard, with no one section dominating. Thorsen's violin was all rosin, the bow scraping over taut strings and the sound transmitted by the wooden body. The word that leapt to mind was *lovely*.

The DSi200 offered as full a glimpse of the acoustic of the recording venue as the engineer captured on tape. A new reissue of Thelonious Monk's *Something in Blue* (LP, Black Lion/Pure Pleasure BLPP 30119) was a case in point. Monk's piano was front and center, with Al McKibbon's bass set back to the left behind him and Art Blakey's drums set back to the right. Each musician had his own space in which the sound of his instrument could bloom while interacting with the sounds of the two other trio members. This was something of a surprise – my copy of the original Black Lion LP doesn't sound anywhere near as good. Good classical recordings, too, spread from wall to wall with an excellent sense of layered depth.

The tube-like richness of the DSi200's sound belied its solid-state origins. In Monk's solo on "Nice Work If You Can Get It," also from *Something in Blue*, each note was full from start to finish, with a slight warmth that never veered over the line into soft or flabby (or cold or sterile, for that matter). The DSi200 fleshed out each note, making this LP sound as close to live as I've ever heard it in my room. The DSi200 made Monk's piano sound like a real, live percussion instrument in both size and weight. The Definition series indeed!

Voices were particular delights through the DSi200. Whether it was the deep, masculine voice of someone like Steve Strauss or the angelic female harmonies of the Wailin' Jennys, the

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DSi200 reproduced each singer as a full-figured person standing right in front of me – no cardboard cutouts here. Dynamic range was another strong point: The DSi200 could turn from quiet to loud on a dime, and its noise level was so vanishingly low that those dynamic shifts jumped out from that tomb-like silence the DSi200 did so well. For me, this went a long way toward the suspension of my disbelief, and let me feel as if I were in the presence of real musicians.

Unless you have bat ears, I doubt you'll be disappointed with the DSi200's highs, but they could sound subdued with some recordings. In many ways, this was a good thing; it ensured that the DSi200 never sounded harsh, bright, or edgy – characteristics that I hate because they compromise the music and, to my ears, scream "It's canned!" The DSi200 never gave that impression. When I listened to "Bloody Well Right," from Supertramp's *Crime of the Century* (LP, A&M SP-3647), while the Fender Rhodes electric piano that opens the track didn't have quite the metallic ring that I've heard through other amps, it still sounded realistic. Nor did well-recorded cymbals shimmer quite as brightly as I've heard them through some other combinations of electronics. I think ARC has voiced the DSi200 just right, but you should hear it for yourself.

Comparison

I pitted the DSi200 against my combination of Audio Research LS17 preamp and Bryston 4B-SST² power amp. The DSi200 was a revelation in some areas. Both separates and integrated offered a full, rich, fairly evenly balanced sound. While the ARC-Bryston combo went deeper in the bass and with more control, it was not a night-and-day difference. The ARC-Bryston combo also had a cleaner, sweeter, more open top end, though again, it was not a huge advantage. But the DSi200 countered with a top-to-bottom cohesiveness,

a midrange richness, and a definition to the music that the ARC-Bryston couldn't quite match. While the separates could lean a *tad* toward the dark side, the DSi200 offered a more even tonal presentation.

The DSi200 integrated can stand among the best separate components out there and not have to hang its head for anything – including its price. Together, my separates cost \$2195 more than the DSi200, even without factoring in the additional cost of a pair of high-quality interconnects, which the DSi200 renders unnecessary.

Conclusion

The Audio Research DSi200 not only caught my attention when I first listened to it, but rewarded further listening by continuing to demonstrate its sonic abilities with more and more depth – during the review period, I found myself looking for ways to free up more time to listen to my favorite music. The more I listened, the more I came to appreciate the overall qualities of this top-notch integrated amplifier.

If you're among those whose noses are bent out of joint at the mere thought that an integrated amplifier – and a solid-state class-D amp at that – might be able to offer all the sonic goods delivered by the best separates, then you need to give a close listen to the DSi200. I don't care what you're looking for, whether you're on a budget, looking to downsize, upgrade, or whatever: You need to hear this integrated. But get ready to have your preconceptions about solid-state and class-D amps take a beating: The DSi200 can stand with the best separates I've heard.

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Company Info

Audio Research DSi200 Integrated Amplifier

Price: \$5995 USD.

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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