

Orpheus THREE-M Monoblock Amplifiers & Model TWO Preamplifier



This is a Swiss electronics manufacturer with which many of our readers may be indirectly familiar. One of their divisions is Anagram which specializes in digital to analogue converters and other digitally related components for the industry. Their client list includes Audio Aero and Manley (reviewed in some of our past issues), as well as Audio Mecca, Camelot Technology and Nagra.

The Orpheus Laboratories division offers modular solutions with open and compatible architecture in products designed to allow easy upgrading to adapt to new standards, as well as improved processing algorithms. Products are designed to be added to and integrated into existing systems or to replace existing components, of course. Anagram/Orpheus also designs products for professional use. Their staff includes people with extensive engineering and manufacturing backgrounds which enables Orpheus Laboratories to offer "innovative and evolutionary solutions within a strong and original business model." The company is located on the shores of Lake of Geneva. The components under review here are the company's produc-

tion references consisting of the ORPHEUS TWO—a multi-channel pre-amplifier and the ORPHEUS THREE-M monoblock amplifiers. A third component, the ORPHEUS ONE digital to analogue converter, will be reviewed in our next issue and at a later date, we will also have a look at a smaller stereo amplifier rated at 40 watts/channel.

Appearance:



All components have identical construction attributes and measurements and their European style is quite obvious. Each measures 1³/₄ inches high, 19 inches wide and 15 inches deep (including connectors). All face plates are made of brushed aluminum, while the chassis are made of black metal. Four small rubber feet support the units. The TWO's (pre-amplifier) face plate is simple and elegant, sporting (from left to right) the Orpheus logo, indicator light, function display window and four small buttons for volume up/down and all available functions. The unit's main on/off switch is located on the rear panel.

The THREE-Ms (power amplifiers) have matching face plates with the logo and a

Source:
Globe Audio
Marketing

Price (amps):
\$13,000.00 Cdn
\$8,400.00 US

Price (preamp):
\$10,416.00 Cdn
\$6,720.00 US

Rating:
Amps 
Preamp 

small indicator light on each unit's left. Though quite handsome, these sleek components do not outwardly reveal their degree of sophistication, which brings us to the...

Technology:

The Orpheus TWO is a multi-channel pre-amplifier, or more precisely, a multifaceted multi-channel analogue domain unit with digital gain control which is adjustable in 0.5dB steps—very precise. Of course it can be employed as a pure stereo preamplifier. Its configuration is software based, and allows switching from one set-up to another simply and quickly. The TWO offers six RCA stereo inputs and one pair of balanced (XLR) inputs. Its outputs include four pairs of RCAs and one pair XLR connectors.

The single multi-channel inputs include one six-channel block; three pairs unbalanced and one pair balanced. For stereo output, there is a multi-channel block with parallel main channels. For dual multi-channel inputs, there are two six-channel blocks; one pair is balanced for stereo output with a multi-channel block with parallel main channels. Confusing? Yes, but all one needs to remember is that the Orpheus TWO meets the needs of pure stereo applications as well as multi-channel set-ups such as those required for SACD and DVD-A, or even multi-amplification stereo systems. The unit has a monitoring loop made up of unbalanced inputs and outputs. The monitoring section can be used as an additional stereo input, or it can feed an active multi-amplification system with the TWO serving as master volume control. Each input and output channel has an independent volume level set-up to optimize the interface between the TWO and, for instance, sources with different output levels. In the multi-channel configuration, the unit will function with multiple amplifiers and without a processor, when the signal is already processed by the source component, a feature of many DVD players. For Dolby Digital® or Pro Logic® an outboard processor is necessary.

The company's specifications list the fixed input signal at 2 Vrms; main level variable harmonic distortion (THD) is quoted as 0.00164 % at 0dB, 0.00408% at

-30dB and 0.11400% at -60dB; signal to noise ratio is 118 dB; residual noise is 118 dB from 20Hz to 22kHz.

The Orpheus THREE-M power amplifiers are what the company calls "analogue domain" boasting 150 watts per channel with XLR and RCA inputs, as well as two speaker outputs (allowing bi-wiring of the mono power amplifiers). They feature Anagram Technologies' "Power Loop" constant power amplification modules, which are said to assure amplifier coherence and optimize quick response throughout the whole frequency spectrum while adapting to every speaker configuration and load. This technology is interesting and a bit different from many solid-state designs. The company's "Power Loop" module acts, indeed mimics, the behaviour of a vacuum tube amplifier with an output transformer, but without the transformer non-linearities. Both tension and current are monitored with the feedback loop to assure that the output energy from the amplifier is proportional to the input tension. The result is that the amplifiers, with a resistive load, function like a tension amplifier. But when a reactive load (such as loudspeakers) is introduced, the load is controlled during transients and the current is adjusted to meet the requirement of the loudspeaker.

There are more complicated technical details, but we'll skip to the more comprehensible such as the balanced technology employed here. Many power amps and preamps offer balanced in and outputs (XLR connectors). Of course, connectors alone do not make balanced circuits. Rather, each monoblock actually accommodates two amplifiers—one to drive the negative side and one to handle the positive side of a balanced signal. In the Orpheus THREE-M, the positive signal is handled on the units' right side which gets a bit warm after a couple of hours operation. The heat sinks are efficient and internally coupled to the chassis. There are three stages to each monoblock consisting of a MOS-FET differential configuration, the voltage gain stage and the power gain stage, also a MOS-FET design. This technology is a bit uncommon, but simply results in a dual MOS-FET design.

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The Sound:

Although this review is really a system evaluation, we reasoned that each component must be evaluated in conscientiously controlled listening sessions, which practically dictates the use of familiar components throughout the tests. This involved much longer and more complicated procedures.

For all auditioning sessions, we used the JMLab speakers (reviewed in this issue), the Mirage OM-5s (reviewed in our last issue), and a pair of Wilson Benesh loudspeakers.

First, we connected the OrpheusTHREE-M monoblocks to our in-house Wyetech Labs Opal preamplifier to check their compatibility with other components, but also to assure a reliable, well known reference. The Goldmund transport (reviewed in this issue), was used for all listening sessions, while our in-house Audio Alchemy, and later, the Orpheus DAC were used for source components. All wiring was accomplished with Nordost Valhalla interconnects and speaker cables.

After giving theTHREE-Ms a burn-in time of about two weeks, we settled down for some serious listening sessions, using program material including rock, jazz, blues and classical music. The most obvious attribute noticed by all listeners was the absence of a distinctive sonic element that would identify the chosen genre—vacuum tubes or solid-state. It took a few sessions before some listeners noticed that the amplifiers' speed and bottom end resolution may be more in line with good solid-state designs. This was a surprise because the amps managed outstanding midrange glow, smooth high frequency information and an overall warm, musical sound normally found in (good) vacuum tube amplifiers. In addition to the amplifiers' impressive musicality, they set up a rather extensive multi-dimensional sound stage while maintaining excellent focus on instruments and voices. All in all, reproduced music sounded authentic and the amps easily handled subtleties, texture and hues.

Next, we inserted the Orpheus TWO (preamplifier). Though a multi-channel unit, in our system it served as a two-

channel preamplifier connected to its sibling power amps and our aforementioned source components. The swap (from the Wyetech Labs Opal to the OrpheusTWO) resulted in only slight differences. Whereas the Opal provided more musical finesse, specifically in the midrange and upper frequencies, the TWO managed somewhat better resolution in the bass regions. Though we expected a touch harder sound from the TWO, it almost matched the softer, more musical sound of the Opal, but didn't quite reach the height of the tube-based Opal's ability to "blossom." Imaging was very well defined and realistic with a well elevated sound stage. Focus and spatial information was excellent.

To check compatibility under the most demanding circumstances, we used the OrpheusTWO with the Tenor Audio Amps (also reviewed in this issue). This combination resulted in refined definition, first-rate resolution across the entire frequency range and, not surprising, excellent "blossoming." This indicates that the

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TWO offers the most sought-after attribute of a preamplifier—sonic neutrality. To ascertain the unit's "neutral" disposition, we connected the Bryston, Manley and Chord amplifiers—all known to our panelists—and listened for the amplifiers' "personalities." The Orpheus TWO passed these tests easily, thereby establishing beyond a doubt that a multi-channel preamplifier can be made for those who love and appreciate high-end audio.

The Orpheus TWO is completely remote controlled, thus potentially a little noisier than a purist design. We listened carefully for such evidence, but couldn't confirm this; and we totally enjoyed the remote functions.

Synopsis & Commentary:

These components are wonderfully laid out and execute audio like finely crafted Swiss watches. The Orpheus system sounds coherent, dynamic, musical and most definitely high-end. However, the amplifiers and preamplifier should be regarded as great-sounding individual components which will perform well with other brands, regardless of make. They stand up to close scrutiny and can function in any high-end set-up.

Beefs? Yes a couple, but not pertaining to the performance. Rather, it's about the instruction book(s). Unfortunately, the copy writer failed, in the English translation, to summarize functions in a simplified and coherent manner—text one can easily understand. Our Editor's

European background helped to clarify the rather elaborate functions of the Orpheus TWO preamplifier. As he put it, "thinking in another language and writing precise instructions is very difficult and cannot be done verbatim." He states that the instructions address all function and set-up procedures, but do not categorically and specifically explain what to do in the various modes—i.e. what to do with multi-channel, stereo or other multi-amp and multi-room applications. However, careful reading and a little hands-on experimentation will get the components working.

We really like the TWO preamplifier, because it offers a high-end design for home theatre enthusiasts, but also conforms to the somewhat higher standards of pure two-channel audio. Coupled with the model THREE-M power amplifiers, a set-up becomes a powerful, professional audio installation. Orpheus engineers are aware that the future holds more integration and convergence of audio, video, computers, even home appliances—and their designs are based on the latest technologies, ready for coming developments. The components in this review reflect the company's dedication to future developments, but also show their consideration for traditional audio—high-end audio. All in all, the Orpheus brand offers impressive components, first rate parts, innovative design and world-class workmanship. ¶

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Orpheus engineers are aware that the future holds more integration and convergence

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