

# Minimum,

**Designed and built in Canada, the diminutive Audio Zone AMP-1 integrated amplifier is attractively minimalist in style, yet big in musical substance, says Channa Vithana...**

**T**he £1,595 Audio Zone AMP-1 has many of the qualities I find attractive in an attainably-priced hi-fi amplifier. It sets itself apart from all those mass-market, button-fetish clones dressed in standard issue rectangular boxes. Rather, here we have single input integrated amplifier, sans tone or balance controls. For me it's a welcome change and an attractive proposition for those who fundamentally use only one important source, but I can't see everyone thinking like that...

The AMP-1 goes further by being completely dual mono, where the power for each channel is fed from a solidly formed separate power supply. Audio Zone says that the AMP-1 can be upgraded with two PSU units, one for each channel, for complete dual mono operation and this would cost approximately US\$400 extra.

The AMP-1 amplifier unit is alluringly tiny, measuring approximately 166x212.5x71mm. It is beautifully crafted in anodised aluminium and features front and rear panels, about 13mm thick, that separate the two mono amplifier compartments, side to side. The resulting casework is reassuringly solid. The finely crafted volume knobs, which operate 31-step Noble 50k attenuators, are well weighted, nicely machined and usefully graduated with physical indents to help align the two channels correctly. Internally, Audio Zone states that the AMP-1 uses a point-to-point hand-wired circuit. The

with attractively formed anodised aluminium using thick front and rear plates that frame the main casework within. The AMP-1 PSU has a single, discrete, red LED at the front and two captive power supply output leads and IEC mains input at the rear. Audio Zone says that the "power supply for the AMP-1 (uses) a Plitron 400VA transformer, 22/22V on the rails and (is) split for 2 channels. All transformers are dual wound for world use 110/240V 50/60Hz operation. We wanted to obtain 45-50W per channel and our R&D configured these voltages as the most optimum to achieve these specifications."

## SOUND QUALITY

The combination of Richard Egarr on harpsichord and Pamela Thorby on recorder from the 2004 SACD release of 'Handel Recorder Sonatas' was a deft and lyrical delight through the AMP-1. Both instruments were nicely cohesive and in balance with each other – any one instrument did not dominate or sound forwardly located within the mix. I could appreciate the intricate melodies, phrasing and rhythmic interactions between the two players. The upper midrange tonality of the recorder did not flare out into uneasiness or coloration as crescendos were reached. The recorder was beautifully counterbalanced by the delicacy of the harpsichord, which was a texturally finessed and reproduced instrument via the AMP-1. Overall,

was superb, ably revealing the complex yet rhythmically accessible production. So here I could follow the unravelling of the instrumental textures from synthesiser keyboards, ethnic horns, percussion and the stunning vocal styles employed. As powerful percussion-led crescendos appeared and faded with alacrity, the AMP-1 displayed no strain or fuss in handling huge dynamic swings. The sound was never less than engaging, richly textured and unconstrained with the 'Passion' SACD.

Pounding hypnotically, the opening to 'Closer' from 'The Downward Spiral' SACD by Nine Inch Nails had plenty of low-frequency feel and tunefulness which set up the darkly themed subject matter of the lyrics and accompanying melodies perfectly. The AMP-1 peeled away the internalised emotional structure of the song through its melodies, rhythms and vocals and reproduced them all with a superb dimensionality. Just as with the 'Passion...' SACD, the AMP-1 was more than capable of handling the complexities of the busy electronic-to-analogue instrumental and sampling concoction of 'Closer' without strain, confusion or fatigue.

Comparing the £1,595 AMP-1 (with its claimed 45W/8ohms) to its fellow Canadian £1,595 Moon Audio i-3 integrated was intriguing. The Moon yielded a wider, broader canvas to bestow its musical abilities. It also had a deeper bass extension and just edged the AMP-1 on speed and attack. The AMP-1 however had superior bass tunefulness and was better overall with the Peter Gabriel and Nine Inch Nails SACDs, where it was more able to portray instrumental timbre with three-dimensional life-like authority. It was also better imparting the collective rhythms, melodies and harmonies with atmosphere and finesse. Additionally on the Nine Inch Nails

"the sound was never less than engaging, richly textured and unconstrained..."

claimed power output is 45W/8ohms and 65W/4ohms. At the rear panel are a set of high quality loudspeaker binding posts, phono socket input and power supply input per compartmentalised mono channel.

The AMP-1 PSU measures approximately 152x204x82mm and is built and designed to the same high standards as the amplifier unit

the speed and interaction between the harpsichord and recorder were excellent.

The deeply atmospheric soundtrack SACD 'Passion. Music For The Last Temptation Of Christ' by Peter Gabriel, was beautifully rendered and acoustically enveloping through the AMP-1. The sound was effortless. The instrumental separation

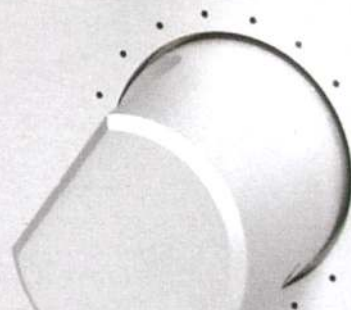


# Maximum

VERDICT      £

Surely one of the most purposeful integrateds on the market, this wonderfully alluring sounding amplifier is not all things to all men – yet is all the better for it.

*Z*  
AMP-1



## DESIGN MATTERS

The two-box AMP-1 is a design success overall and I find its simplicity in appearance (without visible fixings to the front, sides or rear) and function very appealing. The AMP-1 amplifier unit on its own does indeed look similar to the black-clad, esoterically high-end Gaincard integrated amplifier by 47 Labs, which is an amplifier and manufacturer that I have admired since the late nineties. However, George Tordai (AZ Sales & Marketing) says, "to be honest we don't much like comparisons with 47 Labs just for using the same power source. Our approach is totally different; we started from the ground up, (with) design for chassis resonance control and to achieve user-friendly operation. We use different voltages, transformers, parts and circuit layout. It's really like comparing Pass Labs to a Krell even though they both use Mosfet transistors. We have great respect for (47 Labs') Mr. Kimura for being a real pioneer and having the foresight to take a new direction in sound reproduction. I believe Audio Zone has taken this evolution to next level."

Personally, I think Audio Zone should supply the AMP-1 amplifier unit as two components, to visually separate it from comparisons to 47 Labs. On the philosophy of using very short signal paths, and hence such a small enclosure, George Tordai says, "I have been a firm believer throughout... that a short and simple signal path reproduces recorded music at its best. I have the luxury of listening to more equipment from around the world than most enthusiasts can do in a lifetime. To my ears the simple circuits always sounded the best and conveyed music more true to life in reproduction."

recording, the Moon struggled with the dynamic crescendos and sounded a little brittle in comparison. On the 'Handel Recorder Sonatas' the Moon was again better when it came to outright speed and vibrancy, yet it was a little forward with both the harpsichord and recorder. The Moon had more prominent timbre yet strangely, instruments weren't as richly textured or rendered with artistry as on the AMP-1. Consequently, the Moon and AMP-1 were both excellent but different in method - where the Moon was more charismatically engaging, the AMP-1 had finer musical sophistication with greater dexterity throughout the frequency range.

## CONCLUSION

The Audio Zone AMP-1 will appeal to music lovers who want the simple life, where they primarily use just the one source. It is well crafted, nicely styled and has performance beyond its price tag. In sound, design and build quality terms it offers excellent value. In performance terms it compares

brilliantly against the £1,998 Copland CSA29, the £2,000 Phonosophie Classic 1 and the Moon Audio i-3 at £1,595. If a multitude of inputs, balance, remote and tone controls are not important agendas, then audition the AMP-1 with confidence.

AUDIO ZONE AMP-1 £1,595

Audio Zone

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www.shadowdistribution.co.uk

## FOR

- build quality
- minimalist style
- richly-textured performance

## AGAINST

- single input only

## MEASURED PERFORMANCE

This tiny amplifier reveals its specialist nature under measurement. Power output is a limited but adequate 40W into 8ohms, or 50W into 4ohms. Power supply regulation isn't great, but again it is satisfactory for reasonably solid and controlled bass. Obviously, the Z Amp is for use with sensitive loudspeakers that are likely to be well damped acoustically in any case.

The distortion pattern was unusually stable under all conditions. Although this amplifier actually exhibits crossover in the midband - rare nowadays - the harmonic content was predominantly third and, more importantly, the pattern was maintained at high frequencies, so there was very little change in distortion pattern with either frequency or level. With distortion levels not rising above 0.04% (full output, 10kHz, 4ohms) I would expect this amp to sound clean and open.

Although distortion behaviour suggests low feedback, an unusually wide closed loop response of 1Hz-186kHz suggests the opposite; the Z Amp-1 is unusual. Unfortunately, the amp is direct coupled and there is no d.c. servo, so any input offset will affect the loudspeakers. Output offset

varied with volume control position too, although not badly. This amp. should be used with an a.c. coupled preamp or CD player, especially as its input sensitivity of 0.6V is very low.

This is an interesting low power amplifier; it measures well and will likely sound good. NK

Power	40watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	1Hz-184kHz
Separation	96dB
Noise	-110dB
Distortion	0.01%
Sensitivity	600mV
d.c. offset	8mV/14mV

