



Audia Flight FLS 9 Integrated Amp



Eagerly anticipated, Audia Flight's 'starter' FLS series integrated accommodates a suite of optional modules. Could this be the high-end hub you've been waiting for? A synergy of sophisticated original circuit design and Italian style'. That's the promise of Audia Flight, the company established in 1996 by Massimiliano Marzi and Andrea Nardini. Arguably a 'boutique brand' by virtue of a product line focused almost entirely on amplifiers, the lone standout is a CD player in its entry-level 'FL Three S' range [HFN Sep '07]. We are testing its newest addition here: the FLS 9 stereo integrated which pledges to showcase the brand's audiophile philosophy at a price more manageable – beginning at £5950 – than that of its other high-end creations.

Available in either silver or black anodised finishes, the FLS 9 joins Audia Flight's earlier and more expensive FLS 10 [HFN Dec '17] integrated amp in a series the company says 'represents all we have learned over our 20 plus years'. To wit: it borrows circuit ideas from the reference Strumento range, while channelling elements from the company's Classic series, which is now only represented by its FL Phono preamplifier.

Meanwhile, power is rated at 150W/ 8ohm (290W/4ohm), and up to 500W into 'impedance critical' 2ohm loads. So the FLS 9 is not as monstrous as Audia Flight's 500W/8ohm Strumento No8 monoblock amp, but neither is it that much skinnier than the 200W/8ohm (and £2000 costlier) FLS 10.

Following Tradition

The core design of the FLS 9 follows the transimpedance/current feedback approach – described in our Strumento No4 [HFN May '19] and FLS 10 reviews – that debuted in its 1997 Flight 100 model. In the meantime, while its amplifiers have become smarter-looking, its insistence that current feedback brings benefits in transient response and load management compared to voltage feedback designs hasn't waned. The FLS 9, therefore, is very much a chip off the old block.



All Audia Flight's products are hand-built in its Civitavecchia facility, situated 70km north-west of Rome, and the FLS 9 certainly exudes the air of being lovingly put together. It has a stately look that separates it from market rivals which play around with two-tone finishes and 'look-at-me' aesthetics. The fine-brushed aluminium chassis features an engraved logo on its top plate, while the front fascia places a blue OLED display above a curved edge, and control buttons and volume dial below. Hefty at 25.5kg, and with a width (450mm) that goes beyond the standard 'full-size', it looks and feels ready for business.

This amplifier also offers an element of future proofing and customisation. In its basic form the FLS 9 is as an all-analogue integrated, with three unbalanced RCA and two balanced XLR inputs, plus balanced/unbalanced pre outs and an unbalanced tape output. Yet adjacent to its connection bank are two slots for optional cards.

On The Boards

Audia Flight's current roster comprises an MM/MC phono board, an additional two-line input card and a DAC board, with a network streaming module in the pipeline which is said to arrive this summer. Our review sample was fitted with both the £1100 phono stage and £1850 DAC modules, the former including separate, fixed-gain MM/MC inputs with comprehensive impedance settings on DIP switches.



The optional digital module includes asynchronous USB (supporting 768kHz/32-bit and DSD128) and AES/EBU, two Toslink optical and one coaxial S/PDIF to 192kHz, so the end result is an integrated that comes close to covering all bases.

The amplifier's relatively uncluttered front panel belies the flexibility and complexity within. Via the OLED display and volume control (which does double-duty as a navigator of its nested menus), user options include input renaming, setting a 'soft' mute level, home theatre bypass mode, adjustable gain settings for each input, PCM digital filters, and more. A button labelled 'SPK' mutes the amp's speaker output for headphone listening, and you also have the option of listening through both a headphone and speakers simultaneously if you wish.

Operationally, the FLS 9 is a mixture of pleasure and, it has to be said, pain. The supplied milled aluminium remote feels luxurious in the hand, and its controls largely copy those on the amp's front panel. Yet whichever method you opt for, adjusting settings is a somewhat fiddly, time-consuming business, particularly input renaming. And then there's the volume control itself which, while operating over a user-friendly range of -90dB to $+10\text{dB}$ in $\pm 0.5\text{dB}$ steps, lacks hysteresis and seemingly spins for an eternity. The process is marginally faster when using the remote control, but still doesn't favour those who like to respond quickly to demands of 'turn it up (or down)!'.

On a more positive note, the FLS 9's mute function is rather cool in the way it operates. Hit the button and the onscreen display rapidly descends from your listening level to zero, the music fading away. Unmute it and it fades back in.



Divine Right

Sumptuous. Sonorous. Smooth. For some reason the FLS 9 had me reaching for the 'S' section of my thesaurus. Essentially this amp sounds 'just right' – warm but not cloying, well-resolved but not clinical, powerful but not boisterous. Listening via both line-level and digital inputs was entirely unfatiguing, the latter doing justice to the 'Velvet Sound' tag of the amp's AKM-based DAC module.

The Mance Lipscomb track 'Texas Blues', recorded in 1969 for his eponymous Vol 5 album [Arhoolie; 44.1kHz/16-bit FLAC], is as stripped-down as the blues gets – tenor voice, acoustic guitar and nothing else. The FLS 9 took control of these two elements, presenting Lipscomb's slurry vocals with a light touch, and conveying the mixture of twang and tock from his 'dead-thumb' picking technique. Yet it also created space between them, and an appropriate sense of depth and intimacy. 'Every Breath You Take' [The Police (Singles); A&M Records EVECD1] made more demands on the amp's power delivery. There's something of a Phil Spector 'Wall Of Sound' vibe here, and via the FLS 9 it sounded dreamy, a medley of ethereal keyboards and muted guitar notes underwritten by buoyant basslines and punchy drums. Sting's vocals range from quietly sombre to anguished, and this amp puts all this emotion centre-stage.

It was here I noticed the FLS 9's inherent smoothness. It put everything before me, clean and distinct, without over-emphasis or over-projection. Even the smaller of the speakers used – B&W's 705 S2 standmounts – aren't shy or retiring, but this amp seemed to rein them in a little, creating a wonderful sense of balance.

A runout of AC/DC's 'Live Wire' [High Voltage; EMI 494 6712] proved to be a real eye-opener, as the FLS 9 made this rough-and-ready hard rock classic sound positively operatic in its construction. This amp delineated the band's playing like nothing else I've heard, unearthing layers to the instrumentation and letting individual vocal parts recede or push forward. It's not what I would typically call a 'detailed' delivery, as there's a lack of the brightness that perhaps better serves a sense of information overload and gives a crystalline edge to treble, but its sense of space and soundstaging is remarkable. The track's main riff is handled by two guitars, stage left and right. I felt I could pick out each minuscule difference, not just in notes but in tone.



Sharp Shooter

Would I prefer a little more bite and edginess to the presentation of this 1970s rocker? Perhaps, but if it involved a trade-off with the FLS 9's organisational prowess I wouldn't be interested. If the FLS 9 is best-of-breed in terms of an ability to lay out a track's composition, neither is it a slouch when it comes to delivering scale and bass heft. The dense, synthetic textures of Jean-Michel Jarre and Air's 'Close Your Eyes' [Electronica 1: The Time Machine; 48kHz/24-bit FLAC] sounded rich and resonant, extending deep to leave my room feeling energised – and this was with two-way standmounts. And the imaging was a delight, the track fizzing with pin-pointed details across a wide stage.



The amplifier plays loud – once you've coaxed its volume control to where you need it – without sounding in any way like it's losing its composure. I could feel its power in the gloriously riotous second half of Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody' [A Night At The Opera; Parlophone CDPCSD 130], where those multi-tracked vocal harmonies seemed tailor-made for this insightful slab of aluminium, and in the surging melodies of Wagner's 'Ride Of The Valkyries' [Der Ring des Nibelungen – Symphonic Excerpts; Tidal Master].

In fact, this latter piece, from a Paris Opera recital under the wand of conductor Philippe Jordan, told me nearly everything I needed to know about the FLS 9: its command of timbral textures, its depth of image, its ability to transition from tick-over to full-throttle, to the delicate way it handles the ebb and flow of music.

I say 'nearly everything' as the Wagner piece lacks – unsurprisingly – hard-hitting electronic beats and furious sub-bass. Luckily I keep Aphrodite's 'King Of The Beats' [44.1kHz/16-bit Tidal download] on hand for such occasions. The FLS 9 made the track sound deliciously sharp and rhythmic, and maintained that sense of fun even when the level was dialled way down low.

Hi-Fi News Verdict

Audia Flight's gorgeous-looking FLS 9 comes out of leftfield – its volume control best described as 'esoteric' and its user experience being not entirely foolproof. Fortunately, it's right on the money in performance terms. Those seeking an integrated offering imperious imaging, majestic musicality and a smooth, sensuous sound – not to mention a streaming upgrade path on the horizon – should book a flight...

Modular Magic

Audia Flight's latest integrated amplifier shares much of its 'front-end' with the FLS 1 preamp (itself derived from the flagship Strumento No1 mk2 preamp), including the stepwise volume control that operates over a full 100dB range. As our inside shot illustrates, the FLS 9 is almost modular in design, with the power amp 'cards' (see inset picture) essentially one half of the balanced/bridged output stage we saw in the Strumento No4 power amp [HFN May '19].



Instead of six pairs of bipolar transistors handling both the positive and negative-going sides of that amp, the FLS 9 has six pairs of very capable MJL1302A/3281A bipolars from ON Semiconductor forming each complementary channel. Power output is considerable and also very load tolerant thanks to the stiffly-regulated PSU comprising a screened 1kW toroidal transformer and 6x10,000 μ F reservoir capacitors per side. **PM**

Lab Report

If your preferred loudspeakers are either insensitive or present a challenging load then Audia Flight's FLS 9 integrated should be on your shortlist. Rated at 150W and 290W into 8/4ohm, respectively, it succeeds in delivering 2x160W and 2x280W at <1% THD with sufficient headroom in that huge PSU to support 180W, 338W, 615W and 1.015kW (31.9A) into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions [see Graph 1, below]. Overall gain is a moderate +34.4dB, some 10dB lower than most amps but far more practical for use with today's 2V+ line level sources. The A-wtd S/N ratio is slightly below average at 83dB, albeit from an innocuous white noise than any hum from that large toroidal transformer. Output impedance is low, and damping high, at 0.019ohm (20Hz-5kHz) while the response reaches out to \pm 0.1dB from 5Hz-20kHz (and $-$ 1dB/100kHz). Finally, distortion is low at 0.0075–0.027% (re. 0dBW, 20Hz-20kHz) increasing gently with level to 0.017–0.075% (re. 10W/8ohm).

Measured via the balanced preamp output ($-$ 8.0dB volume setting = 3.1V; 0.0dB volume = 7.9V), the new digital card only had one of its digital filter options enabled, despite selections '0' to '6' seemingly on offer. The default filter is a steep linear phase type that has long pre/post echoes but trades this for a superb 135dB stopband rejection and flat response that reaches out to $-$ 0.45dB/20kHz, $-$ 2.0dB/45kHz and $-$ 6.1dB/90kHz with 48kHz, 96kHz and 192kHz digital files. Jitter is low at just 48psec, the A-wtd S/N acceptable at 105dB and low-level resolution good to \pm 0.5dB over a 100dB dynamic range. While distortion is a moderate 0.01-0.05% at max/0dBFs output (20Hz-20kHz), it falls as low as 0.00025-0.0025% at $-$ 25dBFs [see Graph 2, below]. **PM**

Continuous power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm) : 160W / 280W

Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm) : 180W / 338W / 615W / 1015W

Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, Pre/Amp) : 10ohm / 0.019-0.043ohm

Freq. resp. (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz) : +0.00 to $-$ 0.11/ $-$ 1.0dB

Digital jitter (USB / S/PDIF) : 48psec / 25psec

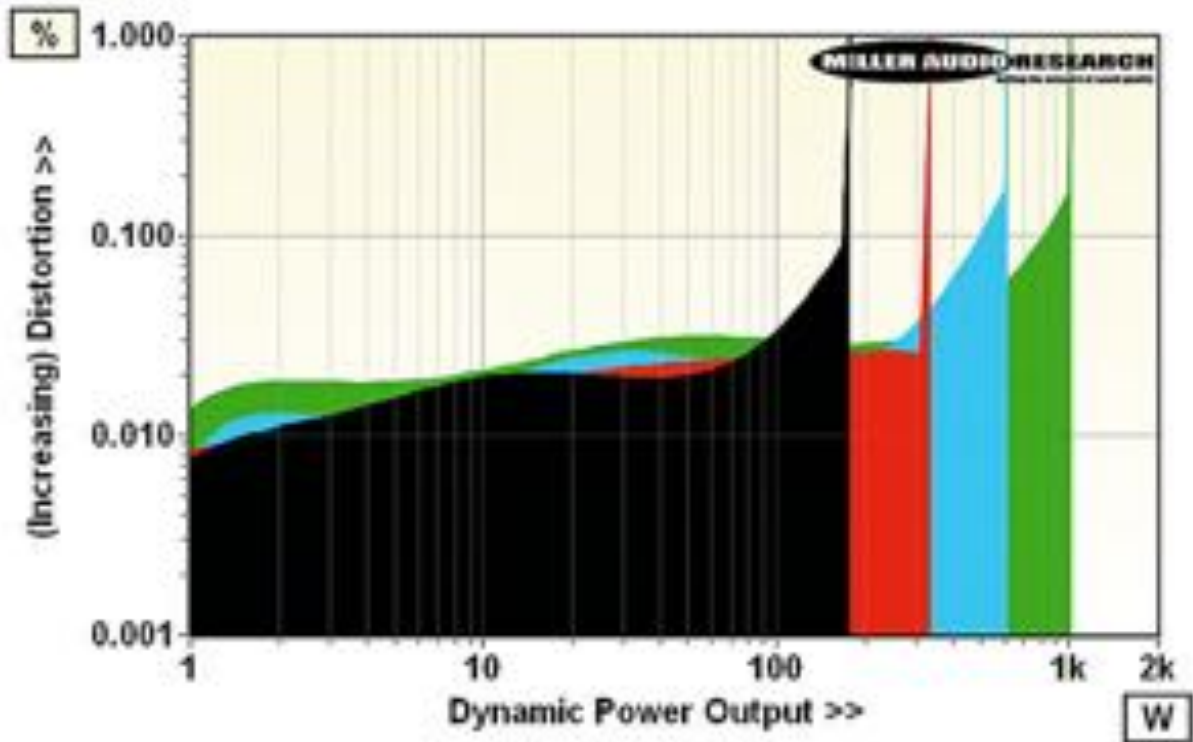
A-wtd S/N ratio (DAC/Amp) : 104.8dB (0dBFs) / 83.1dB (0dBW)

Distortion (DAC, 0dBFs/Amp, 0dBW) : 0.011–0.060% / 0.0075–0.027%

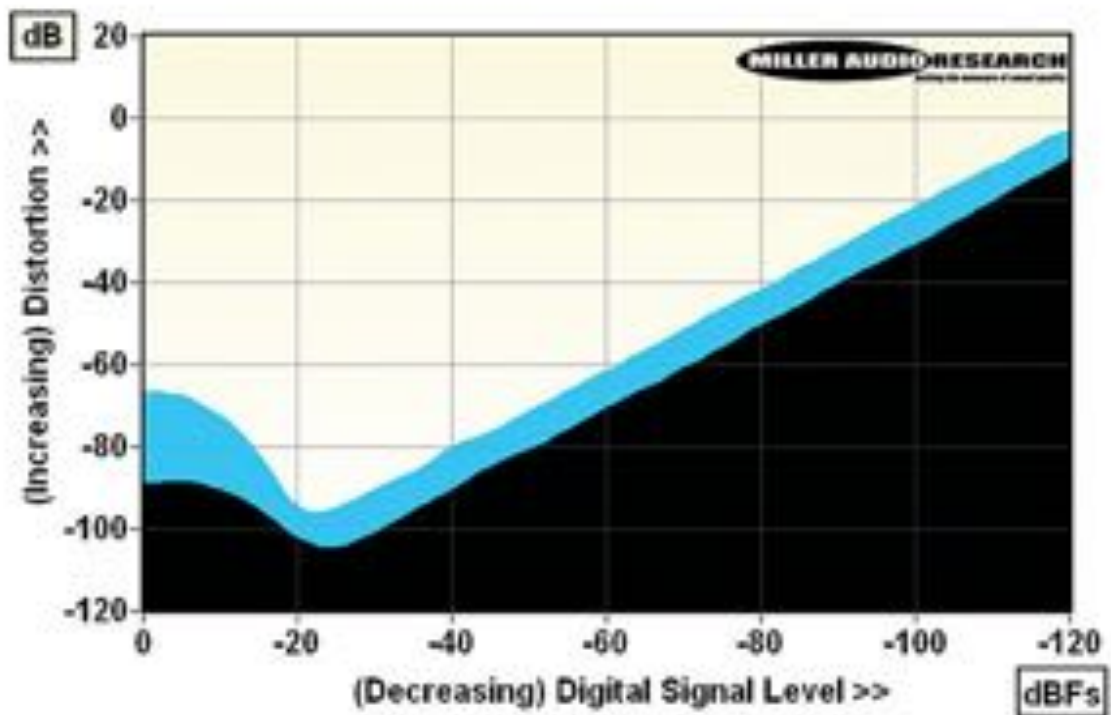
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p) : 111W / 505W (3W standby)

Dimensions (WHD, each unit) : 450x150x440mm / 26kg

Prices : £5950 (+£1100, phono module; +£1850, DAC module)



Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 31.9A



Distortion versus 48kHz/24-bit digital signal level over a 120dB range (1kHz, black; 20kHz, blue)