

## Preamplifier : AUDIA FLIGHT Strumento n°1



The Italians get a rough ride when it comes to high end audio. Flaky kit, manuals that have been edited by Basil Fawlty, iffy distribution, etc. Sure, it looks good, and often sounds divine, but will the company be here for the long haul? I just reviewed a pair of Italian loudspeakers from Chario. They were superb, exquisitely designed and manufactured. That speaker went a long way to eliminating my prejudices (real or imagined) about Italian gear. Another manufacturer that added to the elimination of misconceptions is Audia Flight (AF).

Audiophilia's Andy Fawcett reviewed the Audia Flight CD 3 CD player three years ago. He loved it. I never got to hear it, but was, once again, worried that Andy may wake up in the Outback and realize there's no one there to help in case things went wrong. Wrong, again! Audia Flight is going strong and by all the positive notices continues to design and manufacture superb electronics. After Andy's review and an introduction at last year's Toronto Audio Show, I wanted to test a piece of Audia Flight kit for myself. I opted for the Audia Flight Strumento n1, the company's top of the line Stereo Pre Amplifier.

At over \$16K, the n1 is AF's top preamp and is part of their 'Strumento Series'. It's a Line Stage and comes with a hefty metal remote. There are modular system cards slots for phono inputs and SPDIF/USB 192kHz/32bits inputs. With the two extra cards on board, your musical needs, both digital and analog will be looked after for some time. I did not listen to the n1 with phono stage or via the USB, only in its line stage configuration.

More high end prejudices exist when discussing the need for a preamplifier, especially one costing many thousands of dollars. True, there are a plethora of fantastic DACs and Servers out there trying to put the CD Player and Preamp out of business. Not so fast. Every time I listen to a great system with a gorgeously musical preamp, I am reminded they are the heart of a truly flexible and musical system. The AF n1 is no exception.

Structurally, the n1 is a beast. The design is Italian, but with a Germanic heft. It features '... fully balanced circuitry, highly selected components, a power supply built with extra low impedance, computer grade capacitors (60.000µF only on the main power suppliers), 8 power suppliers, special print boards with an extra high surface copper, copper bars, special audio transformers, ultra fast rectifiers, are only few of main elements. For the volume control, which also controls the balance of the preamplifier, AF uses only high-precision, low-noise, 0,1% tolerance metal foil resistors. The completely new volume control has constant impedance and is absolutely silent during the commutation, without clicking noises'.

AF boasts the n1 ‘...is the perfect device for transfer of the signal to the power amplifier with the best precision, energy and speed (bandwidth more than 1,5MHz). The Strumento n1 is an unrivalled preamplifier where ultra low noise, speed and control ability are elements close to perfection’.



Tactile beauty (front detail).

The unit I reviewed was already broken in. The aluminum front fascia has five buttons along with the largest volume control knob I've seen on a high end preamp. The bright display shows menu options, input or volume. The display may be dimmed. The rear sports XLR or RCA connections (Inputs 1 and 2). Inputs 3, 4, and 5 are XLR only. A RCA tape-out is included. The signal output consists of a single pair of RCA's as well as two sets of balanced XLR's.



Audia Flight Strumento n1 Stereo Preamplifier rear (detail).

I focused on a few favorite CDs to get a handle on the sound. I was lucky enough to review the unit through Raidho D-1 Loudspeakers (in their size, among the best on the planet), the Audia Flight CD One M CD Player and AF's Strumento n4, the n1's power brother. More structural beasts featuring magic within (reviews forthcoming).

I am a true admirer of Raidho speakers and am very susceptible to any changes in its 'house' sound. The AF preamp gave no indication of coloration — certainly, no straight wire with gain, as it 'added' a synergy to the system that was so musical. But, what blew me away with the n1 was the bottomless noise floor. So low, so black. Like a magical elixir. It allowed for many nuances to shine. The new reissue of Billy Joel's greatest hits emphasized this wonderful quality. Never the best recorded (lots of 'studio' artifacts), yet Sony has released a winner. The studio artifice has been removed for the most part, and what's left is Joel's amazing musicianship and the wonderful surrounding virtuosos. But, it was instruments such as harmonica and Joel's own piano that caught my ear. The front edge of the harmonica, with its breathy articulation and the brilliance of Joel's 'pop' piano playing. The piano on his recordings can never be mistaken for a Bosendorfer in a beautiful hall. Here, the piano's transient and decay was lovely. It was involving instrumentally like few pop recordings from the 70s through the 90s. Usually, all glitz and glamour with string machines and imaginary drummers. The reissue's engineering helped a lot, but the Audia Flight unravelled the lines magically, too. The noise floor, again.

Voices on CDs from The Cowboy Junkies, Anita O'Day, and Linda Ronstadt floated in the soundstage between and around the Raidhos. This preamp knows how to reimagine a voice, and with the effortless control of the very best preamps. Everything is locked down and solid, but all the musicality and enchantment came through. So many high end devices get the technology but the music remains elusive. The AF is fleshy, but shapely. Every bump in the right place. Audia Flight has taken great pains to use top of the line parts, solid topology and exceptional 'tuning' to get the balance right. You would not confuse the n1 with a great tube preamp like Audio Research, Lamm or VAC, but it does what the very best of solid state can do in the here and now. As such, a 'great' solid state preamp. Tube guys, hear this preamp.

Orchestral music in this system rocked the room. The Raidhos can outperform just about anything I've heard for orchestral replication, and the wonderful trio from Audia Flight matched them every step of the way. I ended with my 1969 von Karajan Beethoven 9, last movement. Always a snarky, red headed stepchild when trying to deliver the music diaphanously. Much like Beethoven's vocal writing, recordings can get bogged down, especially in the opening orchestral volley, 'Millionen', and the contrapuntal string writing in the 6/8. The n1 did a wonderful job in allowing me to hear the magnificent instrument that Karajan developed (inherited?). Once again, the AF loved to get timbres correct — piccolo (always swamped in this recording), bow on strings in the scrambling 6/8, and bass drum clear as a bell in the back of the Jesus Christ Church in Berlin.

The Strumento n1 will be purchased by those wanting a flexible hi fi system with a heart of a lion. With it in your system, it can be also deliver analog and computer files, and will always be there to provide maximum musicality, maximum flexibility, and yes, even value. You'll never need another. Highly recommended.

*Anthony KERSHAW*