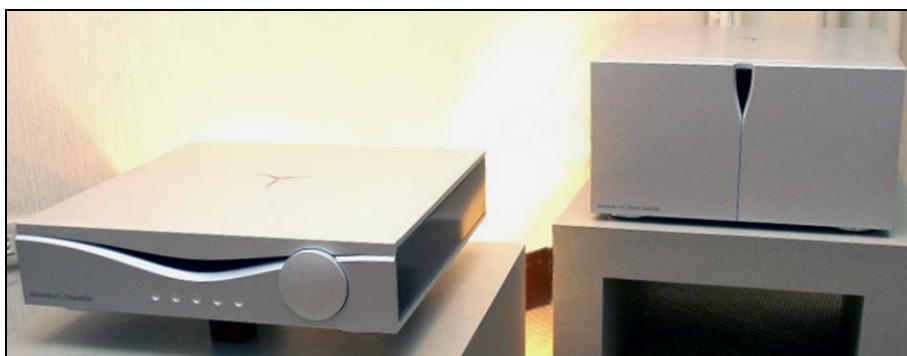


Audia Flight Strumento n°1 & n°4 reviewed by Edgar Kramer, september 2013 on :



# STRUMENTO N°1 & 4



Volare Italia. Ferrari, Lamborghini, Bugatti, Maserati, Prada, Versace, Giorgio Armani... these are brands which are aspirational, which are most desired around the world and which generate the very highest pride of ownership. The common thread there obviously is that they all come from that Latin boot-shaped country. In the world of audio this Italian design flair combined with technical excellence has translated to equally desirable brands such as Chario, Diapason, Eventus, Pathos, Rosso Fiorentino, Unison Research (and its loudspeaker cousin Opera) and most notably Sonus faber. Whilst a large percentage of these are speaker manufacturers where the most stylistic panache can be let loose, a relatively new electronics player is now making a mark in the upper echelons of the high-end arena. Enter Audia Flight with three electronics ranges; the entry point 'Three' Series, the mid-level 'Classic' series and the subjects of this review, the preamp/power amp combo from the stellar high-end 'Strumento' Series.



Fasten your seat belts!... The Strumento N° 1 preamplifier is immaculately assembled and sports a massive rotary volume knob on the right side of the fascia's gently curving display window. Below that is a row of five chromed metal buttons for switching input, balance, power, (menu) set and mute. That's all. The rear panel is a whole 'nutha story resplendent with all manner of audio connectivity. There are two XLR and high-quality WBT NextGen RCA inputs (switchable) and three additional balanced-only inputs. Outputs include two XLR pairs and one RCA with a fixed 'record out' on RCA. There are two removable latch spaces for optional DAC and phono modules.



The Strumento N° 1's gain operates across a range of -90dB to +10dB with a step resolution of 0.5dB. Frequency response within 1w RMS and -3dB parameters is 1Hz-1MHz with a high S/N ratio of 105dB. Input impedance is 15k $\Omega$  balanced or unbalanced whilst the output impedance is a nicely low 5 $\Omega$ . The included remote control is beautifully styled, milled from solid aluminium and features small round metal buttons that make a somewhat intrusive clicking sound when pressed.

Equally impressive specifications are quoted for the Strumento N° 4 stereo amplifier. This is an absolute beast weighing in at 90kg. I don't tend to gauge amplifiers by the kilo but this is one heavy mutha with the promise of overkill power supply componentry and transformers. Adding to the weight is extraordinarily solid aluminium case work which in a nice touch extends over the extensive heatsinking to cover what in other designs are chin-slicing edges. Audia Flight quotes output power of 200/400/800 watts into 8/4/2 $\Omega$  respectively. Inputs are switchable RCA (again WBT NextGen) and XLR while the speaker binding posts are the WBT clear plastic-shrouded type. The Herculean power supply features a mammoth 3KVA principal transformer, two additional 150VA toroids for the gain stage and yet a further 15VA for the logic board. Capacitor banks are substantial at 200.000 $\mu$ F for the output stage and 42.000 $\mu$ F for the voltage gain stage. Circuit gain is 29dB while the frequency response (1w RMS at -3dB) is given as a very wide 0.3Hz to 1MHz. Input impedance is somewhat low at 7.5k $\Omega$  meaning it's just as well the matching preamp has such low output impedance. The amp requires a 20-amp IEC power lead. A generic one is provided but I used a Shunyata.



The two units come in well-designed wooden crates that dismantle around the components via tool-free metal clip fasteners to leave them sitting only on the base for easy lifting. Not that lifting nearly 90kg is ever easy. Heavy internal foam protects the components from uncaring couriers so overall Audia Flight has catered appropriately for freight around the world. Quality leather-bound instruction manuals are included.

I asked owners Massimiliano Marzi and Andrea Nardini about some of the ideas behind the Strumento components. There were some language barriers commendably surpassed by Marzi and Nardini with the aid of Australian distributor Absolute Hi End's affable Boris Granovsky which led to succinctness.

I first asked if all circuit and technical aspects of the Strumento pre/power combo were designed in-house and what output devices were preferred for the Strumento N° 4 amplifier. "Yes, all parts were designed in-house and we use bipolar Semi ON transistors."

I then enquired as to the volume control's design. "The volume control is a constant impedance design. The Achilles heel of many preamplifiers is represented by the volume control since usually it introduces variable impedance as a function of attenuation value (that is, the position of the potentiometer). The result is that frequency response, slew rate and even the internal impedance coupling among different stages are not fixed but a function of volume. This is a problem which affects above all the usual potentiometers. Using instead integrated attenuators—ICs dedicated to volume control or D/A converters—solves the problem of variable impedance but not that of frequency or absolute velocity response.

"For this reason Audia Flight developed a constant impedance attenuator realized with discrete components (low-noise metal-film resistors) which provides a gain range as high as 127dB with constant steps of 0.5dB. The result obtained probably overcomes the wall of standard performance limitations since Audia Flight offers an extremely extended frequency response (3Hz-1MHz -3dB) and high >250V/μs slew rate across the entire gain range (-90 to +10dB)."

The aluminium casework is of extraordinary quality. Where was that done? "Like with all our components, the case is 100% made in Italy. One company makes the CNC chassis for us, another does the anodizing."

What were the main attributes aimed for with each component? "I think the best component of our flagship Strumento series is the sum of our vast experience. Our design has been perfected over many years. We spent hundreds of hours listening and making the right choices. The sound, the 'soul' of our products is a mirror of our culture not only for the high-end but our life too. If I have to identify some parts I am not able to do so because I think it is a synergy of all parts. It is like a chorus. Each has its own contribution."

Just on the point about the Strumento chassis it must be emphasized that the assembly quality, machining and finish are absolutely first class. Most of the chassis joinery is free of fasteners and of seamless integration while the aluminium is of the highest grade and flawlessly anodized. These are components that have the look and feel of true high-end products in the literal sense of the expression.

In full flight. Fire up the preamp and you may get startled by the volume control logic system as it returns to the previously-set level prior to turn off. The multiple relays click away in an orchestral show that is actually quite enjoyable to witness and hear – the same process in reverse occurs when powering off as the relays count down to zero prior to powering down... click, click, click. Fun.

Relay shenanigans aside, the sound from the first few bars impressed with its fullness and authority. The beautifully captured live violin and piano from the Audiofon label's Sonatas by Mozart, Prokofiev, Beethoven, Brahms and Bloch as played by Pavel and Lazar Berman just flooded the listening room with an all-enveloping soundscape. The violin was sweet and detailed, full of bow and string nuance but with the instrument's resonance rendered in full. So was the enormity of the piano in its entire majesty across the keys left to right. This was truly engaging and gorgeous solid-state amplification at its best. Much like the best valve systems this transistor combo provided a sense of corporeal reality to instruments and voices that was very lifelike.



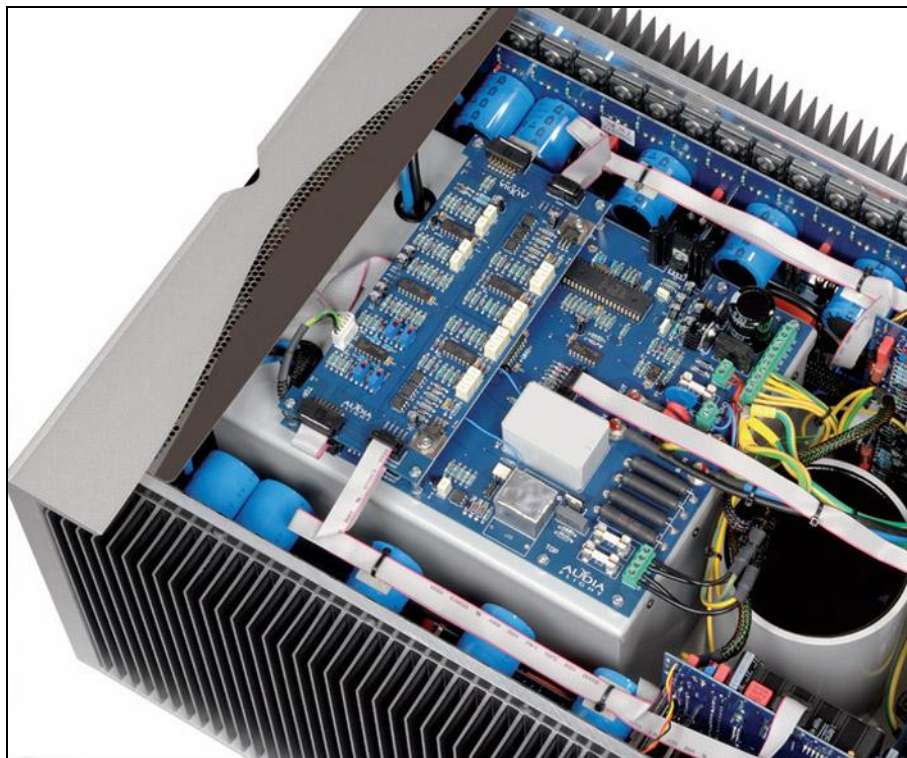
I recently attended one of the most unforgettable live performances I've ever enjoyed. The Jenolan Caves—a massive network of stalagmite- and stalactite-rich labyrinthine caves a short drive from my new home in the upper Blue Mountains—was the unlikely venue for the world-renowned local Paganini Duo and a performance of Gypsy music from Romania, Russia and Hungary. Deep inside a natural amphitheater considered internationally as having the best acoustics in the world, the duo played some of the most heart-wrenching soulful music I have ever heard. After the performance I had the pleasure of chatting on a number of musical and other subjects with violinist Gustaw J. Szelski and guitarist/cellist Georg Mertens-Moussa. I of course purchased the duo's Blue Mountains Gypsies CD on the spot duly autographed by both musicians.

Upon returning home that night I fired up the system and promptly gave the CD a whirl. A flood of recently acquired unforgettable sensations came flooding straight back. This recording was made in a studio but with the performance captured live and while the acoustic environment was wildly different, the Strumento combo provided a live and energetic rendition of the violin and guitar which sounded remarkably like it had back in that glorious cavern.

The Strumenti components provide a very delicate rendition of detail with excellent microdynamic shading and precise separation of instrumental layers. On Curandero's Aras the intricacies of the various instruments and vocal sound effects can confuse some components and make tracks like "Segue" sound congested and closed in. But here I was hearing an extremely well-resolved mix with very accurate timbral information and an openness and spatial freedom that were quite enthralling.

I frequently use the Yim Hok-Man Master of Chinese Percussion album to determine a component's ability to convey realistic dynamic expression and low-end control. Here I discovered how the N° 4 is stunningly dynamic, exerts uncompromising control of the bass registers, is extended and refined in its top end (there's quite a bit of cymbal and bell content here, not just crazy powerful drums) whilst providing a tonal truth that rivals the best valve designs. The preamp was equally adept at presenting beautiful textural timbre and all other fundamental sonic qualities required of a preamp at this price.

However I felt that it could not match the excellence of the amplifier nor my other preamp references in one area: that of dynamic intensity. The Strumento N° 1 marginally tapered the fortissimo slams, it subtly abridged the dynamic chasms between pianissimo and fortissimo. That is the only area where it scores four rather than the five stars it merits in all other aspects.



Female and male vocals were outstandingly real and present via this talented pairing. Lifelike—there is that word again—was often used in my audition notes. And layered too. The combo cast a massive soundstage with extremely accurate placement of full-bodied images that reached well behind the speaker plane especially with the Wilson Audio Alexia having been dialed in to the max via their comprehensive aspherical propagation delay system. Not only did the speakers vanish but via the Strumenti they threw an all-engulfing soundfield I simply wallowed in or was swallowed up by.

As much as the amplifier in particular was able to slam hard which made it more than suitable for heavier musical genres such as hard rock, I'd have to say that it was also among the most refined, tonally sophisticated, nuanced and texture-rich solid state amplifiers I've ever had the pleasure of auditioning. And the same would go for the preamp lest you're after ceiling-lifting dynamic contrasts.

Conclusion. Yes there's an increasing number of companies releasing electronics and speaker systems which reach towards stratospheric price points even above the aforementioned \$50K mark. Heck, just off the top of my head as I write I can think of around ten! The Strumento N° 1 and No 4 are around a quarter and third of that. Could the Strumenti be poster boys/gals for the 'diminishing returns' maxime? Perhaps. That after all is an individual's call.

Rest assured that these components are truly superb sonic performers built to spectacular standards on par with the very best. In fact I've reviewed some very heavy hitters well above \$50K for our domestic print magazines and the Strumento N° 4 in particular would not be embarrassed by any in terms of either musical merit or construction quality. Here at the Kramer's 'Mountain Retreat' they will be missed. Forza Italia!

*Edgar Kramer*