

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Aaron XX integrated amplifier

By Alan Sircom

In Germany, the Aaron and Sovereign brands are well known as being the choice of the discerning engineer. And given the weighting the German people place upon good engineering, that's saying a lot. Reputedly, no less than the Fraunhofer Institute – the boffins behind the development of MP3 – use Sovereign amplifiers in their audio demonstration suite. So, the company behind both Aaron and Sovereign could be accused of knowing what they are doing.

Sovereign came first back in the late 1980s, with all the shiny gold and silver and over-massive build that represented the pinnacle of high-end at the time. Over the years, this budded out into a more down-to-earth brand – Aaron – with its more prosaic (but very rich and deep) black anodized finish and more attainable price points. Sovereign is still very much in business, still making some of the most expensive amplifiers on the planet, such as the €129,000 per pair, tall as a man The Sovereign monoblocks. But it's Aaron that now grabs the headlines in our more price-conscious time. As we shall see, deservedly so.

Both Aaron and Sovereign stick resolutely to their core. Both are amplifier brands through and through. Aaron makes integrated amplifiers, preamplifiers, power amplifiers and that's it. No new model every few years, either. There was a phono stage once and there's mention of a new high-

end phono stage in the offing, but the brand is principally there to make someone else's line-level source sound louder into someone else's loudspeakers. It's the prime example of do one thing and do it well.

The XX integrated amplifier was designed as a celebration of the Aaron's 20th year in business in 2009. It's a meaty, single-ended only, DC-coupled Class AB amplifier delivering 80W into eight ohms and 140W into four though its high-bandwidth bipolar output devices. Remarkably for an integrated amp that isn't the size of a car engine, it can keep on going into really gnarly sub-two-ohm loads, although I think any people still looking for an integrated amp to drive their Apogee Scintillas at high volumes for days on end ▶





might want to consider something more 'meaty'.

It's also a proudly Euro-design; thought up in Germany, built in Holland and capitalizing on the sort of engineering Europe does best; small-batch, precision CNC machining and hand-built circuits. Audio manufacture in the West is at a crossroads; we either give up building things here and accept the consequences of that action, or make things that compete by building them the way we always excelled at, and accepting you are going to pay a premium for that method of manufacture. Except, in the case of the XX, that premium isn't as vast as might be expected; it costs €2,000 and the remote handset – that you could use to dig a road – is an additional €200.

Despite having just two pointy cone knobs on the front panel, the XX is deceptively flexible in use, and that add-on remote is not a mandatory device for the process. Push in the volume knob on the right and it goes into standby, push in the source selector knob and you can adjust the gain for the selected source. There's up to 6dB of attenuation on offer, so that wildly different outputs can be tamed (it's not fine-tuned enough for level-matching for listening tests, but will stop a too-quiet tuner being shouted down by a too-loud CD player, for example). The downside to this is it is too easy to go into one of the modification or sleep mode when all you want to do is change volume or source. You can also configure the Aaron to run bi-amped, using the Aaron No. 3 Millennium power amp (which has the same gain structure as the power amps in the XX), but this time just using the phonos on the rear panel. A centre LCD display provides all the basic information.

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By putting the standby switch on the front panel instead of the rear IEC block, Aaron has placed control of standby back in the hands of the listener. But I'd say don't use standby unless you are sure no listening will happen for quite some time. The amplifier doesn't rely on a long run in, but because it's a Class AB design, the XX takes its merry time to come on song when powered out of standby. You would potentially need to turn the XX on at lunchtime to get it to sing for the evening listening session, and it does get quite hot for a AB design. As the amp seems an unburstable, exceptionally well made beast, I'd treat it like a Naim SuperNait and leave it constantly powered up, except in times of thunderstorm or annual holiday (the two often coincide).

There's a lot of thought gone into this amplifier, from the potted transformer to the mass-loading of the top plate (an additional Aaron logo on a chamfered aluminium plate also acts to damp that plate). The only thing I'm not convinced by is the italic script on the front panel. It's laser cut into the dark alloy front plate so it will never dull, but it detracts from the overall classiness of the look, in my opinion. The more expensive Aaron designs have a more understated script and optional black-on-black or silver-on-silver colour schemes, like the model numbering on a Mark Levinson.

The thing is, if this is the cheaper model, it doesn't look or sound like corners have been cut. Quite the reverse, in fact. The XX performs like it should be a £5,000 integrated amplifier, but comes in at just €2,000 and doesn't do so by being built out of papier-mâché or having a case full of air.

Its sound can best be described as 'upbeat'. It makes most push-pull valve amps sound like they've been sedated ▶

▶ and could even trouble a Naim design in the pace stakes. It's not got the almost psychic delivery of the likes of DarTZeel, but it is quicksilver fast. It's also extremely transparent, and it's hard not to combine that speed and that transparency without thinking 'electrostatic' like sound, but that's precisely what you get.

In the process of delivering such a speedy delivery, it comes with a 'too much of a good thing' caveat. I tried the XX with a number of loudspeakers and it never flinched from the task, but there were combinations that did not gel well together. Like, for example, the Raidho C1.1 tested last issue; the two combined to form a sound that seemed to exaggerate the properties of the ribbon tweeter at the expense of the bass unit, and the net result was lean and almost thin and reedy sounding. On the other hand a pair of Reference 3a Veenas (coming up in the next issue) sprang to life under the XX's care and attention, as did a pair of old ProAc Studio 150s and not so old but just as discontinued Avalon NP2.0s that I still use. On balance then, the amp is a force for good, but it needs to be partnered with suitably voiced loudspeakers to mitigate the occasional intensity of the presentation.

There's a lesson to be learned here. Although the amp can deliver the muscle needed to support more than £10,000 worth of loudspeaker, doesn't make it a shoe-in for good sound. However, I suspect the real reason for that disconnect was the pace of the amplifier and speaker combining to produce something too upbeat for its own good. When correctly partnered, the sound is full and harmonically 'right' and very, very fast. While that will never do for those who like their music 'full fat', or 'lush', there are a lot of people who readily dismiss a lot of modern audio as 'bloated' or 'stodgy' and for them, the XX is an ideal choice.

You'll notice I've spent almost no time discussing the other aspects of the amplifier's performance. That's because in almost all other directions the XX is at or beyond the performance of its rivals. The sound is articulate, coherent, detailed, extremely dynamic and infinitely presentable. The tonal balance – upbeat caveat notwithstanding – is fundamentally neutral, with outstanding bass, and the solidity of instrument images on the soundstage is excellent. It can also pump out the sound like it was going out of fashion; it seems to have near endless, undistorted power delivery for its class. Perhaps the only point of note in the rest of the performance is the soundstage, which is wider than it is deep, but doesn't throw out images too far past the boxes. Instead you get a tight ball of sound between the speakers, unless the engineer went crazy with the pan pot and made noises far to the left or right.

The Aaron XX is a limited edition amplifier. Not in the 'only 200 of these beauties will ever be sold', but at one point in the near future the celebrations of that 20th birthday will cease and so will the production of the XX. Given we are already close to the company's 24th birthday, I'd recommend getting in there quickly. It's worth it. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power output: 80W (eight ohms), 140W (four ohms), power delivery into one-ohm loads suggested

Power delivery: DC-coupled, Class AB bipolar output stage, common emitter coupled

Inputs: Six, single-ended phono only, level matching available

Outputs: Tape, preamp phono outputs, WBT multi-way speaker terminals

Dimensions (WxHxD): 45x11x38cm

Weight: 12kg

Price: €2,000 (remote €200)

Manufactured by: Aaron & Sovereign (High End GmbH)

URL: www.hifi.net

Tel: +49 (0)5068 2858