

Aaron No 22 Cineast preamp and No 3 Millennium amplifiers

by Alan Sircom



This is Aaron's pre-power system, but it's a system with a twist. While the No 3. Millennium power amplifier is a stereo design, the preamp – the No 22. Cineast – is designed to handle multichannel inputs alongside stereo line sources. While that would normally have audiophiles reaching for the 'off' button, the twist is there is no digital processing going on inside the preamp. It simply handles six channel sources, in the same way it handles two channel sources.

Aaron is the value brand of German audio technology company High End GmbH. Its Cineast preamplifier is a multichannel preamp, with two sets of six channel inputs alongside the six stereo line inputs, and one set of multichannel outputs (for two-channel users, plug your power amplifier into the 'FL' and 'FR' channels). Any digital surround sound processing is performed in the source component itself,

the Cineast's multichannel functions are limited to individual channel attenuation and the provision for turning off specific channels. Controls are simple; left knob runs through the sources, and if you push the knob, it goes into set-up mode, while the right hand dial controls volume and pushing it in puts the preamp into standby. A large, two-deck fluoro display sits usefully between the two knobs. There's a chunky remote control, and a pithy Aaron identifier plate on the top panel.

The Millennium has the same dimensions, save for the control knobs (actually, control cones). The amp itself is extremely well made, featuring all discrete, hand-selected and matched components, with no capacitors in the short signal path. The big bank of capacitors under the hood are in the power supply, and there's a lot of air between the large toroidal transformer, the power regulation block, and the twin output stages. These output stages work in a ▶

▶ collector-follower circuit and the amp is capable of delivering 100W per channel into eight ohms, 180 into four and right down to 550 into one ohm. Both amplifiers can be powered on permanently (and don't draw a great deal of current in standby mode), and are fully conditioned and at their best 48 hours after being plugged in. They don't run warm, or make a noise through the loudspeakers when not in use. In other words, they are the perfect audio houseguests.

There's a trend in audio electronics to focus on the ephemera and miss the basics. The Aaron equipment resoundingly bucks that trend. These aren't packed to the gills with the most expensive components; this is good, solid equipment, built well in a no-frills manner. What they deliver instead of a bit of 'bling' is sound good.

I slotted the amplifier duo in a system comprising the Audiocom-modified Oppo 105 player (for disc and Ethernet-streamed music from my Naim UnitiServe), and an original SME Model 20 with Benz Micro SLR cartridge feeding my RCM Audio THERIAA phono stage. These were fed to a pair of Wilson Duette II loudspeakers. Amplifier comparisons were mostly from integrated solutions in and around the same power/price class (Burmester, Devialet, Jeff Rowland, etc.), but notable substitutions have been duly noted.

Like the external appearance of the Cineast and Millennium, there's a sense of down-to-earth confidence about the Aaron sound. And that applies regardless of the scale or genre of music played. This is an acid test for a component for me; yes, the amplifier that makes musical magic when hooked into the jazz scene is lovely, but only if it does the same thing for any other kinds of music. Unfortunately, there's a move to tailor the sound of electronics (consciously or not) in one

direction, and currently that's an obsession with detail and soundstage, or an emphasis on leading-edge resolution. The Aaron amps take a more measured line on music replay, and it's a refreshingly honest one.

Don't mistake this for meaning the amplifiers are incapable of producing sweet jazz tones, expansive soundstaging, fine detail, or precise, tight rhythm. They are more than capable, in fact. But it's the spread of sound that is what the Aaron duo do so right. You play something guaranteed to trigger discussions about detail and soundstage – Dexter Gordon's *Go* [Blue Note] for example – and you find yourself also listening to the timbral properties, and the solidity of the instruments in the mix. You play something with the most obvious beat – 'I Misunderstood', from Richard Thompson's *Rumor and Sigh* [EMI], which was a staple for many a 'tune dem' in the later Flat Earth years – and you find yourself also listening for the soundstaging, the inner detail, and could end up discussing macrodynamics and microdynamics in a way that would get you drummed out of the 'Pace, Rhythm, & Timing' club. In other words, the Aaron duo presents the music in an intrinsically correct manner.

If pressed, I can see why the Aaron amps are sort of associated with rock music replay. The weasel words in the above sentence are deliberate, because the rock association is not a deliberate position of the Aaron, more a lack of flexibility in its rivals that shows up in the rock canon. Nevertheless, the Aaron sound is powerful, solid, and perfect for playing graunching guitar riffs at a fair lick. It's a slightly 'dark' sound too; not rolled off, not brooding, but also not bright and steely in the way many amps can sound with rock. However, the Aaron sound doesn't suffer musical fools gladly, and signal ▶





► compressed sounds are not prettied up. This is not a ‘warts and all’ presentation, but honest enough to show up just what heavy-handed signal compression can do to a piece of music. Even that ‘now’ stalwart of audio demonstrations, ‘Royals’ by Lorde [*Pure Heroine*, Virgin], shows itself as thin and loud... unless you play the LP version.

Of the two components, I find the Millennium the star of the show, although it’s a very close run thing. It came down to running the Cineast and the Townshend Allegri (the most transparent and least obtrusive preamplifier I know of) in quick succession. Both Aaron devices were great products, but the Millennium had huge amounts of power on tap. It can drive absolutely anything (even down to one ohm, so even the most beastly loudspeaker is dispatched without the Millennium turning a hair), and it can drive it with solidity, exceptional dynamics, and slam. That’s a word you don’t hear much in audio today, because everyone seems more obsessed with soundstaging, but play some Who records at a fair lick, and the underpinning of Keith Moon’s ‘Unleash Hell’ method of drumming and John Entwistle’s super-fast, super powerful bass, are both rooted in place. That slam is better expressed with the Allegri+Millennium combination (in fact, the duo works so well, Townshend should consider using the Aaron amp as a handy power amp recommendation), although in great fairness the Cineast does not lag far behind the Allegri. Given the Allegri is arguably one of the best preamps money can buy, it shows how good the Cineast can be.

My concern here is people will miss out. Audiophiles will see the word ‘Cineast’, see those six channel inputs and outputs and jump to the wrong conclusion. Like the Millennium, the Cineast is every fibre a hi-fi preamplifier, and in our spendy world, a good value one at that. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

No 22 Cineast preamplifier

Inputs: six stereo RCA inputs, two six-channel RCA inputs

Outputs: six-channel output

Multichannel functions: output level (can act as balance control for front speakers), provision to turn off subwoofer and rear-channel. No on-board DSP

Frequency Response: 0Hz-100kHz (-3dB)

THD+N: 0.0064% 1V/1kHz

S/N ratio: -107dB ref: Max output level

Dimensions (WxDxH): 44x38x11 cm

Weight: 9kg

Price: €2,590

No 3 power amplifier

Inputs: 2x RCA inputs

Outputs: 2x multi-way loudspeaker terminals

Power output: 100W/ch (eight ohms), 180W/ch (four ohms), 320W/ch (two ohms), 550W/ch (one ohm)

Frequency Response: 0Hz-160kHz (-3dB) 1W/8Ω

THD+N: 0.0087% 5W/1kHz

S/N ratio: -99.7dB ref: Max output level

Dimensions (WxDxH): 44x38x11 cm

Dimensions (WxDxH): 44x36x11 cm

Weight: 13kg

Price: €2,590

Manufactured by: High End GmbH

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