

● REVIEW PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

Audio Analogue Puccini Anniversary

The Italian manufacturer has long done things its own way, launching its simple Puccini amplifier when the rivals were feature-laden. Two decades on, can the Anniversary compete?

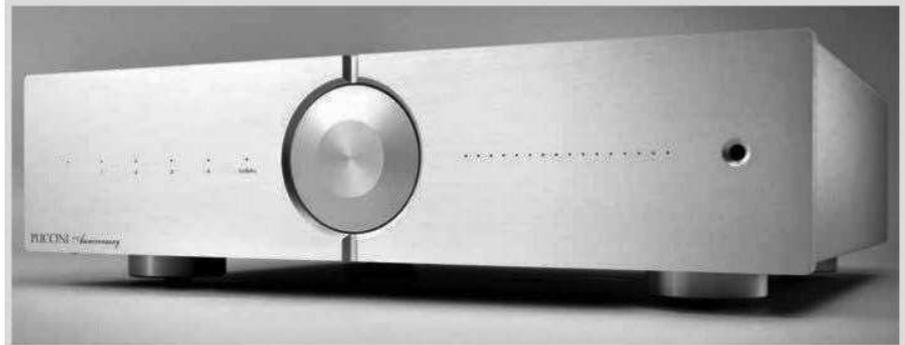
As a reminder of how long one has been involved with hi-fi, 'anniversary' models have a habit of giving something of a jolt. When such an arrival serves as a reminder of the launch of the original and the interest it created – well, at least that helps prove that the old grey cells are still firing and that one was paying attention at the time!

Such is the case with this Anniversary version of Italian manufacturer Audio Analogue's Puccini amplifier. Selling for £2999, which is rather more than the original cost 20 years ago, it nevertheless still has the kind of simplicity the company had on its side at a time when many manufacturers still seemed intent on cramming as many controls as possible on to the front of their products.

At the time of its launch, the original Puccini stood apart from the crowd with its simple arrangement of just two controls – an input selector and a volume knob – on a plain slab of a fascia, and its relatively modest 40W-per-channel output. What it did have, however, was pricing to challenge the midrange amps from the more conventional rivals, a decent phono stage and excellent sound quality, even though it didn't quite conform to the smooth, lush presentation some expected given its Italian heritage – and, of course, its classically inspired name.

Instead, the sound was clean and informative, and seemingly impossible to push into anything approaching roughness or excessive treble enthusiasm, making

AUDIO ANALOGUE PUCCINI ANNIVERSARY



Type Integrated amplifier

Price £2999

Inputs Five line (four on RCA phonos, one on balanced XLRs)

Outputs One pair of speakers

Power 80Wpc into 8 ohms, 300W into 2 ohms

Accessories supplied Remote handset

Finishes Black or silver

Dimensions (WxHxD) 44.5x12x39.0cm

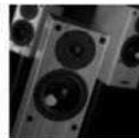
audioanalogue.com; decentaudio.co.uk

it a fine antidote to some of the bright-sounding CD players and lightweight speakers of the time. The Puccini also played a major part in opening up the world of Italian-made hi-fi to a wider customer base – not to mention giving its manufacturer a firm foothold in the market. Based in the spa town of Monsummano Terme, Tuscany, the company was founded the same year the original Puccini appeared, with the twin aims of hand-building its products in Italy and designing 'by ear', its 'mission statement' saying that 'what primarily interests us is to get the "high musicality", and then listening pleasure over time'.

Twenty years on, the products are still made in Italy and those central design ideas still obtain. Indeed, the Puccini Anniversary is, at first glance, an even simpler amplifier than the model it celebrates: it has just one central control and is line-only, with no phono stage. However, as the price suggests, this is a rather more ambitious design, with the output to match: it claims 80Wpc into 8 ohms – even more powerful than the Settanta version of a few years back – and that figure rises to 300W into 2 ohms, promising solid ability when it comes to driving tricky speaker loads.

The dual-mono design manages that impressive power by using three pairs of

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SUGGESTED PARTNERS

The Anniversary is a very traditional amplifier, so here are some conventional partners for it

MARANTZ SA8005

An excellent CD player, with a twist: the Marantz SA8005 also doubles as a USB DAC for a computer



KEF REFERENCE ONE

SPEAKERS Compact but exceptionally powerful-sounding, the KEF Reference One speakers will work well with the Audio Analogue



output transistors for each channel, while a look at the rear panel makes obvious the 'mirror image' layout within, with the two channels placed either side of a centrally mounted toroidal transformer. Rather than the input sockets – which extend to four sets of phonos and one of XLRs – being in pairs, as they are on most other amplifiers, those for the left and right channels are physically separated, and again laid out in mirror image.

Fed with a range of files from MP3 all the way up to DSD, the Anniversary shows a very mature confidence and control that's hard not to like

Another notable aspect of the design is that single main control, which belies some complexity within: it manages to control not just volume but also power on/off and input selection. A short push powers the amp up, while a five second push powers it down and a three-second push changes input – and, of course, turning the control alters the volume.

However, even that 'of course' isn't as simple as it sounds: using a total of four potentiometers – two per channel – means the volume control can offer a choice of 'response curves' to compensate for the characteristics of the speakers to which the amplifier is connected. So if you have very sensitive speakers, you can dial in a slower response in the lower reaches of the volume control's travel or, for low-sensitivity speakers, it's possible to set a volume curve with a smarter 'step off' from zero, becoming more progressive at higher settings.

PERFORMANCE

I have to say I found that single control rather confusing at first, finding myself turning the amplifier off when I wanted to change input, and having to work hard to hear the differences between the various volume curves. Fortunately the Anniversary comes with a rather more conventional system remote handset, even though the fact it illuminates when you pick it up did surprise me at first.

No such nasty shocks are available when one listens to the amplifier, however: rather, the new model has all the qualities I have admired in Audio Analogue's products in the past but on a rather grander scale, thanks to that extra (rather large) dose of power and a topology clearly designed for extra clarity and finesse. In other words, it sounds smooth and sweet, with excellent scale and substance to the music, but doesn't stint on dynamic ability or presence and ambience.

The result is a highly attractive sound across a wide range of recordings, from the most intimate solo instrumental recordings to larger orchestral and choral works. Fed with a range of files from MP3 all the way up to DSD via a top-notch network music player, and powering large floorstanding speakers, the Anniversary shows a very mature confidence and control that's hard not to like, and is as rewarding whether you want to listen into the depths of a recording or simply sit back and relax.

The effortlessness of the presentation is the most beguiling aspect of this amplifier. Even when playing large-scale, complex works at relatively high levels, there's never any sense of its having to work hard, and clarity is maintained however hard you push things. With a recording such as the recent Elgar First Symphony from Barenboim and the Staatskapelle Berlin (Decca, 5/16), the amplifier does extremely well with both the great sweep of the work and the finer details of the various sections of the orchestra, pulling off that great trick of making it all seem so simple while at same time really bringing out the nuances. Similarly, with Ingrid Fliter's reading of Schumann and Mendelssohn piano concertos (Linn, 5/16), while the Anniversary may be a little warm and over-sonorous in the lower octaves of the piano, there's no denying the clarity of the balance between soloist and orchestra, and the way the speed of the amplifier makes every note clear and fluid, even when heard against the rest of the musical forces.

Yes, the Audio Analogue Puccini Anniversary looks very unlike most of its rivals, even at this high-flying price, but the pay-off is a sound of warmth and grace likely to appeal to many listeners. **G**

Or you could try...

The Audio Analogue amplifier is in a relatively rarefied sector of the market: by the time you get to this level, many buyers will be considering a two-box pre-amplifier/power amplifier combination. However, there are some integrated amplifier alternatives worth considering.

Marantz PM14S1 Special Edition

For example, rather less than the price of the Anniversary will buy you the excellent Marantz PM14S1 Special Edition integrated amp (£1799), launched last year with a fine combination of the company's usual finesse and clarity, plus the power to drive even demanding speakers. More information at marantz.co.uk



The Naim Supernait 2

The £3050 Naim Supernait 2 follows the same 'no frills' thinking, having lost the digital section of the original Supernait, and displays the usual Naim trait of a relatively low power output on paper but the drive and grip to make a wide range of speakers sing. It can also be upgraded with the addition of a power supply, as you can discover at naimaudio.com.



Arcam A49

If you want power to match and go beyond the Italian amp, the £3995 Arcam A49 has it, and in spades. A big, heavyweight amplifier, designed in the UK but built in the US, it uses its Class G amplification to combine fine detail with massive slam and drive. See arcam.co.uk



Leema Elements duo

Finally, if you want to go the two-box route, don't overlook the £2590 Leema Elements duo (reviewed last month), which combines a high-resolution DAC/pre-amp with a stereo power amp reconfigurable as a much more powerful mono device, for future upgrading. Details at leema-acoustics.com

