

Audio Analogue Maestro Anniversary

Twice the size, double the power and at two times the cost of the Puccini Anniversary integrated, is Audio Analogue's Maestro Anniversary amplifier doubly entertaining?

Review: **James Parker** Lab: **Paul Miller**

When you have something to celebrate, it's worth doing it in style – which is why Italian amplifier specialist Audio Analogue has not one, but two Anniversary models to mark its two decades in business. When we reviewed the celebratory version of the company's first product, the Puccini [HFN Jun '16], we noted that it was a beefed-up version of the original – and now comes a similarly revised take on the Maestro amplifier, selling for £6500.

That makes it twice the price of the Puccini Anniversary, but this all-analogue amplifier also delivers twice the power, at a claimed 150W per channel [see PM's lab report, p53], and is notably bulked up, not to mention weighing a substantial 31kg. Take all that on board and we have an integrated amplifier clearly of very serious intent, and a very long way – in specification, if not styling – from the original slimline Puccini.

FUNCTIONAL AGGRESSION

If further evidence is needed of the distance travelled, even a first glance will suffice. In place of the plain enclosure sides of the entry-level amplifier, the Maestro Anniversary has elaborate heatsinks running down the left and right of the chassis, concealed from the front by the thick metal fascia but immediately apparent when the amplifier is seen from above. I'm sure the design is entirely functional, but the aggressive look certainly makes a case for this big, powerful amp.

The idea of this being the company's basic amp design, just doubled throughout, is borne out in the layout of the power amp section: it's a fully balanced design, created

by doubling the design of the Puccini, with a dual-mono layout and entirely separate amplifiers for each channel, each using four pairs of output transistors to drive the speakers. They're another result of Audio Analogue's 'Designed by Airtech' project, which is what the company calls its in-house tuning arm. We've seen this in action on the Puccini Anniversary, and PM examines it more closely in our boxout [facing page], but it's worth noting that Airtech upgrades for existing products are also available from the company.

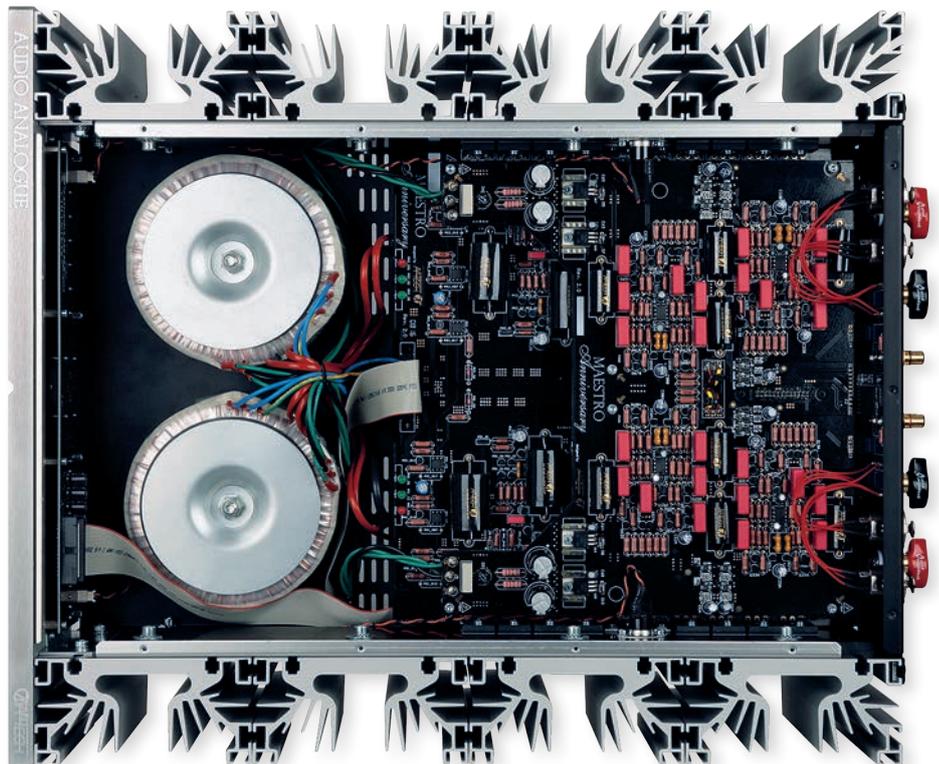
The design also extends to the use of two hefty toroidal transformers, mounted at the front of the chassis, while of course the usual claims are made for the quality of the components used throughout, from the use of 'military spec' resistors to

custom-made polypropylene capacitors, and from 7N-purity oxygen-free copper internal wiring to solid copper for the speaker terminals.

SOLO CONTROL

In terms of input/output provision the Maestro Anniversary is also very simple, with just two sets of balanced inputs, three pairs of line-level ins on RCA phonos and a single set of speaker outputs, and while there's slightly more to the control system than immediately meets the eye, in essence this is basically an amplifier with a source selector and a volume control.

Which is about as simple as things get, although admittedly there's also a chunky metal remote handset [pic, see p53] for volume up/down, stepping through the



RIGHT: The dual-mono design starts with two 600VA toroidal transformers, for left and right PSUs, and no fewer than four pairs of bipolar ON Semiconductor transistors in each amp stage



inputs, standby and mute. Incidentally, there's no way to access inputs directly, the front panel having only indicator LEDs and no selector buttons. Indeed, the only way is to scroll through the range of inputs available – but then with only five on offer, that's hardly any great hardship.

In this all-analogue design, the volume is actually operated digitally. That enables a push of the 'set-up' button to access parameters such as a balance control, a direct mode bypassing the preamp stage and volume control, and adjustment of the brightness and behaviour of the front-panel LEDs.

It also allows various volume control curves to be applied – think of it in terms of throttle mapping, and you're not too far off the truth. A gimmick? It may seem so, but I can see circumstances where this choice of settings might come in useful. For example, as well as a direct linear increase, provided in 'Volume Scale #4', the Maestro allows a 'fast step-off' position, with a rapid increase in the initial movement of the control, flattening out at higher levels (#1),

'The sound is simply packed with detail, the drums tight and clean...'

and versions designed to give more subtle adjustments for use with high-efficiency speakers (#2), and a curve giving better control in the midrange of the volume control's 'travel' (#3).

Having tried them all with various speakers, and finding the low-level 'speed of increase' in positions 1 and 4 rather too abrupt, I finally settled on position 3 as the best all-round choice with my PMC floorstanders. Your mileage may, of course, vary according to your choice of speaker, but at least the profiles are sufficiently different to justify the inclusion of the feature.

The 'direct' setting, meanwhile, will be handy for those wanting to incorporate the Maestro Anniversary into a combined stereo/multichannel system, as it will make it simpler to use the amplifier with the front L/R channel preouts of an AV receiver or processor. However, some caution must be taken with the use of this setting as it applies across all inputs, which could cause some alarming moments, or even speaker damage if switching from, say AV use to CD

ABOVE: Fascia is simplified by the use of one control for on/standby, volume and input selection. LEDs to its left show the input chosen, those to the right volume: all are dimmable

playback. It would be much better if the 'direct' setting could be applied to a single input, or perhaps if there were a simple bypass switch on one input allowing it to skip the volume control stage. Be warned!

MAGNIFICENT CONTROL

Fortunately, the rest of the performance of the Maestro Anniversary requires no such notes of caution. Gross simplification though it may sound, this is the Puccini Anniversary writ large, with an extra sense of power and poise about the presentation that makes it an even easier listen, so effortlessly does the amplifier seem to handle anything thrown at it.

Yes, there's an underlying warmth to the way this amp plays music, which may not endear it to those who like things blisteringly hard-hitting and red in tooth and claw, but the big, magnificent sound here is hard to resist, giving as it does that sense of the electronics being completely in control of the speakers driven.

With a clean, precise recording such as Mike Oldfield's recent *Return To Ommadawn* in 96kHz/24-bit [Virgin EMI CDV 3166] the Maestro Anniversary is very much in its element, from the ethereal opening with its subtle acoustic guitar developing into a driving bass-line and washes of backing instruments – not to mention tuned percussion, of course! – all the way through to the heavy drums and vocals at the conclusion of the first part. The sound is simply packed with detail, but even with the powerful drumming the Maestro keeps things tight and clean while still offering chest-thumping bass.

This precision and definition, while still maintaining scale and weight, is also very much in evidence with the epic *Rolling* ➤

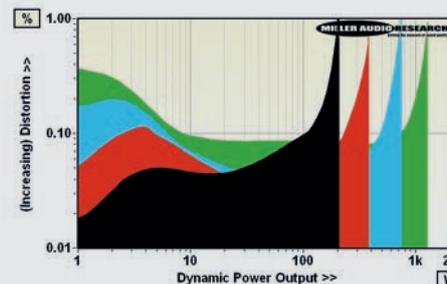
AIRTECH LABS

Not the company specialising in air quality control or asbestos removal, 'AirTech Labs' is really a sub-brand of Audio Analogue that's dedicated to its product development. This meeting of engineering minds has been responsible for the evolution in AA's amplifier circuit design and the Anniversary series of Puccini [HFN Jun '16] and Maestro integrateds. The design philosophy is not atypical of many audiophile amplifiers – a combination of robust but simple and elegant gain stages featuring the minimum of local compensation (feedback) and no over-arching (global) feedback. Coupled with a massive and very tightly-regulated power supply, the fully-balanced architecture has the ability to drive very difficult loudspeaker loads over an extended bandwidth. Distortion is moderate rather than vanishingly low but – and arguably of greater subjective importance – is impressively predictable with frequency, as is the amplifier's output impedance. The Maestro's watchword? *Consistency... PM*

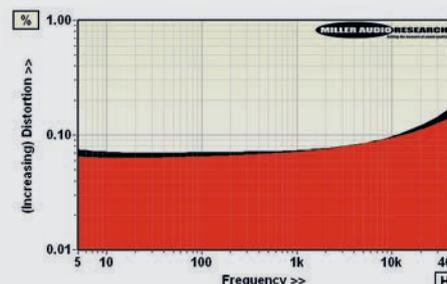
AUDIO ANALOGUE MAESTRO ANN.

Italian brand Audio Analogue impressed us with its Puccini Anniversary integrated [HFN Jun '16] and this Maestro version is very much the same wine, albeit in a much bigger bottle and at twice the ABV. Power output, and the Maestro's ability to drive low impedance loads, is very impressive indeed thanks to its 35.7A dynamic current capacity (<1% THD/10msec). Rated at twice that for the Puccini (150W vs. 70W/8ohm), the Maestro Anniversary does indeed deliver almost twice the output at 2x195W/8ohm and 2x385W/4ohm vs. 100W/185W at <1% THD. Reflecting the very stiff PSU regulation, dynamic power output is not much higher but it does increase magnificently into low impedance loads from 209W/8ohm and 387W/4ohm to 750W/2ohm and 1275W/1ohm [see Graph 1, below]. The Puccini manages 102W, 200W, 385W and 655W respectively.

Interestingly, while the Maestro offers twice the power (+3dB) with the same +34dB overall gain, it's also twice as 'noisy' (+6dB) as the Puccini with its 82.6dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW). The 'zero (global) feedback' topology is retained and we see the same decrease in distortion with increasing output and falling load impedance [Graph 1], albeit typically half that of the Puccini at the same output and frequency. Thus, distortion is 0.07-0.12% [re. 20Hz-20kHz/10W/8ohm – see Graph 2] versus 0.11-0.24% for the Puccini and 0.018-0.2% through bass and mid from 1-150W (vs. 0.12-0.3% over 1-80W for the Puccini). Once again, this promises a uniform tonal colour, with high impedance speakers at least, in line with the amplifier's moderate 0.14-0.16ohm source impedance. Into a non-reactive 8ohm load the response falls by -0.2dB/20kHz and -3.8dB/100kHz, which is a near-ideal performance. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (cyan) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Maximum current is 35.7A



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency at 10W/8ohm (5Hz-40kHz; left channel, black; right channel, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	195W / 385W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	209W / 387W / 750W / 1275W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.140-0.155ohm
Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.1dB to -0.2dB/-3.8dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/150W)	52mV / 650mV (balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/150W)	82.6dB / 104.4dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.070-0.12%
Power consumption (Idle/Max. o/p)	115W / 620W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	450x168x550mm / 31kg



ABOVE: No MM/MC phono stage but the five line inputs include two balanced on XLRs. 'Propeller Post' 4mm speaker outlets feature substantial gold-plated terminals

Stones In Mono box-set [ABKCO 018771834526], where the sheer punch of familiar tracks shorn of later stereo fripperies demonstrates the speed and dynamics of prime-period Stones.

'It's All Over Now' just explodes out of the speakers and keeps on giving, the tambourine punching through the mix and every element of the performance wonderfully clear, while the more laconic 'Time Is On My Side' also has that real 'band in the room' effect.

RAISING A SMILE

As there is a certain lushness about the way the big Audio Analogue integrated does things, it might not be a prime choice for hard-edged metal, say, or the raw extremes of punk. However, what it does with a wide range of music is hard not to like, and for all the warmth in the face there's no shortage of information and sparkle in the midband and treble.

For no particular reason I found myself having something of a folk-rock revival during the Maestro Anniversary's tenure in my system – more specifically, a solid evening of live Steeleye Span. Fed from my usual Naim front-end, the amp successfully summoned up the presence of the band's 2001 *The Journey* [Park Records PRKCD52], voyaging through the band's various iterations for a one-night charity gig.

The effect is infectious, from the close harmonies and simple instrumentation of the early versions of the lineup, such as on the lovely 'Gower Wassail' from 1971's *Ten Man Mop*, through to the most commercial *All Around My Hat* period, driven by the Ashley Hutchings/Nigel Pegrum rhythm section, with Bob Johnson's guitar slashing through 'Cam Ye O'er Frae

France'. Meanwhile the assured *a cappella* of encore favourite 'Rave On' can't help but raise a smile, each of the many lines clearly defined, with Gay Woods and Maddy Prior singing gorgeous harmonies. Instant transport back to the Hammersmith Odeon some time in the mid-'70s, when the band was about as unfashionable as possible among the cognoscenti, but played blinding gigs of whirling violins, soaring vocals, punchy drums and slamming power-chords.

The Maestro Anniversary is just as adept with close-focused jazz of the 'brushes on skin, resonant bass and delicate piano' school, but it's also very capable with sweeping orchestral works such as Mendelssohn's *Symphony No 3* [LSO/Sir John Eliot Gardiner; LSO Live LSO0765, 96kHz/24-bit].

That rich, warm bass, allied to the clarity and precision in the midband and treble, ensures both fine insight and an excellent sense of presence, while the ability of the amplifier with the dynamics of the music is never in doubt, from the stately opening to the infectious rhythms of the finale. The orchestra is treated to explosive power when required, but the Maestro Anniversary amplifier always sounds very much in control of what's going on. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

There's something of a revival of big integrated amplifiers right now, with the likes of the Arcam A49 and Marantz PM-10 joined by this Audio Analogue offering. While its warmth won't be to every taste, and others may find the simplicity of the input provision limiting, the Maestro Anniversary is a mature-sounding and superbly built alternative to more conventional preamp/power amplifier combinations.

Sound Quality: 84%

