



Exposure 2010s system

A no-nonsense, low-cost CD/integrated amplifier combination that delivers the goods. Add a power amplifier for even better results...

Exposure 2010s CD Player

PRICE £599

Exposure 2010s Integrated

PRICE £599

Exposure 2010s Power Amplifier

PRICE £499

It was the pre-release marketing of the *Live Aid* DVD that started me thinking about the whole multichannel thing again. I have no problem with 5.1, 6.1 or any other surround protocol in AV systems, but I've yet to hear the benefit of any more than the front channels for reproduction of music. Pretty much all the five-channel SACDs I've heard have sounded both unnatural and contrived, many of them giving an 'audio ping-pong' effect of the worst kind.

Of course, the musicality of multichannel systems and the software they utilise will improve, but if manufacturers have to invest heavily in multi-channel R&D and production, you do wonder if the stereo format will suffer, even among those manufacturers who outwardly

remain committed to the two-channel cause. For this reason I found it quite reassuring, when discussing Exposure's future plans with company MD Andy Whittle, to hear that it is wholly committed to the two-channel stereo format for the foreseeable future. Indeed, some of the attention to detail in the company's new 2010s series shows a lack of compromise that is really

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quite refreshing. The key example of this is the 2010s CD player's transport mechanism. Its predecessor, the 2010, used a Sony mechanism that is no longer available but, instead of following the mid-market norm and using a CD-R or DVD transport, Exposure has built its own bespoke unit around a Sony laser. Now, while this sort of approach might be expected in stratospherically-priced high-end kit, it is a little bit of a surprise in a £599 product.

Further evidence of Exposure's single-minded approach includes the CD player's digital outputs, which can be user-disabled via a circuit board jumper, for a small, but definitely noticeable, improvement in sound quality. High-grade polystyrene capacitors are used in key locations and, finally, not only is there a m-m phono stage available for the 2010s Integrated, but there is

even a m-c option. OK, maybe there aren't going to be a huge number of exotic m-c cartridge users looking for a £600 amp with an £89 phono card but the fact that the option is there shows a pleasing commitment to the analogue cause.

This review covers the company's current 'lead in' line-up of 2010s CD Player, 2010s Integrated Amplifier and 2010s Power amp (A 2010s Tuner is also in the pipeline for probable summer 2005 release). With the CD and Integrated both

retailing at £599, and the Power Amp at £500, the range works well as an inexpensive entry into quality stereo separates. Starting with a straightforward CD/Integrated set up, the Power Amp can be added when funds allow.

Although visually close to the preceding 2010 series, the new components show substantial improvements in both build and sound quality. In terms of construction, Exposure received some comments that the 2010 series were a little 'light weight' when compared to some rivals. Actually, these comments may have been a little harsh, as the units boasted aluminium casework, which was substantially more expensive than the heavier steel normal at their price point. As well as being non-magnetic, the molecular structure of aluminium is also much better suited to reducing case resonance. Nonetheless, Exposure has reacted to the feedback and, for the revised components, a thicker grade of aluminium has been used, which should improve the units' sound as well as satisfying those looking for a physically weightier product. On a specification basis, both the Integrated and the Power Amp have had their outputs increased from 50 to 75W

per channel, via the use of larger transformers and higher grade output devices.

For this review, the Exposure components were partnered with a pair of Spendor S8e speakers, interconnects were Van den Hul First Ultimate or Exposure's own, while speaker cable was bi-wired QED Silver Anniversary or Exposure DMF two.

CD PLAYER: SOUND QUALITY

Experience with Exposure electronics in dealers' demo rooms and at shows had led me to expect the rocking sound the brand is famed for. However, the first thing that struck me when I slipped the CD player into my reference system was the naturalness of the presentation. Listening to Minnie Riperton's sublime 'Loving You', the soaring vocal had a wonderful combination of smoothness and clarity. In absolute terms, high frequencies might have lacked the ultimate detail offered by high-end exotica, but there was a fine sense of air and lucidity, which even brought the birdsong in the background vividly to life. Checking out some further upper register challenges from the likes of Eva Cassidy and Heather Nova, it was apparent that smoothness

maybe just out-muscled clarity, but it was a finely judged line and, overall, tonal balance was spot on right across the frequency range.

Moving on to some vocals with a little more menace, I spun up Grand Master Flash & The Furious Five's 'The Message'. Here, the expected punch was present in spades, drawing out the growing sense of anger and desperation via laser-accurate reproduction of the track's superb phrasing and scansion. Even at this early stage, I was impressed how the 2010s CD felt at home with such diverse material. The key was the player's neutral performance: it doesn't shout about any one particular attribute, but this allows it to be a bit of a sonic chameleon. While not exactly 'analogue-like', the player was totally devoid of any digital harshness, which allowed extended listening sessions with absolutely no listener fatigue.

If pushed, I would say that the 2010s CD erred ever so slightly towards faster material, but you would never guess this, listening to something like Barber's *Adagio*, which was reproduced with a beguiling mixture of intimacy and grandeur. Oh, and those unpluggable digital outputs? Switch them out, and there is a small but noticeable improvement in focus. Different musical strands are just a little more distinct and the overall presentation gains a touch of lucidity.

INTEGRATED AMP: SOUND QUALITY

Replacing the Musical Fidelity kWP/kW combination with the 2010s Integrated was making a hefty demand on the Exposure amp, but it acquitted itself extremely well. The amp displayed a high degree of synergy with its partnering CD and in fact, in overall presentation, the combination was not unlike a shrunken version of the Musical Fidelity giants. Yes, the soundstage was somewhat smaller and the sound considerably less weighty, but there was the same sense of naturalness in vocals and acoustic



Bi-amp later when funds allow. Handset is a system remote

instruments and, even with the integrated amp driving both bass and treble, Exposure's signature energy was plain to hear, tracks as diverse as Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'Sweet Home Alabama' and Madness's 'One Step Beyond' being driven on with utterly infectious, toe-tapping gusto.

However, putting too much emphasis purely on the amp's suitability for up-tempo music would be doing the 2010s a serious disservice. Taken in isolation (away from unrealistic comparisons with the Wembley Leviathans), the Exposure's spatial performance was mighty impressive. While the Spondors may flatter this aspect of any amplifier, the 2010s Integrated provided a capacious soundstage with a finely graduated depth of image. Also, the amp built on the CD's natural presentation, meaning that both unplugged tracks and classical music were admirably catered for.

The optional m-c phono facility also acquitted itself very well, conveying a surprisingly high proportion of the performance of my SME 20/Sumiko Celebration analogue front-end. As an

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inexpensive introduction to the joys of the vinyl disc, the phono card comes highly recommended.

Of course, nothing is perfect in this world and, while the Exposure Integrated's 75 watts per channel is generous at its price point, the loudest of orchestral crescendos did lead to a slight muddying of the sound. Of course, this is where bi-amping might well help so, time to plumb in the 2010s Power Amp.

POWER AMP: SOUND QUALITY

While the benefits of bi-wiring are contentious, most listeners agree that even passive bi-amping

reliably provides greater control of the speakers. This certainly appeared to be the case with the Exposure pair. High volume renditions of both orchestral crescendos and rock climaxes were significantly more controlled, and listener fatigue, when stretching the SPL envelope, was even further relieved. The bi-amped setup also seemed to provide a worthwhile gain in coherence and low-level insight, with voices and instruments quite far back in the mix gaining a greater sense of presence. Bass also tightened up, with gains in both body and control adding to the Integrated's already accomplished rhythmic performance.

Respectable specs

Exposure's specs may not tell you how the units will sound, but they show that you are getting good engineering and all the necessary facilities for your money. Quoted figures for the CD player are what you'd expect, with a 20Hz-20kHz ($\pm 0.03\text{dB}$) frequency response, total harmonic distortion of $<0.008\%$ 20Hz-20kHz, and a signal-to-noise ratio of $>100\text{dB}$, A-weighted. Both coaxial and optical digital outputs are provided (with a user-disable feature), while the system remote control includes track play that is fully programmable.

Meanwhile, the Integrated Amplifier provides six line-level inputs (one of which can be converted to m-m or m-c phono by

adding the optional card at a cost of £89), a full tape loop facility, plus pre outs for bi-amping purposes. Power output is rated at 75W/channel into 8 ohms, while frequency response is quoted as 20Hz-20kHz ($\pm 0.5\text{dB}$). Signal-to-noise is said to be $>100\text{dB}$ (A weighted) and channel separation is $>60\text{dB}$ (20Hz-20kHz). The

Power Amplifier matches the Integrated's power output, with signal-to-noise being slightly improved at $>110\text{dB}$ and channel separation up to $>80\text{dB}$.

Dimensions for all three units are 440 x 90 x 310 mm (whd), with the CD and power amp each weighing in at 5.0 kg, while the integrated tips the scales at 7kg.



CONCLUSION

I do not have a huge number of reference points at the 2010s series' £600 price level, but judging the Integrated/Power combo against its £1200 peers, I would say the Exposure pair do not quite have the ultimate speed and exquisite timing of the Orelle SA100 evo, nor do they quite match the weight and presence of the Musical Fidelity A3 integrated. However, what they do have is a beautifully judged combination of both these sets of virtues. I would say that both the CD and amplifier are ideally suited to rock music, neither component ever failing to provide an exhilarating, turbo-charged ride. But the presentation is also disarmingly natural, allowing hugely satisfying reproduction of the lushest of orchestral strings or the most delicate of female vocals.

Paired with the Spondor S8e, the Exposure electronics gave a thrilling performance that also oozed finesse. This might be verging on audiophile apostasy, but I would favour the combination of £600 CD, £600 amp and £1800 speakers against the vast majority of 'three-way split' £3000 set ups. The synergy really was that good. On the other hand, I also briefly connected the CD and amp to a pair of Mission 701 speakers (nowadays, comfortably less than £100 a pair), and the resulting rhythmic drive would have the hardest-core Naim devotee seriously considering the possibility of life outside Salisbury. ■

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Supplier

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Hi-FiNews verdict

Still perhaps slightly angled to its traditional 'rock' audience, but a revelation in terms of presence and finesse. They deserve to be matched with speakers above their £600 price point. Highly recommended.