

Double exposure

Can adding a near-identical power amp improve the performance of an integrated? We think so!

PRODUCT Exposure 2010 S Integrated Amplifier and 2010 S Power Amplifier

TYPE Integrated amp plus power amp (bi-amp system)

PRICE (2010 S integrated) £599, (2010 S power) £499

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 44x9x31cm each

● Weight: 7kg each ● Power output: 75W per channel continuous ● (Integrated) Inputs: 5x line plus tape loop (phono optional) ● Remote control ● Two sets speaker outputs (each)

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Exposure's 'S' makeover of the popular 2010 series continues with this power amp version of the integrated amplifier, which our blind listening panel liked so much in a recent *Ultimate Group Test* (HFC 262). Similarities between the two are remarkable, apart from the obvious lack of selector switch, volume knob and (at the rear) the integrated's multiplicity of inputs. Pull the lid off and the theme continues, with the exact same mains transformer and a near-identical circuit board stuffed with mostly the same components. You get the same twin pairs of output sockets per channel, too.

Yet this power amp is sold as an upgrade to the integrated, not necessarily as a partner to a preamplifier. Is someone having a laugh? The integrated has 'preamp' outputs, which follow the selector and volume controls, but clearly if you fed the power amp from those and drove the speakers conventionally you would be getting at most a rather minor improvement due principally to reduced hum modulation within the integrated's case. There didn't seem to be a problem there in the first place, so 'fixing' it really isn't likely to be a chalk and cheese difference – certainly hardly worth 500 quid.

Benefits accrue, however, when you retain the services of the integrated's power section and bi-amp your speakers. Exposure recommends using the integrated to drive the treble and the power to drive the bass; the reverse should work just as well, though most who've tried it would agree with Exposure's scheme, which keeps the largest current flows furthest from the preamp stages. Bi-amping like this will always work as long as your speakers have separately accessible terminals which can be linked or not at will. See this month's *Techno* column on page 19 of this issue for more details of what bi-amping entails and how best to achieve good results.

You can even switch the 2010 S power amp to mono mode, paralleling (not bridging) the channels to give extra current. We didn't try

this but it's yet another upgrade possibility. Power output is 75 watts per channel, exactly the same (surprise!) as the integrated.

SOUND QUALITY

Another non-surprise: the basic sound of the unit is not at all dissimilar to the 2010 S integrated. In case you missed that *Ultimate Group Test*, here's a quick précis. We found it punchy, rhythmic and tonally well-balanced, with a very open and natural treble, offering excellent dynamics and fine imaging. Above all, it was considered very musical and communicative, really drawing the listener into a performance. Measurements confirmed that its basic electrical performance is of a high standard, and its manners are good. In fact, about the worst thing we could find to say

particular favourite orchestral track, for instance, sounded well-rounded and detailed with good spatial separation of the various instrumental groups. There didn't really seem to be anything much to criticise. But with the power amp added (handling the bass as suggested), images firmed up even better and seemed to extend a few degrees further at each extreme. This was achieved with absolutely no change in basic tonality (that we could hear, anyway) but there was a small gain in the precision with which the timbre of each instrument was differentiated from the whole. And no, this wasn't a case of trees being highlighted at the expense of the wood because the homogeneity of the ensemble was if anything improved.

Synth-based, bass-heavy, danceable rhythms told a similar story in many ways. The various

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about the integrated is that the presentation is just a touch 'forward' compared to some other fine models in the same general ballpark. A matter of taste, really.

Fed from the same source (a CD player with an integral volume control, for instance), the 2010 S power amp is slightly clearer than the integrated, which figures given there's less in the way (there's no volume control, source selector or buffer stage, naturally). That means that regarded on its own it's a stonkingly fine power amp at a price where there's very little competition. If you're after a 'starter' pre/power system we would have some trouble suggesting a better place to start. So far so good.

Now, add the power amp to the integrated to form a bi-amp system and things really get interesting. At first, the similarities dominate, since the basic character of the system is not much changed. But after a track or three the penny begins to drop that there is a significant amount more musical information coming across. Images that before seemed clear enough are now even more clear and considerably more concrete and stable. Instrumental timbres are more naturally preserved, and inflections more meaningful. As upgrades go, it's a goody.

A few specific examples illustrate just what bi-amping can bring to an already good system. With the 2010 S integrated on its own, a



Exposure 2010 S integrated amplifier and power amp upgrade [Review]

strands making up the texture were more clearly and consistently revealed but at the same time the big picture was clearer than ever and listener involvement was quite significantly improved. The overall life of the music came more to the fore and distanced the potentially impersonal audio and recording technology used to create it.

You'll notice that both those examples (orchestra and pop/dance) invoke relatively dense music. With much lighter material, such as solo voice and guitar, benefits are less obvious. But there still are benefits, most obviously in clarity of attack on transients, including guitar notes and vocal sibilants. Solo piano gained quite markedly in natural, 'woody' timbre and even a solo flute, supposedly an 'easy' sound to reproduce (is there truly such a thing?) became more believable thanks to seemingly better integration between attack and sustain.

One feature of bi-amping that we learned to love is that it is very easy to audition – you can leave everything connected up to mains and source and plug/unplug only a couple of speaker wires to make the change. This of course makes it easier than usual to spot

differences and we thought at one stage we were becoming 'super-tuned' and hearing things one wouldn't normally notice, but the occasional return to familiar references suggested this wasn't the case. The sound is not dramatically transformed but it is quite significantly improved in subtle areas which, however, seem to have quite an impact on how we hear the overall result.

So, is this a sane upgrade? We'd have to say... absolutely. The cost/benefits of bi-amping may look very different with different products at higher prices, but in this case the upgrade cost is not much more than a group set of fancy cables and the improvement in sound is of at least the same order, or arguably greater. How else do you improve an already good £600 amp for less than its own price? Even allowing for a generous trade-in, you'll probably be looking at more than that to get a truly upmarket integrated, never mind a full pre/power combo.

We often tend to counsel against buying an integrated plus power bi-amp set-up straight off – some combinations do not strictly match in terms of output and the sound is not always worth the financial outlay. But so strong is the

performance of this pair at a still-modest total of £1,100 that we would urge you to try it if you are in the market at that price. As a possible alternative to high-grade integrated models (including Exposure's own 3010), it's a remarkably strong contender. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT – 2010 S power amp

SOUND >> 88%



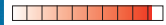
FEATURES >> 70%



BUILD >> 85%



VALUE >> 92%



CONCLUSION

In a thinly-populated market, this 'budget' power amp produces sounds of a genuinely high-end nature and is a great way to get started with amp separates.

HI-FI CHOICE
>> 90%

VERDICT – Integrated plus power

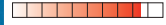
SOUND >> 90%



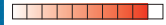
FEATURES >> 82%



BUILD >> 85%



VALUE >> 90%



CONCLUSION

The combined price is still less than some integrated models of similar spec, and the result is very fine with a real lift over the good performance of each alone.

HI-FI CHOICE
>> 90%



2010 S Integrated Amplifier

BEST BUY

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2010 S Power Amplifier

3010 S Power Amplifier

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