



Italian stallion

Bringing more to the stable than just outright power, **Chris Ward** listens in to the AAcento to see if it's a true thoroughbred

Established in 1995, Italian brand Audio Analogue has quietly built a growing reputation for refined, well-built products. Based in Tuscany, it has also earned respect for creating artisan products at sensible prices. For its 20th birthday it released Anniversary editions of earlier classic amplifiers, the Puccini and Maestro. Now, the Italian brand has launched its PureAA line of products, drawing together many of the time-honoured qualities seen in its previous designs with newer technological insights,

and this AAcento integrated amplifier is the first to roll off the new production line. The name AA'cento' hints at the amp's claimed 100W power output (into 8ohm). However, with a claimed 200W into 4ohm and 300W into a 2ohm load, this amp should feel considerably more muscular than its base stats suggest. Audio Analogue is certainly confident that even tough speaker loads should be driven with ease. Yet, this design is not about out-and-out power. Interestingly, this amplifier is also described as a 'zero

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Audio Analogue AAcento
- ORIGIN**
Italy
- TYPE**
Integrated amplifier
- WEIGHT**
14kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**
445 x 92 x 400mm
- FEATURES**
 - Quoted power output: 2x 100W (8ohm)
 - Inputs: 3x RCA; 1x XLR
 - MM/MC phono input
 - Class A headphone amp
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Decent Audio
- TELEPHONE**
05602 054669
- WEBSITE**
decentaudio.co.uk

feedback design'. This is a term more commonly attributed to specialist valve designs, but rarely to solid-state amplifiers like the AAcento. More precisely, it should be described as a zero global feedback design as Audio Analogue confirms there is no feedback by the input section to the power output section. Feedback is a complex subject but is generally applied to reduce distortion, yet Audio Analogue claims its novel design results in less sensitivity to speaker loads, quieter stability and a more neutral and natural timbre.

At first glance the reassuringly heavy AAcento, available in black or silver finishes, looks more like a pure power amplifier, as there are few controls along the front panel. A sleek, brushed metal fascia is home to a central, chamfered boss and a number of tiny LEDs that only hint at features. The central hub can be rotated and depressed, with LEDs lighting up to reflect volume, but I need the printed manual to make sense of its understated Italian chic.

Set up is performed using the substantial yet elegant remote. While some manufacturers seem to view

this as a cheap, necessary evil, Audio Analogue clearly sees it as a vital, tactile relationship the user will have with a system, and so is an absolute joy to hold and operate. With six simple controls around a central standby power button, each adjustment to volume or input quietly confirms this is a high-end hi-fi component. Pressing 'Set up' demands all of my concentration, and I need to follow the manual carefully as I toggle

A sleek coming together of chic design and outright beauty – just don't ditch the instruction manual too soon

through six areas of adjustment spanning LED brightness, channel balance, volume control sensitivity, MM or MC phono selection, subsonic filtering to tame warped records and even a direct power amp setting. The challenge is matching patterns of LEDs to those depicted in the printed manual, with an extra complication being that the six adjustable settings initially appear to only be represented by five LEDs. It's not hard, but don't rush it, as accidentally leaving the amp in direct power mode would be problematic. Pragmatically, though, once set up the AAcento doesn't require any further adjustment for the entire review period.

It has a single phono stage input that can be configured for MM or MC, three sets of unbalanced RCA line inputs and a balanced XLR in. It has mono and stereo pre-out functionality alongside sturdy speaker outputs that accept all standard cable terminations and also incorporates a pure Class A, zero feedback headphone amplifier.

I connect up a Townshend Rock turntable fitted with an Audio-Technica MC cartridge and Shanling CD-T100 HDCD player via Chord Company Epic interconnects with Black Rhodium Foxtrot speaker cabling (HFC 412) to reference Cadence Arca loudspeakers and leave the amp to run in over a long weekend.

Sound quality

Listening to *My Name Is Ruin* by Gary Numan on CD, the introductory, post-apocalyptic soundscape is presented in a compelling and potent way – the amp already signalling it has strong drive with plenty of power in reserve. Dense keyboard riffs feel solid with deep bass that's properly 'phat', with a hint of extra warmth. And while the amp has serious drive, this power isn't held in a vice-like grip that can sometimes desiccate music. Instead, it has a lithe, visceral, almost

organic drama. Some powerful amps will sound tighter with more punch and potentially greater transparency, but this one feels far more supple and musical. Numan's eerie vocals appear centre stage and the naturalness of the voice is remarkable. Any potential lack of transparency now feels entirely misplaced. The voice has a very realistic timbre that feels superbly detailed and nuanced and there is fantastic hear-through depth to the reverb on the vocals. There is a very natural ebb and flow to the music that feels silky and liquid, with a strong sense of dynamic light and

I'm picking up on new tiny inflections as lips part and breaths are taken

shade. It isn't razor edged, but it is highly revealing, especially around critical midband frequencies and has almost valve-like qualities in the way it presents this dense, multi-layered track as a whole, rather than a series of spotlight parts. The soundstage isn't unusually wide, but it has a very natural, rounded depth. Instead of instruments strung along a notional washing line between and beyond the speakers, I get a real sense of three dimensionality and being able to look around each performer and the depth of the total performance.

Swapping to the phono input, I spin Cassadó's *Suite For Solo Cello* played by Vincent Bélanger on vinyl. The communication of the cello's mix of full-bodied richness, complex overtones and rasp of bow is superb. A dramatic flourish at the end of a phrase seems to have endless reverb as it gently ebbs away into a fathomless acoustic space. Other amps might appear to lock the performer more tightly in space, but ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Phono input and earthing post
- 2 Speaker binding posts (left channel)
- 3 Pre outputs
- 4 Balanced XLR input (right channel)
- 5 Unbalanced line-level inputs

Q&A

Giuseppe Blanda

Director, Audio Analogue



CW: Who do you see as the typical AACento customer?

GB: This amplifier is for customers looking for an attractive, high-quality, compact amplifier with many interesting features and a great sound performance for a reasonable cost. While rated at 100W into 8ohm it can reach around 300W into 2ohm. This ability to drive difficult loads is not common for amps at this price. Furthermore, the AACento is a very versatile product, having a very high-quality MM/MC phono stage and pure Class A headphone output section. It also has a bypass function should you wish to use it as a power amplifier and integrate it into a home theatre system.

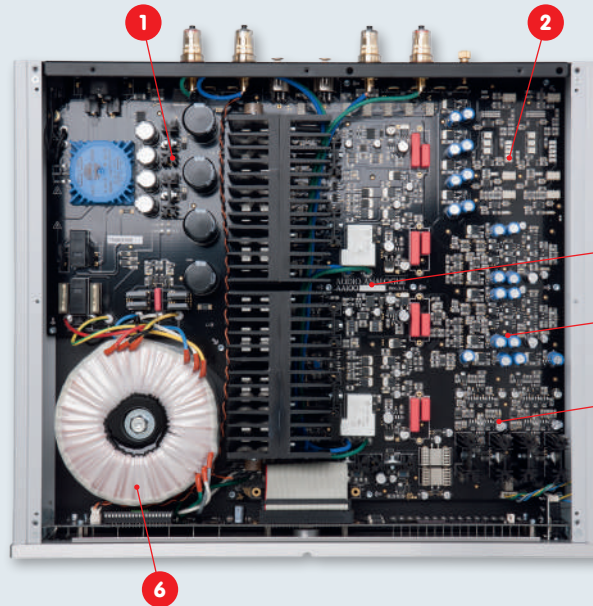
Is integrating many separate quality stages a significant technical challenge?

The AACento is a clever mix of modern technology and a more traditional approach necessary to make good-quality high-end audio products. In order to fit everything in, we do use some SMD technology in the board layout, but we only use the highest quality or oversized components. Our integration mastery arrives at a very advanced and refined circuit design that works brilliantly in our ergonomic and elegant cabinet.

What do you think are the benefits of using zero feedback?

We do employ some local feedback, but the circuit design is 'zero global feedback' meaning no feedback is applied by the input to the output. The most important benefit of this solution is that the amplifier is less sensitive to the load it drives. This gives a lower damping co-efficient, but is much quieter on reactive loads. Our design has no tendency to oscillate, does not have resonance peaks at high frequencies and does not saturate the input stages. In practical terms our amps can be easily matched to a huge variety of speakers, even the most critical ones. In terms of sound, music reproduction is very natural and never tiring for the ears, with a very neutral timbre and great soundstage.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Power supply stage
- 2 Phono stage
- 3 Power amp section
- 4 Preamp section
- 5 Pure Class A headphone amp
- 6 Toroidal transformer

HOW IT COMPARES

The AACento reminds me of the £2,200 Belles Aria (HFC 412), which also seeks to deliver maximum musicality via line-level, phono and headphone stages in a well-engineered package. The Aria also gets the big picture right along with a compelling power and sweetness that is highly addictive. Arguably, the AACento's strongest competitor is Audio Analogue's own Puccini Anniversary also around £3,000. This will be especially true for those that already own a phono stage and don't seek a headphone amp, as the Puccini's budget is more single-mindedly deployed into ever more refined core components to maximise the quality of line-level sources.

I'm simply mesmerised by the way the AACento perfectly captures and communicates the mood, meaning and emotion of this stunning recording. This phono stage is highly accomplished and very quiet. One might only expect an MM phono stage on a product at this price, so the addition of an MC input can be considered a bonus that could reduce your system's box count. The issue is, those with a preference for MC cartridges also often like to fine tune gain or impedance settings to get the exact sound they seek. It's a generous addition, but settings are fixed in the AACento, so you may want to audition the amp with your cartridge of choice first. If you use MM cartridges, you're likely to be delighted with the way it performs and doubly so to have a potential MC upgrade path pre-loaded.

The refined female vocals on *Steady* by The Staves are simply sumptuous. The AACento's midband mastery allows each voice to be distinct, yet the subtle blend of the three together is richly textured yet entirely cohesive. I'm picking up on new tiny inflections as lips part and breaths are taken that suggests the amp is both sensitive and extremely quiet, and the AACento reveals subtle acoustic atmospheres that other amplifiers can only hint at. Some will create more bite and a finer etch to treble detail, but the higher frequencies here are perfectly extended, sweet and never fatiguing. It's difficult to put your finger on, but this is a really moreish amplifier that just keeps on giving.

Conclusion

The AACento is an emotionally intelligent amplifier that gets the musical big picture spot on. It confirms that music should move you and isn't just a set of frequencies. It absolutely doesn't miss any detail, but instead majors on getting the meaning, drama and emotional story of your music correct. I sense a very gentle warmth that gives a pinch of richness and sweetness, yet vocals in particular seem as naturalistic as I've heard in a long time. This may well be an amp for those that think they want a valve set up, but know it isn't practical. The phono stage is quiet and refined, but some might wish for a little more adjustment. Factor in a high-quality headphone stage and altogether this beefy yet chic, artisan-built, integrated amplifier adds up to be a highly addictive proposition that represents extremely good value for money ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Sublime midband; big picture prowess; speaker handling |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Slightly fiddly setup; lacks MC phono stage adjustments |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WE SAY: Powerful yet sweet sound that's effortlessly musical |
| FEATURES
★★★★★ | |

OVERALL

