

Audio Analogue Puccini Anniversary

ITALIAN SPECIALIST AUDIO ANALOGUE HAS CREATED THE PUCCINI ANNIVERSARY WITH ZERO GLOBAL FEEDBACK. CHRIS FRANKLAND CHECKS IT OUT

While unpacking and installing this hefty £3,495 integrated amplifier, I found myself wondering why they called it the *Puccini Anniversary*? OK, so Giacomo Puccini was a famous Italian composer, and the company is based in Tuscany, but the real reason is that, entirely coincidentally, it's also the name of the designer, one Andrea Puccini, of associated company Airtech Labs.

Zero Global Feedback

Audio Analogue produced its first-ever product, the original *Puccini*, some 21 years ago. In pursuit of the goal of producing the finest *Puccini* ever, Andrea Puccini and his team took the bold decision to go for a zero feedback design – an approach more commonly associated with valve amplifiers.

Is there indeed then a bizarre parallel between him and Prince Calaf from the Puccini opera *Turandot*, who had to answer a series of riddles if he was to win the hand of the Princess, but faced death if he answered incorrectly? In facing the zero feedback question, would the *Puccini Anniversary* be doomed to fail if he got it wrong? In finding the answers to this question, I suspect *Nessun Dorma* (none shall sleep) in his R&D team until they had wrestled with that pivotal question.

Puccini had to consider the pros and cons of zero feedback. A well designed zero-feedback amp should have great sound quality and fine soundstaging, but feedback is normally regarded as necessary, as it increases input impedance and decreases output impedance, stabilises gain, reduces power supply disturbances, and decreases distortion.

Puccini and his team systematically attacked each one of these points and concluded that the goal was not impossible, but required certain unique technical solutions in order to deliver the required performance.

Key elements such as distortion were looked at, and Puccini concluded that although feedback worked well in reducing measured distortion, was it either necessary or indeed did it offer an audible improvement? He concluded that an average listener might hear higher-order harmonics up to 0.5%

with difficulty. Those of the *Puccini Anniversary* are between 0.3% and 0.8%. Was that enough, he asked? In his judgement, it was.

Puccini and his team also fine-tuned the power supply, including a DC servo to help stabilise the operating point. It is said to work between DC and 0.02Hz and in practice stops at 20Hz, so that this feedback acts below the audio band.

Puccini does not regard feedback as an absolute evil, but simply asks 'can we live without it?' In the *Anniversary* amp that bears his name, he has set out to prove we can.

Construction

Inside and out, there is no doubting the quality of construction of the *Puccini Anniversary*. Weighing an impressive 15.5kg, it is a dual-mono design with a substantial 700VA toroidal transformer at its heart. Power is quoted as 80W/ch into 8ohms; 160W/ch into 4ohms and 300W/ch into 2ohms, all measured at 1% THD (plus noise).

This is achieved by using six pairs (three pairs per channel) of the ON Semiconductor brand of power transistors. All internal wiring is 7N OCC copper, and all connections and binding posts are gold-plated. Input sockets (four line level single-ended RCAs plus one balanced XLR) are soldered directly to the PCBs, and the internal circuit boards boast double-thickness, gold-plated copper tracks theoretically to increase electrical conductivity. The resistors are described as 'military grade', and the capacitors are 'audio grade' polypropylene types. Somewhat flying in the face of the purist approach, volume adjustment is accomplished using two high precision digital potentiometers per channel.

Finished in black or silver, the 14mm thick brushed aluminium front panel has a large, central rotary controller and two rows of LEDs. The ones on the left indicate the input selected; those on the right show the volume level. The remote control is itself housed in a heavy and rather swanky aluminium case. By pressing a SETUP button on that, various adjustment modes can be accessed, such as channel balance, LED brightness, and the selection of pre-set volumes to match speaker sensitivity.

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Finally, company founder Claudio Bertini took the ultimate responsibility for fine-tuning the design's sound quality, undertaking many hours of listening tests.

Sound Quality

My listening to the Puccini Anniversary was done mainly through Audio Note AN-J LX Hemp speakers, with additional listening through the Neat Iota Alpha. Sources were an Audio Note TT2/Arm2/Io vinyl player and CD1.1x CD player. However, the *Puccini Anniversary* has one thing missing, and that is a phono stage. All five inputs (one balanced and four single-ended) are line level, so I pressed into play a Rega Fono Mini phono stage, fed by an Audio Note S8 transformer as the step-up device.

First up for listening was Jonathan Butler and the title track from his *Deliverance* CD. Instantly, the *Puccini Anniversary* impressed with its great detail, delicacy and syncopation on drums and percussion, while Butler's guitar was eloquently and persuasively portrayed. The overall sound was balanced and dynamic.

Anyone who has been reading my reviews for a while would be surprised if Ben Sidran didn't find his way on to the turntable, so I reached for *Old Songs for the New Depression* and spun up my old favourite, *Easy Street*. Piano and vocals were beautifully conveyed, with great emotion in the vocals, and plenty of detail and body to his piano. Bass lines were rhythmic and had a good 'walk' to them. With my pickiest ears on, maybe the bottom end lacked ultimate weight and slam, but this didn't seem to detract from the overall musicality and feel of the track.

Saxophone is always a brutal test for any hi-fi component, so Gerald Albright's *Just Between Us* came out of its sleeve. On this album, he does a great cover of Luther Vandross' *So Amazing* (from his *Give Me The Reason* album), and I knew that this would test the *Puccini Anniversary*'s mettle. However, I needn't have worried, as Albright's sax was conveyed with all the power, delicacy, note shape and subtlety required. Percussion and drums were open and vibrant and bass lines were coherent and tight. The amplifier conveyed the sax without harshness, and it never blared out at the listener; rather it just soared effortlessly on those *fortissimo* notes.

And if we were trying Mr Albright's version, why not the original? I am a big fan of Vandross, regarding him as possibly the finest male vocalist of all time, and his voice had all the emotion, delicacy and power on the *Puccini Anniversary* that sets him apart from the crowd. Marcus Miller's bass line was full and well controlled and all in all, this wonderful track sounded amazing.



Deciding to try something a bit different, I put on the CD *The Strange Case of...*, by Halestorm. This is a high-energy track with real oomph and soaring, powerful vocals by Lizzy Hale. On poor systems, it can sound atrocious, and on a strident amplifier, unbearable. However, the *Puccini Anniversary* conveyed the track's raw edge and powerful vocals without making her shout and without the sound becoming screechy or oppressive. It was certainly a creditable performance, albeit about as far away from *Nessun Dorma* as one could get!

Conclusions

I enjoyed my time with the *Puccini Anniversary* tremendously. It looks great, is well made, and sounds really good over the long haul. It doesn't slap one round the head with a mug's earful, wow-factor kind of sound that can become tiresome in the long term: it grows on one and its considerable subtlety will win many hearts.

There's little doubt that, when listening to the *Puccini Anniversary*, the words of the original Puccini's famous aria will ring true: no one will be sleeping – as they will be enjoying the musical experience too much. Nor will they be running from the room clutching their ears!

This is an amplifier with subtly persuasive charms that just gets better the more time one spends listening to it. It will impress with a wonderfully eloquent sound, great inner detail, expansive soundstage, tunefulness, pace and sheer musicality. Don't leave it off a shortlist of amplifiers to audition at the price.



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RECOMMENDED

Manufacturer's Specification

Make	Audio Analogue
Model	Puccini Anniversary
Inputs (line level)	4x RCA, 1x XLR
Power (1% THD)	80W into 8Ω 160W into 4Ω 300W into 2Ω
S/N ratio	104dB A-weighted
Size (HxWxD)	120x445x390mm
Weight	15.5kg
Price	£3,495

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