

8-JUL-2005

Pathos Cinema-X EDITOR'S CHOICE review, Hi-Fi Choice Summer Issue

The idea of switching from 110 to 450 watts may put the willies up some listeners, expecting blown drive units every time stereo is selected. Don't worry, there's no dramatic increase in volume level. The extra power comes across as more grip and headroom and - unless you choose to experiment with how long it takes to turn your speakers into a smoking ruin - the two channel mode is just as well behaved as the multichannel.

But it's still a big sound. Big in 110 watts mode, bigger

still when there are 450 watts up your speaker terminals. There is a sense of scale that is almost alpine; an orchestra is pulled wide of the speaker boxes, and the speakers themselves seem to have been given a size upgrade. There is considerable depth and even some genuine height to the sound, too. The combination of depth, width and height makes the sound seem huge, perhaps too huge: a solo voice can sometimes seem as if it's about five metres tall and four metres wide!

There is a good, natural sense of dynamic scale, too. It's not the most obviously dynamic amplifier ever made and the American penchant for microdynamics - the dynamic envelope of a single note - is an element that's largely underplayed. But instead, dynamic shading is entirely right-sounding. Often, those amplifiers that concentrate on the tiny changes in dynamics of an individual instrument miss out on the bigger picture. Here, the Pathos concentrates on the whole sound, perhaps at the expense of some of the smaller things, but this gives a great feeling of an overall performance on a natural scale.

This warmth is not that uncommon among stereo hi-fi amplifiers, but is almost unheard of in multichannel. Even high-quality multichannel audio is almost pathologically connected to clean, sharp, solid-state impact, and for some hi-fi aficionados this sound is simply too sterile. There's worse to come from home cinema, as most amplifiers in this category sound untenably brittle to those who like the classic sound of valves. The Cinema-X is an extraordinary alternative - a refreshingly mellifluous integrated multichannel amplifier.

Not much has been made of the detail so far, but again it falls into the 'big, but natural' camp. There is a touch of veiling that stops the instruments from taking on holographic qualities, but this matters less when the Pathos delivers the sort of image size that is big enough to give your room the TARDIS treatment - it expands the performance beyond the limits of the walls of your room and makes things sound wonderful, if not strictly neutral in tone.

We are prejudiced against pretty audio, especially in England. Unless it looks like it was built with hammers and a cold chisel, we think too much money has been spent on the looks and not enough on the audio circuit. But the Pathos Cinema-X is strikingly beautiful - and has a big, elegant sound to match. Some will think its character too rich and opulent, while others will bask in its generous, ear-hugging majesty. Most of all, though, anyone who fancies having their multichannel music and movies delivered with lashings of Italian romance should park their ears here.

Alan Sircom

