The Ethos is our attempt to attract lifestyle enthusiasts while still delivering a quality sound.

Pathos Ethos
This integrated amp's style might divide, but its sound is truly divine

Profile
Price £3800

What makes it special? A distinctive hybrid electronic design, with dual-mono power amplifier sections and valve pre-amplification working in Class A mode.

Tempted? With those eye-catching looks and Pathos's habit of turning out great-sounding amplifiers, you bet we are.

Italian brand Pathos doesn't do ordinary. Simply toast your eyes on the distinctive Ethos integrated amplifier and you'll see what we mean.

Astonishingly, this is one of Pathos' more conventional-looking products. Even so, we still think it would feel more at home in Battersea Garrick, discreetly tucked onto the flashy control panel of a Cylon spaceship.

With Pathos, it's never been just about looks. In our experience, top-quality engineering, brilliant build and engaging sound has always added substance to the company's style-led designs.

As is the way of Pathos, the Ethos features a hybrid electronic design. We're not usually lovers of mixing valves with solid-state. The intention is to combine the sweetness and fluidity of valves with the grip of transistors - the reality, however, is usually a soggy mess. But that's not the case here.

Hybrid design hits a hot streak
The two valves visible on the top panel are a pair of ECC88s working in Class A mode. Class A is a condition where a high amount of current flows constantly through the circuitry, regardless of what the music signal requires.

The upside is superior performance, normally. The downside is high energy consumption and exces heat. In this case, the relatively low power requirements of preamplification means heat isn't an issue from the valves - however, that role is taken up by the dual-mono power amp sections. These run hot enough to require the large expanse of heatsinking on both sides of the Ethos. Those shiny heatsinks get rather hot, so make sure there's plenty of ventilation before buying, as reliability will suffer otherwise.

That power section has some decent muscle too. While an output of 100 watts into 8 ohms is no great shakes at this price, the fact that it doubles as impedance halves is a sure sign that this amplifier won't wilt when taxed by difficult loads.

We had some memorable listening sessions with B&W's mighty 800Ds. Diamond reviewed this issue, 2005, and these are a pretty demanding load as far as speakers are concerned. We got similarly positive results with our resident ATC SCM30s, as well as Neural's entertaining Ultimatum XTs (reviewed in our September issue).

By the conventional stripped-down standards of high-end stereo amplifiers, the Ethos is well equipped. It's got plenty of line level inputs (balanced and unbalanced), a remote control, and our version came with a built-in digital-to-analog conversion module (buy the amp without it and it'll cost £1,120).

You'll need to load special driver software onto your computer, whether PC or Mac, to make the digital link work. We got this on a USB stick, but it's also available as a download on Pathos' website, www.pathosacoustics.com.

Once the USB software drive is installed, your computer will recognise the Ethos as a means of playback. The amplifier has coaxial and USB inputs, and will happily accept 24-bit, 192kHz resolution files through both.

Sweet spot for Pathos
As far as functionality goes, things could be a touch smoother. While that large volume control feels nice and positive, we're not particularly fans of the other front-panel switches. They feel vague in action, as do the remote control buttons. Pathos hasn't labelled its quirky handset's buttons for style reasons. Sure, it looks classy - but it's a pain to use until the purpose of each button is well and truly memorised. Any doubts raised by the amplifier's ergonomic oddities, however, evaporate like a politician's promises after a general election when listening starts.

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TECH SPECS
Type Integrated
Power 100W/83W into 8/4 ohms
Inputs Line level (balanced and unbalanced), remote control
Outputs Preamping, Remote control (Voc. Finishes)
Dimensions (HxWxD) 15 x 43 x 40cm

Given style set, but it's bang on performance levels in the Class A mode.

Rating 4.5/5

FOR A brilliant mix of sonic sweetness, insight and control, fine build, distinctive styling.
AGAINST Runs hot, the remote handset and front panel buttons are impractical in use.
VERDICT The Pathos Ethos mixes style with substance better than any rival we can think of.