



Ear Ear!

Paul Rigby wonders if the A.N.T. Audio Amber 3T Special Edition can lift your headphone output onto a new aural plane?

It's all very well buying a great set of headphones, but where are you going to plug them in? Are you thinking about inserting the phono plug of your new Grado GS1000s into the headphone socket of your integrated amp? Think again, my friend. The better the headphones, the worse in relative terms they will sound via a basic headphone link. It's at this time that you need to seriously consider investing in a separate amplifier, specifically for headphone use...

There are plenty of units around and, building upon their success with the Kora 3T phono stage, A.N.T. has now released a new example called the Amber 3T which sits in a chassis very similar in style to the Kora 3T. It arrives in two flavours: the basic edition with a green LED, Panasonic FM series capacitors and a switch-mode univoltage power supply or the Special Edition reviewed here, with an amber LED, that sports a very natty 27mm Alps Blue Velvet volume knob, a tiny, adjustable, FET biasing knob around the back of the chassis, upgraded ELNA Starjet output capacitors and a linear power supply.

The front of the Amber 3T chassis features that Alps pot, the power LED and a full size, quarter inch headphone socket. Around the back is the biasing knob, a socket for an external power supply, two monitor and two input ports.

SOUND QUALITY

Heaving a pair of Sennheiser HD650s onto my shell-likes, I plunged 'head-

long', as it were, into the poodle haircuts and mascara-covered mugs of early eighties-era Yes and the highly complex arrangement of 'Changes' from the album '90125' (Audio Fidelity; the best master of this album currently available). The Amber 3T offered a balanced performance with a distinct analogue tone. Granted, it was not as warm as the Musical Fidelity X-Can V8P (£400) or as sharp as the Musical Fidelity V-Can (£100) but sat somewhere in the middle. The V-Can shines very brightly on the master providing an almost clinical rendition. The ANT doesn't go that far but still retains an exciting midrange interpretation and the promise of more comfortable, long-term listening. The X-Can, on the other hand, could be accused of 'going soft' on this dynamic rock track, lacking the speed and drive present via the Amber 3T, which also excels in its broad soundstage and deep bass response.

Switching to the more contemporary electronic sounds, with noticeable synth distortion, of Haxan and 'Centre Of The Universe' ('Bronnt Industries Kapital', Static Caravan), the Amber 3T doesn't lose that kid glove treatment that is sometimes necessary to successfully convey a low-key, ambient wash atmosphere but it sharpens the image, when compared with the rather smudged X-Can, that offers a water colour to the Amber 3T's sharp focus photograph. The V-Can, on the other hand could again be accused of being clinical in comparison, responding to the synth distortions with a brightly

lit output. So as it stands, the Amber 3T is the king of the CD output!

Moving to the higher resolution of vinyl and Crosby, Stills & Nash's self-titled album, a 45rpm edition via Classic Records appeared to place a gentle frown upon the Amber 3T, denting its confidence a tad while the X-Can suddenly sprang to life. The Amber 3T did reveal its solid-state DNA during vinyl play, suffering just a hint of upper-mid hardness during harmonic climaxes while the X-Can revelled in the extra information, proving more tonally appealing.

Bass flowered, however, on the Amber 3T, improving on the already impressive, detailed, output of the V-Can with an added layer of information and more character. Tweaking the Amber 3T FET bias did aid the other frequencies, supplying an extra layer of warmth that enhanced the upper mids and treble response, combining excellent detail retrieval with a lively, more confident presentation.

CONCLUSION

While the ANT Audio Amber 3T doesn't quite have the maturity and self-assuredness of the X-Can on vinyl, it does offer the most performance of any all-transistor headphone amplifier I have yet heard, featuring a sense of smoothness and warmth that most solid-staters wouldn't recognise. This extra sumptuousness works well on vinyl but brilliantly on CD, lifting most CD playback to a whole new audiophile level. Highly recommended, then.

HI-FI WORLD

VERDICT ●●●●●

Offering an enticing blend of solid-state and valve-like characteristics, the Amber 3T is timbrally informative and musically invigorating.

A.N.T. AUDIO AMBER 3T SE £300
Timestep Distribution
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FOR

- propulsive rhythms
- fine detail
- rich bass

AGAINST

- does flatter bright phones