



The Heed Audio Modular Amplification System

by Paul Messenger

I like minimalism. I fondly recall the Naim NAC12 pre-amp that I acquired in the mid-1970s and used for more than a decade. It had three knobs, no switches, and just three inputs (which was all that one needed in those days: one for vinyl one for tuner and one for tape). Friends at the time marveled that I didn't mind sacrificing tone controls, scratch filters, loudness contours and so forth, and I admit I was initially apprehensive that I'd miss all the extras. But I didn't, and soon came to appreciate the more subtle advantages of utter simplicity. It's an attitude that continues to this day, and is one reason why I can raise little enthusiasm for devices such as VCRs, computers and mobile phones, all of which seem to regard complexity as a virtue, if not an end in itself.

The worst offenders are computers of course, which are veritable chameleons in their complexity, and their pernicious influence is spreading inexorably into our hi-fi components. High-class pre-amps I've used recently, such as the Naim NAC 552 and Halcro DM10, are essentially computers at heart. They offer extra flexibility, true, but do so at the expense of simple intuitive operation, requiring that the manual is kept handy for ready reference. At heart therefore, I much prefer products that are simple and unambiguous in operation, and that's reason enough for a close up look at this very neat and ultra-compact amplifier combo, which

is unusual for several reasons, not least that it comes from a Hungarian manufacturer called Heed Audio.

Few can beat its minimalism, yet it does have some useful flexibility at the same time, partly through its modular architecture.

Each part is built into a tiny little rectangular steel tube, just 7cm high, 9cm wide and roughly

27cm deep, with a front panel in Perspex decorated by a blue LED dead centre.

It's a bit hair-shirt in appearance and feel, and the steel-wrap casework doesn't quite have the appeal of the alloy extrusions used by Crimson and Creek, for example. But it's neat, beautifully discreet, and entirely practical, apart perhaps from the need for a considerable number of mains leads!

The system can be configured in several ways, the core collection covered here comprising a two-box Luna pre-amp at £550, and a pair of Canopus mono power amps (£550/pair). Then there's a single-box MM-type phono-stage called Pulsar (£275), or a two-box MM/MC phono-

stage called Quasar (£550). And there's the additional upgrade option of doubling up the power amps in order to bi-amp the speakers.

The Luna has just a single knob alongside a single pushbutton, so ease of use is clearly exceptionally good, assuming that the availability of only two inputs is not considered a fatal handicap. A further ergonomic bonus is that the volume knob is motorised, and may be operated by remote control; input selection, however, is exclusively 'hands-on'.

Before getting any deeper into the product, a little more background is due, since Heed Audio is very new to

Britain. The two principals, Zsolt

Husztai and his brother Alpar, started out importing a number of leading British brands to Hungary in the 1980s. They developed a particular relationship with Richard

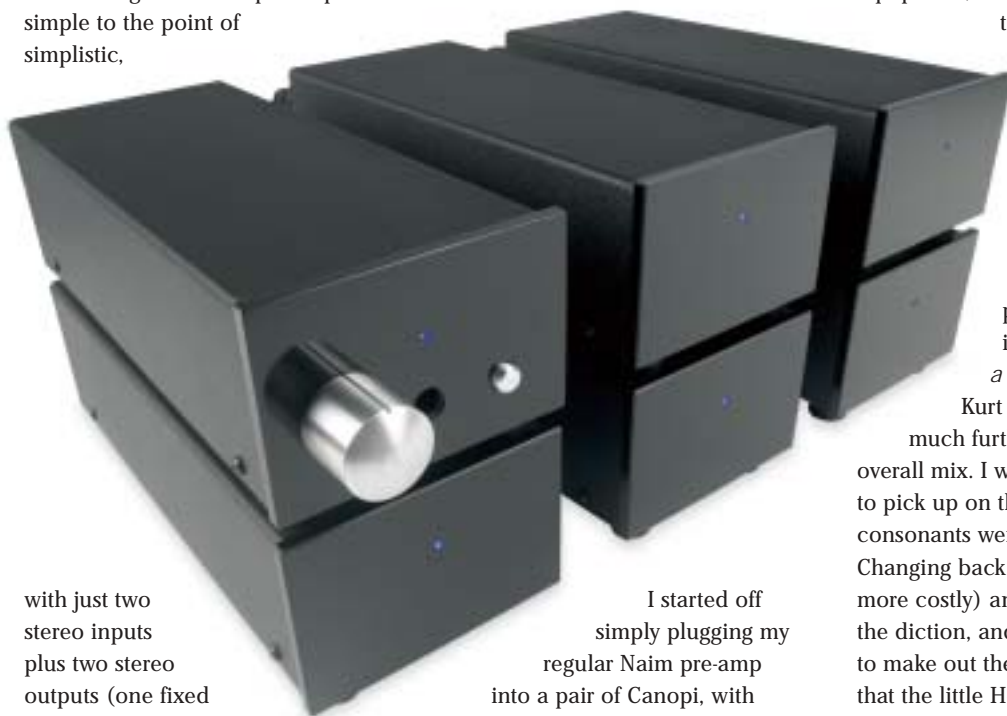
Hay, at one point actually assembling the Ion Systems Obelisk amp in Hungary. Zsolt has subsequently applied some of the same underlying technical principles in his own electronics designs, including using balanced circuitry, outboard power supplies and the deliberate avoidance of DC coupling.

The first of these little modular units appeared in 2000. An outboard power supply for Rega Planar turntables, it's codenamed Orbit, sold particularly well in Germany, and will be covered elsewhere in Hi-Fi+. The two-box Quasar phono-



► stage then followed, enjoying similar success and leading on naturally enough to variations like the Luna two-box pre-amp and Canopus mono power amp that are the main subject of this review.

Although the Luna pre-amp is simple to the point of simplistic,



with just two stereo inputs plus two stereo outputs (one fixed the other variable) the Quasar phono-stage offers a comprehensive array of loading and gain options. It's a dual-mono design with separate amplifier stages for MM and MC cartridges, the latter effecting adjustments of sensitivity and load via PCB jumpers. Separate 'high' and 'low' outputs are available, the former specifically for driving power amps directly. The Pulsar, for high output (MM) cartridges only, follows a broadly similar configuration. It uses passive/active RIAA equalisation, and has ample output for direct power amp drive (via a passive pot).

The 50W Canopus power amp is a three-stage Class AB design using fully discrete components. Its power supply has a 100 VA toroidal transformer and two 10,000 µF capacitors, while the Darlington output stage has comple-

mentary 25amp power transistors. Fully balanced circuit topology reduces susceptibility to external interference. An extra phono socket is fitted to pass the input signal onto a second power amp for bi-amping.

I started off simply plugging my regular Naim pre-amp into a pair of Canopi, with results that were a little dull and disappointing. This was clearly not an ideal match, so I added the Luna pre-amp to the equation, which perked things up considerably.

Fed from a top quality CD player, a Burmester 001 as it happens, the Luna/Canopus combo immediately impressed with its lovely delicate and expressive mid-band. Singers in particular sounded very believable, especially when they were well towards the front of the mix, like Alison Krauss on the *Alison Krauss + Union Station Live* CD, where

she managed to sound even more seductive, humorous and simply more human and real than usual.

At the same time, the top end is rather restrained, which can often be beneficial with modestly priced equipment, but which also manages to suppress a little fine detail. I'd just acquired and was exploring Lambchop's new double CDs, *Awcmon* and *Noyoucmon*, which is a much denser production than its predecessor *Is a Woman*, and has

Kurt Wagner's lead vocal much further back in the overall mix. I was finding it difficult to pick up on the lyrics, because the consonants were a little too retrained. Changing back to my regular (much more costly) amplifier did improve the diction, and make it easier to make out the lyrics, confirming that the little Heed amplifiers do have their limitations.

But then you're not going to ►



► achieve amplifier perfection for £1,100, and what this cute little combo does well, it does very well indeed. There's little evidence here of the mid-band congestion and thickening that is found in many amplifiers, especially those built from solid state components. And while I wouldn't describe the Luna/Canopus as thermionic in character, it clearly manages to avoid many of the solid state vices.

Partly to check out the bass end of things, I hooked up some monstrously large Tannoy Yorkminsters, a 100-litre reflex-ported enclosure with a 12-inch

are quite expressive, if a little soft and lacking in tension. Decent levels of loudness could be achieved, even with relatively insensitive speakers like the Leema Xens. That said, I did generally prefer the sound of this amplifier when it wasn't working too hard, as a mild presence emphasis seemed to become more obvious and show a touch of aggression when it was sweating.

Checking out the vinyl stages showed that both the Quasar and Pulsar had broadly similar characters to the Luna/Canopus combo, and that the two-boxer is clearly superior to the single-box Pulsar in terms of dynamic authority and precision.

Both slightly roll off the extreme top end

way this Heed combo transcends mere issues of sound quality and simply gets you into the spirit and emotion of the music itself. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Canopus

Type: Mono Power Amplifier
 Input Sensitivity: 500 mV
 Impedance: 10 kOhms
 Power Output: 35 W/8 Ohms
 50 W/4 Ohms
 Bandwidth (with filter): 4 Hz-60 kHz (±1 dB)
 Price: £550/pair

Luna

Type: Stereo pre-amplifier with separate power supply
 Inputs: 2x line
 Outputs: 1x line, 1x variable
 Remote control: Volume only
 Price: £550

Quasar

Type: Phono-stage with separate power supply
 Sensitivity –
 MM input: 5 mV / 47 kOhm / 100 pF
 MC input (adjustable): 100 µV / 200 µV / 600 µV
 MC Input Impedance: 100 Ohm / 220 Ohm / 470 Ohm
 Output voltage "Low Out": 220 mV/100 Ohm
 Output voltage "High Out": 775 mV/ 22 Ohm
 Price: £550

Pulsar

Type: MM Phonostage
 Input Sensitivity: 5 mV
 Input Impedance: 47 kOhms
 Bandwidth: 20 Hz - 15 kHz/± 0.5 dB
 Output Level: 600 mV
 Output Impedance: 50 Ohm
 Signal/Noise Ratio: 80 dB
 Price: £275

Physical Specifications (all):

Dimensions (WxHxD): 90x 70x270mm
 Finishes: Black casework with either black or white fronts.

UK Distributor:

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 E-mail: heed@tsource.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Net. www.heedaudio.com



Alnico magnet Dual Concentric, and was impressed at how clean and firm the bottom end sounded here, even without embracing the DC-coupling that so many other designers advocate. The tiny Canopus has convincing enough weight, but might perhaps have had a bit more drive and urgency.

The mid-band in particular possesses good transparency and depth resolution, and the sound as a whole is notably free from any shut in boxiness. The dynamic range is good, and dynamics themselves

and soften leading edges just a little, but have notably coherent tonal and dynamic structure and architecture. I was spinning a familiar favourite, the Grateful Dead's acoustic *Reckoning* set, and found myself sucked into focusing on Garcia's guitar much more intently than usual, and my partner actually started dancing along as she came into the room. Which rather neatly sums up the