



Hi-Fi News

PURE AUDIO EXCELLENCE

June 2006 £3.95



TESTED!

MARTIN LOGAN

Our verdict on the stylish new Vantage speakers

AMPLIFIERS

REVEALED! THE BEST SUB-£1K INTEGRATEDS

IN-DEPTH TEST

NAIM'S BOX FULL OF TRICKS

N-Vi: the ultimate one-box for music & movies?



ALSO ON TEST

- Cambridge Azur 840A amp
- GSP Jazz Club phono stage
- Hadcock Cryo 242 tonearm
- Nordost Baldur cables



BUMPER GROUP TEST

SPECIAL REPORT

NEXT GENERATION AUDIO FORMATS

Will Blu-ray & HD-DVD give you better sound?

CREEK'S DESTINY CHILDREN

CD player & amp combination tested!

AOL Keyword: Hi-Fi News

US \$ 9.25 Aus \$ 9.95



9 771472 256219



Going for Gold

From Switzerland comes this giddily-priced pre-amp, the perfect complement to the company's lauded power amplifier. Ken Kessler sees past the paint job and listens in

REVIEW SYSTEM

Sources: Musical Fidelity kW25 CD player; SME 20/12 turntable, 312S arm, Transfiguration Orpheus cartridge
Amplifiers: Audio Research PH5 and AudioValve Sunilda phono pre-amps
Speakers: Wilson WATT Puppy System 7 and Tannoy Autograph Mini standmount speakers
Cables: Yter and Acrolink interconnects; Yter speaker cables
Accessories: Isol-8 mains regenerator

WE LISTENED TO



Mendelssohn Overtures, Claudio Abbado/London Symphony Orchestra, (Deutsche Grammophon 423 104-20) CD



Keb' Mo', *Peace ... Back By Popular Demand* (Okeh EK92687) CD



Taj Mahal *Recycling The Blues & Other Related Stuff* (Pure Pleasure PPAN31605) LP



The Who. *Sell Out* (Classic Records Track 613.002) LP

However obscure Switzerland's darTZeel may seem, it's now a global player in the extreme high-end. And the pressure for the scoop review of its first pre-amp ramped up by a factor of ten immediately after its NHB-108 power amplifier won a brace of awards from our friends across 'the Pond' at *Stereophile* magazine.

According to the distributor, there was a queue of reviewers dying to get their hands on it, they had to fend them off with fears of the sorts of repercussions that follow bruised egos – so why Kessler?

Yada yada yada. I earned the privilege because I bothered to fly to Geneva, hang out with the pair, learn about the product and prove my worthiness. The latter

'It offered a consistency that shrieks pedigree. The darTZeel didn't put a foot wrong'

might even be due to sharing a common taste in music with darTZeel's Hervé Delétraz.

Must've worked, because I've

just spent a couple of weeks with the little beauty. No kidding: I do feel privileged. Yup, the NHB-18NS is that good.

As with the power amplifier, darTZeel opted for direct paths and 'heightened minimalism' if such a phrase isn't borderline oxymoronic. As Hervé put it: 'Our dedicated circuits are reduced to their most basic form. As before, there is no application of any overall negative feedback.'

Because of this approach, the delicate, small audio signals amplified by the NHB-18NS only pass through seven silicon junctions. And that includes the 13dB full discrete gain stage'.



ABOVE: Modular construction allows choice of input source connection standards to be specified

DETAILS

darTZeel NHB-18NS pre-amp

£15,700

www.absolutesounds.com

020 8971 3909

Musically sublime

Deep pockets required

Despite the company's designers suffering an affection for the hideously coloured Rehdéko loudspeakers, they insist that the darTZeel goal is for untrammelled, pure and open sound. Amplifying the low-level signals are discrete devices, or matched transistors embedded in dedicated integrated circuits. Then there's the fact that there are absolutely no contact or switches nor relay of any kind for source selection, all in the interests of absolute transparency. darTZeel prefers, instead of routing signals through a selector box, to provide each input with its own dedicated gain stage, enabled or disabled according to the user's choice. The signal is then directly routed to the volume control module.

FEEDBACK

Further in keeping with the NHB-108 power amplifier, the '18NS uses only small amounts of local negative feedback at the inputs, with one small, symmetrical loop of local negative feedback in the voltage gain stages. The output stages are open loop, and free of all negative feedback.

Unusually, the company employs its own preferred, proprietary 50 ohm 'darT' outputs and 'Zeel' inputs with BNC connectors, alongside more conventional connections. As shipped and reviewed, the unit features a mix of six inputs covering phono, RCA/BNC and balanced XLR. As standard, these include a phono m-m/m-c input with gain from 30-66dB, a single 'full-floating' XLR input and four RCA/BNC 50 ohm Zeel inputs. Outputs consist of one XLR fully-floating output, three BNC 50 ohm darT outputs, ready for tri-amping, with optional built-in passive filters, a pair of RCA outputs and a pair of fixed RCA record outputs.

Completing the package is a battery power supply. Because the NHB-18NS is an 'authentic dual mono preamplifier, from input to output, with separate grounds for left and right channels,' each channel is battery-powered by its own

battery bank, offering up to 15 hours of playing time on a full charge. And it's basically set-and-forget: automatic functioning allows full battery operation when listening, with the charging mode activated when the '18NS is switched off.

FRONT PANEL

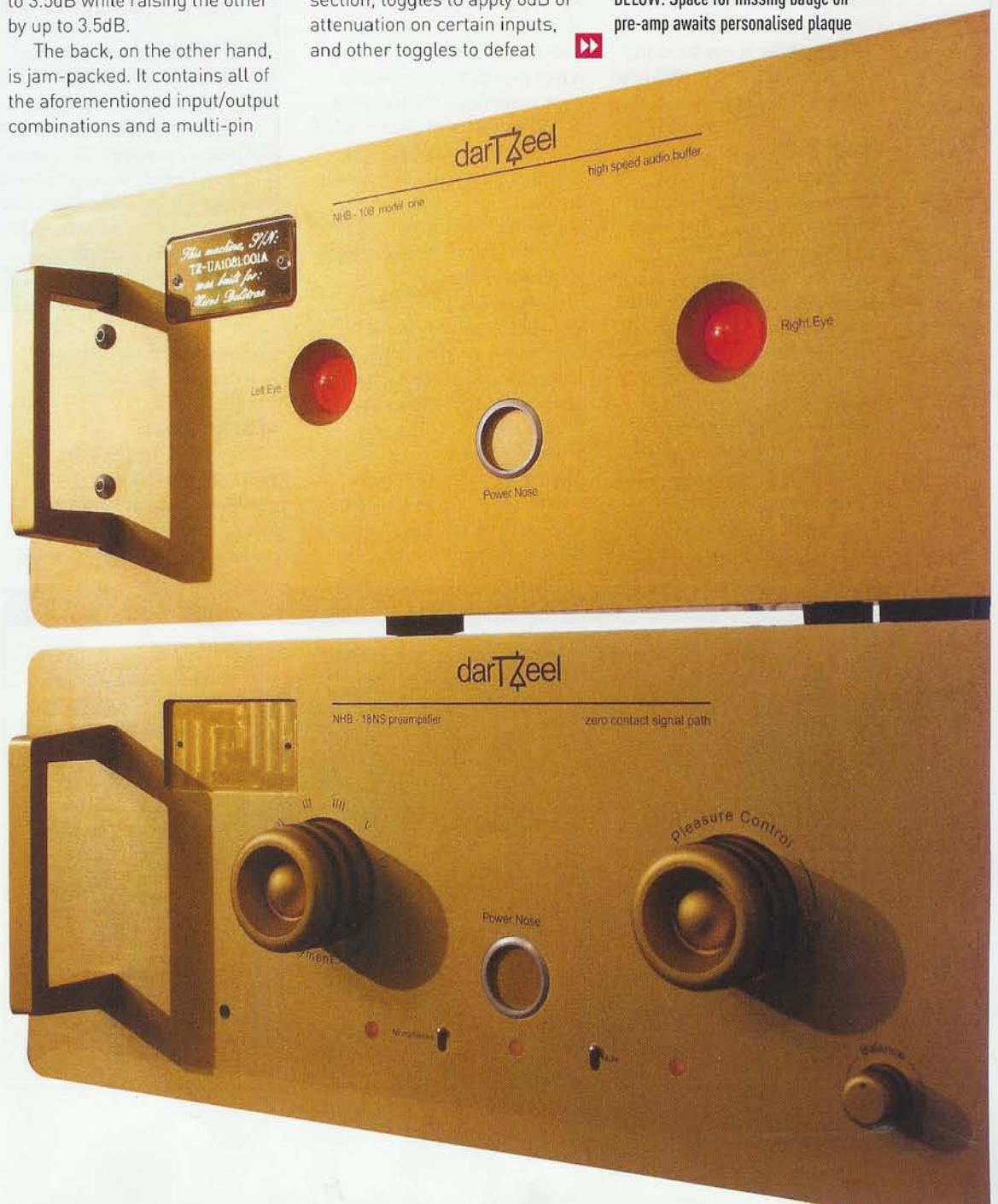
'Deliciously simple' described the front panel: source and volume rotaries marked 'Enjoyment Source' and 'Pleasure Control', an illuminated power on button called the 'Power Nose' [examples, I suppose, of Swiss humour], mono/stereo and mute toggles and a rotary balance which lowers one channel by up to 3.5dB while raising the other by up to 3.5dB.

The back, on the other hand, is jam-packed. It contains all of the aforementioned input/output combinations and a multi-pin



input to accept an umbilical from the outboard charger, along with earth tags for the phono section, toggles to apply 6dB of attenuation on certain inputs, and other toggles to defeat

ABOVE: To reduce signal degradation through switches and relays, each source input is a pre-amp in its own right
BELOW: Space for missing badge on pre-amp awaits personalised plaque



earthing in case of loops. Other niceties include a home theatre bypass mode; multi-coloured LEDs to indicate battery status, charging modes, stereo mode, mono mode, mute, normal, etc; and handles front and rear.

The fit and finish are utterly and undeniably beyond criticism. Indeed, the only area one might possibly object to is the choice of gold front panel and red cover. It is, simply put, so frikkin' ugly that even a chav would

a recording that's 95% 'there', followed by the same again at 100%. The darTZeel does this over and over and over again. Even its phono stage, as set at the factory for median value m-c cartridges, obviates the need to look further.

Everything about the sound is carefully considered, of a whole, and in perfect proportion. From orchestral to unplugged soloist and every point in between – new, old, mono,

'It treats vocals with such utter respect that the realism renders rivals artificial-sounding'

find it objectionable. But that's irrelevant. Within seconds of switching on, after allowing it to charge up fully, it was blatantly obvious that the NHB-18NS goes straight to the head of the class.

HEADY MIX

What we have here is one of those juggling acts performed only by the masters, that heady mix of delicacy and control, sheer musicality tempering almost clinical retrieval of detail, massive scale with no masking of the softest notes. And given its purely solid-state, Franco-Teutonic DNA, the shock is as great as hearing a German tell a joke. One that's actually funny.

I wish there was a way to provide a test CD that demonstrates when everything falls into place. It would include

stereo, digital, analogue – the darTZeel behaved with the kind of consistency that shrieks pedigree. It simply doesn't put a foot wrong, and even worst-case scenarios – CD transfers of '50s mono vocal discs – failed to reveal shortcomings. This pre-amp treats vocals, male or female, single or massed, with such utter respect that the sheer realism renders other systems artificial-sounding.

That stalwart, Keb' Mo', provided both melody and texture that tax most solid-state set-ups, which can never seem to get his rasp just so. They seem to amplify only the harsher elements of it, belying the warmth. Not so the darTZeel: it presented him front-and-centre, tall and noble, the voice a personal command

DATA FILE

SPECIFICATIONS

Gain	Line 11dB Phono 30–66 dB (up to 77dB gain at output)
Frequency Response	1Hz–1 MHz, +0/–6 dB 10Hz–100kHz, +0/–0.5 dB 20Hz–50 kHz, ±0.5dB
Total Harmonic Distortion	<1% from 7Hz–77kHz
Size	440 x 335 x 170mm (wdh)
Temporal Distortion.....	None, at any level
Crosstalk.....	< –90 dB from 20Hz–20kHz
Signal-to-noise ratio	>100 dB (A), line; > 70 dB (A), phono w/factory settings
Size	440 x 170 x 335mm (wdh)
Weight.....	23kg, power supply 3kg, total 26kg

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The NHB-18NS pre-amplifier is exactly the mate for which the NHB-108 Model One power amp has been waiting. They complement each other perfectly, delivering a 'one-two' punch that will knock a hole in the high-end solid-state sector. Admittedly, with a combined price befitting a decent car, you should be getting more than mere amplification, and you do: silky, seductive sound with power to spare. I suppose – following a car analogy – you could liken this in every way to a modern Bentley: sophisticated, capable of cossetting the owner, yet able to play the hooligan when the pedal is floored. Maybe labelling the volume rotary 'Pleasure Control' wasn't so daft after all.

performance, the guitar twanging for real.

PLAYING LOUD

Trying actively to upset the darTZeel revealed only one caveat: so clean is the sound that you may wish to play it louder than you might normally

do, and I did manage to drive the matching power amp into clipping (as evinced by the LEDs). Even then, the clues were stern rather than shocking, and it never sounded like the system was about to implode. You'll be delighted to know that, wherever you dial the 'pleasure control', the scale remains consistent. You'd have to go out of your way to get bad sounds from this. Like hooking up Rehdékos.

Then there's the entry fee. Even before you consider the NHB-18NS pre-amp at £15,700, you must consider its sibling, the NHB-108B power amp, at an equally disturbing £11,490. Should such heady sums be within your reach, you will own a system to rank with the very finest that money can buy. And a mystery, too, will be solved. For those of you who have pondered for decades how the world's premier jazz festival ended up on the shores of a Swiss lake, wonder no more. Montreux: *maintenant tout est clair.* □

UNDER THE LID



LEFT: Chassis is a modular frame with every stage on a subassembly, more like a multi-channel A/V amp or computer. Because of this, the unit might one day be customisable to a degree