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Devialet 240, er... 250

by Alan Sircom



I've had a Devialet D-Premier more or less since the get-go. Which, on reflection, is only about four years. In that time, it went from being a stylish, thought-provoking piece of audio technology, via genre-bending concept that other brands must follow, to being the old man of the Devialet range. But, the innovative French company isn't one for sitting still, and it isn't one for leaving its existing clients high and dry. The D-Premier became the 240 (and by the time this review hits the streets, the 250), and present D-Premier owners have the option for a complete overhaul.

This 'complete overhaul' is fairly substantial. In essence, you give Devialet your Devialet, wait a few weeks, and back comes a new device in the old shell. Inside, everything is changed, even though the basics remain the same. You even get a new five-year warranty. The D-Premier is reconditioned, checked, re-boxed and dispatched. I'm even fairly sure they buffed up the exterior, even though there was that fateful Munich show week a couple of years

ago, when I discovered the amplifier had been left on for the duration and became a warm bed for a cat.

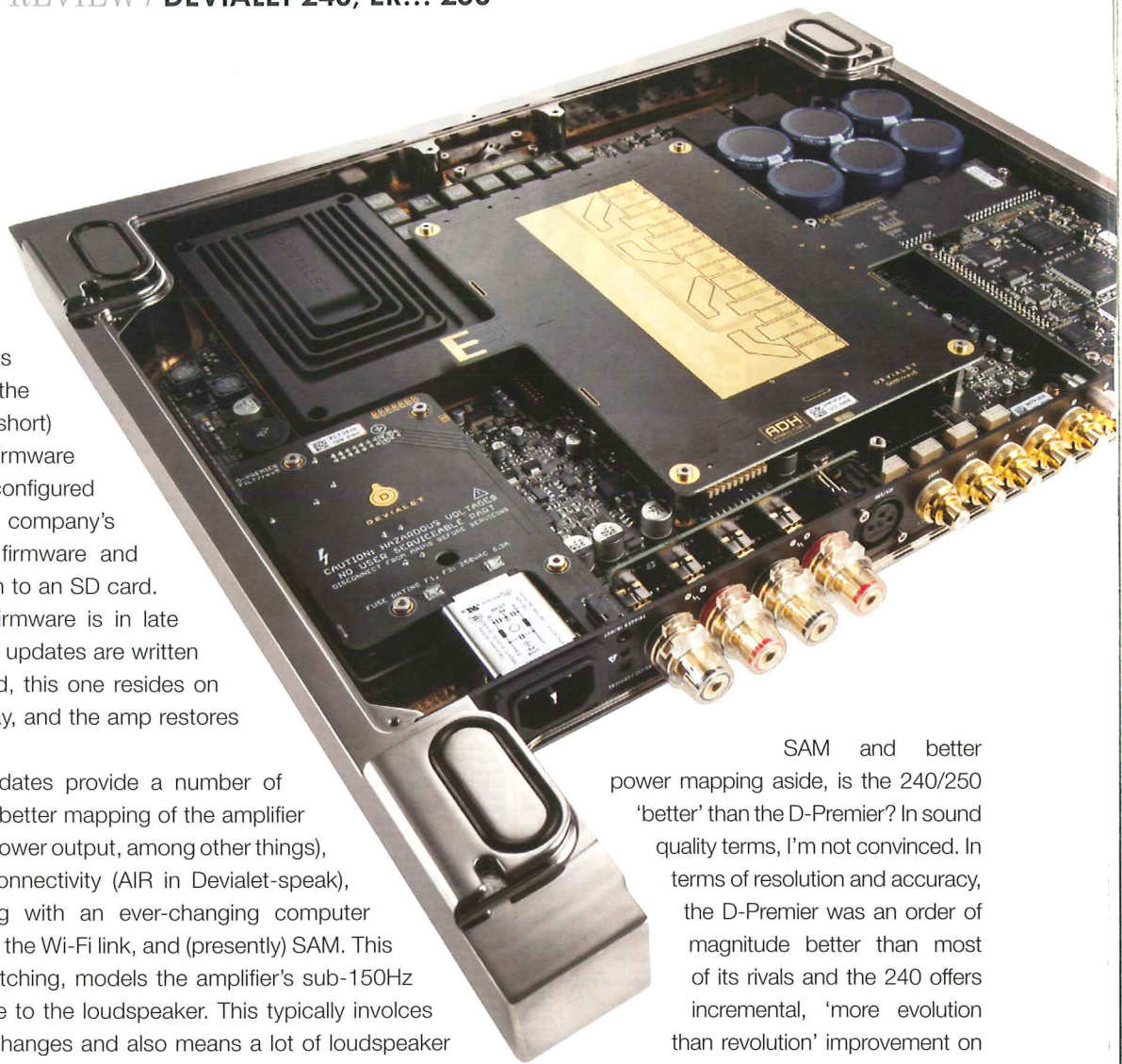
The cat might be a little disappointed now, however. The new 240 runs cooler, both fired up and in standby. The small Class A amplifier in the hybrid Class A/Class D amplifier design still runs warm, but it seems as if the substantially improved power supply and the improved layout of the digital pathways in the 'V5' circuit simply run cooler. This circuit is common to the second-generation Devialet range – the 110, the 170 (tested recently), and the 240 – and all of these models are going to receive the same firmware-enabled performance boost by the time the review goes to press.

To recap, the 110/120 is the entry-level model, delivering 110W (as you read this, 120W) per channel. It's not exactly 'stripped down' (it has coax, Toslink, Ethernet and USB inputs, and wireless streaming), but has an MM-only phono stage, limited analogue inputs, but no digital or subwoofer outputs, all in a very slim case. The 170 tested recently has a slightly thicker case, delivers 170W (200W) and adds a more advanced and configurable phono stage, digital and subwoofer outputs, an AES/EBU digital input, and more or less everything that attracted people to the D-Premier in the first place. An upcoming add-on will be a 200 Slave allowing 400W per channel monoblocks. Meanwhile the 240 (new or reborn) takes that power to 240W (250W by the time you read this), and can be daisy chained for multi-amp capability or for use as a 500W/800W monoblock. At a surface level, D-Premier owners gain USB and Ethernet capability, at the expense of HDMI links, but with an ongoing programme of firmware updates, they may also begin to fall behind on updates and upgrades. ▶

▶ The Devialet is very much a child of the 21st Century. The device (pinning it down as an 'amplifier' is selling the Devialet concept very short) comes with periodic firmware updates, and can be configured as you like from the company's webpage, handing off firmware and configuration information to an SD card. Currently, Version 7.1 firmware is in late beta, so where firmware updates are written to EPROM on the board, this one resides on the SD card: take it away, and the amp restores to its latest version.

These firmware updates provide a number of periodic improvements; better mapping of the amplifier (giving rise to improved power output, among other things), more robust wireless connectivity (AIR in Devialet-speak), especially when dealing with an ever-changing computer world at the other end of the Wi-Fi link, and (presently) SAM. This last, Speaker Active Matching, models the amplifier's sub-150Hz behaviour in accordance to the loudspeaker. This typically involves phase or time domain changes and also means a lot of loudspeaker matching and mathematical modelling written for each loudspeaker. Consequently, the number of loudspeaker that can benefit from SAM is currently very small. Short of running a loudspeaker in fully active mode (something in which Devialet has expressed interest, but necessitates a crossoverectomy in most loudspeaker designs), the closest parallel we've had to this was a variable high-pass alignment filter used by Bowers & Wilkins in the early 1990s with its Matrix 800 series. The B&W filter used an equalisation curve between preamp and power amplifier to compensate for the amplitude and phase response of the loudspeaker. The upside to this is it's the inherently 'right' way to match the output of an amplifier with the properties of a loudspeaker. The downside was that inserting a black box between components and the word 'equalisation' was met with abject terror by those fed on a diet of minimalism. Devialet takes this concept and runs with it to the nth degree, and adds some loudspeaker protection in the process. Of course, it helps that the processing power of a modern DSP chip is greater than what was available to the whole planet when stereo was born.

The SAM concept is applicable to all Devialet models and rekindles this concept; perhaps unsurprisingly, Bowers & Wilkins and Vivid (Laurence Dickie of Vivid was heavily involved in the original Matrix 800 series project) are among the first to have models mapped for SAM. Sadly, I have neither loudspeaker in my own portfolio, but when the concept reaches Wilson Duette 2 or Raidho D1 loudspeakers, I'll be all over it like a nasty rash. Those who have heard SAM at length report it is truly a game changer. We shall see...



SAM and better power mapping aside, is the 240/250 'better' than the D-Premier? In sound quality terms, I'm not convinced. In terms of resolution and accuracy, the D-Premier was an order of magnitude better than most of its rivals and the 240 offers incremental, 'more evolution than revolution' improvement on that D-Premier performance. I'm even less convinced that such changes in sonic performance are ultimately significant, next to the changes in functionality offered today, and tomorrow, by the upgrade. You are getting a (slightly) more powerful amplifier and you are getting a (slightly) better performance across the board; more detail, more solidity, greater dynamics. But not by much.

Put it this way, if you use HDMI, enjoy what you have, in the knowledge that subsequent upgrades and updates will not be for you. For everyone else, this is the equivalent of a 36,000 mile service, and is worth doing if only to unlock future upgrades like SAM.

What is sonically appealing about the D-Premier is just as appealing in the 240. It just adds more input flexibility. I found myself most comfortable with the Ethernet connection (using a Naim UnitiServe pushing files to the 240), followed by AIR, then USB and AES/EBU, and finally coaxial and Toslink bringing up the rear, but the differences ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state, 2-channel integrated audio system amplifier with built-in DAC, phono stage, wireless streaming, and 400MHz, four channel 40-bit DSP.

Analogue inputs: One configurable MM/MC phono input (via RCA jacks), two single-ended line-level inputs (via RCA jacks), all upsampled to 24 bit/192kHz

Digital inputs: Four S/PDIF RCA connectors (can be used for analogue), one optical Toslink, one AES/EBU, one combined optical jack/RS232 3.5mm jack, 1x USB, 1x RJ45, inbuilt AIR wireless

Analogue outputs: multi-way loudspeaker connectors, subwoofer (via RCA)

Digital outputs: AES/EBU and RCA (for daisy chaining Devialets)

Supported sample rates: Wireless: 16-bit, 24-bit, 32kHz-96kHz; Coaxial and optical S/PDIF: 16-bit, 24-bit — 32kHz – 96kHz USB: 16-bit, 24-bit, 32-bit — 32kHz – 192kHz

Power Output: 2x 240W under six ohms (250W with v7.0 firmware)

Bandwidth: digital DC-87kHz (-3dB); analogue 0.1Hz-87kHz (-3dB)

Distortion: THD+N at full power: 0.001%; IMD: 0.001%.

Signal to Noise Ratio: 130dB unweighted

Dimensions (HxWxD): 40.5 x 400 x 400mm

Weight: 7kg

Price: £11,800

Manufacturer: Devialet

URL: www.devialet.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)208 971 3909



▶ between inputs were minor at best. On the analogue side, the phono stage remains one of the best in breed, as long as you remember to set the cartridge loading extremely accurately, and you don't leave the AIR Wi-Fi network connector enabled, but not paired. This last is important; either disable AIR or connect it to a wireless access point, otherwise its constant scanning for wireless points creates a soft, occasional 'pitter-patter' sound through the phono. Once set though, it's magnificent.

However, just as the D-Premier was not for everyone, so the 240 has its limits. And usually, those who have a strong liking for strong flavours in their audio are the first to look elsewhere. But the thing is, it's not soft, hard, peaky, accented, bouncy, bright, gently rolled off, smooth, forward, laid-back, laid-out, or dull. It's just detailed. Exceptionally detailed. If you are after a sound that is all about 'tone' and 'mojo', this isn't it, but if you are after hearing what was laid down in the studio, instead of what you wish was laid down in the studio, the 240 follows the D-Premier in getting it fundamentally correct. That might be too strong a medicine for some.

The fascinating thing about the Devialet 240 is, perhaps more than ever, it has become a mirror reflecting the demands of its owner. There are those who view it as an excuse for endless cable swaps, 'config' adjustments, even arguing about the sound of the amplifier with and without the back of its loudspeaker terminals. There are others who view their Devialets in much the way they do digital cameras, rushing to perform every firmware update 'just because', which gives them an excuse to tinker with the system while not engaging in the endless rounds of hardware tweaking. And there are those who have just blithely plugged the Devialet into their system and enjoy it, without the need for the *audiophilia nervosa*. It's all good! +