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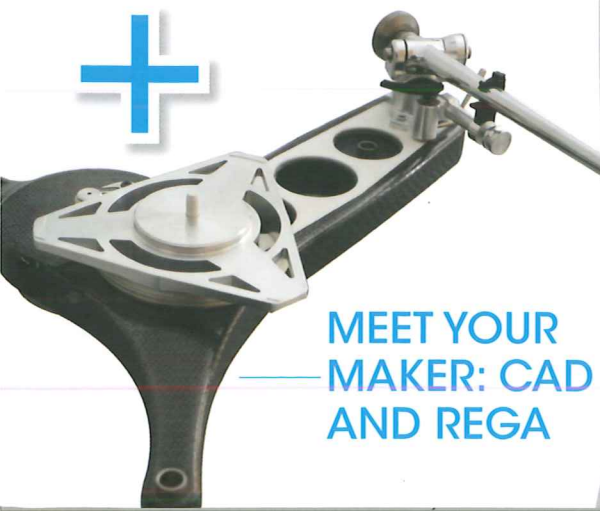
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Constellation Audio Virgo and Centaur

by Jason Kennedy. Photography by Adrian Lyon

When Constellation Audio first appeared at CES three years ago, I was not the only one to be taken aback by the quality and style of the casework. However, I was the first to say as much to the man who would eventually become the distributor for the brand in the UK. I am now very glad that I did so, because I got first 'dibs' on the product range. Not only do the Constellation products look better than any other high end audio component, they sound better than all of those that I have had the opportunity to hear at home. What's more, I only have the Performance Series models, Constellation's 'entry level' pre/power combo the Virgo and Centaur Stereo.

Constellation Audio is not your regular high-end company. It is more like a project to create the best audio components in the world... ever! This is an often the stated aim in this business, but it is usually based on the vision and skills of one or two engineers, Constellation took the unusual approach of commissioning a number of the top names in the audio engineering business and challenging them to come up with something above and beyond that which they had done in the past. The list of engineers in the so-called 'dream team' is pretty impressive and includes James Bongiorno (Dynaco), Keith Allsop (Audio Alchemy), John Curl (Vendetta, Parasound et al), Demian Martin (Spectral, Rockport, Nuforce), Bascom King (Marantz, PS Audio, conrad-johnson) and Peter Madnick (Audio Alchemy). These are just the better known people involved with CA; the design team is 17 strong, which is not something you can say of the entire workforce in many high-end companies. The concept behind Constellation came from Murali Murugasu and David Payes from Continuum Audio, another company that thinks outside the box, who contacted Peter Madnick who pulled the project together in 2010.

The look of these extraordinary pieces is the work of Alex Rasmussen who works with the Neal Feay Company which produces the metalwork. The pictures you see on these pages give some idea of how beautiful the casework is but it's another thing in the flesh. More like fabric than aluminium, the attention to detail is in another league; for instance, the way that a crease line tapers to flat is just sumptuous. The longer you spend with them the more detailing becomes apparent, to the point where the chassis parts on the side of the Virgo preamp join is a work of art in itself. This degree of precision would grace a fine watch and makes all other casework seem clunky and crude. I have to point out one more touch, it's the way that the ventilation holes on the side of the Centaur are shifted out of alignment with holes in the plate underneath. This is particularly pleasing in the flesh, a real meeting of art and design enabled by precision engineering. The craftsmanship reminds me of Bugatti... and strangely enough the sense of speed that this combo can produce does too.

“Constellation Audio is not your regular high-end company. It is more like a project to create the best audio components in the world... ever!”

The Virgo preamplifier is a fully balanced line stage with outboard power supply. Even the latter has a sculpted front panel. It connects via two umbilicals to the back of the Virgo's chassis; the connections for in- and outputs are on two inset boards that are decoupled with elastomeric suspension. It's a fairly stiff mounting and I only noticed some flex when trying to fit one of Audiovox's rather idiosyncratic XLRs, but you can see the elastomer around the edge. It reflects the fact that the same stuff is used on the inside to isolate the circuitry. Constellation refers to this as a raft assembly because the PCBs are floating on an elastomeric suspension. The design of the Virgo's circuit is fundamentally the same as the Altair, Constellations top preamp, but keeps costs at bay with more economical manufacture. The control panel

that fronts the Virgo is very similar to that which operates remotely on Altair, leaving that line stage devoid of onboard controls. It consists of a backlit LED panel with rather attractive serif font in a black on white graphic. The display is activated by five buttons hidden on its bottom edge as well as a handset, this being as aesthetically pleasing as the unit itself. Each input (there are four of each type) can be adjusted for level, balance and phase, and will remain in that state when you return to it. This is the easiest way I've encountered of assigning specific gain for each input. One minor foible is that when the display dims a certain time after you make a change, of volume or input for instance, the knobs on the unit cease to have any effect. You can alter volume with the remote and the knobs can be prompted to action by pressing the home button to get around this, but the only way to avoid it all together is to set the time the display dims to 'never'.

The Centaur power amp is available in Mono and Stereo versions, but it's hard enough to move just one of these beasts, so I'm glad I had the Stereo. It's an interesting design, because there are two pairs of XLR inputs on the rear panel. These are marked balanced and direct and are very different inputs, because direct bypasses a gain stage which is the same as that in the Virgo preamp. This extra stage is on the 'balanced' input and produces a perfectly balanced signal for the Centaur to work with. It's a form of signal conditioning based on the premise that if you avoid putting anything untoward in, it won't be amplified. It results in higher gain for that input and as I discovered a clearly different sound. The Centaur is made up to two 125 watt single ended modules so become a 250 watts balanced stereo amplifier in use. According to the specs supplied it will double that into four Ohms and can deliver 800 watts should impedance halve ▶





► again. Given the 1,600 Watt toroidal transformer with separate windings for left and right channels and not forgetting the elegantly sculpted heat sinking I would say the Stereo is capable of driving pretty much any speaker on the market.

I hooked up the Virgo to the Taurus' direct input with Transparent Audio Reference interconnects and Townshend Audio Isolda DCT speaker cable then I connected my Resolution Audio Cantata CDP/DAC with Townshend Audio Fractal single ended interconnects. I discovered later on that the Cantata's XLR outputs sounded better with the Virgo but this set up was hardly shabby. It was immediately obvious that transparency from the Constellation pairing is as the saying goes stellar; there was oodles of extra detail in familiar pieces of music, sounds that made it easier to identify unusual instruments, the nature of reverb and what precisely was happening at low levels. These are extremely quiet amps. They achieve the sort of noise floor reduction that you expect of top notch power conditioners. This means very clear definition of space and lovely tonal shine to acoustic instruments like vibes. It became apparent after a few pieces of music that there were extraordinary levels of resolution and finesse coming through the Bowers & Wilkins 802 Diamond speakers; levels that to be frank I have not previously encountered. But being an inquisitive type, I thought I'd give the 'balanced' input a try. After the shock of the extra gain – always drop the volume by 10 clicks before trying this at home folks – this proved an exhilarating experience.

This input makes the Centaur sound more like other amplifiers. It lacks the transparency of the direct input, but does have stronger dynamics and a greater sense of speed. In fact, I have not heard a faster amplifier that is genuinely full bandwidth. This much was clear when I put on Goran Kajfes' psych brass belter *The Reason Why Vol. 1*; I could hear that something big was going down from the next room where I was making tea (I'm so rock'n'roll it almost hurts!). The hectic intro track had been corralled into an extremely cohesive and powerful piece of music that made sense however you listened

to it but particularly at full chat. After sending off a tweet and a few texts to exclaim my excitement I settled down to dragging out all the challenging music I could muster and started to thoroughly enjoy the system. The source at this stage was a Naim Unitiserve connected by digital coax to the Cantata, a combo that has always sounded good but nowhere near this good. Now there was depth in grungy recordings like Zappa's *One Size Fits All*, his guitar solo on Andy is way back in the mix and is clearly of a different origin to the rest of the band. Zappa was a master of mixing up parts from different sessions and they are usually seamless, this showed the join but also enhanced the music. I had to play some ZZ Top as well, all it took was the snare at the start of 'Enjoy and Get It On' (*Tejas*) and I was gone, lost in the moment that only music can achieve.

While I could hear that the direct input was more revealing there was something about the extra gain of the 'balanced' one that was totally captivating. Until that is a better source turned up at what turned out to be just the right time, this was the Signature version of MSB's Platinum IV Data ►

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Virgo

Inputs: 4 XLR stereo, 4 RCA stereo

Outputs: 2 XLR stereo, 2 RCA stereo

THD+N: <0.001%, 20 Hz - 20 kHz @ 2V out, <0.1%, 20 Hz -20 kHz @ 10V out

Frequency response: 10 Hz to 200 kHz, ± 0.5 dB

Output noise: ≤ 20 μ V dB, 20 Hz - 20 kHz

Input impedance (balanced): 200 K Ω

Input impedance (unbalanced): 100 K Ω

Output impedance: < 50 Ω

Volume control resolution: 0.5dB from 0dB to -90 dBFS

Weight, preamp: 16 kg

Weight, power supply: 10 kg

Dimensions, preamp: 14x43.2x40cm

Dimensions, PSU: 12.7x15.2x36.8cm

Price: £19,000

Centaur

Inputs: 2 XLR (1 for Constellation Link), 1 RCA

Power output per channel (1 kHz @ 1% THD+N): 250 watts/8 Ohms, 500 watts/4 Ohms, 800 watts/ 2 Ohms

Frequency response: 10Hz-100kHz, +1/-0.5 dB

Gain: 14dB (Constellation Direct)/26 dB Balanced & RCA

THD+N (1 kHz @ rated power): <0.05%

Output impedance: 0.05 Ω

Damping factor (8 Ω load): 160

Input impedance: 100K Ω unbalanced, 200K Ω balanced

Output noise: <70 μ V, 500 kHz BW, -116 dB @ 250 watts

Weight: 44.5 kg

Dimensions (hwd): 28x43.2x50.8cm

Price: £24,000

Manufacturer: Constellation Audio

URL: www.constellationaudio.com

Distributor: Absolute Sounds

Tel: +44(0)208 971 3909

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

CD transport. This combined with a Chord Co Sarum Tuned ARAY coax and the Cantata was astonishing in its ability to combine the best timing yet encountered with a digital source as well as uncanny levels of transparency. Frankly it's the best CD player I have ever encountered... and I had almost given up on the breed!

It turned the tables in favour of the Centaur's more revealing input, now it was clear that less is more when it comes to gain stages. This will depend on the speaker load itself of course and how much level you need but at both sensible and entertaining volumes there is no sign of strain whatsoever. On the contrary, the bass is powerful, deep and chocolatey with a smooth underside and the mid and treble are totally effortless. But what really gets you is the sheer vitality that it brings to well worn favourites, this time I was onto another Zappa classic *Apostrophe!* and had no option but to sing along. Now tea is good but not that good, these amps however are that good.

Finally I put on some vinyl. Now I had to listen to as much of it as I could cram in and put aside eating, sleeping and other basic necessities for as long as possible. The direct input is streets ahead with analogue, the depth of image and the layering within it being considerably better served by the more subtle input. I couldn't quite understand why the 'balanced' input had swayed me but it's obviously related to the source and the music. If you want full speed ahead thrill power then the extra gain stage is very effective, but if you want to relax and immerse yourself in the finer aspects of musical reproduction then it's best to bypass it. One is for Massive Attack and the other for Mozart. It's a luxury to have both options on hand, rather like having a spectacular solid state and a top notch single ended triode amp in one very elegant box. I am going to have a lot of trouble adjusting to normality when the Constellations go, perhaps now's the time to take advantage of plummeting mortgage rates... +

