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• **LOUDSPEAKERS** Cabasse to Wilson Audio • **VINTAGE** B&O, Electrocompaniet, KEF, Sony and more

UK £4.50 US \$10.99 Aus \$10.50





Mono power amplifier chassis. Rated at 450W/8ohm
 Made by: DarTZeel Audio SA, Switzerland
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.dartzeel.com; www.absolutesounds.com

AUDIO
FILE

darTZeel NHB-458 (£75k ea)

Says darTZeel founder Hervé Delétraz of the NHB-458 power amp, the pinnacle of what the brand has been aiming for, 'Performance is a means to achieve musical reproduction, not the contrary.' He keeps a small design team and believes in simplicity. 'The shortest possible signal path is the key factor. But it takes time, patience and lots of listening to ensure that what we hear is not just the pleasantness of a specific moment.'

Imposing in size, the NHB-458 is specified as able to deliver a substantial 450W/8ohm and up to 1kW into 2ohm. There's no negative feedback in the input or output stages, no compensation network.

Its main transformer is a 2kVA toroidal, with a separate isolated transformer for the control circuits and fluorescent display. That display is also a control panel, allowing the user to customise settings in numerous ways; additionally, it can keep the user informed of the unit's electrical behaviour.

Enclosing this circuitry is a massive chassis with a 30mm-thick front panel, made from a newly-devised aluminium alloy. The rear panel is made of four 85mm-thick aluminium ingots, CNC machined

'It seemed to be merely breathing yet the meters showed kilowatt peaks'

as a 'tunnel' and incorporating the heatsink. The various components are 'sprung' to absorb any mechanical hum and vibration between 40-70Hz. It sits on 2kg aluminium feet. A first for darTZeel is the fitting of a thermal switch in place of a fuse, easily reset by a back panel button.

Glass side walls reveal a Swiss penchant: just like the see-through

back on a fine watch, they allow the user to see what's inside... and marvel in wonder at the workmanship therein.

STRIPPING THE LAYERS

The NHB-458 has evolved from its pre-production presence, its personality modified, one might say, from Lamborghini rowdiness to Bugatti finesse. On public occasions Delétraz has had the *chutzpah* to play them through small two-ways, rather than the big Magicos or Wilsons, etc, you might anticipate.

Because small speakers cannot, in any way, exploit the *power* or the bass extension available from these amplifiers, what they leave you with is the sound quality alone. And what you experience is so revealing, so clean and robust that you discover elements in familiar recordings that had previously passed unnoticed.

With some old soul releases, including Sam & Dave's finest moments on Stax, we heard a layer of grunge disappear, without removing any of the raunchiness required to create the raw 'n' sweaty atmosphere needed to convince the listener. The darTZeel allowed the two voices to volley back and forth, in front of the gutsiest, sexiest rhythm section and backing band ever to commit to vinyl.

Johnny Rivers' various platters recorded live at the Whisky-A-Go-Go acquired a new freshness and openness: his

distinctive vocals enjoyed richness and body, while the backing band were honoured with mass, speed and transient attack, all combining to create what can only be described as 'presence'.

We dug out Bonnie Raitt's magnificent LP, *The Glow*, replete with musicians of the calibre of the Memphis crew behind Sam & Dave. Cranking this up to near-live,



ABOVE: Built like a vault; the NHB-458's fittings feel that way too. The buttons command power on/off, menu access and personal settings, and various levels of display illumination. Side windows allow appreciation of the internals

but still comfortable, levels, the darTZeel sounded as if it was barely breathing, while the meters told another story: kilowatt peaks! Just two other power amps have given us the same sensation: the Audio Research REF 600 and D'Agostino Momentum [HFN Jul '11].

VERDICT

We are at a loss to criticise anything about the darTZeel NHB-458. Well, almost: those intense red and yellow-gold colours... but you could learn to listen while wearing a blindfold. Is there anything more one could possibly want or need? We think not, for this amplifier is simply spectacular. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	580W / 1010W
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	620W / 1185W / 1975W / 276W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.28-0.32ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.4dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/450W)	149mV / 3237mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/450W)	87.2dB / 113.7dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.170-0.235%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	51W/690W (4W standby)
Dimensions (WHD)	275x460x518mm