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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# DarTZeel CTH-8550

by Alan Sircom

Know what you're thinking: Sixteen Thousand, Five Hundred Quid... for a fucking integrated amp! It's a big, scary number. Especially when you actually listen to the damn thing, because then you start thinking about how you get it past the other half without a problem.

That's impossible, because this is no shrinking audiophile violet, if indeed the words 'audiophile' and 'shrinking violet' can ever sit comfortably together. The DarTZeel CTH-8550's power amp sized case, its gold and scarlet livery, 15mm thick CNC-milled front panel and a volume knob marked 'pleasure control' (which is, of course, a pleasure to use) isn't going under the domestic management radar, no matter how hard you try. There is an all black version that might take the edge off, but that's still a big slab of darkness on the equipment shelf. Besides, it loses something in translation from the original bling.

*"The amp looks expensive, feels expensive, weighs expensive and even smells expensive."*

Forget the well-known 'hand-written invoice' (the one your friendly dealer pens for you at about a tenth of what you really paid to appease the other half) while you are at it too; the amp looks expensive, feels expensive, weighs expensive and even smells expensive. Plus, you just know that somehow they'll discover that Swiss legend at the back... and then you are screwed. The only way to get past this is to buy them something equally Swiss at the same time; think expensive or you'll be wearing it someplace unmentionable, so we're talking Patek Philippe... not a Toblerone or a cheese fondue.

No, if you are going to own a DarTZeel CTH-8550, be loud and proud. Even in a time where conspicuous spending

is distinctly out of fashion, this is something to shout about. Take the handset for example; I defy anyone to handle this heavy slab of richness without quoting lines from *Goldfinger*, Mishtah Bond.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the CTH-8550 is its protection circuitry. Not protection from blowing up speakers, but preventing any rogue elements from running off with your shiny new DarTZeel in transit. You have to register the amp online and this sends a little file that you need to plug into your amp through a USB stick. No registration, not much of a music session. This also gives you insight into how much microprocessor control is on tap; a front panel screen controls a 50 page menu allowing all manner of adjustments and configuration states. You can even program the DarTZeel to act as the Alarm Clock of the Rich and Famous. This micro-control is a major change, when compared to the discrete-component charms of the pre and power amplifiers. Fortunately, in most cases, the standard settings are the best ones.

The microprocessor is also a self-diagnostic system, designed to keep the extremely simple amplifier circuit in rude health. In many respects, this is its key job. The amplifier is designed to constantly check and adjust the circuit in some fundamental ways; the parallel transistor, dual mono design is made to run cool and be very stable, but this keeps even the implication of

instability at bay. As a consequence, this relatively powerful, yet simple, circuit acts unfazed by almost anything you can throw at it, speaker-wise.

This all solid-state, no feedback design has a tomorrow-chummy nine inputs each with its own ball-bearing press stud, comprising four phono inputs, two dedicated for the optional phono stage, an XLR input and two sets of the balanced, BNC-toting Zeel connections (used to connect pre- and power from the range). As nothing else speaks Zeel, this holds the promise of future DarTZeel sources, perhaps. There's a set of phono and Zeel outputs, as well as monitor phonos for recording. The power amp section delivers 200 watts per channel (into eight ohms, 330W into four and even two ohms is possible) and is effectively run dual mono. The preamp section is completely dual mono right up to the power transformer. Cleverly, DarTZeel uses separate transformers (one on top of the other) for the demands of the preamp and power amplifier sections, so it really is like two amps in one. It also means one of those menu options not only turns off the power amp stage, but turns that big transformer into a paperweight for the duration.

It goes without saying the amp is absurdly well-built; anything that costs so much that it could take nearly an hour for a Premiership footie player to earn enough to afford it is supposed to be well made, but this takes high-quality build to new levels. Forget production lines and think hand-made instead. It is built on a motherboard/daughter card layout though, allowing plug in optional cards for moving coil or moving magnet cartridges. And it's hand-built too, to the kind of uncompromising standards that kept Swiss timepieces at the forefront of engineering for hundreds of years.

The motherboard/daughterboard layout and the stacked power transformers go some way to explain the height of the amplifier. Of course, it's not that different from the equally tall, equally impressively priced rival Krell FBI. But somehow, the overall aesthetic is very different; where the FBI is integrated Krell writ (very) large, this is more like a classic computer chassis, like the IMSAI from the late 1970s. The IMSAI was revolutionary, moving computing from lab-coated acolyte appeasing the IBM god with regular tributes of mag tape to the *War Games*-like home computer geekosphere. Although the DarTZeel doesn't democratise audio amplifiers in the way the IMSAI and its progeny did for computing, in a way it's just as revolutionary.

It's hard to think of this as a mere integrated amplifier; it successfully makes a sound like a hulking great pre/power in a single box. And, once you've spent some time with the CTH-8550, it's hard to go back to other

one-box amplifiers irrespective of price and spec. Little wonder then that the number '8550' is reputed to mean 85 per cent of the performance of the DarTZeel pre/power, at 50 per cent of the price. Designer Hervé Delétraz is apparently well-known for his wry sense of humour.

The sound is somewhat different from the original DarTZeel schema. The original power amplifier was one of the fastest-sounding solid-state devices around, at least in the context of amplifiers with any real-world power delivery. The CTH-8550 loses some of that speed, it must be said, but in the process gains some extra heft and possibly even dynamics. And it's still fast; faster than many in fact. It just loses the bordering on psychic speed of attack of the NHB power amp.



There's a newly minted audiophile cliché surrounding big, good amps. Like any good cliché, it's built on several nuggets of truth. This one's to do with the quietness of very good amplifiers. And it fits here; the CTH-8550 produces a sound that rises out of a very deep, very still, quiet place. This is not something you can explain easily, because it sound trite, but the easiest way is to draw ▶

*"In this case, the Swiss amplifier is good for 'music' and it's as neutral as, ahem, Switzerland."*

▶ an analogy; even the best double-glazing can never totally isolate people from the sounds of the big city. They might be effectively inaudible and the city dweller can overcome them, but they never go away. Move that city dweller into the middle of nowhere for a night and the silence is palpable. It's that sort of absence of background sound you get with the CTH-8550.

Otherwise, the CTH-8550 is difficult to pin down, sonically. There's a fractional trade-off between air and bass depth, and the Electrocompaniet Nemo power amps in this issue represent almost the diametric opposite (more bass, less air) to what the CTH-8550 does. One is not better or worse than the other, though, just differences in taste, like the difference between a really good curry and a good Chinese meal... if you are in the habit of treating everyone in the restaurant to a free meal for the next month or so.

It just does everything well. It's the sort of amplifier that laughs in the face of those who want to call amps 'cold' or 'warm', a design a 'classical' or 'good for rock' model. In this case, the Swiss amplifier is good for 'music' and it's as neutral as, ahem, Switzerland. That almost forgotten concept of an amplifier being a 'straight wire with gain' sees its best expression here, in that the amplifier imposes no character on the music, it merely plays it. Imagery, dynamics articulation, transparency, detail... if it comes out of the source that way, that's how it plays. A trivial inspection of amplifiers would suggest this neutrality is easy; the harsh reality is that the reverse is true and those truly neutral amps are rare enough to be worthy of note.

The DarTZeel CTH-8550 is one such amplifier, and that all but takes the edge off the price tag.+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

darTZeel CTH-8550

**Nominal output power:** 200 watts RMS (230 watts peak) @ 8 ohms  
330 watts RMS (360 watts peak)  
@ 4 ohms

330 watts RMS (400 watts peak) @ 2 ohms (software limited)

**Line Gain:** 12 dB nominal, up to 22dB

**Power Stage Gain:** 26 dB @ 8 ohms

**Input impedances:** MM: 47 kohms.

Neumann RIAA 4th pole included

MC: 1 kohms. Neumann RIAA 4th pole included

**RCA:** > 30 kohms

**Zeel BNC:** 50 ohm

**XLR:** > 15 kohms between Pin 1 and 2

> 15 kohms between Pin 1 and 3

**Line output impedances:** RCA = 75

ohms, darT BNC = 50 ohms

**Speaker output impedance:** < 0.33

ohms, from 20 Hz to 20 kHz (measured under 8 ohms)

**Frequency response:**

3 Hz to 300 kHz, +0, -6 dB

20 Hz to 20 kHz, +0, -0.5 dB

20 Hz to 50 kHz, ±0.5 dB

**Rise time:** < 0.8 µs

**Slew rate:** > 88 V/µs, peak-peak

**DC output voltage:** < ±15 mV max

**Total Harmonic Distortion (THD):** < 1 %  
from 7 Hz to 77 kHz

**Crosstalk:** < -90 dB from 20Hz to 20kHz

**Signal to noise ratio:** > 115 dB (A) @

nominal power

**Power consumption:** 3 watts Standby,  
40 watts @ idle, 1000 watts @ maximum  
output power

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 44x33.5x17cm

Total depth with handles: 41.5cm

**Net weight:** 28 kg

**Price** £16,500

**Manufactured by:** Dartzzeel

URL: [www.dartzzeel.com](http://www.dartzzeel.com)

**Distributed by:** Absolute Sounds

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