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darTZeel NHB-108 Model One

This striking power amp has already made an impact, even before the preamp gets into production

PRICE £11,490 CONTACT Absolute Sounds Studio, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0TW ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.dartzeel.com

Switzerland is not a country normally associated with a sense of humour, but perhaps our image of stolid conservatism is misplaced. Consider then the cuckoo clock, triangular chocolate bars – or the darTZeel amplifier for that matter. The engineer behind darTZeel is one Herve Deletraz, who not only has a fondness for anagrams, but injects rare wit into his instruction manuals and his products.

First news of darTZeel's debut product, the NHB-108 Model One power amplifier, arrived way back in 2001, and examples appeared at a US hi-fi show the following year. But it took until the Autumn 2005 Heathrow show to find its way to the UK, where it's being distributed by a new Studio subsidiary of importer Absolute Sounds. And it is just about to be joined by a matching NHB-18NS preamplifier.

Apparently, Herve took sixteen years to bring the £11,490 NHB-108 – the initials stands for 'Never Heard Before' – to market, but if looks are any guide it was well worth the wait. The standard of finish is everything you'd expect from top-class Swiss engineering, with beautiful surfaces and outstanding panel fit. The top surface is a sheet of transparent glass, giving a fine view of the top quality components and beautiful build – prominently visible are two very large toroidal transformers and a series of hefty brass bus-bar links.

The styling is original – some might say controversial – but to our eyes it's strikingly daring and effective. There are echoes of the

does increase significantly to 160 watts into six ohms, that's still not particularly generous. The reason is that the designer insists on using just a single pair of bi-polar power transistors for each channel, as he believes the multiple-parallel arrays used to generate high powers compromise quality.

The amp is constructed in double-mono form, with no global negative feedback, relays or fuses in the signal path. The circuitry has a significant Class A bias, so the unit gets quite warm even when idling. And it's a sensitive flower judging by the stern notices not to power it up without first attaching speakers and source, for fear of taking out fuses. By following these instructions to the letter, no mishaps occurred. A handy toolkit is supplied, possibly for those that carelessly blow fuses.

This review is only intended to cover the NHB-108 power amp, but a prototype of the £15,700 NHB-18NS preamplifier was also made available to assist with the analysis. Naturally, it matches the gold-and-red combination of the power amp, and the front panel has the same power 'nose' but has two good size knobs in place of the 'eyes' – one for input selection (Enjoyment Source), the other for volume (Pleasure Control). Only the volume setting is accessible via a compact three-button remote handset.

Both these components are massively built, so it's just as well the front and back panels both incorporate hunky grab handles. Having lugged the NHB-108's 30kg out of its carton

One consequence of that super-tight time coherence and freedom from overhang is to deliver particularly clean and clear bass lines, unencumbered by the low end warmth and colour that usually clouds the issue. First impressions are that the amp sounds slightly dry, but it soon became obvious with acoustic material that it was actually delivering the sound that real instruments make, unencumbered by the artefacts of electronic processing and speaker enclosures.

The darTZeel is not only stunningly fast, it's also beautifully precise and delicate, especially in the way it handles cymbals and similar percussion work. This is all the more obvious because the stereo image is tightly focused with exceptionally good positioning in width and depth. The manufacturer's claim for superior phase accuracy would seem to be well supported by this observation.

In a very real sense, it sounds quite unlike the stereotype solid-state amplifier – but then it doesn't sound like a valve amplifier either. There's nothing obviously romantic about its character; it just sounds brutally accurate and honest, letting the music rather than the sound grab one's attention. A sweet recording will come across sweetly, and a crude and over-processed one will sound crude and over-processed. No prisoners taken, no quarter given. During the review programme, a number of different line-level sources were tried, including top class CD players from Weiss, Burmester and Naim, plus the fine Magnum Dynalab MD 108T FM tuner, and the NHB-108 – especially with its partnering NHB-18NS preamp – made it particularly easy to distinguish between the characters of these different source components and media.

One might question whether 100 watts per channel is really enough at this end of the market, and the sparkling clarity of this amp does encourage one to wind the wick up, no question. But for most of the time, there seemed to be ample power, given reasonably sensitive speakers, the more so because the background is very quiet and low-level resolution is excellent.

The bottom line is that this is unquestionably one of the finest sounding hi-fi amplifiers available today, with extraordinary poise and transparency that is immensely involving and seductive. In which context the £11,490 asking price is by no means unreasonable – in the world of high-end audio, it's all too easy to pay much more for much less. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

“This is unquestionably one of the finest sounding hi-fi amplifiers available today, with extraordinary poise and transparency.”

1950s in the gold coloured front and back, and the shiny red heatsinks running down both sides. Then there's the anthropomorphic front panel, with a central on/off button labelled 'power nose', flanked by a pair of large glowing power status 'eyes'. It's all rather friendly in a refreshingly droll way. The back panel accommodates the usual speaker output socket/binder pairs, and a choice of three types of input – phonos, transformer-balanced XLRs and a special, low-impedance (50-ohm) BNC pair, deliberately configured for use with the matching preamp.

A power rating of just 100 watts per channel (into eight ohms) might seem a trifle churlish in view of the high price-tag, and while this

and up onto a convenient shelf – not a task undertaken lightly, it must be said – the first step was to connect it up in place of the Naim NAP500 power amp in our reference system.

SOUND QUALITY

The sonic change was quite obvious and dramatic. The combination actually worked very well indeed, and the NHB-108 immediately showed its remarkable strengths. It is, quite simply, the 'fastest' amplifier this listener has ever heard, with brilliant transient definition and dramatic dynamic expression, thanks in no small part to a freedom from time-smear that must surely beat the best available elsewhere.