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darTZeel

integrated amplifier

CTH-8550

Pleasure Control



Menu
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Monitor
Mute
Sleep
Power

Status



DARTZEEL

CTH-8550

Idiosyncratically styled integrated amplifier is sweetness and light

PRICE £16,500 **CONTACT** Absolute Sounds ■ 020 8971 3909 ■ www.dartzeel.com

Don't dare write off DarTZeel as gimmicky. The Swiss manufacturer's designs are often unconventional, but sonic performance is undeniably the order of the day – and its latest offering – the CTH-8550 integrated amplifier – sounds wonderful.

You'll have to break open the piggy bank for the privilege, though. Its £16,500 price tag may make this one of the most costly integrated amplifiers on the market, but that's still less than half the price of DarTZeel's own pre/power combo – the 8550 segment of its name implies 85 per cent of the sound quality for 50 per cent of the price, fact fans. It also has double the power output and is rated at 200-watts/8ohms, no less.

Unlike the expensive contactless approach adopted by the manufacturer's separate NHB-18NS preamp, this DarTZeel adopts microprocessor control, which actually makes it much more flexible. In this day and age, the mere mention of the word flexible suggests a quick trip onto the web. Here, a new owner has to register and activate his amplifier after downloading a zip file to a supplied USB stick. Programmability is its middle name, backed by no fewer than 50 display pages.

Happily, entering into an emotional relationship with this amplifier is largely optional and the ergonomics that control the basic functions are actually quite delightful. Some of the microprocessor functions might operate the host of preamplifier control features, but others have the much more serious task of maintaining stable operation throughout the power amplifier's exceedingly simple signal path.

There are no fewer than nine inputs included, with four being regular line-type phono pairs.

The others are a mixture: two phono pairs for the optional MM and MC phono cartridge cards (£650 and £1,000, respectively); one balanced XLR; and two special Zeel BNC 50-ohm impedance sockets.

Powered up, the CTH-8550 is simply a delight to use, either hands-on or via its attractively designed and solidly built metal handset. The pleasure control – that's volume control to you and I – is operationally sublime from either control surface. It adopts a sensible 'top-down' approach that doesn't cramp the lower reaches of the dynamic range and covers 107.5dB in tiny 0.5dB steps. The amp can get quite warm in use. The spec claims just 40 watts of power

dissipation at idle, but as much as 1 kW at full power. Make sure you don't leave your beloved LP sleeves on it.

SOUND QUALITY

Given the enthusiastic response that DarTZeel's NHB combo generated three years ago, it was hardly surprising to find that the CTH-8550 sounds quite wonderful. It's difficult to rely on a three-year-old sonic memory, but our impression is that the new integrated amp isn't quite as 'fast' as the separate combo, but seems able to equal it in every other respect. DarTZeel claims it will continue to 'speed up' over the first two or three months of use. That may well be true and we've no knowledge of how many hours our demonstrator sample had under its belt.

This may not be the fastest amplifier around, but it's certainly no lazybones, either. Checked using Rehdeko RK175 speakers (also favoured by DarTZeel and unquestionably amongst the fastest, most phase-coherent and amplifier-critical speakers ever made), it

delivers a killer combination of speed, timing and top-end sweetness that few match.

What's more, it also supplies brilliant stereo imaging. Wonderful depth perspectives and fine focus is clearly audible when using the Vivid

Audio Giya speakers to enjoy a live Promenade concert of Bruckner's *Third Symphony*. The amplifier's low background noise and wide dynamic range helps the Royal Albert Hall's acoustic come through very convincingly. Music sounds

delicate and satisfyingly three-dimensional.

Our sample came fitted with circuitry to match a low output moving-coil cartridge, proving sweet and satisfactory. Vinyl surface noise also seems very well-controlled. The outstanding sweetness makes one wonder whether the top end of this amplifier might in fact

be slightly rolled off. But, there's

loads of delicate detail here, so this suggestion was comprehensively refuted by connecting up the PMC IB2i speakers – genuine monitors that tend to emphasise the frequency extremes.

With speakers like the Giyas, the CTH-8550 sounds fantastic. This wonderful amplifier is less costly and more practical than its bigger brethren and delivers an exceptionally clean, honest and musically engrossing experience in its own right. Reviewing it was both a privilege and a pleasure. ■■

Paul Messenger

"This amp delivers a killer combination of speed and top-end sweetness that few can match"

