

## ● REVIEW PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

# Devialet 170

Innovative amplifier does things its own way and is a highly convincing listen

Some will have you believe that there's nothing new in hi-fi. The basic design of everything from amplifiers to loudspeakers was laid down decades ago, they suggest, and all that's happened since is a range of variations on those ancient themes. Indeed, some would have you believe that all competently designed amplifiers sound more or less the same and that the only differences are in power ratings and facilities. It's true that, slight differences aside – in areas such as the design of the input switching and volume control, the provision or otherwise of tone controls and the like, and the technology used in the power amplifier section – most amplifiers follow the common pattern of an analogue preamplifier control section ahead of a power amplifier 'engine room'. In recent times we have seen amplifiers offering a digital input section, by placing digital-to-analogue conversion in the preamp section, but little else has changed. Unless, that is, you consider the products of French company Devialet, which not only look entirely different from most amplifiers on the market but work completely differently too.

The first patents for what would become the Devialet amplifier topology were filed in 2004, with former telecommunications research lab director Pierre-Emmanuel Calmel laying out the groundwork of his Analogue Digital Hybrid amplifier design, and three years later the company was founded, launching its first product, the D-Premier, in 2009. Now, with the company's second-generation amplifiers – the 110, 170 and 240 – having been launched last year, Devialet is on sale in 45 countries,

has its HQ in Paris and production facility in Normandy, and a 25-strong research team developing new products and expanding the capabilities of the existing ones.

In a section of its website not entirely modestly entitled 'Devialet: an epic story', the company says that 'At Devialet, that which exists today and that which is yet to be is ruled by two beliefs: that knowledge is meant to be shared, and that music is the most important medium for cultivating human emotion. These two tenets are Devialet's lifeblood, and they shine through in every single product the company delivers. One day, everyone will own a Devialet.' Well, maybe not just yet: the current range starts at £4490, with the 170 amplifier we have here at £6390, or £7390 with the optional Devialet AIR (Asynchronous Intelligent Route) add-on, which gives streaming capability over Wi-Fi or Ethernet for content at up to 24-bit/192kHz. That's still well up into high-end territory but it is less expensive than the original D-Premier, and that price gets you a uniquely configurable amplifier, not to mention one that's a real looker.

Housed in the slimline casework – which stands just 4cm tall by a little over 38cm square, is milled from a single block of aluminium and weighs a relatively featherweight 5.35kg – is a 170W-per-channel amplifier you can set up using a home computer and an SD memory card, which has up to four electrical digital inputs, two optical digital and asynchronous USB input, and which can be configured to have a high-quality phono stage plus an extra line-in, a mono subwoofer output or an analogue stereo output, and also allow adjustment



### DEVIALET 170

**Type** Stereo integrated amplifier

**Price** £6390, or £7390 with Devialet AIR streaming

**Power output** 170W per channel

**Inputs/outputs** Configurable using computer and SD card, to include up to four electrical digital inputs, two optical digital, two line-in with fixed 'bypass' setting, phono with adjustable loading, line-out, subwoofer out, active crossover options, etc

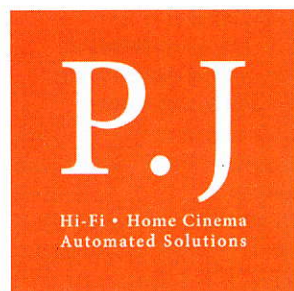
**Other connections** SD card for configuration/music playback, Ethernet/Wi-Fi for control and music streaming, USB-B for computer connection, 12 trigger

**Remote control** via wireless controller supplied or using iOS/Android app

**Dimensions** (WxHxD) 38.3x4x38.3cm  
[devialet.com](http://devialet.com), [absolutesounds.com](http://absolutesounds.com)

of the filtering on those outputs. The AIR add-on allows streaming from Macs and PCs, and will also work with various media players on those computers, internet radio and streaming services such as Spotify and Qobuz. Meanwhile, the same SD card slot used for transferring programming information from a computer can also be used to play music stored on the memory devices – handy, as there's no conventional Type A USB socket to which 'sticks' can be connected. So far there's no direct

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## SUGGESTED PARTNERS

The Devialet is a highly accomplished amplifier. Here's a suggested system to get the best from it...

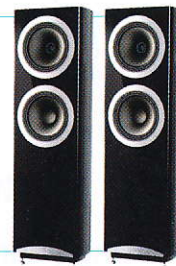
### APPLE IMAC

A computer is all you need to deliver music to the Devialet 170, via USB, Ethernet or Wi-Fi. As a complete all-in-one system, the iMac series is the perfect partner.



### TANNOY DEFINITION DC10T

A big, impressive speaker system with a rich, powerful sound will make the most of the Devialet: the floorstanding Tannoy Definition DC10T should be just the ticket.



streaming from NAS devices but a look at the specification of the amplifier would suggest that there's sufficient processing power going spare to allow such a feature to be added at some stage, should the company wish to do so. Devialet is constantly upgrading the software of these products to add functionality and enhance performance.

The 170, like the other Devialet amps, is controlled by a matching radio-frequency remote, also made from solid aluminium and allowing a range of customisation, or can be driven using a free app on iOS or Android smartphones or tablets. It has a built-in headphone amplifier and is really different in just about every way from a conventional stereo amplifier – in fact the only common references are the input sockets and the speaker outputs. Everything else needs something of a readjustment of thinking on the part of the user. The amplifier itself uses a combination of Class A analogue working and Class D digital, along with a switch-mode power supply and extensive digital signal processing – indeed, there's more DSP capability than is currently required within the 170, ready for future developments including digital filtering, room correction and crossovers – but the main change from the original D-Premier amplifier is the loss of that product's HDMI inputs in favour of the new models' USB and Ethernet input, Devialet having decided that HDMI isn't the high-end audio future it was once thought to be.

There are hours of harmless entertainment to be had playing with the configurator, which can be used in 'wizard' or 'advanced' modes: it's worth a look at [en.devialet.com/configurator/advanced](http://en.devialet.com/configurator/advanced) just to get a taste of how flexible this amplifier is and in what detail you can tailor it to your own needs. However, the real fun starts when you begin to listen to the 170.

## PERFORMANCE

From the off, the Devialet has a seemingly relaxed presentation of music, free from any sense of the amplifier working hard to deliver the music. That's perhaps as it should be with 170W per channel available and sufficient headroom to handle the dynamics of even the most demanding music – but then quite a lot of amplifiers can do the easy-going thing, and most of

them don't cost anything like £7000. What the 170 brings – apart, of course, from that remarkable flexibility – is a sense of direct connection with the music being played. I connected to my Naim NDS network music player via both analogue and digital interconnects, and also used the AV bypass option to insert it into my usual Blu-ray/TV viewing system, as well as spending some time playing records on my Rega turntable, and in each case the amplifier delivered that same honest and entirely involving listen.

The big, expansive sound of Hyperion's recent set of Malcolm Williamson's piano concertos (5/14) is handled beautifully by the Devialet, opening up the interplay between soloist Piers Lane and the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra under Howard Shelley. By turns sweeping and dramatic and then playful and intensely rhythmic, this set has a delicious pace and impetus, fully realised with the 170 in the driving seat. And yet this is all achieved without sacrificing any of that warmth and scale the French amplifier does so well, from the weight it brings to the bass to the finest nuance in the treble. This combination of scale and detail is also heard to good effect in the LSO/Colin Davis recording of Sibelius's Second Symphony (6/07), recently released by Bowers & Wilkins as part of its Society of Sound. The size and power of the orchestra are thrilling but so is the lightness of touch with which the music is handled in the opening movement, the Devialet pulling off the fine trick of delivering full weight without slowness, and speed without any sense of thinness or lack of bass extension.

Agreed, to some ears the 170 might sound just a shade too revealing, and almost clinical with some lighter-sounding source and speaker combinations – it's some way from the lush and rich sound preferred by some listeners. However, when it comes to delivering maximum information from source to speakers, the ability to drive those speakers in a convincing fashion and, above all, sounding musical and entirely enjoyable, this amplifier has much to commend it. Kudos, then, to Devialet for taking the leap and thinking differently about the design of hi-fi amplifiers: the result is as stylish as it's unorthodox and deserves a long, careful audition to hear just what it can bring to your system. **G**

## DESIGN NOTES

### Pierre-Emmanuel Calmel

Co-founder and designer, Devialet

**On the family concert-listening ritual, Pink Floyd at Versailles and how HD music is the future**



Responsible for what became Devialet's Analogue Digital Hybrid technology, Pierre-Emmanuel Calmel founded the company in 2007 after a career in telecoms research. Today the company has more than 50 employees, including 35 engineers in R&D.

He says his earliest musical experiences involved the family gathering around the radiogram to listen to Sunday evening concerts on France Musique – 'It was a kind of solemn moment, like a ritual' – while his most memorable musical encounter involved Pink Floyd live at the Chateau de Versailles in the summer of his graduation year, 1988. 'The set, the music, the atmosphere...everything was magic! I felt the unmistakable sensation of live music for the first time,' he says.

'When designing and testing products, I listen to jazz, classical, percussive styles and lots more. Personal favourites include *Le temps passé* by Michel Jonasz, and great piano recordings – especially Chopin performed by Claudio Arrau.'

Camel is confident high-resolution music has a bright future. 'With the growing number of music streaming services that solve storage issues and 4G networks that allow greater speed, we are on the path to be able to listen to HD music via our iPhones very soon. Besides, when you hear the difference between MP3s and music ripped bit-for-bit from CD – the latter is clearly better – you are curious to listen to the difference between the CD format and HD music.'