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PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 540

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D'Agostino's ace Pendulum integrated amplifier

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► DETAILS

PRODUCT
D'Agostino Pendulum
ORIGIN
USA
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
15.9kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 118 x 356mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power: 2x 70W (8ohm)
• Analogue inputs: 3x balanced XLR; 1x unbalanced RCA
• Digital inputs: 1x each optical; RJ45 Ethernet; Wi-Fi; HDMI with eARC
DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds
WEBSITE
dandagostino.com
absolutesounds.com

King of swing

The first 'entry-level' D'Agostino amp was never going to be a budget offering, but the Pendulum integrated still nudges the dial in the direction of 'affordable'. Start the clock...

Just as the definition of the word 'luxury' means anything more than you need, so it goes that 'expensive' means anything more than you're prepared or able to spend, and it's quite difficult to argue that splashing out £18,000 for a stereo amplifier isn't chicken feed to most of us, even in a world where some amplifiers can cost as much as 30 times that amount.

However, in today's *Exotica* test we're in the domain of the Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems range and the in the context of today's high-end hi-fi market, its Pendulum integrated amplifier is something of a bargain. Relatively speaking, of course... If you have always coveted one of Dan D'Agostino's designs, possibly going back to the early days of Krell, but don't have the disposable reddsies to hand, or if they are only slightly out of your reach, the Pendulum might just be the amp to change everything.

Available in line-level-only form at the aforementioned £18,000, or the £22,000 'fully loaded' version on test here, you will acquire an integrated amp of serious, usable power matched to total sophistication when

it comes to the modern expectations of a remote control system, integration with home automation and streaming sources, an app for overall control and access to other facilities, etc. In fact, the only thing it won't do is clean up after you.

In basic form, minus the optional DAC (£2,850) and fixed (60dB) gain MM/MC phono (£1,150) modules, the Pendulum offers a minimalist front panel which works together

The Pendulum is an exercise in economy even at this elevated price point

with both a stylish Bluetooth remote and an app that operates via any Apple iOS device. Two rotaries and the central display – that's it. Source selection and menu are accessed through the left knob, the right deals with level and mute, while plonked stylishly between is an LCD replica of the familiar Breguet-inspired meter found on other D'Agostino products.

The 'needle' actually follows the actions of the rotary volume control and the rotary ring on the remote,

dropping straight down to zero when mute is used, while also indicating which input has been selected. The fancy, bi-directional remote has its own on/off switch and is recharged via a handy USB-C port.

Walk the line

Under its substantial lacquered alloy hood, the Pendulum leverages the same low-noise J-FET line stage premiered in the Momentum C2 and HD preamplifiers with the current evolution of designer Dan D'Agostino's high-current complementary power amp, here with three big bipolar transistors (per side) bolted to heatsinking on the bottom of the case. The metalwork is substantial but a fair proportion of the amplifier's not insignificant 15.9kg bulk is taken up by the large toroidal mains transformer feeding the PSU.

Aside from one set of RCA phonos, the rear panel contains three pairs of XLR inputs and a pair of XLR preamp outputs. All are line-level unless the phono module is installed, in which case that particular input reverts to MM/MC only. The DIP switches for setting up moving-coil cartridges at 1k, 500, 250, 100, 50ohm and 47kohm for moving-magnets, can be

found under a small hatch on the Pendulum's lid. As this is the case, we have no RCA line input for our legacy products that lack balanced XLR outputs. Happily, this is no real issue as we are able to run four different single-ended-only sources including a CD player, open-reel tape deck and

The photos do not effectively tell you just how bijou the Pendulum really is

two phono amps by using phono-to-XLR adapters (female RCA sockets to male XLRs) found online for under a tenner a pair. No mismatches, no nasties – just the blissful use of extant sources.

Which rather neatly brings us to the digital module, based around the low-power consumption version of ESS's latest ES9039 DAC. This adds one input each of optical, HDMI

eARC and wired (RJ45) and wireless Ethernet. It's worth mentioning here that the Pendulum comes with antenna for both Bluetooth (for the remote) and Wi-Fi connectivity. Employing these is essential to enjoy all that the amplifier can offer, both digital input features and streaming subscriptions, but we spend 90 percent of our time using it as a line-level, old-school unit save for enjoying that outrageous BT remote.

All this said, one must not forget that, however brilliant the Pendulum might turn out to be, it is an exercise in economy even if at an admittedly elevated price point. There are no compromises on parts quality or performance, because this amplifier feels expensive in every way. Instead, it is all about presenting the consumer with a means of entry into the 'real high-end' via D'Agostino hardware.

As for the various reasons for buying the internal modules versus using a legacy DAC and/or phono stage, or purchasing new outboard units, it's very likely that superior, more flexible

outboard converters and phono preamps can be had for the same money as these options, though this must be weighed against the convenience of a one-box solution. Having full control over the DAC, as well as volume, etc. thanks to the app, and dispensing with two extra mains leads and interconnects is hard to argue with if you're an audiophile looking for a simpler life...

Sound quality

Although the following focuses on using the Pendulum as a balanced line-in integrated amp, we do also have a go with both modules, running both moving-coil and magnet cartridges for the phono section. Playing *Superstition* from Stevie Wonder's *The Definitive Collection* we are suitably impressed – having previously listened to it through the Nagra HD Phono (HFC 529, a snip at just £68,000) – with the naturalness of the vocals, contrasting with whatever synth or keyboard makes all that glorious twanging. The





opening percussion is something to behold: crisp, fat, open and hyper-funky. Make no mistake, sonically the phono module is worth £1,150, but outboard rivals for the same price or less will undoubtedly offer more options when it comes to gain.

Moving to the digital board and the app, there's always the obvious choice of iPhone, but an iPad Mini proves the ideal option given the choice of squinting at a phone screen or schlepping a full-sized iPad around the listening room. When you see the main control screen, with HDMI, polarity inversion, 'Dark Mode' to disable the light show, headphone select and more, you'll fully appreciate the larger display.

With beautifully clear graphics and almost self-explanatory operations, the app takes over control of all the major streaming suppliers including Spotify, Qobuz and Tidal as well as any music stored elsewhere on your network. The app handles sleeve art, track info and more.

Having long ago loaded the iPad with the complete Beatles catalogue from the 'metal' Apple USB containing the 2009 remasters (you can find it online for under £300, so make sure you avoid the scalpers asking a grand), we are delighted to discover that it sounds virtually indistinguishable from playing it through a USB-equipped outboard CD/DAC, not least Ringo's

The Bluetooth remote features an LCD replica of the familiar Breguet-inspired meter found on D'Agostino kit

magnificent drumming at the end of *Abbey Road*. It reveals all the weight we were hoping to hear, with superb attack. Another welcome discovery is the warmth in the vocals, achieving an almost valve-like nature. It proves

The stereo spread is wall-to-wall, 'majestic' doesn't begin to cover it

to be a stand-out feature of *Hey Jude* from *Past Masters* and simultaneously reveals one of the Pendulum's most endearing skill sets, that of recreating a 3D soundstage with aplomb. ▶



If you're torn between the modules, as opposed to buying both, the DAC will give you more enjoyment from the Pendulum, and – remembering this is about value – it's the best way to get your money's worth. Indeed, so integral is the app to the full Pendulum experience – assuming the user enjoys digital sources and not just vinyl or tape – that we suspect the majority of buyers will opt for it.

That said, feeding a £14,000 transport/DAC combination via XLR is the first thing to show us just how special this integrated amplifier is. It reminds us of the sheer scale of its titanic sibling, the Relentless 800.

The Pendulum, weighing in at a mere 15.9kg and demanding only 432 x 118 x 356mm (WxHxD) of shelf space, is like a monster truck masquerading as a golf cart. The photos don't tell you just how bijou

A 575VA toroid fronts a big power supply unit (far left) for the EPC-320 phono card (bottom right), ES9039Q2M-based DAC card (bottom left) and power amp (on the heatsinks)

it really is, hardly an adjective ever applied to a D'Agostino design.

It's not often we find ourselves bingeing on music, but the Pendulum inspires us to listen to the entire *Mike Nesmith Songs* 12 CD boxset without interruption. The delicate textures of Red Rhodes' pedal steel and Nesmith's plaintive vocals on *Lady Love* from *And The Hits Just Keep On Comin'* are handled with the same grasp and finesse that the Pendulum musters at the other extreme, with the title track of Anthony Gomes' raw, raucous *Praise The Loud*.

Gomes is all scorching blues and rock and roll in the vein of Stevie Ray Vaughan, abusing his Gibson Flying V guitar to within an inch of its life. On top of that, he has the sort of raspy vocals that defy the use of the term 'midband clarity'. No, this is all about textures, which have nothing to do

with grace. It is thus that we learn that the Pendulum has guts to spare, cranking it through our DeVore O/93 floorstanders to levels our neighbours would prefer we avoid. Gomes would be proud, there's no break up, no compression, just a guitar onslaught below a voice somewhere between Steve Marriott and Rod Stewart.

Another revelation to attribute to the Pendulum is the detail it is able to extract from Shirley Bassey's *Goldfinger* from *Dame Shirley Bassey – The Singles*, which comes as a surprise despite having heard it countless times before. The stereo spread is wall-to-wall, the lower register slam as impressive as Bassey's soaring vocals. 'Majestic' doesn't begin to cover it.

So, if you've been dreaming about owning one of Dan D'Agostino's products since the days of Krell, and can stretch to your budget to £18,000, this is the entry-level integrated amp you've been waiting

The Pendulum is like a monster truck masquerading as a golf cart

for. It's like the Swiss army knife of amplifiers: unbelievably affordable and versatile. So don't resist. Instead, just relent!

Conclusion

After experiencing the Relentless 800 (HFC 522, £118,000 each), we wondered what other miracles D'Agostino had up its sleeve. Who knew it could switch to the other end of the price spectrum to deliver one of the most important high-end amps of the decade? This baby re-opens the debate of integrations versus pre and power amps and begs us to enforce the Law of Diminishing Returns. The Pendulum has swung! ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Clarity; power; everything
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Nothing at the price
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: It may still be pricey, but within the range this is a steal
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL

