

Copland CSA-150 Hybrid Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

Copland is one of those audio companies that never shouts about its products. Their marketing is, in the UK at least, decidedly low-key. As a result, Copland's products might even slip below the radar of most audio enthusiasts. Thinking about it and considering the amount of amplifiers that have passed through my hands over the years, I cannot recall ever having heard one let alone having one at home for any sort of listening but I had always thought of them as tube amplifier builders. But I was wrong, as the CSA-150 leads the line of three new models that are hybrid designs. These use a tube input stage and solid state MOSFET power sections with the obvious intent of utilising the best of both technologies to achieve a specific sonic balance. When implemented successfully this can be interesting audio chemistry.

I have obviously heard other hybrid designs over the years, some more rewarding than others. They are often designs that bring mixed musical blessings. The tonal richness and ease of the tubes alongside the drive, grip and transient power of solid-state is a difficult balance to master. All of my previous experiences have left me with the conclusion that, sitting the amplifier

on a performance peak and extracting the best from both technologies often results in a design that, while generally sounding sweet, often come across as a bit soft and certainly a touch conflicted where tempo and drive are concerned. A classic curate's egg. But the Copland is an object lesson in how it should be done.

Copland amplifiers are designed and built in Denmark. The company was founded some 30 years ago by designer Ole Møller. The CSA-150 is the most powerful of the three amplifiers in the CSA series, the CSA-70 and the CSA-100 being the others. Power output seems to be the most obvious difference between them. The 150 certainly has features aplenty and truly is a one-stop ▶



“In short, the Copland starts singing from the opening bars of music and has a certain clarity of purpose.”



▶ integrated as it comes with an excellent onboard quad mono DAC with good connectivity and even the option of a fitted Bluetooth aptX module which I found very useful. There is also an onboard RIAA phono stage configured for MM cartridges and an impressive DAC. This is based on a Sabre ES 9018 Reference module from ESS Technology. It will deal with PCM and DSD, up to 128, and has several digital inputs. A small front panel window might have been handy here to show the resolution. There is however a small LED that glows whenever a DSD encoded signal is detected. Connectivity to the DAC is made through a couple of optical Toslinks, an S/PDIF or there is a USB.

The front panel design is excellent and very clean with an intuitive layout. A rotary input selector guides you through the three RCA or single balanced XLR line inputs while selecting the digital input option brings into play the small sub-source selector that gives access to the rear inputs. The USB has an effective power supply of its own and can work at 32-bit with a frequency of 384 kHz. Mac OS or Linux computers will work without drivers and for Windows users Copland provide links for a suitable driver, with instructions, in the accompanying handbook.

There is also a headphone socket, a decent remote control and you can also separate the pre and power sections should you want to. Push the power button and the amplifier goes through a 30-second boot up procedure and then you are ready with 145 watts per channel (8 ohms) at your disposal. I wondered how, with the double triode gain stage (6922) the Copland would behave so soon after switch-on but I needn't have worried. From cold the amplifier lets you know its character and although it certainly improves as

the hours pass, it is a rather gentle upward curve and gives the music slightly better top to bottom coherence perhaps rather than offering anything more drastic. In short, the Copland starts singing from the opening bars of music and has a certain clarity of musical purpose that, against the truly silent backgrounds it always produces, makes listening a relaxed pleasure. It won't take long before you pick up on the space and general dimension of the sound that the Copland always seems to produce.

Driving my Wilson Duette 2 speakers the CSA-150, like other quality integrated amplifiers before it, found willing partners in musical expression. Such an expensive speaker with a high performance plateau would seldom be used with the Copland but it is a useful microscope into its performance. The feeling of space and the lack of any sort of grain or edge was welcome in that it lends a feeling of confidence in the system. It treads the line between being incisive, fast and articulate and expansive subtlety and nuance ▶

“The pure dimension this amplifier operates within is just one of the things that make it different.”

► extremely well. During one of my lengthy listening sessions where I was concentrating on listening to trios I stumbled across *Garden Of Expression* by Joe Lovano, a classic three piece of sax, drums and piano. This is a classic ECM recording through and through. Lots of space, inky black backgrounds and an uber-clean production approach allowing the musicians the space and resolution to move beyond the studio and into your listening room. These elements played right into what the Copland does so well. The playing is often very minimal, the melodies stripped of embellishment and a sense of atmosphere and an ethereal mood that few producers can summon. Manfred Eicher is a master of the genre and has been producing music flavoured like this for decades now. Within the framework of what seems like such a simple acoustic Eicher’s gift is that he creates space and within that is a placement and dimension that reveals unstated rhythms and moments of rare interplay that are most definitely not built around drum patterns. The players do not dance to the tempo of the bass drum but rather find their space and lean off each other. The superbly recorded cymbals seem almost part of the reverberation as they lay down glistening metallic textures and micro crescendos that the Copland floats across the room. What is so impressive is the way the CSA-150 finds form and shape in the music. Yes, the band is free but not quite freeform in any avant-garde kind of way. The piano always shapes the harmonic direction and the Copland has the control and the sense of width and depth to bring the atmosphere to you and fill the room with black space.

I love the way that the Copland sounds so clear, open and dynamically free. There’s no sense of over-damped electronics here.

The rhythms flow with clarity and purpose. Listen to the quite amazing Andy McKee playing ‘When She Cries’ [*Common Ground*, Razor & Tie EP] to hear what I mean. I’ve owned an ex-McKee Michael Greenfield guitar and know that it is so, so sensitive that it can run away with you if you don’t have the chops to simply keep the thing under control. Tonally its possibilities seem close to miraculous. It’s the Formula 1 car of the custom acoustic guitar world and is, at the same time, among the most rewarding and dispiriting of any instrument I have ever played. I couldn’t ever really get the saddle on, let alone ride it. The sheer intensity and intricacies unfolding within the dynamic themes he can conjure on a solo steel-string guitar and the polyrhythms he creates can have many amplifiers wiping their foreheads while tripping over themselves to get it all out, but not here. Set within a super-focussed acoustic, he just lets rip and the notes are flying everywhere. There are bass lines, percussive elements and amazing melodies, all interweaving with machine-gun complexity. I’ve seldom heard this balance between control and free-flowing musical expression so eloquently expressed and with such comparative ease too. The Copland simply loves these challenges and somehow finds both the space and the temperament to bring them to a completely understandable whole. It’s that sense of dynamics within a broad space again. The pure dimension this amplifier operates within is just one of the things that make it different.

It also has an uncanny way with vocals, virtually any vocal too. It unsticks them from the backing track and projects them forward into a rock solid central image with real natural clarity and this is one of its most attractive attributes. If you like a sense of close intimacy from your system and through that, perhaps even a sense of involvement then give the Copland CSA series some consideration. Gillian Welch’s *Boots No 2: The Lost Songs Vol.1* {Arcony}, the MQA version streamed through Tidal Masters has an entrancing sense of calm and melody about it. The Copland puts it all together with considerable charm by capturing the atmosphere of the songs and the beautiful contrasts. Her voice is liquid and colourful and free of any sense of processing. Just a straight microphone technique aimed at giving her interpretation of the short songs a full colour rendition. The Copland is in its element here. Full of body and space, the acoustic relies on subtle contrasts as Gillian’s voice has that beautiful but essential loneliness and this is one of the things that defines the CSA-150. The way the vocal touches you emotionally is so typical of this amplifier.

But, don’t get the impression that the Copland can’t kick its generous power through the speaker drivers. If you survive on a diet of heavy metal then perhaps it might not be your first choice but it can swing a transient with considerable force and it can get down and dirty too. It’s just that it does this with a certain degree of tonal finesse and shading. The new album by Steve Lukather, (ex-Toto and just about everyone else for the past decades), *I Found The Sun Again* [Mascot] shows that that tube isn’t just there for show. Pulsing ►

“Great job by the CSA-150 here as it peels back the layers to reveal another side of its nature.”



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier with DAC and phono stage

Power: 2 × 150 watts into 8 ohms

Analog Inputs: 1 × balanced (XLR),
3 × unbalanced (RCA)

Digital Inputs: 1 × coaxial S/PDIF,
2 × optical S/PDIF, 1 × USB, 1 × aptX
HD Bluetooth (optional)

Line Output: 1 × unbalanced (RCA),
1 × pre-out unbalanced variable
(RCA)

Phono Input Impedance: 47K ohms (MM)

Frequency Response: 10 Hz- 150 kHz -3dB

Headphone Amp Gain: 22 dB @
100 ohm load impedance

Vacuum Tubes: 1 × 6922

Remote: Yes

Dimensions: 164 × 435 × 370mm (H×W×D)

Shipping Weight: 15 Kg

Finishes Available: Silver or Black

Price: £4,988

Bluetooth Module: £198

Manufacturer: Copland

URL: copland.dk

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

URL: absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)20 8971 3909

► bass, charging drums and high tempos are all handled well, albeit with a nod of politeness, with surprising transient delivery and recovery. A quick word for Steve’s take on the old Robin Trower classic ‘Bridge Of Sighs’ here too. A swirling wall of sound with a Hammond organ in there to congeal the mix alongside fat bass and busy drums. Lukather plays a real dirty killer solo too, if that’s your kind of thing. It is mine. Great job by the CSA-150 here as it peels back the layers to reveal another side to its nature.

So, what we have here is a musically focussed and serious integrated amplifier, with a difference. That difference being its tonal subtlety and the interesting way it conjures up sonic landscapes and paints pictures between your speakers. The tube input stage brings a sense of colour and added variation for sure but it doesn’t intrude on the solid-state output devices ability to really drive and deliver transients. I’d say that the recipe is just interestingly balanced, helped in no small way by the pure speed of the solid state and the considerable wallop and weight that it packs. But, perhaps its real strength is the tonal contrasts and harmonic subtleties it constantly surprises you with. The DAC too is very good and enhances the amplifier’s attraction enormously and I found the HD Bluetooth module the review sample came fitted with, to be a lot better than I expected and although I never tried the phono stage, I imagine that it is going to be up to scratch. I haven’t heard the whole CSA range but I would encourage you to seek it out for a listen if you are in the market for a do-it-all integrated amplifier. Few people complain about having too much power but perhaps you might not need the considerable output of the 150 and the CSA-70 starts at a very reasonable price of under £3k. The

Copland amps are a bit different for sure but, from what I’ve heard, they are always on the side of the music and that’s not a bad place to be. This is a very strong segment of the market with some notable performers but I think that if you seek it out, the Copland, is very well worth a serious audition. +