

Constellation Audio Inspiration Integrated 1.0 amplifier

by Chris Thomas



The best audio equipment always has its say. It grabs hold of you and shows you new musical directions, persuades you with performance and suggestion and serves up rewards throughout those journeys. It should change your mind about the music you listen to. If you are into high-quality streaming and its limitless library you will absolutely find yourself strolling avenues new and re-living music that you had completely forgotten about. Along the way you will discover gems and experience emotions from the fun to the profound.

The best audio equipment is unequivocal in its impact and the finest components that have passed through my hands over the years have all left their mark on me by setting

new standards throughout many hours of musical involvement but, curiously enough, I often associate each of them with just a single piece of music that has lived on within me. These experiences are powerful and remain as ethereal benchmarks in my audio history. I should add that these don't have to be through stellar recordings either, just music that really moved me. Because, if an audio system doesn't do that, then what use is it?

All of which leads me to describe my time with the Constellation Audio Inspiration Integrated 1.0 amplifier, because inspiration is a rare enough commodity these days so when it appears I say you must seize it. After the very first hour's listening with this device, I surfaced, full of the musical ▶



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- ▶ journey with a single thought, “This is one hell of an amplifier.” And that’s the story really, but what followed was weeks of lengthy listening sessions that included just about every mood and fancy, comprising journeys to every corner of the musical world. This is the meat of the review, but you are probably looking for a more practical description, so here goes.

The Constellation story is an interesting tale where, under the auspices of presumably well-heeled founders, a team of hugely respected and experienced audio individuals were assembled and asked to design a large range of high-end audio equipment. It has a certain fairy-tale feel about it already, doesn’t it? Perhaps the term “no compromise” was used. I imagine it was, because propping up the four ranges in the Inspiration Series is the cheapest product to emerge from the collaboration, the Inspiration Integrated 1.0, a component that has surely benefitted enormously from the sort of trickle-down advantages that often, but not always, might conceivably bring a component within financial reach. I guess this approach, with these designers, seemed like a dream team on paper but the proof is in the listening, because as many things can go wrong as right in these situations. But, given the experience and the sheer knowledge and understanding that these gents bring to the products, I was hoping that it would bring a real sense of musical intensity to my home system. Actually, it went much further than that.

The Inspiration Integrated 1.0 amplifier’s matt aluminium design is beautifully clean and sharp to behold, and that sense of minimalist efficiency is carried through its ergonomics. The overlapping side holes look great and provide essential cooling for the unit, which does run mildly warm. The twin rotary knob section, which looks rather like an old fashioned in-car audio unit jutting from the body of the case, provides access to the menu through the cunning set of buttons located beneath its protruding bottom edge and a touch-screen display. Here you can select inputs and do all you might want to, including adjusting the very nice display which is as cool as the rest of the design. The right-hand rotary knob controls the volume while the left concerns itself with balance, supported by a clear and easy graphic. Once you get used to using it, you’ll find it as intuitive as you’d hoped, aided by each input retaining a memory of the last level setting. There is also a minimal but excellent aluminium remote.

At the rear, connections are much as expected. Balanced or single-ended inputs with an additional pair of balanced outs should you want to employ it as a preamplifier. The standout features, though, are the Argento speaker binding post connections which feel great and are among the best I have found. But they are designed for spade terminals so, if you have 4mm terminations you will need to source some adaptors rather than trying to jam them in place with all the ▶

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► inelegance that engenders. Far easier to change to spades, I would have thought, and well worth it for the quality of that particular and crucial interface.

At a (conservative) 100 watts per channel into 8 ohms, doubling into 4 ohms, the Inspiration Integrated 1.0 is going to have enough power for most people. It was certainly enough for me and the Wilson Audio Duette 2 speakers it was asked to drive. Cabling was Nordost Odin 1 and the source was both CD and streaming through a dCS Vivaldi transport and DAC, and the dCS Network Bridge streamer.

I have always subscribed to the unavoidable conclusion that so much audio equipment sounds rather like it looks. Yes, I know it's an odd thought and open to all sorts of exceptions but, if the Inspiration Integrated 1.0 looks sharp, clean and ultra-cool then, believe me, that is how it sounds. Upon switch-on, the amp goes through a ritual of warming that takes only a short while before it's ready to use but my suggestion is to leave it playing for a short while before settling down in front of it. It not only sounds better as time passes, but you are likely to be there for quite a while, so bring refreshments.

What struck me initially was how bright the music sounded. Brightness can often be used as a pejorative term and though I would say that the amplifier is tonally bright, I really mean that it is bright in a musical sense. It is bright, as in alive and dynamically so, too. It reminded me, with a none too subtle prod, that so many high-end systems can be rather conservative in their balance and despite their rather clinical nature, rather dull tonally and even musically. Sit with a quality musician and listen to the sound that he conjures from his instrument and you will hear a world of high frequencies gushing forth. Even a double bass or a cello are bristling with finger noise and high-frequency components. Within those areas are the realities of the instrument and what the microphone hears. The Constellation just lets them all happen. There's no sense that the amplifier is rolled off or too polite. It sounds wide-open all of the time and it took me by surprise at first, but then I learned to trust it and there's the rub. It got me thinking of how audio systems lead us toward certain types of music, because they sound good. Consequently, we perhaps subconsciously avoid playing music that we might like but which we know doesn't really work as well. Having complete confidence in a go-anywhere system is comparatively rare.

But this set-up, with the Constellation as its beating heart, just took off musically. Play anything and it was there, telling the story in an ultra-dynamic and completely impartial way regardless of the difficulty of the music. In fact, it thrives on complexity and simply adores multi interweaving themes from intense instrumentation.

It is fast – very fast – and right through the bandwidth too. Fast to deliver and equally fast to recover. There's no sense of the music being remotely vague anywhere. No feeling that anything within is inconsequential or unresolved. It simply shows you what you are listening to in a completely straightforward fashion. Is it slightly cool or clinical? In certain systems it might just come across that way, but it is as good a partner to the Wilson speakers as just about anything I have heard and it can bring its full weight and control to bear with startling results from the manic to the contemplative.

Bill Laswell's slightly crazy remix of Carlos Santana on *Divine Light* [Epic] was utterly mesmerising. It's spacey and occasionally cosmic, a bit like Carlos himself, but the Constellation lit it up like a beacon. I've heard ultra-high-end systems flatten the perspectives and bleach the colours of this album, but not here. The Constellation drifts the waves of mysticism across the room from the opening track and then the bass starts. It always takes me a bit by surprise but it's hard not to be captivated by the superb mix and the ambient elements that Laswell is a master of as the piece takes shape. The soundstage, so unfathomably dense through lesser amplifiers are opened up gloriously. Bill creates a delicate world that is so very light that he literally paints a rainbow picture in sound. Weird? Yes, definitely, but bring it on and let it take you with it. That creamy, liquid midband combined with the full range of mixing tricks and effects thrust a mood into the room and your head that is memorable as the Constellation resolves the micro musical nuance that lies within the detail and shows you the core of the piece, at the same time as sounding beautiful, fully resolved and totally together

If it excels at the big and complex, then it is equally impressive on the seemingly simple. 'Wayfaring Stranger', the classic American folk tune from *Grateful Dawg* [Acoustic Disc] by David Grisman and the late Gerry Garcia is a simply arranged live recording with a couple of gloriously out of tune vocals that is so compelling because of its sheer ►

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► reality and straightforward instrumentation. It could hardly be more different from Bill Laswell's *Divine Light* but it is no less compelling. The Constellation shows what a charmingly intimate amplifier it can be. It even makes a banjo sound good and that will do for me. The song is from Grateful Dawg which is not an offering that has undergone much in the way of studio mastery or post-production enhancement, I would think. But it's the straight-up charm and, of course, the quality of the playing from the guys and their bluegrass sidekicks which make it so real and so interesting. The Inspiration Integrated 1.0 just lets it all through. Atmosphere all the way but very different indeed from another largely acoustic album that has charmed me. Julian Lage is, I believe, one of the finest guitarists on the planet at the moment, electric or acoustic, and I am particularly fond of his collaborations with Chris Eldridge. On *Avalon* from 2014 [Modern Lore] they use a simply recorded, dry acoustic space to demonstrate some stellar musicianship and show just how expressive, versatile and real this classic format can be. The Constellation showcases the wealth of tonal shading, stunning clarity and texture that these two embellish through thicker, wound strings to breathe life and touch-ability to the music. The speed and eloquent note control plays right into the amplifier's considerable strengths and illustrates exactly how to tell a story through an instrument. I've never heard it sound better.

Bass player, singer and writer extraordinaire Meshell Ndegeocello and her music often present severe demands for any audio system to deal with but on *Ventriloquism*, from 2018 [Naive], her approach is more considered. This is an album of other people's songs, unified through her unique production and style. If your amplifier isn't ultra-resolute at all levels and a superb translator of interwoven themes and nuanced textures then the denser tracks will perhaps leave you unmoved. But no detail remains unresolved as the Constellation never drops a stitch here and it has ever-changing presentation vistas that can grow and grow through the Wilson Audio Duets. It conjures up vast yet intimate backdrops and then pushes an instrument or voice straight out of the picture, while retaining absolute control of the superb bass that is so much a part of her musical identity. No vagueness, just focus and

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier
Power: 100 watts into 8 Ohms – 200 watts into 4 Ohms
Inputs: 2 × XLR, 2 × RCA
Outputs: 1 × XLR pre out
Freq Response: 10Hz–100kHz +/- 0.5 dB
Input Impedance: balanced 20K ohm – single ended 10k ohm
Headphone Output: Yes. Rear panel.
Dimensions: 14 × 43.2 × 48.3 (H×W×D)
Weight: 11.3 kg
Price: £17,995

Manufacturer: Constellation Audio
URL: constellationaudio.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds
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pinpoint accuracy in the most musical sense. Rhythmically the Constellation is right on the button regardless of the tempo.

This is one hell of an amp and my respect and total confidence in it has just grown and grown. It is a trusty companion for long and deep musical journeys. The fact that it operates within a totally black, noiseless background and leaves no trace of the processes involved in getting the music from source and into the room is beautiful. I can only imagine how good the higher-level Constellation Audio electronics might be.

For its performance capabilities and bearing in mind the other high-end integrated amps I have experienced over the past few years, I might even whisper (although such statements are completely relative) that it's actually a bit of a bargain. Most importantly of all and just like a great instrument, the Inspiration Integrated 1.0 comes to life in music. +