

B.audio B.dpr one preamplifier and B.amp one power amplifier

by Jason Kennedy

Only a Frenchman would have the audacity to build an amplifier with a volume control that's essentially the wrong way round, that is, the level goes up as you turn it anti-clockwise. You get some cool white LEDs to indicate that things are increasing that help, but it is nonetheless wilfully contradictory. I asked B.Audio co-founder Sébastien Bermann why and got the response "it's made intentionally to match at best with the design." In other words 'because we could', not to mention because it makes this preamplifier stand out from the crowd.

B.Audio was created by brothers Cédric and Sébastien Bermann in 2016 and is based near Strasbourg on the French/German border. Inspired by their father's enthusiasm for music and tech, electronics engineer Cédric and tuning specialist Sébastien use contemporary technology to create a small but rather attractively formed range of audio electronics which share the minimalist style seen in the two units on this page.

The B.audio range has two strata if you like with the one series being the more affordable, they appear to have different feature sets to the 'bigger' models but share the same design philosophy. The B.dpr one for instance is a preamplifier that incorporates both analogue inputs and a DAC but unlike the

more pricey B.dpr it doesn't have a regular input selector on the front panel. Short presses of the power button will take you through the inputs or alternatively there's the remote handset. Which is fine if you have the eyesight of a hawk but the text on the display makes it hard to see from more than a couple of metres. So it is at least socially distanced. That said the remote control is a beauty that reflects the build and design of the preamplifier precisely, it requires a little intuition to use but this doesn't take long and I hardly ever turned off the preamp by accident.

The input selection process takes a little familiarisation too, B.audio use the term 'coax' to indicate any input with an RCA phono connection, so both analogue and digital inputs have the same name. Fortunately there is a second line on the display that says 'analogue' or 'digital' (with format and sample rate) so you can differentiate these two. However for the lay visitor that once asked why a particular DAC had the word 'coax' (which means 'persuade' in English of course) illuminated on the front panel this might be rather baffling. There are three analogue inputs across the usual connectors and six digital inputs in S/PDIF, AES/EBU and USB varieties. The source weighting here indicates that the B.dpr one started out as the B.dac and incorporates B.audio's patented SJR or ▶



“The B.amp one is a Class AB stereo power amplifier with a 120 Watt power rating in a precisely built but fairly modestly sized case.”



► source jitter removal tech which claims to eliminate incoming jitter entirely. This is achieved by a process not dissimilar to that used in reclockers where a new clock signal is generated in order to remove the noise associated with the signal coming from a digital source. It is worth mentioning that even though the B.dpr one is based on a DAC it contains balanced mode analogue circuitry alongside a suitably symmetrical volume control, this is not a digital preamplifier in any sense of the word.

The B.amp one is a Class AB stereo power amplifier with a 120 Watt power rating in a precisely built but fairly modestly sized case for the price. It has balanced and single ended inputs and high quality cable terminals plus an on/off switch on the rear that's a bit too close to the IEC inlet to use the chunkier variety of IEC plug. There is also a front panel switch with some white LEDs to match those on the B.dpr so the rear one is perhaps vestigial. Under the hood *les freres* Bermann have introduced what they call an IOD (intelligent output drive) stage, this sits between the voltage gain stage and the output stage and acts as a kind of buffer. It does two things, delivers drive current to the output stage at high speed and buffers the feedback generated by loudspeakers, effectively allowing the voltage stage to operate independently. It's claimed that this reduces crossover distortion to the levels achieved in Class A designs without the inherent inefficiencies of that approach.

This innovation in the power amplifier is presumably behind the unusually powerful nature of the bass that this

combination produces with both analogue and digital signals. It feels like a considerably more muscular amplifier than the 120 Watt figure would suggest, in fact the last power amp I had that delivered this sort of grunt weighed too much to be lifted and cost rather more than the B.amp one. And it's not just about low end energy and resolution; this pairing delivers uncannily solid and three-dimensional imaging with all manner of material and via different loudspeakers. It seems that IOD is an acronym that amounts to more than just marketing spiel.

I really enjoyed the dynamics that the B.audio delivered too, in the first instance I hooked them up to PMC Fact.12 Signature speakers which are not the most sensitive of beasts, but the B.amp one had no trouble getting them to jump when it said so. The live energy of Frank Zappa's *Roxy and Elsewhere* [DiscReet] was palpable with this combo, and the sound so clean that it could be turned up without fear of grain or glare coming through. More up to date recordings like Matthew Halsall's *When the World Was One* [Gondwana Records] produced impressive depth of image with all the instruments presented in a solid and believable fashion. I also played some vinyl through a Tom Evans Groove SRX phono stage and enjoyed the same qualities, Peter Green passed away as I was writing this review so I played the eponymous Fleetwood Mac blues classic with the bin on the cover [Blue Horizon] by way of tribute. This managed not to sound its age somehow albeit the music is very much of the sixties blues ilk, ►

“The B.audio amplifiers live up to their billing of using modern tech to deliver exciting results.”

- ▶ ‘Long Grey Mare’ being a stand-out that managed to deliver unusually powerful bass for its age along with good three dimensionality and presence to the voice.

I initially used one of the coaxial S/PDIF inputs connected to an Auralic Aries streamer for a digital source and the B.audio pairing produced some rich and delightful sounds, often from recordings that you wouldn’t expect to have so much body to them. However using an iFi Pro iDSD DAC into an analogue input created a more convincing and relaxed result. So when it became clear that the S/PDIF input wasn’t interested in DSD I tried another tack and connected the USB output of an Innuos Zenith SE server directly to the input on the B.dpr one. This is something of a last resort for me because it’s an approach that rarely delivers engaging musical results, however this turned out to be the exception that proves the rule by sounding better than the streamer-S/PDIF connection. The result being closer to that I have been getting with the remarkable Innuos PhoenixUSB reclocker than I think I have encountered with USB before. Rhythmically tricky tracks like Nubya Garcia’s take on ‘A Shade of Jade’ [*Blue Note Reimagined*, Blue Note] are not a problem and the groove becomes as clear as any 4/4 beat. It also displays the clarity of image that more audiophile tracks deliver, suggesting that this quality is in the data of most digital recordings yet it often gets flattened somewhere along the line. I chose another slightly off kilter jazz song to follow in Joni Mitchell’s ‘Sucker Dance’ [*Mingus*, Asylum], which usually doesn’t fare well on digital, yet here it sounded real and present with voice and drum kit coming through very strongly.

By this point I had moved onto Bowers & Wilkins 802 D3 speakers which have a brighter balance than the PMCs, the combination with the B.audio delivering a more detailed result that worked better at low and medium levels than at full chat. These amps are themselves highly detailed and the combo can sound a bit forward if you turn it up. That said another track from *Mingus*, ‘Dry Cleaner from Des Moines’ really bounced with energy and finesse, if you are looking for an in-the-room result this is a pairing that delivers.

The B.audio amplifiers live up to their billing of using modern tech to deliver exciting results. The quality of imaging they deliver is beyond that achieved by most electronics and the bass is outstanding. Having a volume control that

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

B.dpr

Type: Line-stage preamplifier with fully complementary circuitry and DAC

Analogue inputs: Two pairs of single-ended inputs (via RCA jacks), one pair of balanced inputs (via XLR connectors)

Digital inputs: Four S/PDIF (two coaxial, two optical), one USB port, one AES/EBU input (via XLR connector)

Sample rate/bit length: PCM up to 384kHz/32-bit, DSD up to DSD256 via USB

Analogue outputs: One pair of balanced outputs (via XLR connectors), One pair of single-ended outputs (via RCA jacks)

Input impedance: Not specified

Output impedance: 100 Ohms (XLR), 75 Ohms (RCA)

Bandwidth: Not specified

Gain: Not specified

Distortion: Not specified

Signal to Noise Ratio: Not specified

Dimensions (HxWxD): 91 × 450 × 375mm

Weight: 6.9kg

Price: £8,990, Analogue input option £1,490

B.amp one

Type: Class AB stereo power amplifier.

Analogue inputs: One pair single ended (via RCA jacks), One pair balanced (via XLR)

Analogue outputs: One pair of speaker taps (via 5-way binding posts)

Power output: 120Wpc @ 8 Ohms

Bandwidth: >200kHz

Sensitivity: Not specified

Distortion: THD <0.0005% (1–100W, 8 Ohm)

Signal to Noise Ratio: Not specified

Dimensions (HxWxD): 112 × 450 × 385mm

Weight: 16.5kg

Price: £9,900

Manufacturer: B Audio SAS

Tel: +33 3 89 73 01 41

URL: www.b-audio.com

goes backwards doesn’t take much getting used to either, I don’t expect to come across another in the foreseeable future but then again I didn’t see the vinyl revival coming, so who knows. +