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CP-500

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CA-2200

Classé Audio Delta Series Electronics

Neil Gader

Is it possible to marry old-fashioned two-channel virtues with new-world control and functionality?

Classé Audio's new Delta Series might have been just another exceptionally pretty face if it weren't so seriously good. Bringing much of Classe's flagship Omega Series technology and topology to the table, these new Delta components offer a wider-ranging lineup, a bit less power, and a significantly lower pricetag. To traditional high-enders, however, the integration of cutting-edge command and control in Delta's two-channel gear may prove controversial. What will diehard audiophiles make of the large, touchscreen TFT displays on the CP-500 linestage and CDP-100 CD player? And what about user-friendly items (heaven forbid!) like DC triggers and bi-directional RS232 ports for software updates? These features are more a part of the modern home-theater scene than the classic high end. But audio traditionalists needn't worry—the Delta electronics will touch their musical souls.

I have one word to describe Delta styling: gorgeous. Authored by Morten Warren's Native Design group, a London-based leader in industrial design, the CP-500 preamplifier and CA-2200 power amp feature a thick, continuous, aluminum wrap-around exterior panel. The lack of sharp edges and corners imparts a sensuous but purposeful feel. So strong is the styling statement that it encourages buyers to collect the whole Delta family like a handful of baseball cards—a shrewd marketing move since the "family" also includes a CD player (see sidebar), universal player, integrated amp, A/V controller, and three- and five-channel amplifiers. Construction tolerances appear mil-spec tight.

Except for a few small hard buttons and a volume knob on the preamp, the front panel is an open field. The LCD touchscreen displays, however, facilitate a remarkable amount of user optimization. On the CP-500 preamp, inputs can be renamed, and there are language options for those motivated to practice their Italian or French. When equipped with the optional CPM (Classé phono module, \$500), gain can be adjusted and triggers programmed. There are even individual compensatory adjustments for balance and offset for each input. Display brightness can be regulated, as can a "time-out" feature, which switches off the display at any selected point from seconds to hours.

Perhaps the principal virtues of the Classé preamp/amp combination were the subtle ways it isolated delicate inner voices and resolved low-level detail.

The coolest feature is the rotary adjustment for volume, which includes responsiveness controls (at low and medium volume levels) and a "speed limit" that establishes a maximum rotary turning speed to protect against the mad rotary spinner. (There's one in every family.)

Interestingly, Dave Nauber, Executive VP of Brand Development, admits that, having evolved from the Omega, the Delta Series is actually "out in front of Omega in terms of ultimate sophistication" and that Delta circuit topology represents the direction Classé will take with new Omega designs.

The first thing I encountered when I cued up Norah Jones' "Cold, Cold Heart" [*Come Away With Me*, Blue Note]

was what *wasn't* there. How dark and still the soundstage seemed. The introductory fleshy bass vamp was closely followed by the piano, each surrounded by studio silence. The Delta gear never added a hint of noise, electronic hash, or veiling to the personality of the notes. Join to that a chocolate-like midbass, an articulate upper bass, and a treble that was almost moist with air, and I knew right away this was going to be a relaxing ride. Occasionally there was a slightly laid-back quality to the presentation that made me yearn for a tad more rhythmic energy, more propulsive "go" in the transient-attack department. But these were subtle subtractions at best.

More importantly, there was little or no vestigial solid-state stringiness or constriction in the highest frequencies. Given its warmth and presence in the midrange, there were moments when the equipment's character was reminiscent of good tubes. This may account for why the Deltas were so highly flattering to SACD source material. In my mind, the format's extended treble, harmonics, and wider dynamic potential don't cotton to amplification that is anything less than monastically quiet and distortion-free. Such distortions piggyback onto and deform the music. A flat dimensionless recording on the PCM layer of Warren Bernhardt's cover of "Somewhere" [*So Real*, DMP Records]

blooms with space and depth in SACD. On the brushed snare and piano the Delta electronics removed the treble leanness from the recording, which suddenly seemed to expand outward, growing more relaxed as the sense of harmonic complexity increased.

Perhaps the principal virtues of the Classé preamp/amp combination were the subtle ways it isolated delicate inner voices and resolved low-level detail. There were passages in Glinka's *The Lark* [RCA] where Evgeny Kissin touched piano keys as if he were playing a keyboard made of rose petals. Larger symphonic works exhibited a similar delicacy—each instrument seemed specific and defined, as if cushioned in its own space within the proscenium. It was almost as if the ease and clarity with which we visually identify instrumentalists at a concert had been accurately translated for my ear. Maybe this was

Music flowed effortlessly across the frequency band, helping to create a sensation of unbroken acoustic space.

attributable to the exceptional isolation of the circuit elements in the CP-500 and CA-2200, or to a general freedom from extraneous noise and a low, low noise floor, but I was never more aware of microdynamics spread throughout the sections on the orchestral stage.

Similarly, the Classés' dynamic strengths played to the layered complexity of choral music such as Rutter's *Requiem* [Reference Recordings]. At the beginning of each track there was profound silence—a lack of hash or gauziness that helped define venue depth and width. The full chorus could be perceived as inclined rows, the mass of voices creating a tremolo effect in the hall. During "Lux Aeterna," the mezzo-soprano seemed further upstage than I've typically experienced, yet her articulation and resonance seemed clearer

CDP-100 CD Player



The tonal character of the CDP-100 mirrors the performance of the preamp and amp. Textures are velvety smooth, with a vestigial analog-like warmth and expansive dimensionality. The player seemed to shun anything approaching digital edginess, casting a mellow, almost golden glow over orchestras. I shouldn't have been surprised. The entire Delta series was developed over an amazingly short time frame (under a year), with the same team listening to and voicing the products. Like the preamp/amp, there is a comparable fluidity across the CDP-100's frequency spectrum, imbuing it with a cultivated sound that is especially complimentary to classical music. The transport possesses exceptional low-level resolving power—again I return to the Rutter *Requiem* and "Lux Aeterna" and the ability of the CDP-100 to isolate voices, singling out one singer from another.

Paradoxically, what works for classical doesn't always get the rocket to the moon for rock and pop. The slight inclination toward distance and soundstage depth is more conducive to symphonic or choral material like the Rutter *Requiem* than studio tracks. On popular vocals, the Classé was less upfront than some other premium players I've experienced; in this regard, the Simaudio Equinox comes to mind. During "Jesus on a Greyhound," Shelby Lynne's vocal sat a couple rows back and nestled in a shallow soundstage pocket. Her voice had more treble air than I'd previously heard from this recording, but it also lacked a certain throaty darkness and dynamism that creeps into all of her singing. Elton John's original version of "Madman Across the Water" [*Tumbleweed Connection* hybrid SACD, Island] lacked some of the transient juices and rawness. It seemed overpolished and a step or so removed from the performance generated on other comparable players. Piano notes' leading edges had a mellowness that was not entirely consonant with the percussive flavor of John's playing. And low bass, while harmonically refined and exacting, was just a little light. These distinctions are subtle—some might accuse me of being hair-splittingly finicky—but in these instances I did not feel as heavily engaged with the music.

The CDP-100 is a worthy companion to the Delta electronics. Although it is not as purely transparent as the CP-500 and CA-2200, it shares the same high musicality, build quality, and ergonomic excitement that made everyone who heard it want to reach out and touch it.

Reviewer's Notebook: On occasion the CDP-100 seemed to "think about" some hybrid SACDs before playback, even needing a second prompting, but generally its software logic was glitch-free. (A minor oddity—there is no OPEN/CLOSE button on the remote control, although, in fairness, the time you save closing the drawer from your seat rather than popping it open from the player's front panel is negligible.) NG

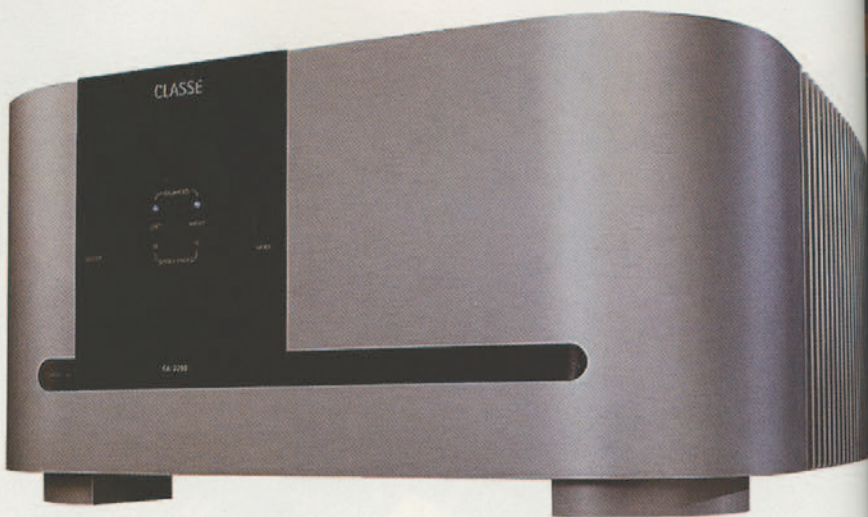
and bolder. The strongest notes were pointed but not peaky. Transients and sibilants were presented with no significant artifacts: The diction of the choir was unhyped and articulate, and "sss"

sounds had the necessary speed that permitted clarity without electronic sizzle. In the jazz field, Pierre Sprey's Mapleshade recordings are nothing if not fast—the very embodiment of the

expression "whiplash transients." Consequently, his recordings don't like edgy electronics that add emphasis where none is needed. However, the Delta gear was heavenly with a disc like *The Powers of Two* [Mapleshade], where the speed and bloom of Larry Willis' Steinway and Paul Murphy's drum kit were enthralling.

Harder to quantify was the sensation of evenness across the frequency spectrum. On good recordings, there was never an octave or fraction of an octave that seemed out of place. Music flowed effortlessly across the frequency band, helping to create an impression of unbroken acoustic space. A terrific example of this phenomenon was demonstrated with Laurel Massé's "I Am the Mountainy Singer" [*Feather and Bone*, Premonition], a song for voice and violin that begins at a good distance from the microphone and progressively grows closer as it continues. It was rewarding to hear the components resolve the subtle dynamic and acoustic changes as the ratio of direct-to-reverberant sound shifted over the course of the song, until, by the last verse, Massé reaches the microphone.

Image and soundstage presentation were also impressive strengths of the Delta Series. Instrumental voices did not meander randomly around the stage, and never sound crimped or blurred in relation to one another. The interplay between fiddle, cello, and bass on Yo-Yo Ma's *Appalachian Journey* [Sony] is complex. One moment Ma acts as the "swing" player, weaving melodies near the range of Mark O'Connor's fiddle, and then at another, he plunges into the lower-octave wheelhouse of Edgar Meyer's bass. With such frenzied overlapping it's difficult to get a reading on each player's position, but the Classé gear fixed the trio members in space to a degree I've rarely experienced. In addition, I've seldom noticed such mid- and upper-bass richness, bloom, and clarity. Accuracy in this frequency region—where it's easy to smear cello and bass voices—is one of the keys to this sense of imaging precision. Compared to my own bellwether references, with the Delta equipment the soundstage of nearly every acoustic recording seemed




to inflate, as if re-oxygenated air was being blown in.

Harmonics, too, were more complex, and I could hear deeper into recordings. Details remained in clear view even at the lowest levels. The real delight was getting a greater sense of the playfulness embedded in recorded performances, and perceiving the give-and-take between musicians during moments when they might have locked eyes in appreciation of one another's gifts.

Despite its 80-pound mass, the CA-2200 is not a stump-puller when it comes to subterranean bass. Other 200-watters can best it on raw extension, but the CA-2200's strengths lie in its finesse and ability to control bass timbre and detail with the most difficult loads and at high levels. Listen to any good recording of a bass drum being doubled by an acoustic bass, and you'll easily hear each instrument's distinct signature rather than an energy muddle of low-frequency growls.

The Classé Delta electronics are a rarefied breed of audio components with excellence to spare. They combine the audiophile's demands for superb performance with the aesthete's sense of

style and the techno-junkie's obsession for a cutting-edge fix. For the bit of the sybarite in all of us, Classé has produced a series of components to indulge in. 

SPECIFICATIONS

CA-2200 Power Amplifier

Power: 200Wpc into 8 ohms (400Wpc into 4 ohms)

Dimensions: 17.5" x 8.75" x 18.5"

Weight: 80 lbs.

CP-500 Preamplifier

Inputs: Three unbalanced, two balanced, one tape loop

Outputs: One unbalanced, one balanced

Input impedance: 100k ohms

Dimensions: 17.5" x 4.75" x 16.5"

Weight: 26 lbs.

CDP-100 CD Player

Dimensions: 17.5" x 4.75" x 16.5"

Weight: 26 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V pick-up arm; Shure V15VxMR cartridge; Simaudio Equinox, Plinius CD101S, and Sony DVP-9000ES digital playback; Magnum Dynalab MD102T tuner; Plinius 8200 Mk2 integrated amp; Placette Volume Control pre-amp; ATC SCM 35, SCM 20, and SCM 20-2, Energy Veritas, and PSB T55 and Subsonic 6i speakers; Outlaw LF1 crossover; Nordost Blue Heaven, Kimber Kable BiFocal XL, and Wireworld Equinox III cables; CPCC, Wireworld Silver Eclipse and Silver Electra, and Kimber Palladian power cords; Richard Gray line conditioners

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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Prices: CA-2200: \$5000; CP-500:

\$3500; CDP-100: \$3500