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THE RECORDING REVOLUTION

PVRS & HDTVS OVERTHROW THE VETERAN VHS



CLASSE

CDP-100 & CAP-2100

\$7500 & \$10,000 | ★★★★★

CD PLAYER & INTEGRATED AMP

FOR

sophisticated internal design architecture
 yields excellent character free sonics, good
 circuitry and an elegant user interface.

AGAINST

—Text is an obvious omission.

VERDICT

A refined system that is a natural
 marriage between audiophile sound
 quality and style-led designer packaging.

Easy on the eyes and ears

THIS CLASSE PAIRING COMBINES EYE-CATCHING STYLE WITH EAR-PLEASING STEREO SOUND BUT CAN IT COMPETE WITH THE TOP-END SYSTEMS?

Look at the photos and you may conclude that Classé has gone all image-led; the old range didn't have an image (or even much of a presence in Australia, if truth be told).

Trouble was, any two randomly chosen Classé components were likely to look as though they had come from completely different brands.

But Classé has always had a strong reputation among the cognoscenti, and with good reason; the sound was first rate. This rather parochial Quebec-based hi-fi specialist has now been fully integrated into the B&W global empire. In fact, this happened about three years ago, although the new Delta products have only started to trickle out to the shops in the last few months. The ambitious Delta series consists of an extensive and fully integrated range of stereo and multichannel/home cinema components, each of which conforms to the same radical styling and user interface groundplan. This is also a range where voicing (if that is the word) also has a real uniformity across the range, thanks to consistent design strategies and the use of common modules across the range.

Industrial design is from the Morten Warren stable, previously responsible for the B&W Nautilus 800 series. The single piece curved extrusion that constitutes the front and side panels is one of the two most distinctive features of the design. Its strength and solidity allows it to behave as a mechanical ground along with a dual layer anti-vibration base (made in conjunction with Navcom, a vibration control specialist), to which everything else is attached. The fascia extrusion is also largely

responsible for the clean-cut appearance. More distinctive still is the user interface. The two Delta series components reviewed here have an irreducible minimum of hardware controls (power/standby switching, a menu key and — for the amplifier — a rotary volume control), and the rest of the range is similarly (under)endowed. The main element of the control system, however, is a high-resolution blue touch screen thin-film transistor (TFT) display. The default display shows the main touch selectable controls (play for the CD player, input selection plus a volume readout for the amplifier). Subscreens provide access to the secondary features — a playlist for programming the CD player, for example — and the various display and setup options. It's also use-

ful for troubleshooting, via a dealer's laptop. The digital filter is a Pacific Microsonics PMD200 HDCD design, chosen partly because Classé's engineers believe it to be one of the best for all disc types, but the choice also means that HDCD encoded recordings are correctly decoded. The D/A section is driven by two differential mode Burr-Brown PCM1738 multibit delta-sigma 24-bit converters. The single-ended output is itself derived from a fully balanced source, and each of the + and - pins in the balanced XLR output are derived from four D/A conversion stages. The player is powered by 11 separate and regulated power supplies from a substantial toroidal transformer.

The CAP-2100 is Classé's entry level integrated amplifier, rated at 100 watts per channel into eight ohms. This amplifier has a balanced

"THE SOFTWARE TO DRIVE THE TFTS HAS BEEN SUPERBLY IMPLEMENTED, USING THE VARIOUS COMPONENTS TO THEIR FULLEST EXTENT."

amplifier has a balanced internal topology, and a single balanced input plus four line inputs, one a tape circuit, with a preamp output available in addition to the main output. Internally, there are three screened toroidal transformers, one each for the preamp, the power amps and the control circuits, while the main reservoir uses multiple small value caps to maintain speed and load independence without prejudicing current capability. The input stage loading is determined by J-FETs, which drive a MOSFET driver stage, and ultimately a bipolar high current output block.

Other design highlights include very short signal paths and four-layer high-grade PCBs that include a ground plane. The amplifier is DC coupled, and includes extensive protection circuitry using non-intrusive Hall effect sensors. Overheat protection is also included, and the amplifier monitors line voltage, frequency, phase and ground condition and internal temperature. An optional MM/MC phono module is promised soon.

But there is always the option of remote control, using handsets that can be stood on their heels, or external control using Crestron and similar controllers. The Delta range is specifically designed for custom install, with trigger outputs, IR inputs, system bus sockets as well as RS232 communication connections, which allow internal firmware upgrades.

The CDP-100 is a single disc upsampling CD player. The Philips VAE1250 professional transport is controlled by a master clock positioned close to the 24 bit/352.8kHz D/A conversion upsampled D/A converter stage, rather than using the clock on the transport servo board, which is subject to a lot of electrical noise. The



CLASSÉ

DP-100 & CAP-2100
PLAYER & INTEGRATED AMP

SOUND QUALITY

The Classé pair has been put to the test for an extended period – a little in excess of two months – during which they have been used in a variety of systems, mostly wired in true XLR balanced mode with Nordost Valhalla, which suits their character well, though pricing is bound to be an issue. They have been used as a front end for a number of loudspeakers from Revel, B&W (800D), Ruark, Opera (the new high-end Divina) and others. The Classé equipment played musical chairs with counterparts from the likes of Marantz, Denon and Krell (the KAV-400xi integrated amp).

From experience with other Delta range components, burn-in time is extended considerably, and the amplifier was kept under power for most of the test period.

At the end of all this comparative listening, it is very difficult to level any real criticism at the player or the amplifier, at least when judged against price. The bigger Classé power amps are significantly better than the one in the CAP-2100 when driving difficult loads like the B&W 800D, and we have heard better players, though none close to the price.

The essential qualities of the Classé components that stand out on audition are their speed and agility. They are not achieved at any cost, but in the context of a smooth, surprisingly comfortable and a very neutral overall presentation. Other than this there is... nothing much, in all the right ways. There is no hint of temperament, a complete lack of drama other than of the musical kind, even in system combinations which are known to be tricky (the B&W 800D is a good example for the reasons already given).

No brash treble, either; just the opposite in fact: the high frequency region is silky smooth, with a near complete absence of grain and imposed structure, and the overriding Classé demeanour has a touch of warmth and grace, but not to the extent that the sound could be described as valve like, still less lacking in resolution or bite. They just don't sound solid-state in any pejorative sense. In short, there is very little readily identifiable character to the sound, and as is often the case when this happens, imagery tends to be unusually explicit and 'out of the box', with clear differentiation of the lay-

The industrial design from Morten Warren gives the system a distinctively solid but clean-cut appearance.

ers of sound in the depth plane. There's even an impression of height information given suitable recordings.

The comments above are especially true of the amplifier, which is a peach. Power output is notably generous, and although this is not unusual in ambitious designs of the type, 100W per channel could easily be mistaken in practice for, say, 150W. Despite this, the CAP-2100 doesn't have the devastating authority or the ultimate control necessary to show the B&W 800D in the best light, but it would have been a major upset to the natural order had it been otherwise. And in the final analysis, the CD player is 'very good' rather than 'great'. The Denon DCD-SA1 SACD/CD player has even more of the Classé's best points – refinement, elegant tonality, articulation and fluidity – but take note also of the Denon's \$11,999 bottom line.

"THE VISUAL ELEGANCE OF THE DESIGN IS AN EXCELLENT METAPHOR FOR THE SOUND."

Through the variety of permutations of system, we came to see the Classé pairing as a safe pair of hands. The combination would easily show much of what most speakers, even high-end models, were capable of. Their voicing was consistent and, in the best sense, predictable and there was never felt to be much danger – when winding the volume up – that the amplifier was likely to break first.

The visual elegance of the design is an excellent metaphor for the sound, especially in the case of the amplifier. Pricing is also clearly realistic for the engineering and performance on offer. But, no-one could ever mistake this duo for cheap electronics – the fit and finish, coupled with the high-tech front panel displays and sheer bulk put paid to any ideas like that.

When buying equipment like this, the final decision is often determined by factors other than outright performance. The Classé pairing has good performance in spades, but above all they are great all-round packages. They don't



just sound good, they are visually elegant and refined, flexible in their configuration, and the touch-screen interface is the finest contribution to its field that we can recall.

There are also features you can't see which add to the attraction, notably in the way that serviceability is addressed, which should

maximise reliability and minimise downtime.

Our only slight disappointments are that the CD player lacks CD-Text (inexcusable given the qualities of the display), and that it is not also an SACD stereo player. But clearly most important of all is that the TFTs are not driven in white (sorry, shades of grey), instead of blue on blue. This grey panel against a grey and black amplifier would surely look even, er, classier. However, if the only disappointments have no real bearing on the sound quality of the products as they stand, it's clear that Classé is on to a winner or two, here.

The player is powered by 11 regulated power supplies from a toroidal transformer.

