

Serious surround

It's been a while, but Classé delivers the multichannel goods with its new processor and power amp

PRODUCT Classé Delta SSP-600 and CA-5200

TYPE Multichannel preamplifier/processor and five-channel power amplifier

PRICE (SSP-600) £5,450; (CA-5200) £6,450

KEY FEATURES (SSP-600) Size (WxHxD): 44.4x17.2x41.9cm • Weight: 21kg • TFT touch-screen user interface • Stereo analogue inputs: 11 (line-level) • 7.1 channel input • Microphone calibration
(CA-5200) Size (WxHxD): 44.4x22.2x53.3cm
• Weight: 55kg • Rated power: 200W per channel

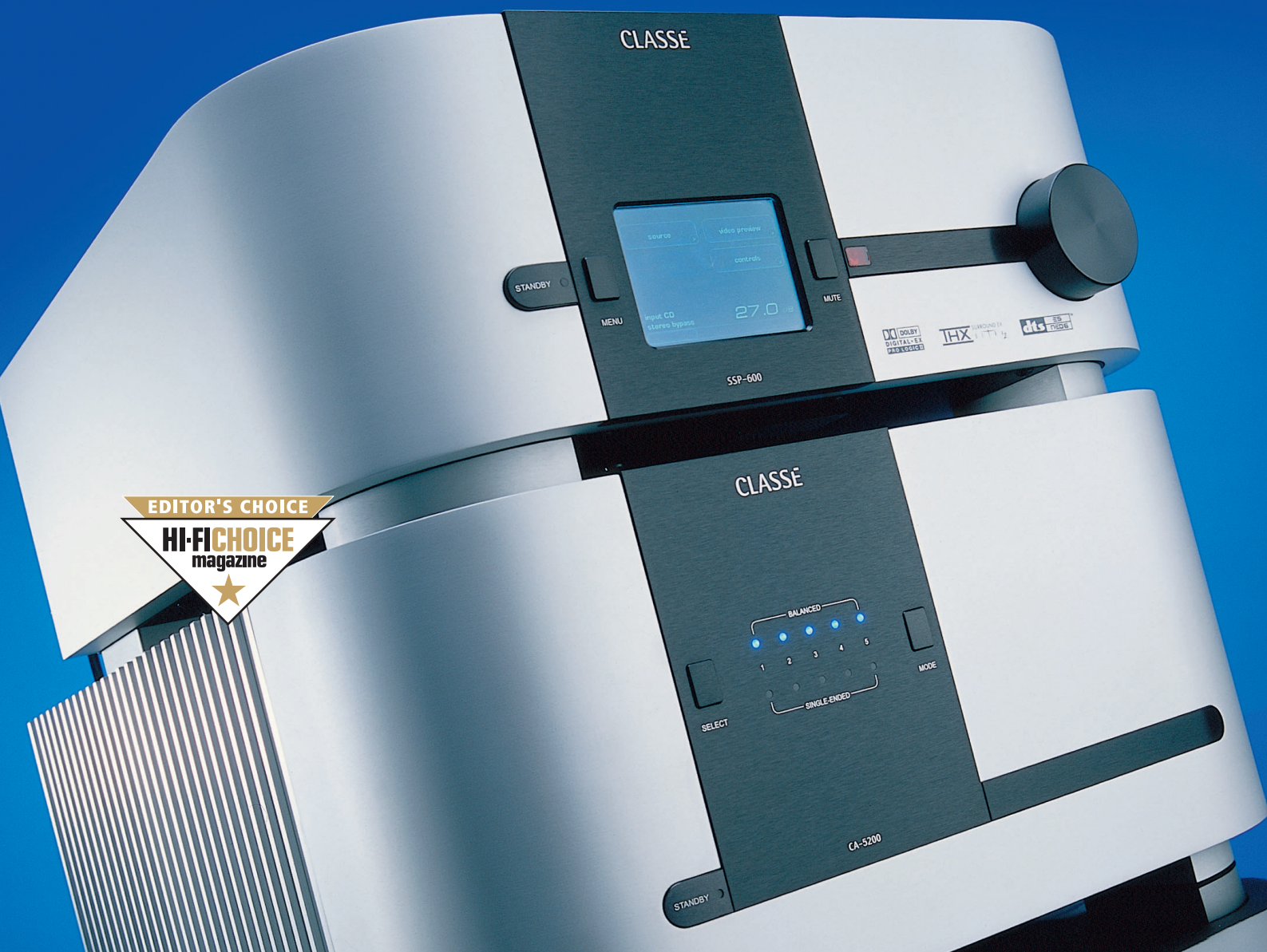
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After a long gestation period (the products were first shown to the public in January 2004), Classé's multichannel hardware is finally coming to light. Both the CA-5200 multichannel power amp and the SSP-600 processor are built in Classé's unique house style, with a three-sided alloy vertical frame, which gives the range its 'Delta' prefix.

The SSP-600 processor, a THX Ultra compliant design, has the usual blue TFT touch screen panel that is fitted to most of the range. After a little acclimatisation, this makes the unit very easy, even intuitive, in day-to-day operation. It features some elegant and powerful routines so that different users with different requirements can access their own pre-programmed interface – his and hers, for example. The TFT panel can also be used to show on-screen menus, and optionally the video programme, while unused inputs can be skipped altogether. THX facilities include re-equalisation, timbre matching, Adaptive Decorrelation, Advanced Sound Array, THX Music/Movie mode and Boundary Gain Compensation. A microphone-driven auto system calibration set-up feature is included, and up to four such calibrations can be stored for instant recall.

It's essentially an 'analogue' processor – that is to say, the inputs are mostly analogue, with the exception of Red Book resolution optical and electrical inputs. There is no i.Link, no HDMI and no DVI digital connection. The way that Classé will accommodate itself with the future is by feeding HDMI from the forthcoming £4,950 Delta CDP-300 DVD player straight to the display screen. This means there is no digital video switching, and therefore limited ability to handle multiple HDMI sources.

There is also an internal component video pass-through mode, but this allows no mixing with other data streams. On the plus side, the Classé will transcode all video inputs up or down – composite to S-Video up to component and down again, if you can think of an excuse for doing so. But progressive component video is not available in a remote zone, which is limited to interlaced composite video.





“This is a very expressive amplifier. It can cope with material of arbitrary complexity without sounding artificial.”

The processor is well endowed for high-quality analogue pictures, with broadcast-quality, wide bandwidth video and an enormous range of in and outputs. The list also inputs a balanced analogue and an AES/EBU digital input, and a full set of eight balanced outputs. Indeed, if balanced operation is not on your wish list, you could opt for the cheaper but essentially similar single-ended model, the SSP-300. The processor is also very well equipped for multiroom and custom installations, with a full roster of IR and DC triggers, and the CA-5200 is similarly equipped.

The CA-5200 (not technically THX compliant, by the way, though it greatly exceeds THX requirements in most respects as far as we can determine) is a massive five-channel, passive convection cooled power amplifier rated at 200 watts per channel into eight ohms. It virtually doubles to 370 watts into four ohms in true audiophile tradition, thanks to its massive 2.5kVA toroidal transformer that feeds the power supply, with dedicated secondaries feeding a large reservoir bank for each channel. The output stage uses bipolar devices, and in common with other Classé amplifiers, the input uses high-impedance J-FETs, feeding a MOSFET stage. Bias varies according to the duty cycle in such a

way that about 30 per cent of the output is in Class A, sometimes described as enriched Class AB. Each channel can be driven via single ended or XLR based balanced inputs, and the internal gain circuitry is also balanced from stem to stern, again as usual for this marque.

SOUND QUALITY

Although not strictly related to sound quality, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the user interface. It is not that it includes an all-singing TFT panel, or even that it can be turned off. (One much more affordable processor has a display that is permanently stuck on!) It is the

depth and subtlety of the thinking that has gone into the SSP-600's extremely powerful control firmware that makes it special. It's all readily updatable, too. An example is the variable speed volume control law, which can be reprogrammed if required through the menu system. We cannot think of another processor that gives such fine control to those who want it, while providing a parallel control chain for those who just want absolutely bare bones press-button convenience without frills or complication. And the software that drives the TFT is a dream.

But of the two components, both of which are superb by any reasonable standard, it is the CA-5200 that we ultimately find more convincing. It is a very heavy and bulky unit, and it runs very warm, but visually it has a simplicity of line, and an elegance that is unique. Most of all, however, is its superb audio performance – not just alongside other multichannel power amplifiers, but qualitatively it is absolutely up there with high-end stereo amplifiers too, making due allowance for the number of channels. It has a muscular, very deliberate style of low frequency reproduction that is strikingly more solid and ultimately believable than most other AV power amps. What impresses most, though, is that this is a very expressive amplifier. It can cope with material of arbitrary complexity without sounding artificial.

Objectively, the SSP-600 is an expressive jewel of a preamplifier when used in stereo and in balanced mode, which sounds noticeably bolder and more open than the single-ended option. In effect, this meant using a balanced mode stereo CD player (actually a Krell ▶



[Review] Classé Delta SSP-600 processor and CA-5200 power amplifier

Q & A

We spoke to Dave Nauber, Classé's executive VP responsible for Brand Development, about these new multichannel components



HFC: Why doesn't the SSP-600 include hi-res digital video and audio inputs?

DN: If HDMI were included, you would still need all the other input/output features offered in the SSP-600. In a system – where HDMI is used by the display device – all analogue video sources should be converted to digital, then de-interlaced and scaled if necessary. Doing this at a level commensurate with the quality of the SSP-600 is far from free. Proper HDMI functionality can be added by way of the CDP-300 DVD player.

How does a buyer cope with more than one device that uses HDMI?

The CDP-300 is designed to be upgradeable to a model coming later this year called the CDP-300V. The V, for video, has two HDMI inputs as well as inputs for component and S-Video. Analogue video is converted to digital, de-interlaced and scaled up to 1080p. When used with an SSP-300 or SSP-600, the main video outs of the SSP can be routed through the CDP-300V for processing and connected by a single HDMI output to your display. This simplifies both the system cabling and switching requirements. This solution accommodates three HDMI sources, which should suffice for quite some time.

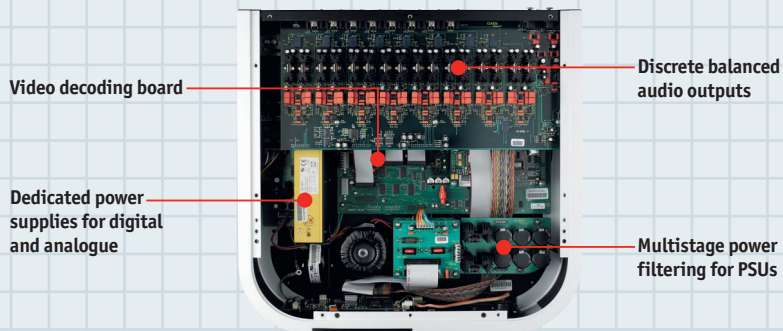
What upgrades are envisioned long term and what is the RJ-45 socket for?

The touch screen control allows us to change the way the processors work. One such addition was the profile buttons. Next up will be multiple speaker configurations to accommodate different crossover, level and bass management settings, depending on the type of source. We will also be adding CAN bus support (using the RJ-45s) for status and control of Classé amplifiers as well as Classé system interoperability.

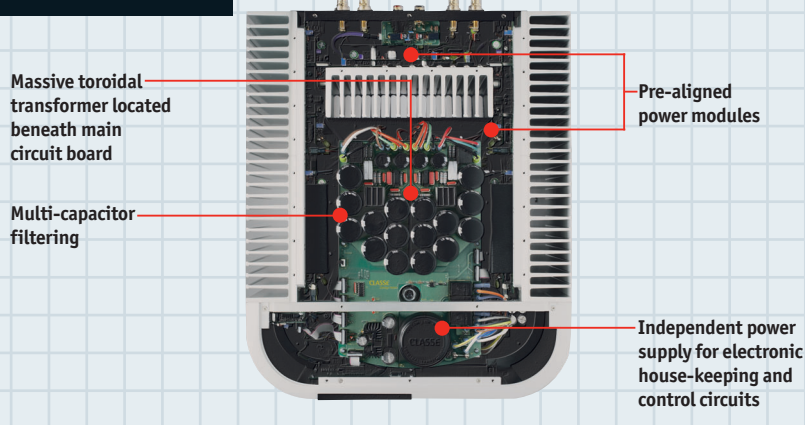
Are these two products intended for hi-fi or home cinema buyers?

The balanced output circuits of Delta components are ultra-high performance and the SSP-600 balanced input connects directly to the output through a volume control when in analogue bypass mode. People respond to Classé's Delta series because, whether two-channel or multichannel, performance is optimized for serious listeners.

Detail – SSP-600



Detail – CA-5200



❑ SACD Standard) as we had no access to a balanced-mode DVD player during the test period. From this point of view, the SSP-600 fulfils its brief of being an excellent stereo preamplifier, though perhaps not quite in audiophile stereo territory, compared to which it sounds ultimately a little grainy and 'flat'.

Nevertheless, as a home cinema processor using Dolby and DTS codecs, the Classé is superb. It has expansive yet stable imaging that is capable of presenting the dialogue, main and surround channels exactly where they should be. At the same time, though, it retains the intelligibility of individual channels – especially the central dialogue channel – even when practically drowned out by what's happening elsewhere. It also offers superb performance with video signals, especially through the component channel, which is every bit as precise and clean as HDMI.

The CA-5200 power amplifier is a very straightforward, near transparent and extremely power amplifier that is as good as anything multichannel out there. It's even capable of showing a clean set of phono sockets to many a stereo power amp, too. The preamp/processor comes close the same ideal, but it is hard to avoid concluding that it is the best of the last generation rather than ushering in the new. The lack of high-resolution digital audio and encrypted digital video connections suggests that the SSP-600 is based on a somewhat dated platform, though Classé would argue

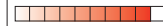
that its own design solution (incorporating the forthcoming CDP-300 DVD player) is both elegant and effective. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

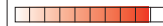


VERDICT – SSP-600

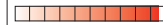
SOUND >> 90%



FEATURES >> 89%



BUILD >> 95%



VALUE >> 79%



CONCLUSION

Superb user interface and sound quality that verges on complete transparency. The only real shortcoming is the lack of digital interfaces.

HI-FI CHOICE
>> 85%

VERDICT – CA-5200

SOUND >> 95%



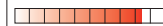
FEATURES >> 85%



BUILD >> 95%



VALUE >> 84%



CONCLUSION

A superb, if heavy power amplifier, which fully complies with requirements for quality stereo reproduction of audiophile standards.

HI-FI CHOICE
>> 90%

