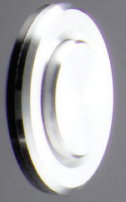


hi-fi+

Function



CARRAT



The Carat A57 Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

It's an old chestnut I know, but at what level does true hi-fi begin and how much does it cost? What constitutes a "real" music system, as opposed to something that merely produces a sound through a pair of speakers? I have my own opinion but these are very difficult things to define, let alone pin down with hard and fast rules. I say the answers lie in the music, but ask ten people and you will get as many different views. There are very few real bargains I could recommend in the world of low-cost audio equipment but the Carat A57 integrated amplifier is certainly one because, despite its relatively modest price, this is a component that has changed my conception of what such an amplifier can achieve, given the right operational circumstances.

Carat is the electronics wing of Inovadis, the French company who already manufacture Highland speakers, the Norstone range of AV furniture and cables as well as Lumene projector screens. The A 57 integrated amplifier is built in the Far East and named after a famous style of diamond cut, presumably with 57 facets. The amplifier I have been listening to is part of a three-piece system comprising of matching tuner and CD player (more of which in a coming issue). These are beautifully made and finished components, physically distinguished by their black acrylic fascias and brushed alloy

controls. There is more than a hint of the "lifestyle" product about them, but for once they are as impressive in use as they are svelte in appearance. The amplifier is extremely versatile, having phono inputs for four line-level components, a tape loop and even a set of inputs for a turntable with switchable moving

coil or moving magnet cartridge selection. There is also a set of line out sockets for driving a separate power amplifier and enough gold-plated 4mm sockets to connect two pairs of speakers that you can drive together or individually. On the front panel you will also find a jack socket for a set of headphones and the now de rigueur mini-jack to connect some sort of MP3 player.

All switching is achieved by combining the function button and the continuously rotating volume control. At first it does seem a bit quirky, but bear in mind that

this is a French-designed amplifier and there is always something slightly off-the-wall with their designs; you will soon get used to it. You can scroll through the menu with the function button and then make choices and adjustments with the

volume knob, all of which are viewed in the display window. Bass, treble and balance controls are a little superfluous in my opinion as the A57 is so well sorted tonally anyway, but this is designed to be an amplifier for all seasons. Power output is a healthy 80 watts into 8 ohms, which almost doubles into 4 ohms and the A57 is more than happy to drive speakers that one might initially consider well out of its league. All this is remote controlled from a single system unit that can operate the entire 57 range.

What will certainly impress you is the way that this amplifier goes about its business when you give it some hard work to do. From the opening bars of music the first thing that grabbed me, even from cold, was the sheer presence and strength of the musical image it produces. I have ▶



► seldom heard such a strong, solid central focus and sheer in-the-room projection, especially from such a modestly priced amplifier. It is a little forward but transparency is excellent and there is a tremendous sense of depth and space around the instruments. This extends not only to the dimensions of the soundstage but is matched by the Carat's resolving powers too. Feed this little amplifier with high levels of musical information and it really thrives. It not only has real driving power and a superbly extended and dynamically controlled low-end, but it produces a very balanced tonal view with no undue emphasis or harshness anywhere across the bandwidth. Speaking of which, I have to mention the refinement, purity and extension through the treble. Amplifiers at this price seldom have any real quality here but the A57 exhibits a level of subtlety both tonally and texturally that is quite exceptional.

Usually with such amplifiers the shortcomings are only too evident and you are left pondering whether

(or not) these are acceptable at the price. But the only thing I can find to criticise about the A57 is that the acceptance angle for the remote operation should be broader.

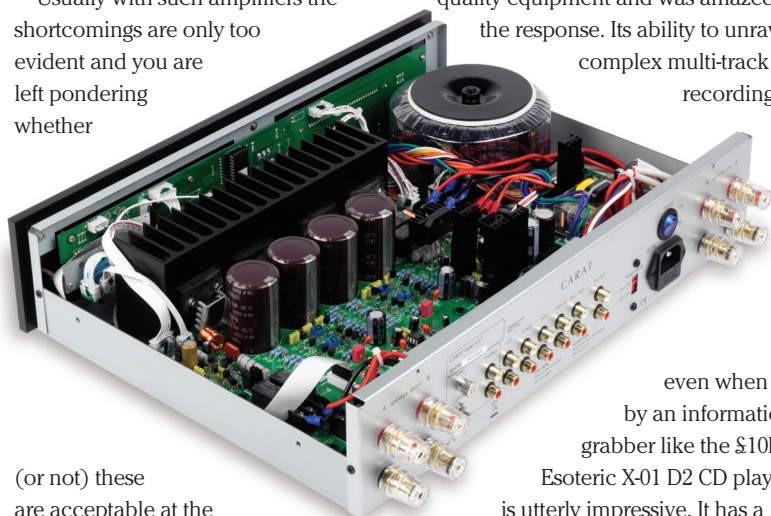
Use it at any volume level and the lack of the compressive nasties that plague so many of the competition are virtually non-existent.

The way it can open up the rhythmic elements within the music with its fine sense of drive and controlled deployment of its quite considerable power reserves deserves comparison with amplifiers I have recently heard that cost twice the price. I used it with indecently high quality equipment and was amazed at the response. Its ability to unravel complex multi-track recordings,

even when fed by an information grabber like the £10k Esoteric X-01 D2 CD player, is utterly impressive. It has a lightness and delicacy of touch, which it maintains regardless of the kind of music you ask it to play, and this soon gives you the confidence to push

it into any musical situation. The danger is likely to be that it won't be asked the right questions by its partnering equipment and will be wrongly judged for the answers it comes up with.

In other words, used out of the context I can imagine the A57 finding itself doing the bidding of cheap CD players and few fates are quite as horrible as that. That would also be a criminal waste as this is a genuinely smart and very accomplished integrated amplifier that really engages you with the enthusiastic way it makes music and certainly deserves serious consideration. It produces that music with a smile on its face, so if you are shopping in this area of the market then ignore it at your peril – and if you already have a main system of high quality and are looking for a second one for the bedroom, study or office, then look no further. Where does serious audio begin? It begins here. This is a great little amplifier and cheap at the price. ➤+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated amplifier
Inputs:	1x phono (mm/mc) 3x line-level 1x tape 1x MP3 on front panel
Outputs:	1x tape
Speaker Outputs:	2prs 4mm (switchable)
Output Power:	2x 80 W/8 Ohms, 2x150W/4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x100 x 360mm
Weight:	10.2kg
Price:	1200 Euros

Manufacturer:
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