



Mighty CD

Le Player 2 champions
silver disc comeback

NuForce DAC

Is this no-nonsense digital
converter the one to beat?



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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**The
Knowledge**
Top tweaks
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Music marvel

AVM's one-box solution plays it
all with style

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PRODUCTS ON TEST:

Auralic, Clearaudio,
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GROUP TEST

Groove riders

Moving-coil cartridges to
upgrade your vinyl replay

Classic reborn

Acoustic Energy's AE109
goes back to the future





One-box wonder

AVM's CS 2.2 one-box system seems expensive compared with its rivals, but it packs a lot of punch says **David Price**

Hi-fi, like so many other things, is a prisoner of its past. Hi-fi systems didn't just suddenly appear fully formed, they evolved from the primordial slime – so to speak – of do-it-yourself electronics that hobbyists made 60 or more years ago. By the seventies, the breed had evolved into recognisable separates – the pre, power and integrated amplifiers, tuners and turntables we know today. At the same time, a hierarchy appeared between these and plain old consumer audio. Well

heeled enthusiasts ran hi-fi systems while Joe Public was content to make do with his 'radiogram', and latterly his 'music centre' – and never the twain would meet.

This gave rise to all sorts of badge snobbery; beautiful and sophisticated integrated systems from the likes of B&O were breezily dismissed by so-called audiophiles, who were content to run a seemingly random assortment of often ugly and/or frustratingly hard-to-use equipment – all in the name of 'real hi-fi'. We're still dealing with this state of affairs

DETAILS

PRODUCT
AVM Inspiration CS 2.2

ORIGIN
Germany

TYPE
CD receiver and streaming system

WEIGHT
10kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 92 x 350mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 110W RMS (8ohm)
• Wi-fi and Ethernet streaming up to 24/192

• Inputs: 3x RCA; 1x coaxial digital; 1x optical digital; 1x USB

• MM/MC phono stage input

DISTRIBUTOR
PMC Ltd

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today, to an extent. It's why some people will be naturally suspicious of Audio Video Manufaktur's (AVM) Inspiration CS 2.2; it's expensive at £3,995, small and integrates a CD player, DAC, RDS FM radio, network player – even a phono stage – into one compact box. Surely it can't be pukka, proper, grown-up hi-fi can it? Should a serious hi-fi magazine such as this even cover it?

Unboxing the product, you quickly discover that it's a lovely piece of design, with just a hint of Dieter Rams-era Braun. The quality of the finish is superb, and the general look and feel of the product is lovely. The CS 2.2 may seem very expensive for what it is – yet the closer you look, the better it gets. So many 'lifestyle' one-box systems seem impressive straight out of the box, but a couple of minutes of closer inspection shows you where the cost has been cut. However, the display does let the side down a little bit. At this price I had expected a fine-pitch, full colour OLED (or some such), but it's a rather cold blue dot-matrix affair with large pixels – more nineties, than 21st century. In use, this doesn't prove so much of an issue and actually gives



the unit a sort of retro quirkiness, adding to its character.

The display has a lot of work to do; there are many functions and to offer all of these it uses the horizontal row of 'soft buttons' underneath it, whose functions change depending on the mode. The vertical row of buttons beside it controls the sources, and of course the rotary control inset into the fascia operates the volume. It's got a lovely smooth action, and the level is displayed (0 to 100.0) in the bottom right of the display. Once you

get the hang of it, the AVM is pretty easy to use. The only other issue of any real note is the left-hand on/standby button; the main power switch is on the rear fascia. Switch-on takes about 10 seconds, as the unit boots itself up and checks if there's a disc inside the CD drive.

Round the back, there's a set of banana-plug loudspeaker sockets (not binding posts), digital inputs (S/PDIF coaxial and optical, USB), Ethernet in and three sets of RCA line-level inputs. There's a bespoke phono

input, complete with earth terminal. Fixed and variable line outputs are also offered. Coaxial and optical digital outputs are fitted too, plus a radio antenna socket and a firmware update port. The latter is a very useful addition, meaning that the unit's streaming client firmware should be upgradeable, bringing a degree of futureproofing.

The AVM is highly configurable. Switching the unit on with the right-most key under the display pressed gets you into the personal

CONNECTIONS



- 1 MM/MC phono input
- 2 Coaxial digital input and output
- 3 Optical digital input and output
- 4 4mm shrouded speaker sockets
- 5 Preamp outputs
- 6 USB input for hard drive/memory stick

set-up menu. Display brightness can be set, bass and treble can be varied – either for individual or all inputs – unused inputs can be deactivated, input names can be set and the FM autostore stations can be edited. There's also an Autoplay function that can be turned on, so that the CD player starts when a disc is inserted. As one would expect, there's a balance control and the input sensitivity of all inputs can be adjusted. The Inspiration CS 2.2 even lets you programme in your desired track order for CD playback, should you so wish. There's also a parametric-type loudness control fitted, with a bypass function.

Inside, the Class D amplifier stage delivers a claimed 110W RMS per channel into 8ohm, and 165W into 4.

It throws stereo images wide left and right, giving plenty of depth perspective

The TEAC-sourced slot-loading CD drive works seamlessly and quietly. The Wolfson DAC upsamples every digital signal it gets to 24-bit/192kHz and plays a wide range of files including MP3, WMA, AAC, OGG Vorbis, FLAC (up to 32/192), WAV (up to 32/192), AIFF (up to 32/192) and ALAC (up to 24/96). The media server supports UPnP 1.1, UPnP-AV and DLNA-compatible servers, Microsoft Windows Media Connect Server (WMDRM 10) and NAS drives. There's no need for a DAB tuner because the AVM offers Airable Internet Radio Service. The headphone stage sports a 3.5mm socket and has its own Class A driver stage. There's an optional RC 9

remote control with colour display, which is both programmable and rechargeable via its supplied charging dock. AVM also offers an RC S App for iOS and Android tablets and handsets, which provides full remote functionality.

Sound quality

Although compact, the Inspiration CS 2.2 delivers a surprisingly good sound across all sources. It's actually quite a suave-sounding unit, with far more sophistication and subtlety than you'd expect for an all-in-one box of such diminutive dimensions. It goes decently loud and never appears to lose interest in the job it has been built to do. This is an important point, because a great many Class D amplifiers I have heard have a smooth and agreeable tone, but lack any real sense of musical zeal. The AVM by contrast, is unexpectedly animated and lively sounding – while retaining a smooth tonality.

I kick off with Supertramp's *Oh Darling* via the built in CD player; taken from the band's *Breakfast In America* album. It's a slick late seventies analogue recording, but seems to have been mixed for US FM radio. By this I mean that it's just a little bright and sparkly – which doubtless sounded good inside your Pontiac Transam on Venice Beach, but via a neutral system is a little intense. The AVM carries it really professionally; there is none of the shrillness that I've heard from other one-boxers and no sense of Roger Hodgson's distinctive vocals grating on the ear. Indeed, bass is quite warm and treble surprisingly sweet. Moving to The Redskins' *Lean On Me* – a great slice of early eighties white soul –



The greatest problem for the Inspiration CS 2.2 is the quality of the competition that it faces. Naim's new Uniti Nova (£4,100) is a seriously tough challenge for it. With a big toroidal transformer feeding an 80W Class AB amplifier, the traditional Naim sound impresses – highly musical and propulsive with lively dynamics and bouncy rhythms. The AVM has a more polished tone, but seems less relaxed when pushed to high volumes, or with harder loudspeaker loads. Functionally, both units have a plethora of facilities, but in design and packaging the German-built unit appears to have the edge on the British one.

Build quality and design are to the highest of standards

confirms my suspicions that this is a real smoothie. This recording sounds deep and richly textured, and the CS 2.2 carries it just as it should, without ever seeming dull. I am particularly impressed by the lustre of the brass, and the grain of Chris Dean's voice.

Great expectations

With rock music, the AVM keeps on confounding my expectations; it's far better sounding than you would expect from this type of product. Yet with electronica, it is less unassailable. Uncle Bob's *Sensory Delight* is a classic slice of early nineties progressive trance with a vast, all-encompassing bassline that's hard work for any integrated amplifier, let alone a one-box system. I have noticed in the past how the bass guitar line on The Redskins track is just a little loose, and so am intrigued to see how the CS 2.2 handles the tracts of synthesised low frequencies on this. At high volumes, you can tell the unit is struggling, just a little out of its depth, with more demanding loudspeaker loads. Given its price and purpose in life, this isn't so much a criticism as an observation, but it does mark it out as mortal. The louder you go, the softer the bottom end gets with difficult speakers. However, put more sensitive speakers on the end and it really rocks the house.

Sensory Delight has a gloriously large soundstage, and this isn't lost on the AVM. Indeed, this is another of its unexpected abilities; the unit can really fill a room with sound and serve up a wonderfully immersive listening experience. Isaac Hayes' *Café Regio*'s is a beautiful early seventies analogue recording with a vast, chasm-like recorded acoustic – and so it should have, given that it was recorded in Stax's famed Memphis





INTRODUCING AVM

Malsch-based German company Audio Video Manufaktur GmbH might be new to British audiophiles, but the company comes with quite a pedigree being over 30 years old. Owner and MD Udo Besser has a distribution agreement with PMC, and since the beginning of this year we've begun to see its products appear.

The company philosophy is to make simple and elegant designs, rather than developing, "unnecessarily complicated circuits, which need a lot of compensating components in order to function correctly". It states that every component "has its own clearly defined task and we

have found that often the most simple circuit concept works the best".

The company values the aesthetic and ergonomic side too. "We always attach importance to a worthy and beautiful appearance. Besides that we try to make all our components easy to use." The result is a three-tier product lineup; the entry-level Inspiration range (from which the CS 2.2 is taken), the Evolution Line (which moves to full-width cases) and the Ovation Line (the company's flagship hi-fi separates range). Both Class D and Class AB are used, and tube line stages are offered further up the range.

studio. The CS 2.2 has real fun with it, throwing stereo images wide left and right, and giving a good deal of depth perspective too. In truth, it can't quite match a decent £1,500 integrated in this respect, but it's not too far off and the overall effect is most pleasing. It also carries the song's rhythms with great aplomb.

Conclusion

One of the best things about this little one-box system is its sheer consistency across all sources. All its digital inputs sound good at either CD-quality or higher resolution, streaming is impressive and even the phono stage and radio are well done. The CD drive is obviously of fine quality, rather than just being there to make up the numbers. Each aspect of the unit is close in ability to all of the others, and this presents a solid and professional front. The centrepiece is that unexpectedly capable amplifier, which – although not superhuman – is undoubtedly better than most.

The AVM Inspiration CS 2.2 is damn expensive for a CD receiver, but this is

no normal CD receiver. Extremely versatile, it has been thoroughly engineered to deliver genuinely respectable audiophile sound. It won't beat a well-chosen separates system at the same price, but the surprising thing is that it's not that far behind. If you're looking to downsize your hi-fi, or simply for a great second system for another room – it represents fine value for money and consequently comes heartily recommended ●

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Great sound for a one-boxer; versatility; build quality

DISLIKE: Expensive; not a great display

WE SAY: Interesting, likeable and capable single-box system

Q&A

Udo Besser

Owner and managing director, AVM



DP: What type of buyer is the Inspiration CS 2.2 aimed at?

UB: The CS 2.2 is a beautifully crafted product that will appeal to both design-conscious and audiophile buyers. This all-in-one solution offers uncompromised sound quality combined with versatile connectivity, and is very easy to use.

What type of power amplifier was chosen and why?

The CS 2.2 uses a switching amplifier generally known as Class D. This design was chosen to combine musicality, transparency and reliability into one powerful design to partner with a large array of speakers. This design allows for a compact size and at the same time avoiding visible heatsinks as the cabinet is designed for this. Even when used at full power output at parties, the amps do the job at the rated output.

Tell me about the CD player

We have specified the PureCD slot-loading drive manufactured by TEAC exclusively for AVM. This pure Red Book CD drive delivers optimal reading results and serves as a base for the striking natural smooth CD sound. It is not a computer or DVD drive, it is a dedicated CD mechanism and, therefore, gets the very best from CD playback. In addition the drive is damped all around with felt cushions and mounted in a suspension system. We use the 8471 DAC chip from Wolfson. We are able to use this converter at maximum performance, as we upconvert all digital signals (including from the digital inputs) to 24/192. There is no DSD functionality because 99.99 percent of users won't be using it. Instead, we thought it imperative to focus on a great phono input rather than offering costly playback possibilities for niche formats.

How much is the chrome option?

This faceplate may be combined with a silver or black chassis and this CS 2.2 Deluxe comes for an additional £495 as a special order. The chrome faceplate is hand polished as well as the volume dial. It is just beautiful!