

## Norma HS-IPA 1



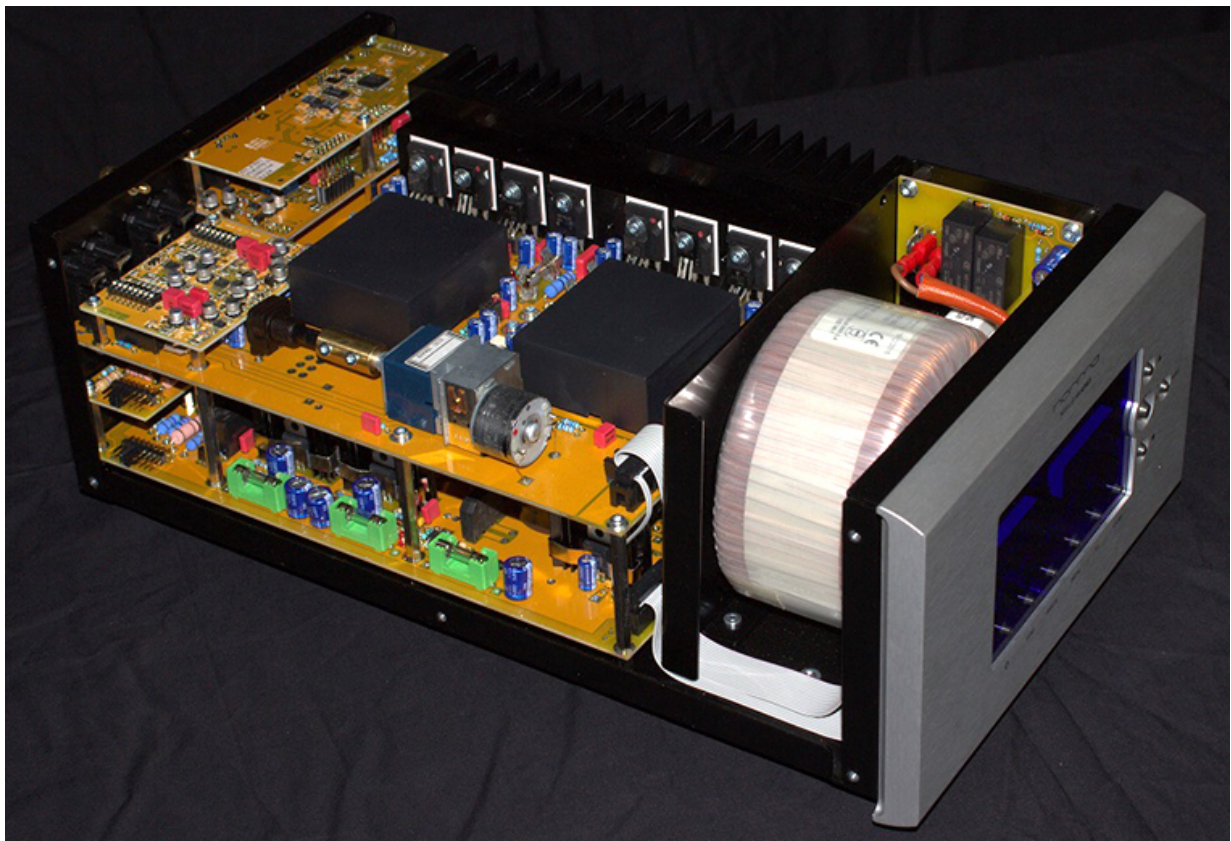
Recently I seem to have had a lot of contact with Italian audio components and the latest to grace my equipment rack is the Norma HS-IPA1. Packed into its diminutive case work there is a solid state amplifier, a phono stage, a headphone amplifier and a DAC, which is really quite remarkable. Norma is based in Cremona, a city steeped in musical history and this device most certainly carries that heritage into the 21st century with pride and panache. The engineering skill of Enrico Rossi the designer and chief engineer at Norma is deep and impressive. For instance the phono stage on this amp can be set up by accessing dip switches that adjust cartridge load inside the case, a facility rarely found on integrated amplifiers. The circuitry inside the HS-IPA 1 is amazingly well laid out. There is no cabling used - everything is routed through the various printed circuit boards, and the very chunky mains transformer is mounted on its side behind the alpha-numeric front panel. A nice touch is the provision of a spare set of fuses should the owner manage to blow the installed ones.



The connectors are all high quality and gold plated. There are four pairs of analogue RCA inputs, one pair of which connects to the optional phono stage, as well as USB, Toslink and S/PDIF for the optional DAC. The headphone socket is also on the rear panel - the matching amplifier is another optional extra. The Norma remote control is a chunky aluminium lump with a large array of buttons to cover every function. The buttons are a little small but it works perfectly well.

The power output rating of the main amplifier is 75 watts into 8 Ohms, doubling to 150 into 4 Ohms. In use, this pocket rocket has more than enough power to drive most loudspeakers to ear splitting levels. At comfortable domestic listening levels it has ample head room and delivers 24A continuous current and can peak at 100A.





With the case back on the unit slid into a spare space on my Quadraspire rack and all the necessary connections were made. At power up the front display shows a count down as the HS-IPA 1 goes through its self check procedures. Selecting the appropriate input via the remote control, I used the phono stage to warm things up. My usual Harbeth Super HL5+ 40th Anniversary loudspeakers were attached using Tellurium Q Ultra Black II cable. The first record on the LP12 was 'Woyaya' by Osibisa, which I bought when it was released in 1971 and still play regularly. Wow! Stone cold, out of the box, this thing sounded great. Full bodied and even handed right across the frequency range, with full tuneful bass and sparkling high frequencies. The sheer exuberance of this fusion of West African, West Indian and rock music simply leapt from the loudspeakers. I played a lot of records through the Norma and really liked how it sounded. Reverting to my standalone phono stage (which retails for more than half the purchase price of the Norma) I heard a bit more detail but that is the least I would expect, the Norma stage is clearly no slouch.

### **Sound quality**

In the week that the Norma was here I failed to find anything which it did not do exceptionally well. I played CDs from my Yamaha CD-S3000 through the DAC and was deeply impressed with the musicality and 'rightness' of the sound. Rock, jazz, classical and spoken word all sounded excellent. I plugged the optical cable from my television in and dialogue was crisp and comprehensible. This is an extremely well sorted digital section.



During the course of the review I was able to use three different pairs of loudspeakers with the HS-IPA 1. In addition to the Harbeths mentioned above I also listened to my smaller Harbeth [P3ESRs](#), which do like an amplifier with plenty of drive to get them really working well. The Norma proved to be a brilliant match. I also had a pair of Swedish Marten Duke 2 standmounts here for review (to appear in The Ear very soon!) and the Norma really got them singing beautifully. Here we had loudspeakers retailing at just under £7,000 working perfectly with a device that sells for just over half that but it was far from a mis-match.

It is always tricky to review amplifiers. I guess if I got one that sounded 'wrong' it would make itself very obvious. However that has yet to happen. So what do I expect from an amplifier? Clean sound, sufficient power to drive my loudspeakers, even handedness across all frequencies, sufficient inputs, reliability, are just the first things that spring to mind. Well, this Norma HS-IPA 1 ticks all those boxes of course. However, I think it is actually more than a sum of its parts and should be on the short list for audition of any music lover who wants a great sounding device that punches far above its price-point. Pair it with your preferred sources and loudspeakers and I think it will be the last amplifier you will need - it really is that good.