

Norma Audio HS IPA1 Integrated Amplifier by Greg Simmons, 04/2020, on :

Stereo Times



Taking Myself Down A Peg or Two

We have a 1948 Steinway six-foot grand piano in our living room. It belonged to my mother, who cleaned it continually, had it tuned religiously, and played it daily for fifteen years - far and away from her most cherished possession. Given a choice between, say, the piano and basic shelter, she might have thrown a tarp over the case and slept under it. The lid was always raised (inside the house, obviously), with a large sheet of green felt over the strings when not in use. Any suggestion that it was merely an impressive piece of furniture - an excellent place to keep family photographs, the tragic fate of so many pianos - was met with icy contempt. A little more ornate than the classic black concert instrument, it's got carved ball-and-claw legs, a moderately baroque music rack, and a case veneered in dark, bourbon-colored, figured maple. The phrase "tickling the ivories" is one-hundred-percent factual here, harking back to a time when such barbarism was still legal.

It's a beautiful instrument, too; sweet-toned with none of the hard, overly metallic quality you sometimes get with modern pianos from other manufacturers. This one, above all, just sounds well balanced. It can be incredibly dynamic, capable of immense power, but equally capable of extraordinary subtlety. Even my seven-year-old daughter's simple first-year lessons occasionally acquire unexpected substance on this instrument. I wouldn't go so far as to suggest that "Jingle Bells" takes on a new poignancy. Still, with a confident left hand, it does achieve a certain gravitas, sonically if not musically, at least to the extent such a thing can be accomplished by a 2nd grader with four months experience (When it comes to my daughter I am unapologetically and perhaps even irrationally biased).

A few days ago, we were practicing left-hand intervals in the G position with the lid open, allowing the piano to radiate its fullest volume. My daughter hit the keys hard and held a low D major fifth. I considered the chord for a second, played it myself, repeated it, then modified it with a sharp in the middle; all big chords that filled the room with great vibrato and resonance; sound that comes from everywhere and nowhere at the same time, especially when you're sitting at the keyboard. It saturates the space like no other instrument. It conveys mass, substance, and power. Beyond simply hearing the notes, the sound envelops you.

And here's the kick in the jewels. Like many hi-fi enthusiasts, I've got a small fortune worth of electronics downstairs - vacuum tubes, boutique Japanese cartridges, fancy phono-stages, etc. - which at their best really do sound terrific. I love the diversity of music I can enjoy in my own home: instant command performances from any of the ghosts of jazz legend or symphonies from around the world reproduced with far better than average fidelity. But as great as that gear sounds, none of it comes anywhere close to recreating the brawn and sonic density of that one chord on the Steinway. That one chord is a good reminder that there will always be some limitations to the electronic reproduction of music that simply cannot be overcome. As my wife wryly noted, "See if you can do that downstairs." I can't. Sometimes there's no substitute for the real thing.

Although...maybe some fancy new speaker cables... Aw... Who am I kidding?

Smaller and Simpler

As I get older, I find myself admiring different physical qualities in my gear. I used to gravitate towards BIG amps that looked as impressive as they sounded (though perhaps they should have sounded as impressive as they looked, and that wasn't always the case), but now - though my own equipment takes up an enormous amount of space - I very much appreciate the elegance of more modestly proportioned, high-quality industrial design, especially when it delivers the musical goods.

A few years back, I reviewed a pair of class D mono-blocks that - while not quite my aural cup of tea - offered a bewildering amount of power from a package that fits in the palm of my hand. They were impressive the way it's impressive than an ant can lift over 5000 times its body weight. Remember that the next time you see the family Formicidae wobbling off with a potato chip at your next picnic.



The Norma HS IPA1 Integrated Amplifier

In that vein, the Norma HS IPA1 integrated amplifier is compact at about the size of a shoebox, falling squarely into the category of diminutively scaled equipment. It's not Class D tiny, but it is small. In this case, however, the size of the box is in no way indicative of performance. I'll state for the record that my discussion of the IPA1's size is not to suggest that this is some sort of lifestyle component that someone would want primarily to meet spatial rather than sonic requirements; in fact, far from it as I'll discuss shortly. This is a muscular little integrated, delivering scale and instrumental solidity that belie its modest footprint. It just happens to come in a conveniently small package. Norma Audio Electronics, which began producing equipment in 1997, is headquartered in Cremona, Italy, a city with a very long musical tradition that includes perhaps the world's most famous instrument maker, Antonio Stradivari. I'm paraphrasing here a bit from a rough Italian to English translation. Still, their philosophy seems to be to recreate a musical performance as a whole-cloth presentation rather than as a dissected pile to audiophile parts.

A colorful, if the somewhat macabre description on their website reads, “As by describing a human body by sectioning its organs, you deprive it of its life.” Well, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that, but metaphorically it’s as good a way of describing what they’re trying to achieve as any. The tap of a ride cymbal floating in space – no matter how well it’s reproduced - isn’t going to sound right if it’s not connected to the rest of the music. Performance is best appreciated in its entirety, not as a horn here or a voice-over there with a piano in the next room.



The IPA1 is rated at 75 watts per side, runs in good-old-fashioned class A/B, and offers a lot of built-in features as well as a few options, making it a highly versatile piece of equipment. There's an optional DAC card that'll sample at up to 384 kHz, as well as an optional P-stage card that comes set at 34 dB of gain at 47 Ohms for basic moving magnet operation. The Phono card can also be adjusted to accommodate other cartridge needs. Also, the basic integrated amplifier is capable of pre-setting line input levels to accommodate the varying outputs of source components. There are also jumpers inside that can be arranged to match specific headphone loads. A robust set of protection circuits prevent damage should one overdrive the unit, and it comes with replacement fuses in case you do get carried away. Analog input four can also be inverted, reconfigured as a pre-amp output, making it useful for hooking up a subwoofer, or possibly a cassette deck if anyone is still making mixed tapes the hard way (Regrettably, I gave my Nakamichi away twenty-five years ago). Remote control comes standard. The IPA1 is priced at \$3,000 for the basic integrated, with fairly priced additional charges for the options.

Being somewhat of a technological caveman, I auditioned the IPA1 strictly as an integrated amplifier, forgoing the optional digital and phono cards in favor of my phono stage and CD transport. I also used the factory settings on the line inputs. Still, it's easy to appreciate the benefits of all of those features for someone traveling in the digital domain or who has neither the space nor desire to add separate components and/or related clutter (there is so much clutter).

Setup

Setup of the IPA1 is as simple as one might expect of any integrated amp. Attach a power cord – I used a Cullen cable instead of the factory one, drawing power from my AudioQuest Niagara 1200 conditioner – then connect your speaker cables and source components, and turn it on. Hit play or drop a needle, and you're playing music. I also really enjoyed not having to crawl around behind the equipment rack to navigate a jungle of wires. The IPA1 is small enough that you can stick it almost anywhere and it would never be in your way or be visually obtrusive. In my house, I simply disconnected my preamp, which shares a shelf with my phono stage, installed the IPA1 in its place then re-connected the sources. Easy.

Functionality

Functionally the IPA1 has a couple of unusual features. Volume, which is actuated by buttons on the front panel or the remote, is reflected in a digital readout on the face of the unit. Instead of the typical 0 through 100 or similar ascending scale, the selected volume is indicated in decibels with dead silence at -51 dB, and increasing volumes showing decreasing negative numbers.

The loudest volume setting I could stand was -26dB, which was very loud indeed. I never came anywhere close to a positive number on the IPA1. Adjusting volume by increasing or decreasing negative numbers on the readout is visually counterintuitive – increasing volume is negative but less negative than reducing volume - but in operation, the UP button makes it louder. In contrast, the DOWN button makes it quieter, as one would expect. Selecting the input is also a little unconventional. Instead of just hitting a button for input one, two or three, etc., the IPA1 requires that you first hit one of two buttons marked INPUT or DAC to select the section of the internal pre-amp to be utilized. You have to cycle the numbered inputs of that section one-through-four to your desired source via a second set of pushbuttons. My guess is that this was done to keep the analog and digital operations completely segregated internally. For someone using the optional DAC as well as the analog inputs, this would make perfect sense. Used as a basic integrated amplifier with external source components, it was an extra step: not especially cumbersome, but something that took a little getting used to. I found myself performing most volume and source selection functions from the remote control, which brings up my one real ergonomic complaint. The compact multi-function remote – like everything else on the IPA1 - is very well constructed: two pieces of solid milled aluminum bolted together with countersunk Allen-head machine screws. Though small, it has a high-quality feel in both heft and operation. However, all but one of its thirty-one buttons are exactly two millimeters in diameter - I measured them - labeled with font that's almost as small, adding this remote to a long list of handsets that may violate the Americans With Disabilities Act for failing to provide reasonable accommodation for anyone not blessed with perfect 20/20 vision. And forget about using it with the lights down low - it's not backlit. It works fine, but it is hard to see.

Ancillary Components

At the time of this writing, my system contains all of my old favorites: Lyric phono-stage, Cambridge DAC and transport, and my latest Technics 1200 M3G Franken-Table. All of these sources sounded great running through the IPA1. But most importantly, my Verity Audio Fidelio Encore speakers really liked IPA1. The amp's 75 watts drove the speakers easily, never sounding stressed, let alone coming anywhere close to clipping. Treble extension was silky smooth without any hard spikes; the entire frequency spectrum was always very consistent with no peaks, valleys, or unnatural emphasis. The midrange sounded right, whether cello, tenor saxophone, human voice, or whatever your choice of instrument may be. The IPA1 had excellent synergy with my speakers.

What's It Sound Like?

Whenever anyone tells me that a solid-state component has all the best qualities of tubed gear or vice versa, I take that with a grain of salt, mostly because I've heard that claim many, many times before and the reality is never quite that simple. The sonic differences between vacuum bottles and transistors have indeed narrowed in recent years, and the line between a so-called Tube sound and a so-called Solid State sound has blurred a bit. Audio writers seem to be prone to making these kinds of generalizations because it lumps gear into neat, easily understood categories familiar to most hi-fi hobbyists. I'm as guilty of this rhetorical sin as anyone.

When I began speaking with Derek "Skip" Skipworth at Audio Thesis, the U.S. importer and distributor for Norma's line of electronics, he told me that the company's amplification was the first gear he'd listened to that made him want to make the switch to solid-state. He cited Norma's warmth and three-dimensionality as the qualities he'd found compelling. Having spent time with the IPA1, I'd have to agree that this integrated is indeed a little warmer than neutral – though by no means artificially saturated – and it does deliver a full and reasonably three-dimensional soundstage, precisely the qualities that tube lovers often cite as the features that drew them to bottles in the first place. These are by no means bad qualities, tilting the IPA1 towards a pleasant listening experience and away from a laboratory-grade analytical presentation. Overall, it's a bit laid back. It's also not as warm or dimensional as my Cary V12, but then the V12 is no one's idea of neutral, either. In general, I'd guess that in addition to meeting technical specification targets, this amplifier was also voiced by ear to reproduce beautiful music. That would always be my personal preference for listening.

The other thing the IPA1 does is present a dense musical image, in part because it is very quiet and does an excellent job of reproducing space. Listening to a string quartet or a jazz combo, the musicians spread between the speakers as they would through many amplifiers. Still, the IPA1's quiet backgrounds also convey a bit more atmosphere around the ensemble, more completely recreating the physical context of the performance. This goes back to Norma's stated goal of reproducing a whole-cloth musical event, a goal that I'd say they've met. Most importantly, the effect is lifelike and natural, free from exaggeration. The image scale was also excellent.

Despite those exceptional qualities, the Norma IPA1 is a solid-state amp, and – to my ears at least – sounded like one in certain areas. The midrange – where everything happens – does not possess quite the liquidity that I'm used to with my own amplifier's dozen 6550 valves, but it was detailed with an appropriate tonal palate. Despite this inherent difference with tubes, it sounded quite good. Massed strings were lush, trumpets were brassy and bright (though never hard sounding), and drums had the correct snap. Nothing here struck me as amiss, and it was unfailingly pleasing to the ear.

The bass was where “solid-state” was most evident in a good way. In essence, tight, powerful, and well-articulated, reproducing the vibrato of a bowed double bass or the metallic slap of a Fender electric. It was also reasonably quick, though not the quickest I’ve heard. I didn’t detect any blobby overhang or other gross misbehavior. In symphonic recordings, massed, plucked staccato double bass notes were punchy and very much conveyed the effect of moving air; if not to the full degree, you’d get in a concert hall, but then I’ve rarely heard any hi-fi equipment that could reproduce that effect accurately. A more stereotypically solid-state sounding bass is by no means a bad thing here.

Finally, in a fit of “Nobody but an audiophile would care about this,” the IPA1 proved to be neutral enough to tell the difference between source components when those sonic variations are wrought in subtle shades of grey; in this case, a pair of phono cartridges running through the same P-stage. In one corner was my trusty Lyra Delos moving coil, which is noted for its detailed delicacy, well-defined bass and very high resolution. In the other corner, A Gold Note Vasari moving magnet, which is significantly more affordable than the Lyra but still offers a great deal of performance. With a review of the Vasari pending, I won’t go into specifics except to say that the IPA1 was clear and detailed enough to hear the differences between the two cartridges easily.

Listening



Among the pile of records in heavy rotation this month is a 1960 Deutsche Grammophon stereo pressing of pianist Sviatoslav Richter with the National Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra performing Mozart’s piano concerto no. 20 along with Prokofiev’s piano concerto no. 5 [Deutsche Grammophon 138 075 SLPM]. Both pieces are played with tremendous expression, but the Prokofiev stands out for its angular drama; powerful, sometimes even bombastic, but also intensely engaging, like a book with concepts I’m grappling to understand but just can’t put down. I confess to having spent little if any time with Prokofiev before discovering this record in a collection I purchased last year. The first time I listened to it reminded me very much of the first time I heard Thelonious Monk: so radically different that I wasn’t sure I liked it.

Then I became a little obsessed with it. Moreover, for purposes of this review, the recording is excellent – if occasionally a little hot in the treble - with the piano large and in front, the rest of the orchestra audibly recessed, everything filling the space between the speakers and - in places - well beyond. In the introduction to this review, I spoke about hi-fi not being able to duplicate the scale and dynamics of a real piano. But in the second movement of this piece, there's a passage when Richter is authoritatively pounding the daylights out some disjointed chords. It's not the "sound from everywhere and nowhere" that you'd experience with a piano in the room, but it does offer a reasonable facsimile of the brawn of the instrument, albeit directionally from the speakers. There's subtlety as well. In the fourth movement – the Larghetto - double basses are momentarily bowed sharply, but quietly, still reproducing resonance and air movement, audible through the diminuendo. The reproduction of this recording through the IPA1 was beautiful: explosive and energetic, where it needed to be, subtle and delicate where that was required as well.

Switching over to a good old-fashioned Red Book compact disc (I have not joined the millennial fad of using them as drink coasters) is Abdullah Ibrahim & Ekaya's Sotho Blue [Intuition Records 3433 2]. This 2011 release is among the highest sound quality recordings I own, despite the limitations of its format. It's a disc that I come back to regularly when reviewing equipment because it just sounds so damned good! A septet, this moderately paced music is full of magnificent horn textures, in some ways recalling the lush arrangements of Duke Ellington's best work. The upright bass of Belden Bullock is one of the finest recorded captures of the instrument that I've heard in my system, front and slightly to the left, its tone is fat and palpable. His fingers are audible as they move about the neck and vibrate off the strings. Ibrahim's piano is recreated with crystalline clarity, intersecting overtones, and natural case resonance. There are a couple of tracks where he plays solo, the piano stretching fully from speaker to speaker, immense in scale. It's an incredible recording that begs the question: Why isn't every jazz album recorded this well? Of course, none of that would make a damned bit of difference if the music was uninspiring, but it is. Ibrahim, now well into his 80s, is a legendary figure in jazz. His piano touch is highly refined, drawing on all the elements of his predecessors, but with his unique melodic perspective. As already noted, his arrangements are impeccable, often reflecting the hymn-like polyphony more closely associated with choral music. The harmonic textures are extraordinary. I'm going to throw a plug here: if you don't have this CD, track one down. You will not be disappointed. The Norma IPA1 did justice to both these albums. Bass was delivered with punch, weight and power. The mids were richly textured and highly resolved, whether massed strings or a trio of saxophones. The treble was fully extended, but never harsh.

The voicing of this amplifier – a bit towards the warm side of neutral – added beauty and a bit of luxuriousness to both performances (and many others). Dimensional space was reproduced clearly, and these qualities were audible on any decently recorded album of any genre. Plus, on something like George Semper's Funkproof – which is about as far from Prokofiev as one can get – featuring pulsing beats and rhythms that would make George Clinton sweat in fear for his funk crown: the IPA1 can rock, too (Funkproof – by the way – was recorded in the early 70s and never released. It's out now on a limited edition of 500 copies on vinyl. If you can still find it, grab it – an excellent record).

Yeah, I like It

It's been years since I reviewed a piece of equipment with which I had more than a few minor quibbles (Manufacturers, please remember that on/off switches on power amplifiers are not optional). The quality of components these days is so high that differences between them often come down to the personal preference of the person or team who designed them. Consumers have a bewildering selection of excellent gear to choose from in almost any category of equipment. It's a great time to be an audiophile, that's for sure. To wit, The Norma HS IPA1 is a lovely sounding, diminutively sized class A/B amplifier and it represents good value too. You might consider it because it's small and easy to place in any room, but you'd be missing the point. This thing just makes great music, checking an awful lot of high-fidelity boxes along the way. Everything I listened to through it was engaging and dynamic. Paired with appropriate speakers, it delivered excellent bass response, and with its modest warmth throughout the spectrum, it was voiced with an eye towards sonic beauty. With all its possible configurations and options, the IPA1 is a versatile little machine. If you're looking for an integrated amplifier in this price range, the Norma HS IPA1 is worth your time to audition.

Greg Simmons

