



Talkin' 'bout a Revo-lution

A smitten **Chris Ward** takes this decidedly understated Italian integrated for a test drive and comes back smiling

Norma Audio hails from Cremona in Northern Italy, a city famed as the home of the world's greatest stringed instrument makers – Stradivari, Ruggieri and Amati – so maybe sweet music making comes from something in the water? Or, more probably, the wine.

Whatever, the name may not be as familiar as other audio brands, but it's certainly no newcomer. Founded

in 1987, it is part of Opal Electronics which builds advanced electronics measuring equipment – so it will have few excuses for poor measurements.

The Revo IPA-140 is the bigger brother of the Revo IPA-70B that we reviewed back in *HFC* 455. Claiming 140W into 8ohm from six MOSFETs per channel, this integrated amplifier is effectively a fully dual mono configuration of its smaller sibling. Alongside extra power the IPA-140

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Norma Audio
Revo IPA-140

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
25kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 125 x 430mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 140W (8ohm)
- Inputs: 4x stereo analogue RCAs; 1x XLR; USB-B
- Outputs: 1x stereo analogue RCA

DISTRIBUTOR
Hi-Fidelity Ltd.

TELEPHONE
07787 056723

WEBSITE
hifidelityuk.co.uk

also boasts discrete power supplies for gain, driver and output stages. While its power output is healthy, this doesn't tell the full story, as other potent specifications are possibly far more important. Norma Audio claims it can deliver over 2MHz of bandwidth, up to 150A of peak output current and 1,500W of peak power handling capability. Exceptional bandwidth plus some serious muscle feels like an exciting, dynamic recipe.

Visually, the chassis appears quite understated, but lifting the 25kg from its box confirms it means business and has been seriously over engineered. While much of the construction is aluminium to reduce unwanted magnetic issues, this relatively compact amplifier is deceptively heavy. Yet form and function come together beautifully with an elegantly tapering top plate hiding integrated cooling fins on both sides. Available in silver or anodised black (for a small extra charge) build quality is exquisite and peeking inside I appreciate that extreme attention to detail has been applied to every meticulous inch. Connectivity includes four line-level



RCA inputs, one RCA out and a single XLR balanced input, while the optional DAC module with a USB-B input has also been included. USB-only digital connectivity might seem a little spartan, but I find myself using coaxial and optical connections less and less and Norma Audio believes it can achieve superior results

through this route. The optional phono stage has also been included on this sample. As standard it comes set for MM cartridges, but it can also be reconfigured for a variety of MC options. This fine tuning of gain and impedance values requires the removal of the top plate and the flicking of left and right channel dipole switches, but once you're set up correctly it won't need attention again. I know many MC cartridge fans that delight in some adjustability, so it's a very helpful and thoughtful feature to offer. Once powered up, a simple button on the front cycles through inputs and the central volume knob can be turned manually or remotely controlled with course or fine adjustment via the comprehensive all-metal remote control.

I connect Cadence's Arca loudspeaker via Black Rhodium Foxtrot cabling (HFC 412), a Garrard 401 turntable, Shanling CD-T100 HDCD player via Chord Company Epic Analogue interconnects and warm everything through ahead of critical listening. From experience I know Norma Audio amplifiers enjoy a good warm up and consequently qualities improve noticeably over an hour.

Sound quality

Playing Vivaldi's *Gloria in D major* by the Choir of Kings College, Cambridge, on CD is a sumptuous treat. The opening strings set the tone, creating a rich backdrop, full of dynamic energy and euphonic warmth that paints a truly compelling image of the vast acoustic space. This is one of those recordings that just urges you to wind the volume up, and the Revo IPA-140 moves up through the gears with eagerness. The chorus rises from the deep soundstage as a near tsunami of positive emotion. Lesser amps will make their excuses and

bow out, but this feels completely unburstable – easily communicating the huge dynamic swings and majestic scale of the rapturous chorus at full tilt. Where some rivals flaunt simple watts, Norma Audio extols current delivery and peak power handling. It's akin to certain supercars celebrating horsepower while others with huge torque leave them in the dust. This is a big performance that balances huge, luxurious sweeps of lush instrumentation and voices with masterful attention to detail, somehow delivering massive scale alongside a feeling of intimacy and

Vivid soundscapes sound totally correct, coherent and completely unsullied

presence that you are in the chapel with real performers. I often find integrated amplifiers are more adept with big pictures or small vignettes, but rarely both and never with such fluency and manoeuvrability as I'm enjoying so much here.

Spinning *More Money* by Barry Reynolds on vinyl reveals the phono stage is a class act in its own right. This 1982 track features the maturing talent of session musicians Sly and Robbie and the Revo IPA-140 does a fantastic job of locking into their truly infectious groove. The track somehow feels even more spacious than usual, enabling me to delight in the chemistry between performers. Shakespeare's bass has real body and propulsion, with the amp conveying both vivid textural detail alongside flowing, natural timing that effortlessly drives the song. Whenever anyone describes an amplifier as having great 'pace, rhythm and timing' the scientist in me

CONNECTIONS



- 1 MM/MC phono stage input (right channel)
- 2 RCA output (right channel)
- 3 2x RCA inputs (right channels)
- 4 Balanced XLR input (right channel)
- 5 USB-B input

gets highly sceptical, but this one is absolutely outstanding in this regard.

The track has extra depth than I'm used to, with tiny guitar licks, layered percussion effects and subtle nuances in Reynolds' vocal delivery all having more credible air and space around them. Top to bottom the Revo IPA-140 conveys sweet treble that never feels grating, a sublime midband that projects singers forward as fully rounded human beings and a properly physical bass that still remains fast and agile.

This integrated is completely agnostic to genre, seeming to convey maximum musicality and emotional impact whatever you feed it. Here, it is as funky as they come – whether you prefer thrash metal or a chamber quartet, you won't be disappointed. As a phono stage, Norma Audio has struck a wonderful balance between extracting vital detail while keeping

It balances huge, lush instrumentation and voices with masterful attention to detail

surface noise at bay. You may well own an excellent phono stage already, but this dual mono design is highly refined, beautifully integrated and as a £389 optional extra you should snap Norma Audio's hand off.

I connect my MacBook Pro and swap to the DAC input via a Chord Company C-USB (HFC 427) interconnect playing a ripped file of Rae Morris singing Bowie's *Moonage Daydream*. Given the amp is designed by a measurement specialist and has a claimed bandwidth of 2MHz, one might expect the DAC section to be dry or businesslike, yet its character is visceral and alive. The opening piano



has fantastic heft and body. Of all instruments, this is one of the hardest to reproduce in my listening room, but here the image is stable, three dimensional and utterly compelling, complete with rich layers of overtones and harmonics. Rae's voice enters centre stage, perfectly balancing warmth and emotional frailty. I know in designing its amplifiers Norma Audio uses human voices as the acid test of success, and here the results are spot on. The amplifier blends highly refined, sweet treble detail with a human warmth that is just captivating. In some respects it replicates many of the qualities of very high-end valve amplifiers, yet in a highly practical and flexible solid-state way. Captive DACs within integrated amps can date quickly and this one simply sets its stall out to handle 24-bit/192kHz files alongside DSD compatibility, but the application feels utterly addictive and timeless and the numbers irrelevant. I know of few more natural or analogue-

HOW IT COMPARES

Anthem's STR Integrated Amplifier (£5,500, HFC 459) has lots of power plus a great phono stage and DAC. Leema Acoustic's Tucana Anniversary Edition (£5,000) marries refined signal handling with healthy power, but lacks a phono stage. Hegel's H390 (£4,900) matches power with superb resolution and finesse, but no phono stage. While The Leema and Anthem are more neutral, but the Revo IPA-140 extols extra flow and passion with greater expression.

sounding standalone DACs without spending a great deal more than the option price. It may not quite be the bargain that the phono stage so clearly is, but I wouldn't hesitate to tick that option box too.

Conclusion

The Revo IPA-140 is one of the finest integrated amplifiers I've heard at any price, and this is praise indeed for a product positioned so sensibly. Norma Audio sometimes describes its sound quality as "unfatiguing" but this is way too modest. It paints vivid soundscapes that simply sound correct, absolutely coherent and completely unsullied. And while some high-end amps can be revealing yet desiccated and insistent, the Revo IPA-140 just sounds astonishingly lifelike and natural. I sense the company believes music is there to be enjoyed, not dissected, and this it achieves through greater musical insight and expression, an adeptness with dynamics and intimacy, effortless timing, sweet detail and a richer palette of colours and textures. Strongly recommended ●



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OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



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FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Sweet treble; potent dynamics; highly communicative; over engineering

DISLIKE: DAC is USB-only

WE SAY: An effortless, engaging and highly expressive integrated