

Audia Flight FLS10 integrated amp elegant and well-poised



AUDIA FLIGHT FLS10 integrated amplifier

+ Highly refined and poised performer; very detailed presentation with lots of air and ambience; excellent headphone amplifier.

- Slightly lighter balance and a tendency towards a brighter presentation will require careful matching with partnering equipment.

Sound: 8.5/10

Value: 8/10

ABOUT three years ago, I had the privilege of reviewing Audia Flight's phono stage, simply called Phono. I recall being highly impressed, especially by its utmost clarity and supremely assured performance. The Italian company has obviously not rested on its laurels and has updated its product line-up. Reviewed here is its flagship integrated amplifier, the FLS10, a fully balanced design that borrows heavily from the technology in its bigger stablemate, the FLS4 power amp.

The FLS10 sports specially selected components, 32 power devices, high quality capacitors (288,000 μ F alone on the main power supply), 12 power supplies and a 2,000VA toroidal shielded transformer to generate 200 watts into eight ohms. This almost doubles to 380W into four ohms, almost equalling my resident power amplifier. The FLS10 is also rated to be stable with a maximum of 700W into two-ohm loads.

The amp, as to be expected, is quite large physically and weighs a backbreaking 36kg (it comes packed in a wooden crate, the total shipping weight being about 42kg). However, despite the bulk, the Italians have managed to design it to look good. The fascia is a model of elegance with a wide smiley screen that has blue LEDs to show status of performance and mode. Below, in discrete small buttons, are various controls used to adjust settings. A large volume control sits on the right side.

At the back, inputs and outputs are neatly laid out in similar balanced manner. Instead of descriptive labelling, RCA and digital inputs are numbered, and the user can assign names to each. There are altogether three RCA and two XLR input pairs. Two sets of speaker outputs caters for bi-wiring. As befitting the price, all the terminals are of excellent quality.

The FLS10 also has two slots to incorporate the optional phono MM/MC and DAC boards but the review unit did not include these. It would have been good had the phono board been included to assess its performance against the standalone Phono that I reviewed.



In common with many integrated amplifier offerings, a headphone output is included, located conveniently in front just below the volume control. Siting the FLS10 required a bit of brawn due to its size and weight. Connections were very easy to do as everything is nicely spaced. The only complaint I have is the rather tiny on/off switch located next to the power cable inlet. I suppose the manufacturer intended this switch to be used only once when first set up, but in my lightning-prone area, I found it prudent to always put the amplifier into full off mode when not in use. Once in place, in its full brushed aluminium trim, the FLS10 looks elegantly unobtrusive in spite of its size.

LISTENING

From the outset, it was amply clear that the FLS10 was almost factory fresh with hardly any run-in time. The sound was bright and etch-y, lending voices a brightish tone. There also seem to be a lack of power and drive with the sound seemingly unable to rise with the volume knob increases. I resigned myself to a long period of breaking in the amp.

About 10 days later, things changed and quite significantly so. The brightness and etch-y nature receded significantly, although the sound remained slightly light and breezy in character. The air and ambience surrounding instruments now were on full display and delightfully so.



Vocals became natural and very articulate, with every syllable clearly articulated. Every intake of breath was now heard in a natural “live” manner. In the Diana Krall *Turn Up The Quiet* album, the close miking favoured by her made listening to this a most intimate experience. I noted that the bass had now deepened and was much better nuanced.

Further listening of my favourites revealed how exceptionally detailed the FLS10 is. Chico Freeman on *Spirit Sensitive* sounded brilliantly brassy but one can hear the slight noises of the lips on the mouthpiece that tell you that a real human is at work there. The very detailed light coloured character is also eminently suited to classical music.

I played a large number of classical pieces and was highly impressed by the tonal accuracy, in particular the piano. On the excellent rendition of Beethoven’s *Third Piano Concerto* by Perahia/Haitink/Concertgebouw Amsterdam, the famous concert hall ambience was amply displayed (although the volume had to be set quite higher due to the inherent low recorded level). The excellent sonics on most of the Tsuyoshi Yamamoto recordings and especially so on the *Autumn in Seattle* album was extremely enjoyable.

As is usual, my acid test is in how Ella Fitzgerald’s voice is portrayed. Here, I found the FLS10 to be slightly light and perhaps not warm enough for my personal preference. I am sure many would not find this so but perhaps it’s due to my preference for some tubes to be in the chain. When I inserted a tubed phono stage (still under assessment) into the chain, the sound warmed up sufficiently to be of no further concern to me. I should mention here that the FLS10 is very transparent to the upfront source, be it analogue or digital, and to the quality of the recordings. I would not say that the FLS10 is tolerant of poorer sources or recordings as its very detailed character reveals imperfections quite starkly.

The FLS10 also exhibited excellent imaging and soundstage. The Rodrigo y Cabrera acoustic guitar duo’s *Live in Japan* recording with an uncharacteristically enthusiastic Japanese audience was very well played, with the duo placed pinpointedly, but here, I should note that perhaps the FLS10 is a bit too elegant and polite for the live music excitement to shine through. But on piano recordings, this excellent level of imaging even allowed for right and left hand playing to be discerned.

Bass quality is of the fast and tight kind but does not plump the depths as others may. What is available is a tuneful and impactful bass that provides just the right balance to the FLS10 overall sound. In the Isao Suzuki Trio album *Blow Up*, the bowed double bass on the first track was luscious and ravishingly beautiful!

I also noticed that, like most of today's solid-state offerings, how very quiet the FLS10 seemed to be, with hardly any discernible noise in between tracks. Nothing could be heard even with the ears next to the speakers. Obviously, this contributed to the utter clarity, extreme detail and smooth sonic character of the FLS10.

Lastly, I listened to the headphone output using my trusty Sennheiser HD600. My, what a revelation. This is not a patch-up output just to make up the features set, but a real world-class headphone amplifier. Bass quality in particular stood out, being firm and solid, and with real impact when it mattered. Yet, the sound retained all the best of what the amplifier delivered through the speakers! Potential buyers who are also headphone users should also audition the amp with their favourite headphones, it might very well influence their decision to buy. I am quite certain this is the best headphone amplifier I have ever used with my HD600.

THE LAST WORD

The FLS10 proved, after the lengthy run-in period, to be a captivating performer. Its prowess lies in its very detailed and poised portrayal of music and the excellent imaging and sound-staging capabilities.

The potential buyer who values such qualities should put the FLS10 on his shortlist to audition, preferably with his intended partnering equipment. The real icing on the cake is the really excellent headphone output.