

Review of Audia Flight FLS10  
by Hans Wetzel, 02/2023 on :



## Audia Flight FLS10 Integrated Amplifier-DAC



Audia Flight is an Italian electronics manufacturer whose products I'd seen at shows in the past but never had the chance to listen to for an extended period. So when the opportunity arose to review their flagship FLS10 integrated amplifier (\$12,999, all prices in USD), I grabbed it with both hands. I'm a sucker for a high-powered integrated amplifier, and the big Audia Flight amp looked promising: lots of power, an optional phono stage (\$1299), an optional DAC (\$1999), and an RCA (\$599) expansion board—all designed and built by hand in Italy. The fact that it ships in a crate rather than a cardboard box should be a welcome sign for the hi-fi-by-the-pound types among you.

The company was founded in 1996 by Massimiliano Marzi and Andrea Nardini in Civitavecchia, a small town on the Mediterranean located 50 miles from Rome. All manufacturing is proudly performed at their Civitavecchia facility, which employs a total of ten people. Marzi and Nardini were coy about their background and experience, but the Italian gentlemen were more forthright regarding their audio philosophy: "We are not only looking for a 'good instrument' to reproduce music; we try to convey emotion to the audience that will make a listener cry. This is the power to convey emotion; this is our mission. So, when we work on new products, we spend a long time listening to [them], trying different components and different brands."

Audia Flight currently ships ten products—three integrated amplifiers, three power amplifiers, three preamplifiers, and a CD player—across four product lines. Listed in ascending order of cost, their lines are the Classic, FL Three S, FLS, and Strumento. The second-from-the-top FLS line features the FLS4 power amplifier, the FLS1 preamplifier, the FLS9 integrated amplifier, and the focus of this review, the FLS10 integrated amplifier. Effectively, the FLS10 can be considered a marriage of the FLS1 preamplifier and FLS4 amplifier housed in a single chassis. This, as you'll read below, is a potent combination.

I needed only to glance at the shipping pallet the FLS10 was delivered on to appreciate that the flagship Audia Flight integrated was no flyweight. Weighing in at a healthy 82 pounds, installing an FLS10 is a two-person endeavor, despite the FLS10's fairly ordinary dimensions (17.7"W × 7.1"H × 17.3"D). After resting it on top of my custom media console, what accounted for much of the weight became apparent: the front, top, and bottom panels are all fashioned from thick slabs of brushed aluminum, while the sides are lined with exposed heatsinks.

My black review sample (the FLS10 is also available in silver) boasted an impressive build quality. The obligatory knuckle rap on the unit's thick, brushed, and anodized aluminum panels met with zero give—this is a dense, solid piece of kit. Short of the back panel, I saw no joins, screws, or fasteners of any kind, and the top of the unit was imprinted with Audia Flight's logo. Very cool. The overall aesthetics were a mixed bag to my eyes. The FLS10 is an interesting-looking design, with a curved flourish on the front panel that frames the blue OLED display. The big volume knob felt good in day-to-day use, though it's recessed into the chassis, which makes grabbing it and turning it a bit awkward. The front-mounted buttons, by contrast, worked flawlessly, with superb clickiness—that's a sign of art right there—and no wobble to speak of. It felt like they were installed in a broad rock face, such was their solidity. The buttons on the front of the unit are On (power), In (input), Set, Mute, Phase, and Spk (for switching between speaker and headphone outputs). There's also a 6.3mm headphone jack that runs off the amp's output stage. Out back are the usual suspects, including three pairs of single-ended RCA and two pairs of balanced XLR inputs, two pairs of single-ended RCA outputs and one pair of balanced XLR outputs, four binding posts per channel, and slots for two of the three available optional drop-in modules.



My review unit had the Italian firm's DAC and MM/MC phono boards installed. The DAC board includes five digital inputs: two S/PDIF optical (TosLink), one S/PDIF coaxial (RCA), one AES/EBU (XLR), and one USB Type-B. This board also utilizes ESS Technology's ES9028Pro chipset. The FLS10 accepts up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD512 via USB; all other inputs are limited to 24/192 PCM. Short of streaming digital content, the FLS10 should be an effective and complete one-box solution for the majority of audiophiles. Hook up your loudspeakers, connect a source, and you're all set.

Under the bonnet, there's an awful lot to like. The class-AB FLS10 is fully balanced from input to speaker terminal, with 16 Motorola transistors per channel, combined to yield 200Wpc into 8 ohms, 380Wpc into 4 ohms, or a whopping 700Wpc into a demanding 2-ohm load. This truly is an amplifier intended to accommodate even the most difficult-to-drive loudspeakers. That's backed up through the use of a 2000VA toroidal transformer and caps sporting 288,000 $\mu$ F of capacitance. The FLS10 is a wide-bandwidth device with a quoted frequency response of 0.3Hz–500kHz (-3dB), THD of 0.05%, and a signal-to-noise ratio of 110dB (no conditions given). Bass control promised to be excellent too, with a damping factor greater than 650. Audia Flight confirmed that the FLS10 operates in pure class A for the first 8Wpc. Design-wise, the FLS10, like all of the Italian manufacturer's amplifiers, leverages a current-feedback architecture in lieu of the more common voltage-feedback topology, which they argue allows for wider bandwidth and a higher slew rate.

Each input can be renamed, activated, and deactivated through the on-screen controls, and each is adjustable by  $\pm$ 6dB, the latter a handy-to-have feature for those juggling between different sources. The bespoke remote is an all-aluminum affair that's fairly light in the hand and has most of the buttons you'll need.

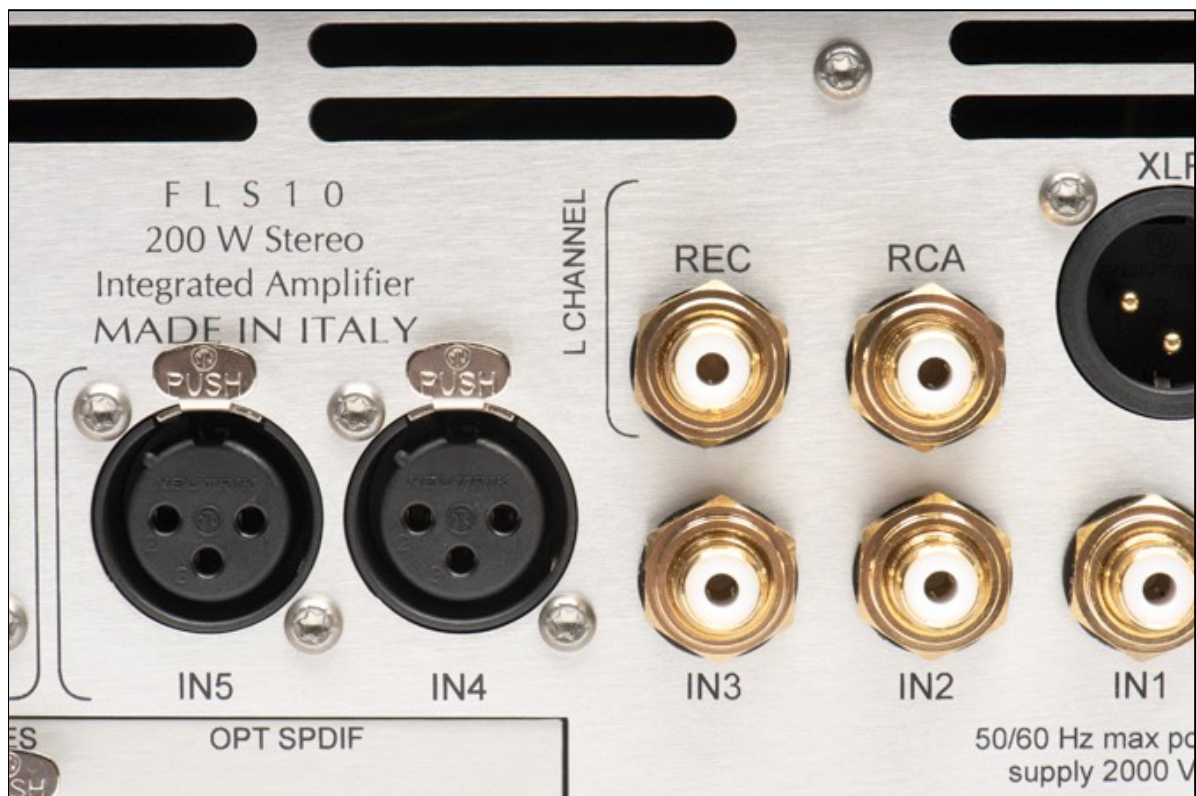
I say that because, by default, the “+” and “-” buttons are used to control the FLS10’s volume—which ranges from -90dB to +10dB in 0.5dB increments—but they’re also used to select the input when the Input button is pressed. This means you have to wait for the plus and minus buttons to default back to volume once you’ve navigated to the input you want. This is mildly annoying though hardly a deal breaker.



The FLS10 carries a two-year warranty, which is disappointingly short for such a premium product.

### Setup and listening

Once my brother and I had manhandled the FLS10 out of its shipping crate, setup was a cinch. I hooked up my KEF Reference 3 loudspeakers using single runs of Siltech Classic Legend 660L speaker cable and wired my Intel NUC music server to the Audia Flight’s USB input using a matching Siltech Classic Legend 380 USB. Power was provided to the Audia Flight with a Siltech Classic Legend 680P power cord. My KEF LS50 monitors and Hegel Music Systems H590 integrated amplifier-DAC sat idly by for the majority of the review cycle. With Roon queued up on my laptop, I was ready to roll with the big Audia Flight integrated.



In operation, the big chassis got fairly warm to the touch, as did the side-mounted heatsinks, but it was never hot, even when I pushed it through extended, high-octane listening sessions. The FLS10 wasn't the quietest amp at idle, as I could hear noise from my KEF's tweeters from a distance of more than a foot, but I couldn't hear it from my listening position around ten feet away. I do wish the unit's screen was a little bigger, though, as I sometimes had trouble making out what was displayed without reaching for my glasses. Fresh out of the crate, the FLS10 sounded fantastic, performing every bit the way you'd expect a \$12,999 amplifier to function. On Phil Collins's "In the Air Tonight," from his 1981 album *Face Value* (16-bit/44.1kHz MQA, Rhino Entertainment / Tidal), I reveled in the reverbed growl of the electric guitar that emanated from the right channel during the intro, as well as the spooky three-dimensionality of the Englishman's opening vocal. More impressive was the tonal density I heard, and transparency by the bucketful married to a slight but definitely perceptible shot of sweetness throughout the audible frequency range. Ordinarily, I dislike electronics that are anything other than ruthlessly neutral, but in this instance, I was enchanted. Collins's voice was imbued with a touch of warmth that rounded out his delivery, and seemed to come more from his diaphragm than his vocal cords. Then there was the matter of the song's massive drum solo that sweeps from left to right across the soundstage. The Audia Flight's control of both the instrument and the space it occupied was incredibly satisfying, and each drum thwack was rich in both texture and slam. Quite the promising start for the Italian super integrated.



Wanting to explore the FLS10's spatial talents, I jumped to "Intro" from The xx's exceptional self-titled first album (16/44.1 FLAC, Young / Tidal). The atmospheric track is an excellent test for exploring an amp's ability to throw out a deep soundstage, and I listened for two things: how deeply the soundstage appeared to extend beyond the front wall of my room and the amount of space recreated around the simple guitar chord that serves as the foundation for the cut. In each case, I heard a hint of softness in the treble that abbreviated the soundscape's fringes. In tandem with this, however, the textures of the guitar chords were sublimely supple, with a ripeness and sonic weight that solidified the bones of the underlying performance. The purity of timbre on offer was off the charts.

I dug further. On went Billie Eilish's smash first single, "Bad Guy," from her debut album, *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* (16/44.1 FLAC, Darkroom / Tidal), and I reveled in the Audia Flight's ability to recreate Eilish's muttered, closely miked vocals. Attack and decay on her lyrics were utterly natural and authentic, with none of the softness that you might expect from an amp that exhibits a modicum of tonal warmth. Stereo imaging was excellent, with Eilish's well-articulated vocal hanging in space between my floorstanding KEF towers with excellent edge definition. Audiophiles who are after a pacey sound characterized by whip-and-snap levels of transient response might not warm to the FLS10's velvety presentation, but it's not off-putting. There's an unvarnished, analog-like candor to the Audia Flight's voicing that left me—a dour critic through and through—with nothing to comment on. When "Bad Guy" finished, I found myself listening to the rest of Eilish's album, perfectly content.

Gregorio Allegri's "Miserere mei Deus (Psalm 51), motet for chorus," as performed by The Sixteen under the direction of Harry Christophers (16/44.1 FLAC, Coro / Tidal), sounded sensational under the FLS10's wand. The cut was recorded in the famous King's College Chapel at the University of Cambridge, a venue I've actually enjoyed in person, and the Audia Flight did a fabulous job of bringing the chapel's soaring ceiling and stained glass into my humble listening room. The delicate and mellifluous tails of the sopranos' passages resounded for several seconds with a gorgeous golden hue. Ultimate treble extension was slightly attenuated, as if the air in the chapel were particularly dense; given the chapel was completed in the year 1515, this may well be the case. And after the Audia Flight transported me through space to Cambridge, it then took me back in time to when I sang in church choirs as a young'un and the well-worn wooden church pews and stone columns of my church's sanctuary contributed a certain gravity to the choir's performance. And that is the power of the finest hi-fi gear, isn't it? It's the power to melt the walls of your listening room and your mind, to push the noise and stress of our daily monotony to the side, if only for a few minutes, and allow you to experience something special. It's an uncommon piece of hardware that can manage such a trick for this grizzled and jaundiced reviewer, but the FLS10 certainly is one.

Now, Allegri to Rammstein may not be the pivot you were expecting, but I would humbly submit, it's the one I needed to best contextualize this Audia Flight integrated's talents. Rammstein's gothic metal deviates ever so slightly from the gothic architecture of King's College Chapel, and singer Till Lindemann possesses a different kind of vocal power and delicacy than the highly trained bass performers in The Sixteen. But having recently witnessed Lindemann and Co. on their North American stadium tour, performing arguably the best concert I've ever witnessed, I felt compelled to queue up "Ich Will" from the German quartet's third album, Mutter (16/44.1 AIFF, Republic Records / Tidal), and just crank the FLS10's volume dial. Lindemann's talent lies in his deeply emotive, guttural delivery, and the Audia Flight conveyed an outrageous amount of texture to my eardrums. The hulking frontman's vocal power shone through clear as day, with a combination of rasp, depth, and venom that was as alluring as it was unsettling. The flanking guitars of Richard Kruspe and Paul Landers were easily discernible in the busy mix, while Christoph Schneider's hi-hats shimmered in the background. Each element of the track was clear and differentiated, while also pregnant with inner detail. It was a complete performance by the big Audia Flight amp.



Finally, I turned to “Blood Bag,” from Tom Holkenborg’s towering soundtrack for *Mad Max: Fury Road* (16/44.1 MQA, WaterTower Music / Tidal), to pressure test the FLS10’s ability to handle huge dynamic swings at high volume. It’s a violent mix of layered taiko-like drums—all performed by Holkenborg himself—with an abused electric guitar, also played by Holkenborg. The liberal synthesizer work coalesces into an all-out assault on the senses. The searing distortion of the electric guitar was palpable, and I felt the drum impacts power through my chest, a testament to the amp’s outstanding control over the 6.5” woofers in my KEF Reference 3s. While 200Wpc may not be a prodigious power rating, it was more than sufficient to drive the KEFs to extremely high levels in my large room, always with unswerving accuracy and nary a hint of distortion. It’s a powerhouse, the FLS10, and a worthy partner to all but the most inefficient loudspeakers. Transients on the track didn’t exhibit the fleetness of foot that you might expect from something like a Simaudio integrated amp, whose calling card is bell-like clarity. But the slightly smoother interpretation of the Audia Flight makes a track like “Blood Bag” less aggressive on the ear drum and less likely to induce listener fatigue. The FLS10’s euphony, even on a bonkers orchestration like “Blood Bag,” is most welcome for a reviewer who’s stumbling badly into middle age.



## Comparison

Compared to the Audia Flight FLS10, my reference integrated amplifier-DAC, Hegel of Norway's line-leading H590 (\$12,000), is a different kettle of fish. Next to the Audio Flight, the H590 is cheap looking, with its minimalist design language, less expensive materials, and a chassis that weighs much less than that of the FLS10. The Hegel's casework build quality is also a clear step—or two—down from the FLS10. But, as my mother repeatedly told me as an angsty teenager, it's what's on the inside that counts, right? It's on the inside that we find a more compelling proposition, in the form of a dual-mono, class-AB amplifier section that pumps out a healthy 301Wpc into 8 ohms, a power supply that generates almost as much current as its Audia Flight competitor, and a Roon Ready streamer with support for Spotify Connect and Apple AirPlay. Even its input and output complement are similar, though Hegel does not offer a built-in phono stage, so neither offering is a true one-box solution for all audiophiles.

Sonically, the differences between the European heavyweights were instantly noticeable. After hooking up the Hegel and once again queuing up "In the Air Tonight," Phil Collins's voice sounded thinner and less fulsome, but it was also projected further forward into my room and exhibited an airier quality. The FLS10's dash of midrange warmth and weight was now missing in action. Different sides of the same coin? Perhaps, as I heard no loss—and just as importantly, no gain—in resolving ability with the Hegel shepherding the proceedings.



It was a similar experience with Allegri's "Miserere." It was as if the heavy air of King's College Chapel had suddenly gone on a diet—the Hegel placed less emphasis on the chorus and instead offered a more macro view of the performance. The H590 proved more evenhanded with the underlying performance, but soloists Ruth Dean and Sally Dunkley were robbed of their tonal intensity and power. And in that sense, the FLS10 offers something unusual: A marriage of the organic palpability you find with the finest vacuum tube amplifiers and the power, control, and low distortion of a solid-state amp. It conjured a magic on this almost-400-year-old composition that my reference Hegel, despite its multitude of talents, couldn't match. And in hi-fi, one should always follow one's heart, no?

I found myself waffling on Rammstein's "Ich Will." On one hand, the bombast and aural pyrotechnics from the Neue Deutsche Härte pioneers benefited from the Hegel's ruthless linearity, as Christoph Schneider's abused drum set offered cleaner impacts and more rapid decays with the H590 in play. Yet, Till Lindemann's vocals suffered, as the Hegel's interpretation of the huge frontman's operatic lyrics was daintier by comparison. And that rather ruined the appeal of turning Rammstein up to 11. With the Audia Flight's volume knob jacked, I could practically feel the spittle from Lindemann's guttural, animalistic delivery splattering across my face and his combat boots compressing my chest cavity. The Hegel left me wanting more, regardless of the volume.

### Conclusions

Audia Flight's FLS10 is a terrific integrated amplifier. It's hand-built to a high standard, with a solidity that's impressive for the price. The 200Wpc power rating felt conservative as it went toe-to-toe with my 301Wpc reference Hegel H590 integrated amp in my large room, and it never faltered. Its ability to pirouette from pop rock to sacred music to electronica-infused soundtracks, and from whisper quiet to eardrum-splitting levels, was evidence to me that the FLS10 could be an endgame amplifier solution for many audiophiles. The Audia Flight's magic midrange, with its intoxicating combination of warmth, layered texturing, and fine detail, was a most welcome quality in my system for many months, and I still feel its absence. If you're in the market for a high-powered, five-figure integrated amplifier, Audia Flight's FLS10 warrants—demands, even—your consideration. It's that good.

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