



## Audia Flight Three S Integrated Amplifier



I have to admit some ignorance to the Audia Flight brand. Sure I'd heard of them, but I really didn't know a lot about the brand and their products. And I hadn't had the pleasure of hearing any of them, until this review product came along. Boy, have I been missing out! The item being reviewed is the new model Flight Three S (FL3S for short) Integrated Amplifier. The retail price is \$4,990. Audia Flight has been making the Flight Three for some 6 years now and the new Three S provides an upgrade in the evolutionary path of the product. It will replace the outgoing Flight Three.

The Flight Three S belongs to the entry level THREE series of components, designed for audiophiles with budgetary constraints. The CLASSIC is the middle tier, with STRUMENTO being the company's state of the art for pre and power amplifiers.

Audia Flight is a high-end audio manufacturer based in Civitavecchia Italy, a sea port on the Tyrrhenian Sea, about 80 kilometres west-north-west of Rome, across the Mignone river. The company was founded in 1996 by Massimiliano Marzi and Andrea Nardini, both men having backgrounds in the electronics industry. Their stated goal was to design and build components that neither altered the audio signal nor slowed down it's transmission. From 1994-1996, working together they both designed a new circuit using current rather than voltage feedback, allowing for a high speed response and easy load control, even if the load is reactive. The first year of retail production occurred in 1997 when they released the Audia Flight 100 power amplifier. Their product policy is: "Our products come from the synergy between sophisticated and original design, Italian style." Capish?

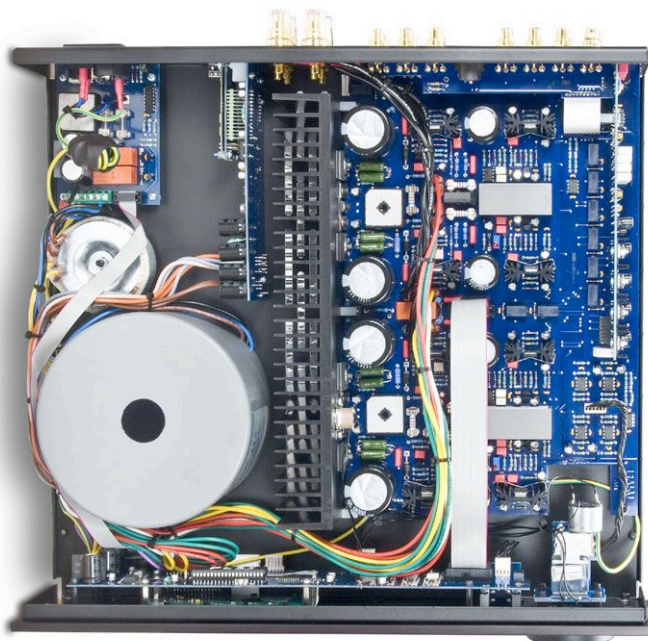
Looking at the FL3S, it is a lovely masterpiece of Italian craftsmanship, with the thick front panel, volume knob and the remote control crafted from solid aluminium. The unit that I received has a silver front face, but a black one is also available. The front panel is dominated by a large blue display within a curved cut out and is flanked underneath with a row of switches. To the right is the very large volume knob, some 63mm in diameter and is very pleasant to use. The remote control is also a welcome departure from the cheap and cheerful plastic units, all too often used.



The input selector allows the user to choose among four unbalanced and one balanced inputs, featuring sealed relays in an inert atmosphere and with gold plated terminations. A by-pass feature, selectable by remote control, allows the user to turn the FL3S into a power amplifier through a specified input. You may include the amplifier in a multi-channel system as the amplifier for front speakers, while using the same speakers for two channel listening, with stereo sources connected to the amplifier. It also features Record, Monitor and Preamp outputs for additional flexibility. The attractive blue front display lets you know the input choice and the main settings.

It can be purchased with an optional USB 24bit 192KHz DAC board (\$580) and an optional MC / MM phono board (\$620). These two options were fitted to my review unit. There is also a headphone output on the front face fitted as standard. There is one set of multi way speaker binding posts. All the connectors are high quality. You really get the feeling that every small detail in the design and manufacture of the amplifier are done to very high standards.

Internally the AC input and filtration is on the left hand side with a large potted 600VA toroidal transformer dominating the available space. The right side has a full size circuit board with a sophisticated preamp section, dual mono design and current feedback. There are 8 individual power supplies feeding the various parts of the circuit. The logic control has its own separate toroidal transformer and is independent from the analogue section and is connected by photo-couplers. An ALPS blue potentiometer is used. The output devices and heatsink are located in the centre, naturally separating the power supply and preamp sections. The power output is rated at 2 x 100w @ 8 ohms, or 160 w @ 4 Ohms. I found that it ran quite cool to the touch above the vented casework, even after running it all day long. At 16.5Kg it is a substantial unit that feels very well built, you could say built to last and with very high level of workmanship.



## Listening

Upon switching the unit on, a series of relays click and 'AUDIA FLIGHT FL3S' shown in the front display panel, before it completes the self-test cycle and displays the selected input. This is a unit that requires at least 100 playing hours to really settle in, which is entirely normal for any quality product. Initially the sound was disjointed with a midrange that didn't match the rest of the frequency spectrum. But slowly and surely the sound of the FL3S grew more unified and natural.

Once run-in and ready for review, what I heard brought a huge smile to my face; this is one nice amplifier. Tonally, it has real harmony from top to bottom, with no dips and peaks that I could hear, something very rare for an integrated amplifier, let alone a pre-power combo. There is a wonderful sense of extension in the top octaves and it sounds linear all the way up. And down too, with the bottom octaves sounding realistic, not over emphasised, but not shy either. It is just right. The quoted frequency response is 1Hz - 450KHz, a very wide range indeed and I have no reason to suspect otherwise. The midrange was smooth and natural and did nothing to draw attention to itself. In fact naturalness is a prominent attribute of this amplifier. It simply allows music, including voices and instruments to sound realistic, with a draw-you-in quality to it.

Listening to Ricky Kej & Wouter Kellerman Grammy Award winning album "Winds of Samsara", whilst typing up the review in the background was an absolute delight. The music as both evocative and relaxing, with the piano and flute instruments sounding very natural indeed. The decay and air around both the instruments in "Grace" (a song written and played by Australia's Fiona Joy) was almost palpable with accurate micro dynamics and emotional sensitivity from the Audia Flight amplifier.

To move it up a little, I picked a favourite (of many) Kraftwerk track from the live "Minimum - Maximum" album, "Numbers" a track with a wide frequency and dynamic range. The bass is strong, powerful and intense, while the fast attack in the mid-treble area is incredibly good, with no smearing, just clean and dynamic. The live audience of the concert is portrayed evenly and has good spatial information. Even at volume settings that made me feel guilty, the FL3S just kept on delivering, without drama or stress and with very little dynamic compression. Boris Blank's "Electrified" is a terrifically dynamic track with punch and kick to spare. Or try Knife Party "Power Glove". As the words go "Now you're playing with power". The amp just keeps playing unfazed with really fast tight bass, not overly prominent, but in proportion to the rest of the track. This amp certainly does not sound like someone has left the old fashioned 'loudness' button switched on, but neither is it anaemic in the bass, it's just a very good balance and...it's fast.

As mentioned in the introduction, Audia Flight's stated goal was to design and build components that neither altered the audio signal nor slowed down its transmission. I think that they have largely succeeded on both those objectives with the FL3S, as that is exactly how it sounds. Many conventional architecture amplifiers slow down the transmission, while some new switching type amps tend to exaggerate or speed up the transmission. The FL3S gets it right and as a result music is relaxing to the ear and sounds natural and comfortable, enabling long listening sessions that are fatigue free. That quality made me want to listen to well recorded, natural sounding tracks as they sounded so darn good. Played loudly or softly it sounded great. Playing Aaron Diehl's album "The Bespoke Man's Narrative" quite softly is another good example, it's engaging thanks to its great sense of accurate speed and timing.

I noticed that male voices sounded particularly well reproduced with strength and vitality. Listen to the Three Tenors and you would swear that Italian operatic tracks were made to be played back on this amplifier. Perhaps when voicing the FL3S at the factory, this may have been part of the reference track repertoire. "Turandot / Act 3: Nessun dorma!" sung by Luciano Pavarotti is accurately portrayed with power and feeling. I also appreciated the subtle vibrato of his voice that was conveyed naturally. The orchestra and strings are delightful reproduced through the FL3S. Jonny Cash singing "Hurt" sounds superb, with all his natural graveliness and emotional anguish of the soul handsomely transported into my listening room.

I connected the amplifier to a couple of different speakers including the smallish stand mounted Rogers LS5/9 65th Anniversary Edition monitors (review coming) and the monster Brodmann Acoustics JB205 loudspeakers. The amp has no difficulty driving the somewhat fussy Brodmann's and the balance is absolutely spot on. They are ruthlessly accurate and revealing, yet the FL3S were a very good pairing with them, high praise indeed, due to the fact that they are so neutral. So I'm quite comfortable to suggest that they should be able to drive almost anything that you have to connect to them. If you want any particular additional flavour to your sound, finding a suitable speaker with that taste would be way to go, knowing that the amplifier has very little of its own flavour to add to the overall sound.

Even connected to my 2 channel AV system with the speakers sitting alongside my flat panel TV, I didn't feel the need to exaggerate the bass with a sub woofer, as an almost full range system sounds more lifelike and less fatiguing. But who am I kidding, there is nothing lifelike on TV. That aside, the FL3S gave all my movies and shows a great sense of space and air, with very clear dialog and plenty of detail. It's very powerful and easily handles everything I want to hear. But really the FL3S is too good to put on an AV system, it screams for something more worthy. At least with the flexible inputs and outputs it can be handily used in that way if required.



The optional DAC module proves to be a very handy performer. It's not quite as good as a mega buck high end separate DAC, and it's not meant to, but at only \$580 I challenge anyone to find something better at that price. I found it to be very usable and convenient, having it built in and selectable via the remote control, is just convenient.



The phono stage module (optional) was also put to the test and I can verify that this is a very handy option and a worthy inclusion to the amplifier. It's very neutral sounding, without any rough edges or character of its own, very much in keeping with the overall package by Audia Flight. It just gets out of the way of the music and allows LP's to sound glorious and room filling. Incidentally, a small Philips screwdriver is included in the packaging to enable access to the small cover at the rear of the amp, which allows access to the hidden dip switches to set the board to your particular cartridge, MM or MC, loading etc. It's a nice touch and adds to the luxury feel.

I also briefly tried the 6.35 mm (1/4") front headphone socket and found it very useful and musical in a similar manner to the speaker output. It has no difficulty driving my low impedance (32 Ohm) headphones to realistic levels. I'm really enjoying the overall flexibility of the FL3S, it seems like everything that I need is there and works exactly as it should.



## Conclusion

It's obvious to me that the FL3S is an incredibly well made component, where every detail has been carefully thought out for the discriminating high-end audio enthusiast. The FL3S is entirely made in Italy and it certainly feels European with its luxury sound quality and solid engineering. If the THREE series is only the entry level as far as the Audia Flight range goes, I would really love to hear the top tier units!

I like the simplicity of a single amplifier unit but have often found that there are some fairly serious audible compromises compared to a pre and power combination ... until now. Forget your Japanese integrated multi-channel AV amplifiers, this is on a totally higher plane than them. Comfortably, this is an audiophile quality amplifier of the highest order, with attributes of something that is a lot dearer. At \$4,990 RRP plus options it is not exactly cheap, but I do believe that it is extremely good value, along with loads of flexibility. If you consider the cost of purchasing alternative separate pre and power amplifiers, a DAC and a phono stage, including all the quality connecting cables and power cords, along with the resulting mess that creates for a single reliable self-contained unit, then yes, it's extremely good value.

You will never feel short changed as far as sound quality goes. It's easily the best integrated amplifier I've heard in my system.

PRO'S - Powerful, Natural and a clean revealing sound, Good value, Flexibility, Quality, Made in Italy  
CON'S - Cost, I can't think of anything else.