

Power Amplifier : AUDIA Flight Strumento n°4



I killed two Italian birds with one stone while reviewing the mighty and impressive Audia Flight Strumento n1 Stereo Pre Amplifier. To the preamp, I added the hefty and equally impressive n4 power amplifier. Both these pieces are the stars of the Audia Flight (AF) top line, named Strumento.

The Audia Flight Strumento N°4 Stereo Power Amplifier is a solid, massive block of an amplifier in the tradition of Boulder and Burmester. It weighs in at just under 200 lbs, features exquisite build quality, and will take two grown adults to move and position. It ships in a large, wooden crate, comes with a one year warranty and retails for \$25K. The build and price implies a lifetime amplifier. Does the sound?

Audia Flight details the n4 design with ‘... fully balanced circuitry, highly selected components, 48 power devices, a power supply built with extra low impedance, computer grade capacitors (320.000µF only on the main power suppliers), 12 power suppliers, special print boards with an extra high surface copper, copper bars, 3000VA special audio transformers with double shield, ultra fast rectifiers, with 200Wrms on 8ohm output power.’

Audia Flight owners Massimiliano Marzi and Andrea Nardini are justly proud of their benchmark Strumento products, describing them as ‘the sum of their audio knowledge’. They are equally proud of the case design and the internal circuitry, all proprietary to AF.

The solid state circuitry of the amplifier matches its preamp sibling perfectly, but the neutral and incredibly dynamic sounds the n4 amplifier produces should highlight the excellence of any fine preamplifier.

The main mover of the preamplifier, a bottomless, totally black noise floor is once again heard, or not heard, from the amplifier. Throwing in a couple of very highly regarded amplifiers to hook up to the Strumento preamp was instructive to Audia Flight's sound design. The other amplifiers (both less expensive than the AF) sounded beautiful, especially the 16K solid state Jeff Rowland 525 Stereo Amplifier. But, if push came to shove, I'd chose the more expensive Audia Flight for its uncanny ability to unravel the most complex musical passages and lay them out in a very logical fashion. It manages perfectly what well designed solid state amplifiers should attempt — liquid black backgrounds, effortless dynamics, a magical soundstage, a true to life timbres. It reminded me of the Burmester 911 Mk II (a personal favourite solid state amplifier), Boulder's beasts at their very best, and even an old stager, the very fine Sim Audio Moon W5. As such, I'd place the mighty Strumento as a must hear if you're a solid state fan. Tube guys should take a listen, too. You may be surprised at what you (don't) hear.



During my audition of the n4, I reviewed the new Harmonia Mundi/Bartok Violin Concertos CD by Isabelle Faust. The last movement coda of the First Concerto is a devil for any amplifier. Orchestrated by a madly in love nineteen year old, the excitable brass writing can easily overwhelm that of the strings and woodwind, and, while we're at it, young Bartok's bass drum dynamic markings are too quiet for the busy orchestral writing. Conductors usually hold their hand up to quiet the brass and pump up the bass drum. On the new Harmonia Mundi recording, the AF makes the conductor's changes moot. The noise floor and the clarity of the brass, strings and bass drum was heard very clearly. Other amps did this house cleaning, too, but none I've heard at shows (I use the Sony/Midori Bartok CD as a test CD at shows) or during this review cleaned up the musical scenery like the Strumento n4.

This new CD was especially illuminating concerning string timbres. Bartok uses a plethora of string techniques (they even named a type of pizzicato after him) to project his musical ideas. Lots and lots of high end kit, especially the solid state variety, congeal the sounds. Yes, it's a violin, but what about the bow, resin, attacks, etc? The AF allowed this listener to easily discern the differences between Faust's more direct view and Midori's much more slick approach. At the opening of the 2nd Concerto, Faust really digs into the main theme — it's all resin and horse hair, which is heard clearly, but with the heart of Faust's lovely tone intact. I love that the AF gets this most elusive timbre from a digital source. Bodes well for a match with the AF phono stage (review forthcoming).

Vinyl was like a dream state through the AF. I used a Brinkmann turntable/arm and Koetsu Rosewood cartridge and the incredibly subtle gradations in timbre and dynamics heard on the reissue of Meyerbeer's *Les Patineurs*/Israel/Martinon/Decca were incredibly beautiful. Nothing this tricky disc could conjure bothered the amplifier. You want defined basses in comparison with cellos (and their completely different timbres), it's there, you want accurate pitch in timpani, it's there, you want violins and piccolo that go to heaven, they're there, you want phoney, bloated mid bass, coloration, and the like, look elsewhere. Even though they produce some glorious sounds, The Israel Philharmonic, for many reasons can be a sloppy orchestra. Here, Martinon has them on a knife-edge, yet, inaccuracies creep through, usually in attacks in instrumental sections or choirs of sections. If you have the ears and the knowledge of the scores, the AF will be your best friend. A lackadaisical musician drawing his breath and his pay, won't. They don't call the 'rank and file' violinists in some orchestras 'wank and smile' for nothing.

The Strumento n4 not only matched my benchmarks for outstanding solid state amplifiers (models by Rowland, Burmester, Moon, Boulder), it has become a favourite. To be honest, I'd be happy to live with power amplifiers from any of these legendary manufacturers, but the refinement of orchestral sound, that total absence of coloration, jet black background and effortless dynamics makes me believe that I'd ask her to dance first.

If you'd asked me before the music began, the other four ladies may have had their dance card completed before Audia Flight's beauty. We always knew that the Italians had style and flair, but I would not have imagined the Italians could match the best of Canada, the US and Germany for innovation and technical execution. A wonderful musical and technical achievement.

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