HAMY/SOUND Appassionato

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AUDIO ANALOGUE

Extrait du banc d'essai paru dans HIFI CHOICE (Janvier 2006)

"...le classieux constructeur Italien entend suivre Linn et Arcam sur le chemin des chaînes compactes Audiophiles. Ainsi cet Enigma concentre le désormais classique triptyque Lecteur CD, Amplificateur et Tuner. Contrairement à Arcam le Tuner est ici AM/FM... Mais quoi qu'il en soit l'ensemble rempli parfaitement son rôle avec une subtile touche Audiophile. ...rien qu'à son allure selon nous, cet Enigma l'emporte sur ses deux concurrents British en termes de finition et de dessin. Mais la qualité de construction l'emporte aussi sur l'Arcam Solo grâce notamment à la façade en aluminium massif et les possibilités de l'Enigma. Son prix apparaît plus attractif encore quand on sait que cette petite boîte n'est pas fabriquée quelque part en Chine mais dans l'usine de son constructeur, en Italie. Comme souvent en pareil cas, la qualité de la construction fait son effet sur celle du son... Un autre de ses points de curiosité se voit au travers de cette petite fenêtre en haut à gauche de la façade avant; un tube double triode ECC88... Tout cela permet d'expliquer la bonne note en qualité sonore. L'Enigma délivre sa musique avec facilité... Il est nettement au-dessus du Linn et de l'Arcam en ce sens qu'il a quelque chose des systèmes à tubes qui lui évite le son plutôt "électronique" de ses concurrents. ...c'est sans doute là le meilleur système Mini que nous ayons jamais écouté et il mérite certainement beaucoup mieux que de se retrouver dans votre cuisine ou votre chambre à coucher."

Audio Analogue Enigma CD player/receiver [Review]

BEST BUY HI-FICHOICE magazine

Fancy an Italian?

Audio Analogue's Enigma adds a dash of Latin charm to the one-box system concept

PRODUCT Audio Analogue Enigma
TYPE Integrated CD player/receiver
PRICE £850
KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 37x10x44.5cm ❖ Weight: 9.5kg ❖ One-box CD player, amp and FM/AM tuner with 30 presets ❖ Rated power: 54W per channel (eight ohms) ❖ ECC88 valve in output stage
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www.audioanalogue.com

Audio Analogue traditionally christens its products with names associated with great classical music composers. In the past, we've had Paganini, Puccini and Donizetti for a CD player, integrated amplifier and power amp respectively. So, you can imagine our concern when we first heard about the Enigma. Not, as you might expect, because the classy Italian manufacturer has followed Linn and Arcam down the 'audiophile' one-box system route, but because for some reason it has decided to name its debut product in this arena after one of the worst musical atrocities of recent times: Enigma, that hybrid mix of new-age nonsense and soft dance music of the very worst kind.

The Enigma (the hi-fi product, that is) offers that mini-system holy trinity of CD player, amplifier and radio tuner. Unlike the similar Arcam Solo, the tuner here is an FM/AM model, and not a DAB unit. Anyway, whatever this system contains or lacks, it performs its tasks with a subtle, audiophile twist.

Importantly for this kind of product, the Enigma, in our subjective opinion at least, beats both its British competitors in terms of looks and style. It sports a highly attractive 'shoe-box' case, fronted with some very high-grade aluminium polished to give a highly attractive sheen. The build quality is also considerably better than that of Arcam's Solo, with an incredibly solid aluminium front panel and extremely responsive controls, including a very nice volume knob and an array of stainless steel buttons. The volume knob doesn't turn: it 'jogs' one way or the other to increase or reduce the level. All this is no mean feat, considering the asking price is some £150 less than Arcam's offering. Also, it shouldn't be forgotten that this piece of kit isn't bolted together in China, but instead is designed and constructed in Audio Analogue's Italian factory – which makes the price even more impressive.

As is often the case, build quality also has an effect on sound quality, and Audio Analogue claims that the fairly deep body – in relation to the width and height of the unit – allows the company to place sonically vital components away from each other, while still allowing the Enigma the benefit of a slim (ish) profile.

There is, however, one point of contention on the features front: the remote control. Basic at best, the supplied controller doesn't look as though at was conceived to partner the rest of the Enigma, and while it's simple to use and control the system with it, we can't help feeling it's something of a carbuncle on what is otherwise an incredibly well made, very attractive proposition.

A major part of the attraction – especially on the front panel – is the little window to the left of the volume knob. This rather proudly displays an ECC88 double triode valve in the output section of the amplifier.

SOUND QUALITY

All this comes together to put a big tick in that all-important sound-quality column. Okay, so the Enigma isn't quite a high-end audiophile proposition when compared to many of the components that fill the pages of this magazine, but it's no sonic slouch either. It certainly performs well when compared to the direct competition, whether that be a one-box solution or even a components-based system.

Fittingly for a valve-based music system, refinement is the order of the day here... and the Enigma delivers music in a cool, collected manner. Not 'cool' in the chilly sense, though; there's definitely something 'valvey' about the sound. It stands out from the likes of Linn and Arcam in this respect – while there's nothing bad about the way they perform, there's definitely a more 'electronic' feel to the sound that is delivered by these devices.

The Enigma has a presentation that leans towards laid back rather than in your face, and points toward Audio Analogue having a slightly more classical music market in mind for the Enigma, something that's often said about many of Audio Analogue's products. That's not to say that the Enigma is sluggish or dull, it's just slightly more at home with the likes of Elgar than it is belting out The Stooges' *Fun House*. Perhaps it was Elgar's *Enigma Variations* that Audio Analogue was aiming at with that product name after all...

However, even with the abrasive rock of Iggy and the boys, the Enigma manages to keep things tight, and vocals are a particular highlight – especially the bit where Iggy shouts 'lordy' between tracks, which sets your arm hairs on edge. Switch to the rather better recorded vocal musings of Tom Waits' *Real Gone* and things improve still further, with a lifelike quality to the intonation. This really does belie the asking price of a system comprising the Enigma and a pair of Quad 12L loudspeakers. Female vocals are even better served, and the subtle differences in the delivery of Joni Mitchell's *Blue* set are rendered with startling accuracy, resulting in several checks to make sure it was still the Enigma playing.

Larger scale works also get the full treatment, whether it's the pomp rock of *And You Will Know Us* by The Trail of Dead or Beethoven's seventh symphony, there's a scale and presentation that is never less than impressive. It's also very controlled, and even when music gets complicated the Enigma remains sure of foot, and all the separate elements – both instrumental and rhythmic – are kept on a tight leash.

While it's not the loudest system in the world – party animals may be disappointed, compared to mega-watt nonsense from brands who should know better – there's enough volume there for most people's needs, and the Enigma never sounds like it's going to blow a gasket, even when you do crank it up. It also manages to remain tonally accurate no matter what volume you listen to it at, with lower-level presentation matching louder run throughs accurately and without too much deviation.

The Enigma system may tread new ground, but sonically it's all Audio Analogue, with many of the manufacturer's signature characteristics present and correct. It knocks all the cheaper competition for six; even the impressive likes of Denon's mini-system offerings can't come close to the look, feel and above all performance of this piece of equipment. But perhaps more importantly, it also gives the Arcam a good run for its money, just edging it in terms of sound quality, although the Solo's DAB tuner scores high on the feature front. **HFC**

Shaun Morin

"The subtle differences in the delivery of Joni Mitchell's *Blue* set are rendered with startling accuracy by the Enigma."

VERDICT

SOUND >> 82%
FEATURES >> 86%
BUILD >> 88%
VALUE >> 88%

PRO: We love the convenience, we love the sound and we love the price, but most of all we love the audacity of putting valves in a mini system!

CON: It suits gentle classical better than full-tilt rock. We could build a same-price separates system that would pip it – but it wouldn't be so neat and stylish!

FINAL WORD: While the Enigma isn't more than the sum of its parts in a true audiophile sense, it is possibly the best 'mini' system we've ever heard, and deserves more than simply being relegated to the kitchen or bedroom.

HI-FICHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 86%

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