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April 2010

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Three World Premieres

Monrio Audio Asty Digital Integrated Amplifier

Asty Player VT CD Player

And JAS Audio Oscar Loudspeaker

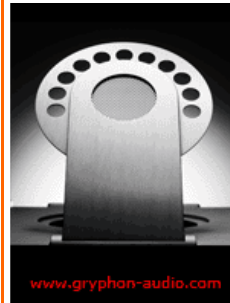
A \$7,500 Trifecta A system worth salivating over.

Review by Dick Olsher

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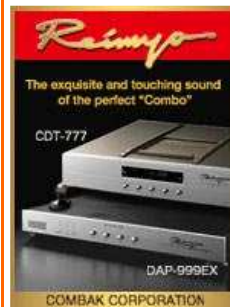
Located a short drive from Milano, in the town of Piacenza, Monrio has established a fine reputation for good sound in its Italian home market. I understand that the company's name represents a concatenation of "Monte Rio," the birthplace of Mr. Gazzola, Monrio's head man. Their products are designed and built in Italy and should be understood as a serious effort to extract a substantial level of high-end magic at affordable price points. This is an art form that few manufacturers have mastered. And Monrio has demonstrated that a reasonable price does not automatically equate with made in China.



When I approached Stephen Monte of Quest for Sound, Monrio's United States distributor, about loudspeaker recommendations he quickly pointed at the JAS Audio line which he also happens to distribute, and in particular the Oscar (\$3,495 per pair). My goal was to locate a compatible loudspeaker at a price point fairly close to the combined cost of the integrated amp and CD player. It made no sense to me to audition a \$2000 integrated amplifier with an ultra expensive loudspeaker. Such a coupling is simply not grounded in reality and would have represented a clear case of mixing "apples and oranges." Choice of matching speakers represents a critical decision that can make or break an amplifier review. It's my impression that many reviewers simply drop an amplifier into an existing system, allow it to sink or swim, and report their impressions. That is, metaphorically speaking, playing Russian roulette with the review outcome. I would much rather report on a marriage made in heaven than on an incompatible coupling. And that's how the Oscar made it into my listening room.

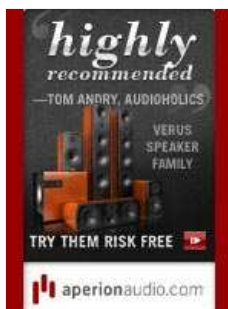
Hong Kong based JAS Audio is a bit unusual in how it develops audio products. Each new product is said to be carefully evaluated by an expert panel of audiophiles using blind listening tests and presumably such feedback is used to fine tune the product. Such an approach strikes me as a perfect balance between physics and perception. I know of some designers that rely entirely a particular measurement or set of measurements in assessing product quality. Yet ultimately sound quality is all about perception. For example, one may reasonably attempt to describe the sonic character of a speaker on the basis of frequency response and distortion measurements alone. But there are many perceptual factors such as immersion in the soundfield or musical values such as rhythm and pace and communication between musicians that can only be judged via critical listening. My enjoyment of or dissatisfaction with music reproduction are perceptual attributes generated by the auditory system and influenced by my state of mind. They exist in my head and cannot be measured by a meter.

I should note that the folks at JAS Audio were amused when I asked if



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the model name was an allusion to the Hollywood Oscar. I was told that originally the speaker was designed for a friend named Oscar. But after their Canadian distributor fell in love with its sound and advised to have it inserted in the product line between the Orsa and Orsus models, the name Oscar was a perfect fit for the O-series.

Technical Details

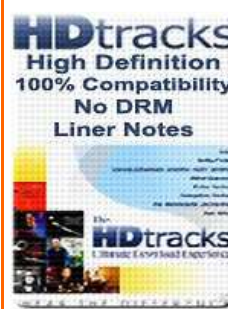
The Asty Digital 70 wpc integrated is said to be Monrio's first entry in their new technology line and is capable of accepting both digital and analog inputs. In addition to the usual suspects (six analog line-level inputs that can accommodate CD, tuner, external phono stage, etc.), it can also accept digital files via a rear-mounted USB port from a computer connection or music server. iPod docking functionality is also provided via a mini jack on the front panel. The key to all this functionality is an onboard 24-bit/192kHz Crystal DAC. Audio files supported include Internet radio (WMA, MP3 Streams, MMS), MP3, Apple Lossless (from iPod), Windows Media formatted content, WAV, FLAC, and OGG Vorbis. It is fair to say that in addition to being an integrated amplifier, it is also an iPod dock, DAC, and music file player. A direct bypass setting allows integration of the unit into a home theater system. I should note that since computer audio is not my thing I only reviewed the Asty Digital as a conventional integrated amplifier.

The front panel is dominated by an LCD which shows the input selected as well as the volume level as a range from -55 to +31. Volume can be adjusted manually on the front panel or via a remote control. At this price point the only sensible solution which includes remote control is an electronic volume control. The Burr Brown PGA2311 is a digitally-controlled analog volume control based on internal low-noise op amps. It was designed as a high performance, stereo volume control for professional and high-end consumer audio systems. It is instructive to remove the chassis cover and take a peak under the hood. One large circuit board houses all components except for a toroidal power transformer which is mounted directly to the chassis. The layout is clean and professional. The output power stage is spaced apart from the low-level section to reduce interference. It consists of pair of Sanken C3263 epitaxial planar power transistors per channel, capable of dissipating up to 130 watts.

The Asty CD Player VT represents a complete redesign of Monrio's previous Asty Player. It is based on a sigma-delta upsampling 24-bit/192 kHz chip from Wolfson, which I happen to like a lot based on past experience due to its intrinsically low jitter spec. The question remains as to how to tame digital nasties produced by sigma-delta DACs, and it seems to me that the most reliable approach, which has withstood the test of time, is to introduce a tube output stage. And this is exactly what Monrio did with its new CD player. A single 12AU7 dual triode is used here to add natural warmth and imaging magic to the presentation. My sample was outfitted with a Russian Electro-Harmonix, a New Sensor brand. Being a natural-born tube roller, I attempted to roll-in one of my Mullard NOS 12AU7s. I knew I was in trouble when I removed the chassis cover and didn't see a tube socket, the tube pins appeared to go straight through the circuit board. It appeared that the tube was soldered in place. That much was confirmed by Giovanni at Monrio Audio.



The end result is that tube replacement is quite complicated. First, the PCB needs to be removed from the chassis before the tube can then be desoldered. According to Monrio, that approach was adopted mainly due to the fact that the total height of the enclosure is insufficient to accommodate a tube plus socket. It is not clear to me why a tube+socket could not be deployed in a horizontal orientation. After taking into account tube life and how often the tube might need to be replaced, they decided to take the risk. The Electro-Harmonix is said to have been selected after listening tests of several current production types and performed best in this application due to its warm textures.



The GyrFalcon CD loader was quite sluggish in initializing a disc. That was a minor annoyance. However, a bit more annoying was the interference between the remote controls for the CD Player and integrated amp. For example, the CD Player's remote track advance simultaneously also changed the amplifier's input source selection.

The JAS Audio Oscar is advertised as a 2.5-way design. At first, that sounds like an oxymoron. There are two-way and three-way designs, but how can you have something in between? It's like saying someone is a little pregnant when it clearly is an either or proposition. Well, in fact the Oscar is a bit more than a three-driver two-way design. The tweeter and the upper mid-woofer are crossed over conventionally at about 1800 Hz while the lower mid-woofer is rolled-in at around 250 Hz with a second-order network. The latter's function is to augment the lower midrange and bass range.



The star attraction here is the Chinese LCY twin-ribbon tweeter. This is a true ribbon design, a rare sight at sub \$10,000 price points, which is custom made for JAS Audio and is further modified in house to improve the neodymium magnetic circuit. Instead of using a single long ribbon transducer, the LCY uses two short ribbons of equal length, positioned side by side, with the idea of improving dispersion in the vertical plane. A transformer is used to maintain a decent impedance over its operating bandwidth. Here the ribbon tweeter is pushed down to 1800 Hz with the aid of a third-order network. I have to say that I'm mightily impressed with the clarity and transparency of this tweeter, being head-and-shoulders above the typical dome tweeter one experiences at this price point. I was also surprised by the appearance of good quality 6.5-inch Morel mid-woofers; clearly the Oscar's design team was intent on achieving good sound the most reliable way I know of, and that is by deploying good drivers.

The Oscar is beautifully finished and features a well braced cabinet. It also happens to be a bass reflex design, but don't expect to find the vent at an "anatomically" correct position on the back of the cabinet. Instead, the vent is located on the cabinet bottom and JAS makes a big deal out of this claiming that this is responsible for a 360-degree radiation pattern. Well, the wavelength is so long in the bass range that the vent output wraps around the cabinet and radiates omni-directionally no matter where the vent location happens to be.

On their website LCY recommends a parallel trap circuit to contour the tweeter's response. According to JAS Audio, such a circuit has been implemented in the tweeter's crossover network, so I expected to find a pretty uniform treble response. However, my frequency response measurements showed a peak of about +5 dB centered around 6 kHz. When I inquired about this I was told that the design team panel, based on listening tests, opted for a final voicing which included a slight recession around 3 kHz and a peak around 6 kHz ? rather than making the frequency response linear. Now, I do agree with a manufacturer's right to alter, "season to taste" if you will, a speaker's frequency response in the pursuit of musical enjoyment. But I should hasten to add that I also believe in truth in advertising and expect a manufacturer to disclose the nature of the product up front. This could best be done by publishing an on-axis frequency response curve, something JAS Audio has not done. And if you look at the published "frequency response", you find that it's actually a frequency range - given as 40 Hz to 60 kHz without a +/- dB deviation spec.

This sort of engineered response enhancement may well be a consequence of cultural expectations. This is a far cry from the laid-back British sound I grew up with. I suspect that Chinese sound preferences may be closely aligned with 1970s West Coast sound, a cultural bubble that seems to have faded away in the US. During the golden years of

cinema, think Altec-Lansing's "Voice of the Theater," it was common to hype a theater speaker's presence region in order to make the dialog jump off the screen. No doubt the Oscar has a bit of that jump factor, but there are also some unintended consequences. I found the presentation to be overly sibilant. Some of that character can be controlled, but not entirely eliminated, by toeing in the speakers so that they intersect well in front of the listening seat. The idea is to listen to the ribbon tweeter off axis.

Sonic Impressions

I do not mean to imply that the Oscar is a hot sounding speaker. Aside from the peak at 6 kHz, it measured smoothly from a few hundred Hz up to at least 20 kHz. If you're a perfectionist about natural balance, then the Oscar may not be your cup of tea. But despite its presence region hype, or possibly because of it, I found the Oscar to be a seductive and charismatic speaker. First and foremost, the Oscar could boogie. It propelled the music along with plenty of kinetic energy, what you might refer to as rhythm and pace. It came across as quick and detailed, adept at resolving instrumental lines in complex mix. The speaker universe is divided into two camps: low-res and high-definition. The Oscar is definitely in the high-def camp. Having the LCY tweeter crossed over at 1800 Hz has paid handsome dividends. The upper midrange was pure and sweet sounding, accommodating of female voice and violin overtones. It was capable of excellent clarity and managed to portray a wide soundstage with excellent depth layering. Ebb and flow of instrumental harmonic envelopes was also a highlight. The lower midrange was sufficiently authoritative to do justice to piano reproduction.

However, on the minus side, the resultant bass range in my room was uneven. There was too much midbass and not enough upper bass. I wish I could trade some mid bass away for more output in the octave from 120 to 240 Hz, but alas that was not a realistic possibility. The consequence was a bit of midbass heaviness and a slight loss of bass definition. Box tuning appeared to be around 46 Hz, so I was a bit worried about loss of damping in the deep bass and sensitivity to subsonics during analog playback. But I did not experience any such problem during the analog sessions.

It is important to tailor the front end to the needs of the Oscar, and that is where the Monrio CD Player played an important role. One of the challenges any CD player under review has to negotiate is a head-to-head battle with my Sony XA5400 SACD player. Yes, it's back in production, and with a street price of under \$1,500 it defines value at this price point. If you have a significant SACD collection, the Sony offers the chance to accommodate both your SACD and CD collections, so if the competition can't get past the Sony, it's game over! Well, no worries, the Monrio did well here; after all it's a battle of (I'm guessing) an inexpensive op-amp vs. a tube-based output stage. The Monrio sounded more focused, free of digital nasties, without a solid-state edge that permeates the sound of the Sony. The overall presentation was warm, with excellent detail retrieval, and a laid-back darkish treble range. All of these characteristics happen to be a perfect match for the Oscar.

I was worried about the MonrioAsty integrated right out of the box, but after a few hours break-in period it woke up and began to smell the coffee. After that I left it powered in Standby mode between listening sessions, something I recommend you do as well. In common with other solid-state amplifiers, it struggled with harmonic colors, sounding grayer, less color saturated than the real thing. Performance in this area proved to be load dependent. With the DALI Helicon 400 Mk2, colors as well as stage depth dropped a couple of notches relative to the Oscar. With both of these speakers the Monrio evinced plenty of bass drive, definition, and decent slam. It sailed right through loud passages with minimal compression and was surprisingly adept at giving orchestral crescendos full scope of expression. But there was undeniable synergy with the Oscar. As a system, Monrio + Oscar, I felt that rendition of harmonic color merited a rating of 8 out of 10. And that's high praise in my book for any solid-state device. On the whole, the Monrio gear catered to the Oscar's needs while preserving its inherent clarity, transient speed, and

rhythmic drive.

Conclusion

In audio as in life context is critical. Sonic judgments are always influenced by specific settings. It's unfortunate that our pursuit of audio excellence has degenerated into listings of recommended components. That must account for what seems like chronic audiophile dissatisfaction with one's system and constant trading around. Well, we present here a \$7500 Trifecta, a system recommendation that will keep you enjoying the music for years to come and with a minimal hit to your wallet. Monrio plus JAS Audio ?a system deserving a serious audition.

Specifications

JAS Audio Oscar Loudspeaker

Recommended amplifier power: 10 - 220 wpc
Sensitivity: 90 dB/1W/1m
Nominal impedance: 4 Ohm
Frequency range: 40 Hz - 60 kHz
Net Weight: 29 kg per speaker
Dimensions: 22 x 102 x 33 cm (WxHxD)
Price: \$3495 per pair

Monrio Audio Asty Digital Integrated Amplifier

Power output: 70 wpc into 8 Ohm
Frequency range: 20 Hz - 50 kHz
Signal-to-Noise Ratio: 90 dB
Weight: 10 kg
Dimensions: 43.8 x 8.4 x 36.5 cm (WxHxD)
Price: \$2000

Monrio Audio Asty Player VT Tube CD Player

Output level: 2.01 V at 1 kHz/10kOhm impedance
THD+N: 0.1% at 1kHz/10 kOhm impedance
Power consumption: 30 W
Inputs/outputs: 1 RCA digital output; 2 RCA analog outputs
Weight: 8 kg
Dimensions: 43.8 x 8.4 x 36.5 cm (WxHxD)
Price: \$2000

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