

Equipment Report



T+A Series 200 Preamplifier/DAC, Power Amplifier, Disc Transport/Streamer

Good Things, Small Package

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In my series on “Building a Compact Reference System,” I sang the praises of modular, multifunction electronics as space-saving alternatives to separate components. I’m happy to note that since those articles appeared about two years ago, the number of modular integrations on the market has dramatically increased. Today, audiophiles building compact reference systems can buy a modular integrated from CH Precision, Dan D’Agostino, Aesthetix, and others.

All these units start out as standard integrated amps with built-in power amps and linestages. Users can then slide additional cards (DAC, streamer, phonostage) into the main chassis, as needed. The footprint doesn’t change, even as functionality expands.

In creating the Series 200, German audio-powerhouse T+A had the same goals for its modular electronics: versatility, customizability, compact form factor, great sound. But T+A’s designers noted that, for all their flexibility, modular integrations can’t deliver certain advantages innate to separates. Those include independent power supplies for each functional element, as well as physical isolation between digital and analog components, which reduces noise.

“What if,” these designers thought, “we could retain the space and versatility benefits of modular integrated amps, while also delivering the unique advantages of separates?” Such a product, they reasoned, would be the best of both worlds. Thus was born the fetching Series 200, a suite of high-quality separates shrunk down to conserve space.

When most audiophiles think of “mini” components, they recall the junk stacks available at Best Buy, Target, and Crutchfield. That’s not what the Series 200 is.

T+A was serious about making these components both compact *and* true audio-

ophile caliber. For example, each box is a dual-mono design and features fully balanced circuitry. Chassis are made of non-magnetic metals that help resist RF. And every component utilizes the high-voltage-power-supply approach that T+A employs in its flagship models to increase linearity.

The Series 200 stack I reviewed comprised three separates: the MP200, a Roon-Ready multi-format player that, among other things, will spin CDs and stream Tidal or Qobuz; the DAC200 Roon-tested DAC/Pre with both digital and analog inputs; and the A200 stereo power amp. There is also an M200 monoblock amp and an

Specs & Pricing

MP200

Formats: CD/DA, CD-R, CD-RW, CD-text

Frequency response: 2Hz–20kHz

Data rates: PCM 32–192kHz, 16/24-bit

Supported media servers: UPnP 1.1, UPnP AV, DLNA, WMDRM10, DLNA compatible servers

Services: Tidal, Deezer, Qobuz, Roon Ready (subscription required)

Interfaces: 10/100 Base-T, 2.4GHz, +20dBm (100mW), IEEE 02.11 b/g/n, 2x USB 2.0 Master mode, Bluetooth, SPDIF (16–24-bit): 2x coax (192kHz), 1x TosLink (96kHz)

Outputs: Digital coax, SYS-LINK, USB-SYS

Dimensions: 12.6" x 4" x 13.4"

Weight: 9.7 lbs.

Price: \$5900

A200

Nominal power per channel: 250Wpc @ 4 ohms, 125Wpc @ 8 ohms

Frequency response: +0/–3dB, 1Hz–60kHz

Signal to noise ratio: 113dB

THD: <0.002 %

Intermodulation distortion: <0.002 %

Channel separation: >103dB

Damping factor: >800

Weight: 11 lbs.

Price: \$5450

DAC200

Frequency response: +0/–3dB, 0.1Hz–200kHz

Signal/noise ratio: 114dB

THD: <0.001%

Intermodulation: <0.001%

Channel separation: >108dB

Inputs: SPDIF, 2x coax, 2x optical TosLink, BNC, 1x USB, 2x HDMI IN, 1x AES/EBU

Price: \$7125

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A Deeper Dive

Before getting to the sound, let's take a closer look at each of these small gems, beginning with the A200 stereo power amp. The A200 is designed and developed by T+A and contains T+A's HV (High Voltage) input stage and high-frequency-sinewave AC-power-supply technology combined with the Purifi Eigentakt Class D module. The use of Class D explains how this unassuming little guy can produce 125 watts into 8 ohms and 250 into 4 ohms. The Class D module is complemented by another in-house, fully discreet, super-low-noise switching power supply.

The A200 will accept both single-ended and balanced connections. There are two sets of speaker outputs and a pair of front-panel buttons that control activation of one or both outputs. Another front-panel button, labeled LoDF, allows the user to select the standard damping factor of 800 or a much lower damping factor of 70. The idea is to permit users to tailor the amp to the speakers in use.

I had no doubt that the Acora SRBs I had in-house for review, with their extreme resolution and inherent tightness, would prefer the standard damping factor, but before getting down to serious listening I needed to confirm that theory. A quick (two-second) listen told the tale. The LoDF (70) setting robbed the Acora of its strengths, leaving instead a tonally dull, muddy presentation with overly soft edges. Perhaps there are speakers that could benefit from the LoDF setting, but the Acora clearly isn't one of them. I therefore set the A200 to standard DF and never looked back.

One last A200 feature is thermal monitoring and control, implemented at a level normally found only on much more expensive products. Specifically, the thermal monitor feeds a micro-processor-controlled protection circuit that guards against shorts, clipping, and overheating. In any of these situations, the A200 will shut down to save the amp and speakers.

The MP200 has two primary jobs: It is a CD transport (*not* a CD player) and a Roon-ready streamer. Both functions assume and require the presence of a downstream DAC. The MP200 also includes optical and coax digital inputs, should that DAC be lacking such functionality. Additionally, right on the front panel you'll find an HDD USB port. This makes it simple and convenient to plug in a music-laden thumb, USB, hard-disc, or solid-state drive. Most DACs lack this feature, making it most welcome here. Rounding out the MP200's technical chops, the unit houses the same streamer module that T+A employs in its more expensive offerings, as well as a CD transport mechanism that's built in collaboration with a CD-drive manufacturer. T+A has added additional functions and software features such as the disc's table-of-contents information. Finally, the MP200 offers Internet Radio.

The DAC200 is something of a misnomer in that it's not merely a DAC but also a linestage—and an analog linestage, at that. There's an analog input (single-ended), and the volume control is a pure analog, stepped-resistor-ladder design. I could wish for at least one more analog input, preferably balanced, but in

HA200 headphone amp, which I didn't review. (An unofficial member of the Series 200 family is the T+A Music Navigator app, which controls the whole shebang.) As with larger separates, you only buy what you need, and each model works just fine without the others. Unlike larger separates, the complete stack operates as a single entity—i.e., when you turn on one box, the others turn on, too, thanks to control interfaces between the individual components.

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truth the only likely analog source this unit will ever see is a turntable. For that, the DAC200 is perfectly suited.

Although the DAC200 contains both digital and analog circuitry under one roof, so to speak, T+A uses galvanic isolation between these modules to minimize interference. The DAC also employs completely separate signal paths for PCM and DSD sources.

Sound

I happen to own a wonderful-sounding modular integrated amp: the CH Precision I1. Comparing it to the Series 200 was natural but a bit unfair. The CH unit costs more than double the price of the Series 200 stack. Nonetheless, I was glad I embarked on this comparison, because otherwise I never would have known that the two systems sounded *almost identical*.

By this I don't mean they sound equally good, with trade-offs in both directions; I mean the two are nearly indistinguishable. Both are exemplars of the Swiss school of sound, characterized by unbridled dynamics, sterling tonality, and remarkable speed. The Series 200, like the CH, serves up musical line and details in a highly resolving yet organic way. Image placement and rhythmic precision are terrific. Most importantly, musicality is never in question; both systems drew me in like a tractor beam, and never put me off with intrusive factors like grain.

There were a few minor differences, of course. The T+A had a slight edge over the I1 with respect to bass definition, and its bass was a hair more fulsome. Meanwhile, the CH, with its megahertz bandwidth, was marginally superior at airiness. The I1 also exhibited a hint more timbral detail and depth. But these distinctions were so minute that only a direct comparison revealed them.

To illustrate their similarity, consider three examples. The first is "Leisure," a track from XTC's brilliant *English Settlement* ("They taught me how to work/but they can't teach me how to shirk correctly"). On this tune, Colin Moulding's fretless bass and Trevor Chambers' kick drum are so perfectly synchronized, they come across like a series of lightning cracks. Reproducing that requires not only an unerring sense of pace but faultless transient response and decay. The CH does it with ease—and so does the 200 Series stack.

An acoustic track, "Even I Can See" by Jeff Tweedy, is close mic'd and so intimate you feel as though Tweedy has taken up residence in your listening room. You'll hear the effect with either of these systems, though it's a skosh more palpable with the CH. In both cases, the song is beautiful and spellbinding.

Joni Mitchell's *Live at Carnegie Hall* reminds you that one of the sonic elements that triggers your ear-brain to identify a performance as live is unbounded dynamics. You'll find the purest of examples on this LP. At this early point in her stylistic development, Joni was fond of big jumps to a floating falsetto. This was often accompanied by a sudden crescendo, and the effect is like nothing you'll hear in a studio recording (or even on most live recordings). This album has no dynamic compression, and Mitchell's voice has no dynamic reticence. The combination is startling—if the system can deliver it. These components can.

Because of the modular nature of both the I1 and the Series 200 stack, I was able to easily compare individual functions. That is, I compared the CH's power amp with the A200, the CH's stream-

er with the MP200, the CH's DAC with the DAC200, and the two respective linestages using LP and my Bryston BCD-3 CD player as sources. I also compared the BCD-3's world-class internal transport with the T+A transport within the MP200.

There's no need to report each of those sessions, because their results were so similar. I'll just summarize by saying that they aligned precisely with my observations about the entire stack versus the CH. So, the A200, for instance, had a bit better bass definition and more low-end energy than the I1; but the latter was just a little more airy and timbrally rich. Both were wonderfully musical and a delight to listen to.

Regarding the two transports, from a tonal and spatial perspective they were indistinguishable. The Bryston was a little better at timing and its highs were slightly smoother, but the T+A's dynamics had more impact. Ultimately, while the Bryston was a bit more refined, I found the MP200 more musically engaging.

Price and Conclusion

The price of admission for the Series 200 is roughly \$6–\$7k per component, or about \$20k for the full set. That might sound like a lot for audio equipment of this scale; we're conditioned to equate small with inexpensive (and big with expensive). But considering the build-quality, features, and, most importantly, the unbelievable performance that T+A has squeezed into these petite chassis, they're actually quite the deal. You can't touch their price with most large separates, and the full stack is even at the low end of the \$20–\$50k range occupied

by competing modular integrateds.

All this is quite a tribute to T+A. Each individual component is an unqualified success—with top-flight sound and undeniable musicality. Meanwhile, the fully loaded stack can go toe to toe with the best modular integrateds—at a fraction of their cost. If you're in the market for a component—or a component stack—that delivers superb sonics, musicality, value, achingly good looks, and the advantages of separates, along with a small footprint, the Series 200 will remind you that good—even great—things really do come in small packages. **tas**