

ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier



By Alan Sircom

If there's a funny anecdote about a product, ideally one that doesn't involve explosions or court cases, it's always a good starting place. Here's the one attached to the ASR; I got told there's an integrated amp coming my way one Friday, but it never arrived. As I was walking out of my front door on Saturday morning a large van turned up, with apologies because the even larger van given over to delivering the ASR Emitter II Exclusive couldn't make it down my road. The Emitter amp was weighing the van down and the delivery took up a small roomful of cardboard boxes, each one heavier than the last.

"What is a volestrangler, anyway?" asked the delivery guy (the boxes have the word *Vollverstärker*, German for 'full amplifier', written on the side).

"It's an amplifier for a hi-fi system"

"Must be a pretty big system" is the before-the-watershed, cleaned up version of his reply. He then asked for some painkillers and limped off, his Transit van visibly standing taller as it pulled away.

You see, that's the fun of the ASR Emitter. It's technically an integrated amp, but by all things normal, integrated amplifiers don't have a habit of turning up in four boxes as big as a car engine. Neither do they weigh as much as a car engine that often. Still, you gotta love those crazy Germans and their wild volestranglers.

The mental process behind all the boxes is actually quite simple and obvious when you think it through. There's the amp proper, its power supply and a pair of batteries to drive each channel of the amplifier's line-stage. The mains feeds the batteries and the whole system is there to allow you to listen to music entirely unencumbered by any form of fluctuation on the power line, because the battery takes care of that.

The basic plan of the Emitter II is over-engineering. This is the amp for beast loads in big, bad rooms. Of course, it will happily drive more down-to-earth

loudspeakers, but if an amplifier could get a solid metal bar to make music, it would be the Emitter II Exclusive. Three transformers turn out eight different individually rectified and buffered voltages. The input block is made from brass, the output terminals are rated to 100 amps and mounted 50mm apart, the PCBs are made from thick copper-tin tracks and mounted on high mass 60mm² rails, and the 20 MOSFETS in the output stage delivering 280W into eight ohms, 500W into four and 900W into two ohms. Short of shock-mounting the four boxes in their own ejector seat, this is about as macho as integrated amps get.

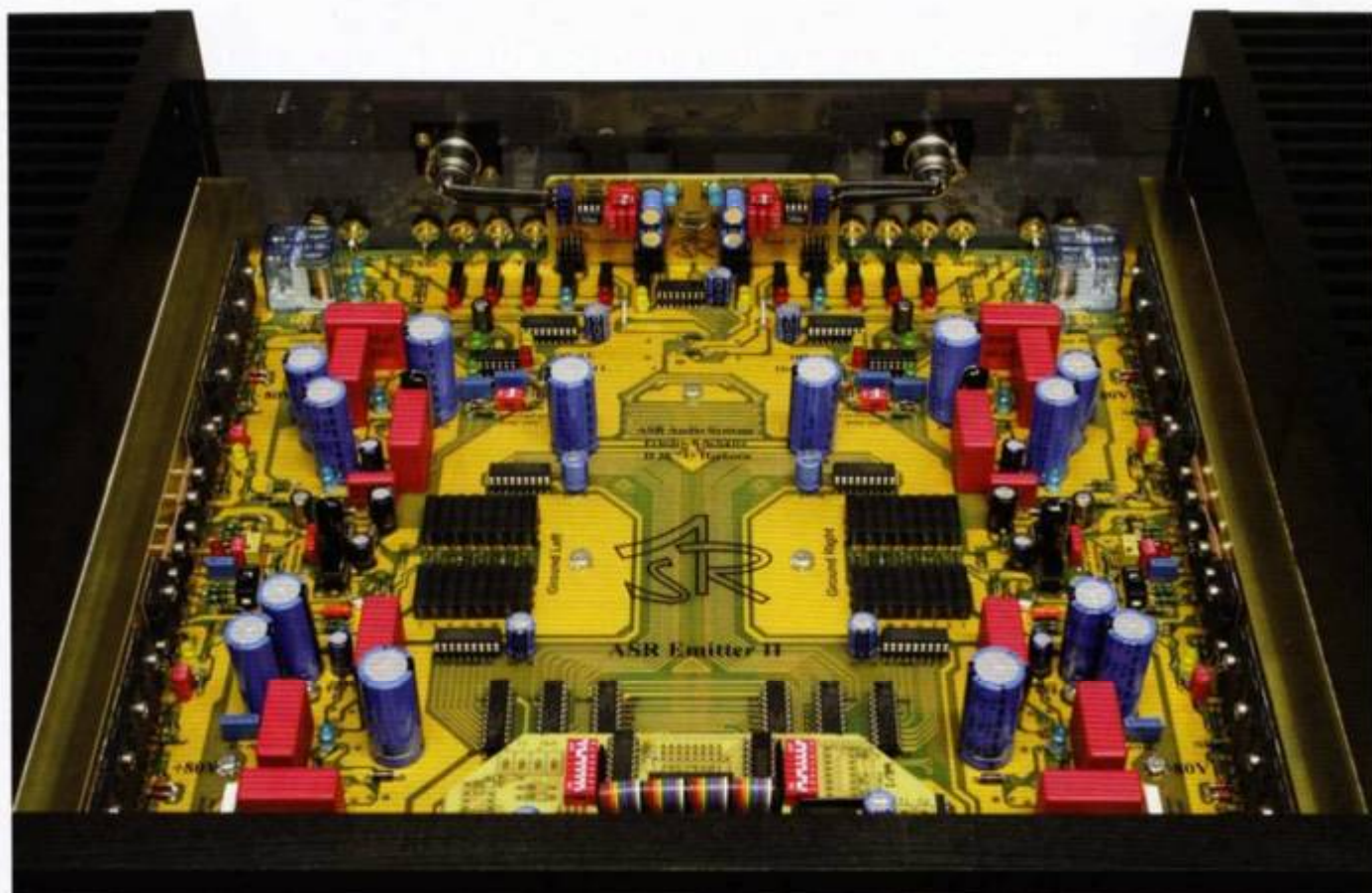
There's little point discussing the physical appearance more than this, save for the seen across the room LED read-out. And, despite looking every inch the hyperminimalist audio product, the ASR is actually a joy to use, once the pain of that hawser-wrangling installation is forgotten

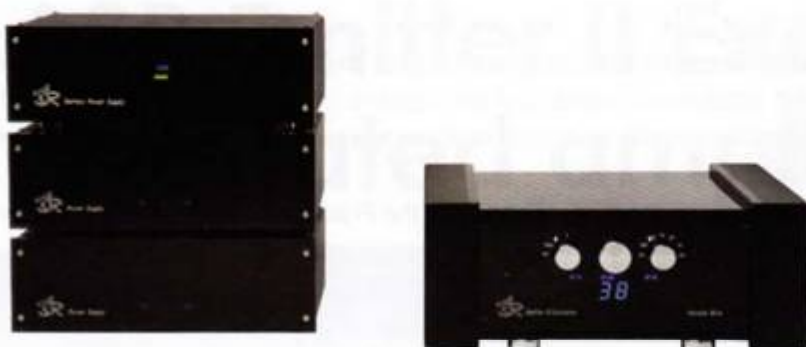
about. There's six inputs as standard (with an option for a seventh, a balanced input, headphone output and two flavours of phono stage, along with the different finish options), but the best method is to stick to 'direct'. There's even a remote!

Whether it the bank of batteries, the Philbert-Mantelschnitt transformers, the 20 MOSFETS in the Class AB power amp stage, the battery arrays or the 862,000µF of buffer capacitance is unclear, but this is an amp that takes its time to come to fruition. It sounds excellent right out of the boxes, but hundreds of hours later, it sounds a heck of a lot more excellent. Given that it achieves its full conditioning from straight out of the warehouse in slightly more than eight days and it stays that way, this isn't some kind of 'wait until the warranty expires' scam. From an engineering standpoint though, aside from rechargeable batteries and their memory, the idea of electronics 'conditioning' is distinctly left-field. Regardless, a week or so after you receive new boxes, you get most of the true ASR experience.

That experience is one of absolute neutrality and accuracy. Uncannily so. There's little point banging out the old cliché about veils lifted, jaws dropped or envelopes pushed. It does all that. It does all the dynamic range you could wish for, all the detail you could want, as wide a soundstage as its possible to throw in your room and from your speakers, clarity, articulation, resolution and more. Even pulling out individual pieces of music to highlight aspects of the performance seems pointless, because you might as well list the entire record collection. And you get all this from the first bar of the first piece of music. And still you are left with more. Or maybe less.

You see this amp is so exceptionally 'right' sounding that it transcends all those hi-fi attributes. They read trite on the page. As does anything about 'musicality'; this amp doesn't do 'musicality'. It simply does what an amp ▶





▶ should be doing and so rarely does. It acts like a straight wire with gain, and it shows just how rare that really is. And it shows how demanding that is on listener and system alike.

It means no compromise on source components, loudspeakers, room acoustics or room. Compromise will be immediately obvious, laid bare and open by the ASR's faithful account of what it is fed and what it feeds. It means no compromise on musical content; 'Loudness War' signal compression is exposed as an ugly, music-crushing blight on music. And such honesty and a natural presentation require natural sounds. It will make an excellent job of a spring reverb or a guitar amp, but you will be able to hear the difference between spring, plate, digital and natural reverberation all too easily and will crave the real thing through the ASR. Similarly, you'll find annoying the guitar amp's inability to process string noises and subtle tonal changes due to the fingering being outclassed by the guitar's input gain. You might even find yourself preferring the sound of a Gibson over a Fender because of the way the Gibson's humbuckers lower the noise.

In fact, lowering noise might just be the key to the ASR. If there's one hi-fi cliché worth restating in the Emitter world, it's the one where the noise floor falls away. Because that's precisely what happens. The sound of the Emitter II Exclusive has an exceptionally low noise floor, and this manifests itself to make the amplifier get out of the way of the music. Sounds don't rise out of an 'inky black silence' in real life; no-one comments on the pellucid background of the Royal Festival Hall. But when the musicians start, and if they are good, there's a stillness to the world around them, as if the music is all and the rest is silence. That's what the ASR Emitter II Exclusive can do, and it's why the amp is close to the stuff of legend.

But this raises philosophical questions. Can a device be 'too' neutral? If so, is the ASR the 'perfect' amplifier and do we either need or want such perfection? Just when you think the bar is raised as high as it's possible to be raised, an amp like the ASR comes along and does a Dick Fosbury. This sounds like nothing I've heard before from audio equipment before, refining 'clarity', 'detail' and removing a sense of high-frequency glare that you only notice by its absence. It makes other neutral sounding amplifiers appear as if they are trying to be neutral sounding. But when I try to set equipment in context, thinking who an amp would best suit, but I cannot say for certain whether someone who puts 'neutrality' at the top of their list would find this amp the most musically honest device ever placed in their system, or lacking what we mistakenly pass off as neutrality in audio.

I have to say that, despite the room o' cardboard, the fact that an integrated amplifier can take up its own rack, the pain of installation and even a conditioning period that could be measured in geological time, the thumb is distinctly 'up' for ASR. I've a nagging suspicion that it is the most uncolored electronic component money can buy. The term 'high fidelity' is overused as to

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Double- monoaural-construction in a single case, mirror- symmetrical design
MOSFET Class A/B technology

Power output: 2x 280W (8 ohms), 2x 500W (4 ohms), 2x 900W (2 ohms)

Two separate power units with energy management circuitry

6x relay driven high level inputs, 1x direct input, 2x tape recording outputs
Slot for phono preamplifier or balanced input

Volume control with relay in 1dB steps

LED display as operation indicator

Infrared remote control for all functions

Protection circuits to ensure against overload, override, short circuit, excess temperature and DC voltage

Signal to noise ratio on high level input: 90 dB

Rise time lower than 0.8 μ s

Distortion lower than 0.01%

Damping factor: more than 1000 •

Power consumption in standby mode: 20 VA

Quiescent power consumption in energy- saving mode with half supply voltage of the output stage: 90 VA

Quiescent power consumption in normal mode with higher output power capacity: 200 VA

Dimensions of control unit: 57 x 47 x 23 cm

Dimensions of power units: 44 x 33 x 15 cm

Weight: 43 kg

Weight per power unit: 30 kg

Price: £14,500 (as reviewed)

Manufacturer: ASR

URL: www.asraudio.de

Distributed by: Manger Audio

URL: www.manger-audio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)161 304 0099

be almost redundant, but in it's tightest, most forensic form it applies here. This amp is faithful to the original recording. Those eight words say it all, and yet don't even begin to do this amp justice. +