

hi-fi+



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Back in Black...

Renaissance RAP-03 preamp and RA-03 power amps

by Steve Dickinson

Shortly before Christmas, I got myself a new mobile phone because the battery in my old one had died and, I'm ashamed to admit, getting a new phone was the easier option. Thanks to a funky touchscreen this one promised email, web browsing, more megapixels and lots of other life-enhancing stuff. Two months on it sits in a drawer and I've gone back to my old phone (plus new battery) because, despite several hours with the manual, simply making calls and sending text messages on the new one is a complete pain in the wotsit. Particularly once it started doing predictive text in Czech, something the manual has been disappointingly silent about. Probably out of embarrassment.

There's a lot to be said for good old-fashioned simplicity and honest purpose, so when three boxes from Renaissance arrived, I put down my phone manual and set to with rather more enthusiasm for this particular new arrival. Three boxes? Simplicity? Well, yes, relatively speaking.

This lot takes me back. A simple metal box with a plain, nicely finished, aluminium front plate. An rotary on/off switch on the power amps, similarly the preamp which also sports a volume control and a four-position source selector, all using knobs from some off-the-shelf parts supplier. And not much else. Under the bonnet is a good Class AB MOSFET design (both in preamp and power amps); the preamp with four line-level single-ended inputs, the power amp punting out 50 watts a side.

The obligatory blue LED power light places these amps in the noughties, not the eighties (though Renaissance will happily fit a red LED, or even a green one, should you prefer), but there is little else which would have looked out of place in my system twenty years ago. Even the remote control, or rather the lack of it, harks back to earlier, more enlightened times when men were men and didn't mind walking across to the room to raise a well-turned volume dial. That it doesn't look anachronistic now is testament to



fundamentally sound industrial design.

Good, honest fare for decent, uncomplicated folk. Like me.

In truth, if you like your kit to draw attention to itself, either visually or sonically, there is probably little here to tempt you. The word is 'understatement' and if you have to look it up, then this mightn't be quite your cup of air-dried, macrobiotic herbal infusion. Or something.

The RA-03 combination is something of a departure from the company's better-known offering: the RA-01, a 300B-driven monoblock valve power amp of somewhat traditional

appearance. If you thought the Renaissance name meant valves, wooden panels and wire cages, think again. The solid-state electronics range now encompasses a CD transport and DAC, standalone phono stage and two pre/power amplifier combinations. This new RAP-03 preamp represents an upgrade from the cheaper RAP-02 but sports the same number of line-level inputs; the RA-03 power amplifiers share the 50 Watt output of the cheaper

RA-02 monoblocks and they all use the same chassis, but the -02 units are built with less costly components to compete at a lower, sub-£2,500, price than the -03 series whose combined cost for a preamp and a pair of power amps is almost £3,800.

It's worth bearing in mind that the Renaissance RAP-02 and RA-02 products are impressive enough in their own right; the combination actually won an award in *Hi-Fi Plus* back in 2005. So, upgrading these successful designs without doubling the price – or demanding expensive power-supply upgrades and their like – makes the RAP-03 and RA-03 an exciting proposition even before they are powered up. Of course, with Renaissance's ultra-minimalist approach, the only exterior differences between old and new are hard to spot without Sherlock Holmes' spyclass.

The Renaissance equipment is also one of those few product lines that's both designed and built in the same country. So often these days, the

► 'Designed in the West, built in China' badge has become almost a mantra. So, perhaps it comes as a pleasant change to find something wholly designed and built in the UK. Renaissance is built by a company called Integrated Engineering Solutions Ltd here in Blighty. This has a very 2009 advantage for Renaissance; although the costs of buying in raw materials has increased in recent months due to fluctuations in the currency, the products are less likely to suffer sudden 30per cent price rises because of the state of

the Pound against the Euro or the Dollar. It also makes the products very attractive as an export proposition. Which is perhaps why there are new models to be found in the range. And the range is growing at speed, at least for a company the size of Renaissance. Having started with a distinctly 'hollow state' brand, the newer solid-state products – both analogue and digital – are proving to be a resounding success; powering the Rowntree Acoustics OmniMon loudspeakers at this year's Bristol Show, the Splash Audio stand was considered by many to be the star of the show.

Perhaps the strangest part of the Renaissance story is that the company's products are not better known, at home or abroad. The products are well made, elegant whether valve or transistor and minimalist enough to catch the attention of many audiophiles. Hopefully, with both a digital front end in the RT-01 CD transport and RD-01 converter – as well as phono stage and an increasingly thorough range of amplifiers – it's hoped that

Renaissance stops hiding its light under a bushel soon.

Despite all this self-effacement, the RAP-03 and RA-03 pairing does impress, and quickly, but much more for what it doesn't do than for what it does. In a simple A/B dem in a shop it would, alas, be easy to miss the point. The Renaissance combo imposes very little of itself on the music, allowing the signal to pass comparatively unmolested from source to speaker. This means that when I wish to play



something possessed of subtlety and grace I get precisely that, with no added sweetness or inappropriate drama. But if drama is called for, it doesn't come with a dollop of extra bass just because it can. It doesn't make music, it just lets the music happen. This is immensely reassuring and confidence-inspiring. I found myself testing out ever more varied material, some from the more foetid backwaters of my CD collection, just to see what these amps would make of it. That's usually an encouraging sign and, in a nutshell, if there was music to be had, then that's what I got.

Perhaps this is why the Renaissance range isn't up there with the big

names in British hi-fi. Taking a more honest approach to music-making, avoiding all the *sturm und drang* of some of the more easy to find brands, will never win out in quick-fire A/B demonstrations. Renaissance plays the longer game instead, teasing out the sound intrinsic to the recording and never imposing its own character.

I have a Yo-Yo Ma compilation, *Classic Yo-Yo* (Sony Classical, SK89667) and one track features Alison Krauss in a wonderfully understated duet, performing 'Simple Gifts' from Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*. The delicate breathiness of her voice brings out an extremely touching and nuanced performance, totally charming. Far grander amps than the Renaissance would not have bettered that result.

At the other extreme, I wound it up to somewhere closer to Spinal Tap's 'eleven' and put on The Mission's *Tower of Strength*. I had to double-check that these amps are really only fifty Watts per channel because the sheer volume levels I achieved, clean and quite spectacularly devoid of stress and harshness, really shouldn't have come across the way they did on that track. Absolutely no shortage of excitement here. Afterwards I turned it back down, more out of consideration for local property values than concern for my system. Being critical, the modest output betrays itself at higher volume levels by some loss of grip and control in the bass, particularly on large-scale orchestral or choral music with sustained levels of bass energy. This is characterised by a slight disjointedness, a mild disconnect ►

▶ between the lowest frequencies and the upper bass and midrange, the more noticeable because the amps are otherwise so even-handed. At more normal listening levels, this is seldom something which is drawn to your attention.

While we're on the subject of volume, I can't ignore the one big flaw (well, the other big flaw after the lack of remote control, of course!). The preamp's volume control is a stepped-attenuator design and the steps are, bluntly, too big. The designer has chosen 3dB steps and the volume pot is carefully

constructed to achieve that, consistently, but too often I found the jump from one step to the next took me from 'just a touch too quiet' to 'just a bit too loud'. This was particularly the case during later evening listening at lower levels. To his credit, the designer is responding positively to criticism and can offer the option of a volume control with 1.5dB steps in the part of its range associated with most normal listening levels, indeed this may yet become the standard fit. If you're thinking of shortlisting the Renaissance amps then this option is one worth very serious consideration.

The lightness of touch extends to phrasing, which is effortlessly natural, and timbral resolution, which is as understatedly correct as a Savile Row suit. Sting's 'If you love somebody (set them free)' from the live album *All This Time* has a great and infectious sense of rhythm and timing. Both parts

of the amplifier are playing their part in the greater whole but, the better to consider the preamp and power amp sections in isolation, I connected the preamp up to the power amp section of my regular Accuphase e213. This time around, Sting has more foot-tapping pace and drive, but the Yo-Yo Ma/Alison Krauss 'Simple Gifts' sacrifices a little of its essential fragility. I use the word deliberately, that fragility is very much the essence of the piece and any diminution is a definite loss.



So, the Renaissance power amps are evidently more adept at preserving the preamp's carefully nurtured delicacy than the power section of my Accuphase. An interesting and telling result. Repeatedly, the Renaissance proved better at preserving timbre and the finer detail of music, the sense of atmosphere, ambience and texture, whereas the Accuphase, particularly when used as an integrated amp (i.e. with its own preamp section) was invariably ahead on pace and timing, not to mention drive, rhythm and flow. Which you prefer is as much a matter of the musical material being played as it is of personal taste, which is another way of saying: these differences are very far from black and white.

The £3-4k price range is an interesting place. Amplifiers range from good integrateds like my Accuphase (recent price rises and exchange-rate slumps have pushed the entry-level Accuphase above £3k), through two- and three-box pre-power combinations,

for which you also need to factor in the cost of an additional pair of interconnects. The musical argument (there is a parallel economic one, particularly at upgrade time) for separating the roles is that you get the benefit of dedicated power supplies for the delicate preamp section and the grunter power sections, and in the case of the Renaissance, a pair of mono power amps gives yet further dedication to the power supplies and much less risk of intermodulation. The argument is certainly well-made in the Renaissance setup, seldom is a musical signal better preserved at this price. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Renaissance RAP-03 preamplifier

Type:	Solid-state MOSFET, Class A, no overall feedback
Inputs:	4 line-level, unbalanced, (RCA phono)
Output:	1 pair, unbalanced, (RCA phono)
Input impedance:	50k Ohm
Sensitivity:	0.5V
Output impedance:	75 Ohm, 20Hz to 100kHz
Bandwidth:	20Hz to 100kHz, +/- 0.1dB
Gain:	14dB max
Remote control:	No
Dimensions (WxHxD):	455 x 75 x 336
Weight:	7.5Kg
Price:	£1,295

Renaissance RA-03 mono power amplifier

Type:	Solid-state MOSFET, Class AB, low overall feedback
Output power:	50W (8 Ohms); 85W (4 Ohms)
Distortion:	<0.1% at 10W output; 1% at full-output (50W)
Bandwidth:	20Hz to 20kHz +/- 0.2dB
Outputs:	1 pair, WBT loudspeaker terminals
Dimensions (WxHxD):	455 x 75 x 357
Weight:	9.0Kg
Price:	£2,495 per pair

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