



Flex appeal

Mark Craven puts the latest of Emotiva's many affordable products through its considerable paces

While some audio brands tend focus on a specific area of the market, say speakers or turntables, others like to cast their net far and wide. The catalogue of Emotiva, a manufacturer from Franklin, Tennessee, runs the gamut from speakers, subwoofers, cables and headphones to amplifiers, preamps, CD players, home theatre processors and portable DACs. In short, if you can think of it, Emotiva almost certainly makes it.

One example of this wide-ranging lineup is the BasX A2m Stereo Flex (aka BasX A2 Mini), an integrated amplifier that's designed to bring speaker-driving juice to wherever you might need it most. Dimensions of just 209mm wide by 76mm high make it amenable to desktop use – although it's 362mm deep, so not akin to a WiiM Ultra (HFC 522) or Marantz Model M1 – and it can be easily installed in any living room setup. Emotiva also markets it as ideal for adding extra power channels to a home cinema array if that's your bag.

Yet the A2m's allure isn't entirely down to its size. A price tag of £319 puts it resolutely in 'affordable' territory, where it might be matched up with similarly bargain-priced loudspeakers, plus it has a couple of

features that elevate it above the integrated amp norm. One of these is the inclusion of a full-sized headphone jack for private listening, although there's no conventional discrete headphone amp onboard. Instead, a circuit the manufacturer describes as: "typical of the headphone outputs in vintage audio equipment" passes the unit's main output amplifiers through a series of resistors. Alternatively, by fitting a jumper to the amp's internal circuitry,

It offers a meaty, honest sound with solid, grippy bass and bags of energy

the full speaker output can be routed to the headphone socket – although as this is something Emotiva says should be done with: "extreme caution" and involves faffing around with a screwdriver, it's hard to imagine many will take the risk.

The second feature, and one that's exclusive to the A2m among the American company's various BasX amplifiers, is a choice of fixed or variable gain output. Allied to the unit's front panel volume control (for which there's unfortunately no

remote control), this turns the A2m into an integrated amplifier, albeit one of limited connectivity.

How limited? Well, tucked into the small real estate of the amp's rear plate is a single set of line-level inputs on RCAs... and that's it. A second set would have been useful, but sticking to just one, and not having to worry about switching circuitry and controls, helps keep the price down. Other sockets are trigger in/out, some fairly chunky five-way speaker binding posts and a figure-of-eight mains. Lastly, there are two switches: one for flicking between the fixed and variable output, the other to set the amp to remain always on or to go into auto standby mode, wherein it will wake when an audio signal is detected.

Under the hood, the A2m swaps the 'oversized' toroidal power supply of Emotiva's full-size models for a compact, cooler-running switch-mode type, but maintains the range's Class A/B amplification – in this case rated at 2x 50W into 8ohm loads. There's 'audiophile-grade fault protection' at work here, apparently, in addition to an internal fan, and the black steel chassis itself is ventilated for heat dissipation. The A2's front panel, meanwhile, is hewn from milled aluminium – giving it a robust look.

One thing worth mentioning with Emotiva is that while it operates a direct sales model in the US, it's handled by a distributor in the UK and its products are sold through conventional retailers. Therefore, prices listed on its website always look temptingly lower than those in the UK, but the latter include import duties, currency conversion, etc. plus bring the peace of mind of local after-sales servicing, if needed.

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Emotiva BasX A2m Stereo Flex

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Stereo integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
3.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
209 x 76 x 362mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power: 2x 50W (8ohm)
• Class A/B amplification
• 6.35mm headphone jack

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma AV

WEBSITE
emotiva.com
karma-av.co.uk

Sound quality

With the A2m fed by a WiiM Pro (HFC 511) streamer and laced up to a pair of Q Acoustics 3010i speakers, we quickly arrive at a desktop system with easy usability and an impressive performance. While not a powerhouse, Emotiva's amplifier offers a meaty, honest sound with solid, grippy bass and bags of energy. Indeed, this is arguably its standout attribute, and a primary reason to give it an audition.

Michael Jackson's *Get On The Floor*, streamed via Tidal, flies from the 3010is with its sense of funk and fun intact, helped by the A2m's forthright delivery of the bassline – which ranges up and down the fretboard at speed – and accompanying drums. Add in the bursts of brass, guitar licks from 'Wah Wah' Watson and strings

Where some budget rivals dance along the surface of music, this dives right in

that steer clear of brittleness, and it's all rather impressive – certainly from such an affordable design.

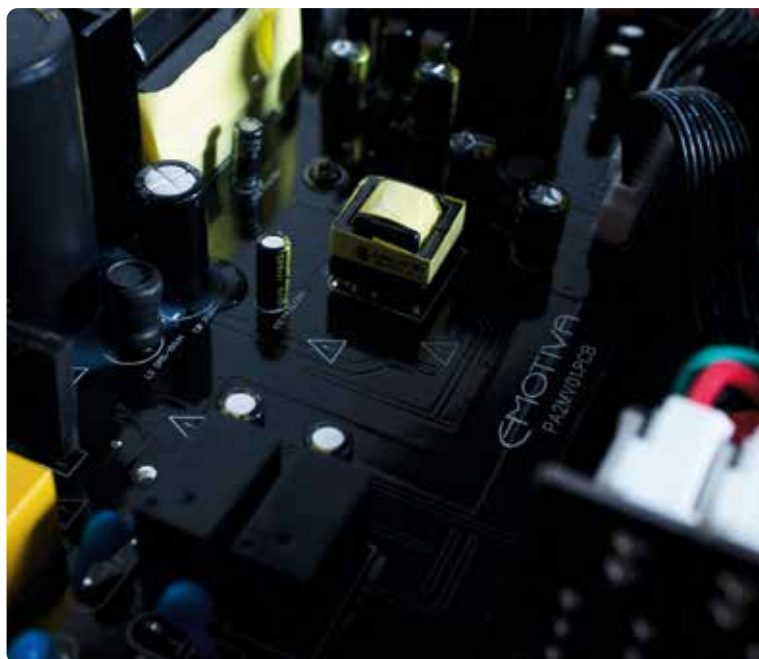
The Emotiva amp does an equally good job with The Orb's *Little Fluffy Clouds* where soundstage pans are smooth and there's good separation of the various samples and electronica. This ambient classic also shows the A2m is at its best at a decent volume – at a more 'background' listening level, the enjoyably deep bass output starts to disappear and the music begins to sound a little flat.

Installing the amp in a main setup using Bowers & Wilkins 705 S2 Signature standmounts and a Primare PRE35 preamp probably counts as overkill, but it means the absence of a remote control is no longer a problem and gives the A2m scope to highlight



There's no getting away from the fact Emotiva's A2m sells for the same price as the well-regarded WiiM Amp (HFC 514), so the two are natural competitors even if differences between them are pronounced. The small-scale WiiM is a proper 'just add speakers' streaming amp and almost overloaded with features, including HDMI ARC, parametric EQ and automated room calibration, while its (Class D) power plant is rated at a comparable 60W per channel. Performance-wise it gives some ground to the more organic, beefier delivery of the Emotiva A2m, and headphone compatibility is Bluetooth only.

Switches on the rear allow for fixed or variable output and to set the amp to remain always on or to go into auto standby mode



both its full potential and foibles. True enough, the synth-based lunacy that's Jan Michal Szulew's *Airwolf* theme is writ large by Emotiva's amp – it sounds unflustered as it pounds out the synthetic rhythm section, but also admirably smooth and musical in its presentation of the main synth line. At the same time, some splashiness to the hi-hats and snare suggest there are limits to its audiophile pretensions.

And what of Emotiva's 'old-school' headphone amp design? The performance here has similar traits, really pushing hard and deep with AKG's closed-back K371 cans to render *Panic Station* by Muse with delicious punch, while paying more than just lip service to the instrumental textures and Matt Bellamy's theatrical vocals. And winding things down with Rebecca Pidgeon's gentle, country-tinged *Texas Rangers*, the A2m's clean and focused portrayal of

the singer, against the banjo backing, is captivating throughout.

Conclusion

This Emotiva integrated amp has been engineered to fulfil certain roles and to not destroy your bank balance at the same time, so is very much frill-free and utilitarian rather than stylish in its looks. It's also not as diminutive as some rivals, but the chassis space has been put to good use – the Class A/B amp stage puts in a serious shift, equally so when it's called upon for headphone listening.

Certainly, there are integrated amplifiers around this price level that do more in terms of features, from multi-room compatibility to app control, but the BasX A2m fights back with the strength of its performance. Where some budget rivals only dance along the surface of the music, this unit dives right in. In some rooms and systems, it might be just what the sonic doctor ordered ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Authoritative, deep-reaching sonics; variable output aids system building
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Single set of RCAs; chassis depth
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Emotiva's budget-priced integrated performs admirably with a trick or two up its sleeve
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL

