



# Smart power

**Nick Tate** samples a highly affordable yet supremely capable DAC/preamp and power amplifier combination



**C**ompanies like Emotiva have built their success on very affordable, high-value products sitting in an unusual space where specialist audiophile-oriented products are offered, complete with many high-end features, to the more budget-end of the market. And what's not to like about that?

Emotiva is an American company that designs its products at home and then manufactures them in Asia in relatively high quantities. If the XDA-3 Reference DAC/preamplifier is anything to go by, it has very much got the quality right. It's well-finished and doesn't seem particularly built down to a price.

The XDA-3 is said to be a true, fully balanced, fully differential design from its balanced inputs to its balanced outputs. It is both a DAC and preamp, the latter having a digitally controlled analogue ladder volume control. There's an HDMI-ARC input for HD streaming from a TV or projector and a decent quality headphone output stage. The DAC

section uses twin ESS ES9038Q2M SABRE32 Reference converter chips, supporting up to 32-bit/768Hz PCM. It offers DoP support up to DoP 256 and native DSD up to DSD512. Connectivity is good with two coaxial and two optical digital inputs, plus XLR balanced in and outputs. There's even a dedicated headphone stage.

The partnering power amplifier has huge heft considering its very modest

## It steps aside and lets the recording do the talking, to a surprising extent

price. A decade or two ago it would simply have been impossible to buy something offering a claimed 2x 160W RMS per channel into 8ohm (250W into 4) for this little money. And it's all the more surprising because it's a Class AB design, not Class D. It sports a heavy-duty power supply, using a large toroidal transformer and four smoothing

capacitors inside a sturdy steel chassis with milled aluminium fascia.

## Sound quality

The standout characteristic of the XDA-3/BasX A2 is clarity. It's a clean and neutral performer that has a good deal of detail. You're very aware that you're not buying a 'character amp' that softens the bass or sweetens the treble. Nor does it harden things up to make music appear superficially more exciting. It's for this reason that many would say it has a 'grown-up' sound. Nothing is particularly exaggerated yet nor is it dull or recessed. Instead, this combo steps aside and lets the recording do the talking, to a surprising extent.

At this price, you shouldn't take transparency for granted – but the XDA-3/BasX A2 combo is open and uncoloured. Cue up *Lady Writer* by Dire Straits for example, and not only do you enjoy this charming soft-rock ballad, but you're taken by the very 'period' sound of the recording. As were so many rock tracks of the early Eighties, it's predictably dry and clinical sounding with not much bass, yet the treble is silky sweet and the midband is satisfyingly smooth. The Emotiva pre/power tells you all of this in a matter-of-fact way, where one of my favourite similarly priced integrated amps – Exposure's 2510 – embellishes things a tad, with a warmer and more ripe bass.

That's the key to this pairing; it's not interested in sugaring the musical pill. So, when you play some pretty fierce-sounding rock such as Motörhead's *Ace Of Spades*, it sounds like it was recorded in a roadie's caravan or possibly in the men's loo at a festival. Yet the XDA-3/BasX A2 still

### ▶ DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Emotiva XDA-3  
**ORIGIN**  
USA/China  
**TYPE**  
Stereo preamplifier  
**WEIGHT**  
3.9kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
432 x 57 x 343mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Twin ESS ES9038Q2M DACs  
• Analogue inputs: RCA; XLR  
• Digital input: 2x optical; 2x coaxial; USB; HDMI ARC  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Karma AV  
**WEBSITE**  
emotiva.com  
karma-av.co.uk

### ▶ DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Emotiva BasX A2  
**ORIGIN**  
USA/China  
**TYPE**  
Stereo power amplifier  
**WEIGHT**  
11.4kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
432 x 102 x 393mm  
**FEATURES**  
• 160W RMS per channel (8ohm)  
• Class AB design  
• 1x RCA inputs  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Karma AV  
**WEBSITE**  
emotiva.com  
karma-av.co.uk



manages to convey the intensity of the music with aplomb. No prizes for the hard and steely tonality, but that's what you get on the record. You'd never file this track under 'cocktail jazz', but that's not the point. This pre/power combo again does a proper job of reproducing precisely what it's asked to.

The power amp is good here; it's far more gutsy than you'd expect at the price and goes loud with relatively little strain. Again, my favourite 'affordable' power amp – the more expensive Exposure 3510 Power (HFC 505) – does better, but costs over twice as much. If there's a criticism of the Emotiva, it's just a little dry across the whole frequency spectrum – it doesn't have the tonal vibrancy of more expensive designs. Yet it's still cracking value and with a good, smooth pair of floorstanders

## The sort of big sound that's not normally offered, or even expected, at the price

like Acoustic Energy's AE509 (HFC 456), you're really smiling. The great thing is that it's got enough grunt to drive some really quite inefficient speakers – like a small pair of mini-monitors – with absolute ease.

Feed this pre/power combo a curve ball in the shape of some classic modern jazz – like Lee Morgan's *The Sidewinder* – and its budget roots show a little. Tonally it sounds a tad more processed than more expensive kit, but where it really counts, in the Emotiva combo's capacity to carry the groove and swing of the song, it scores highly. The onboard DAC is rather good – it's not fitted as an afterthought and many will not see the need to upgrade. All the same, a Chord Qutest (HFC 436) will improve the digital sound even more, albeit at



### HOW IT COMPARES

There are few cheap pre/power combos these days, but Pro-Ject's Pre Box DS2 Digital and Amp Box DS2 (HFC 430, £700, £600) fit the bill. Together the pair is just a little cheaper than the Emotiva pre/power, but compares closely with good DAC functionality and a claimed 100W RMS per channel from its Class D power modules. The Pro-Ject duo is very nicely built and finished for the price, and sounds surprisingly good too. It has a warmer, softer sound than the Emotiva combo, with plenty of air and space – but lacks the latter's 'get up and go', plus its ultimate punching power.

**The BasX A2 has huge heft considering its modest price**



quite an outlay relative to the cost of the Emotiva duo. Left to its own devices, the XDA-3/BasX A2 shuffles along with this track, having fun. The music comes across in an engaging and happy way, even if it isn't as organic sounding as some more expensive designs.

With its detailed, engaging sound, this pre/power does surprisingly well considering its modest price. Across all types of music it is true to itself, and doesn't fall apart with some genres or styles. It's particularly handy with well-recorded programme material, where its very good soundstaging ability comes into play. You get a satisfyingly wide recorded acoustic on the frenetic drum and bass of LTJ Bukem's *Horizons*. There's a strong central image to the snare drum pattern, with percussive effects darting around across the soundstage.

There's even a fairly convincing sense of depth to the recording, which isn't something that usually comes with the territory of budget amplifiers. Again, it's the sort of big sound that's not normally offered, or even expected, at the price.

### Conclusion

Overall then, a firm thumbs up for the Emotiva XDA-3/BasX A2 DAC-preamp/power amplifier combo. It will appeal to people who want serious sound-per-pound, rather than brand snobs showing off to their friends. It's a powerful, confident and articulate duo that gets the basics right. Okay, maybe it's not the most subtle or sweet sounding pre/power around, yet it achieves far more than you'd expect for the money. Well worth an audition then, if you're a power seeker on a budget ●



### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Enjoyable sound; power; features
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Nothing at the price
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> Exceptional value pre/power pair
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	

#### OVERALL

