



Power couple

David Vivian wonders if true high-end clarity and power can be had at a distinctly low-end price. Emotiva provides the answer

A few years ago, I asked the former Vice President of Global Strategy at America's Emotiva Audio Corporation, Walter Schofield, what he felt constituted 'high-end sound'. Emotiva, being a manufacturer of audio components that offers an unusually high performance-to-price ratio, his answer was helpfully specific and nicely colourful. "Current delivery for maximum dynamics," he began, continuing with: "a smooth, earthy, organic sound quality that doesn't shave one's beard and a spatial perspective that allows one to envision the performance as recorded. Musicality and realism are very important factors for Emotiva."

I'd just reviewed its entry-level pre-power amplifier combo, the BasX PT-100/ BasX A-300 (HFC 429). It tracked remarkably true to Schofield's wish list for an almost absurdly low price – so low, it would have been foolish not to cough up the readies to find a new home for a stellar budget amp reviewer reference, which is what I did. And for me, it's still untouchable for the money.

Emotiva claims to work smarter, not harder. Before he founded the company in Nashville Tennessee, CEO Dan Laufman was an OEM supplier to some of the industry's biggest hitters and observed what he considered to be manufacturing inefficiencies in the system that contributed to price escalation and diluted value for money. He thought he could do better and, to cut a long story short, Emotiva was the result.

There's a more natural-sounding balance I can listen to without tiring

The fact that it's staffed by audio enthusiasts and music lovers after Laufman's own heart isn't so surprising and a 'lean is mean' approach to business is hardly rocket science. But it is effective if conscientiously executed, resulting in low overheads, no redundant layers of management, an intelligent mix of inhouse and OEM components and, almost a given

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Emotiva XSP-2

ORIGIN
USA/China

TYPE
Preamplifier

WEIGHT
5.9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 133 x 381mm

FEATURES
● Analogue inputs:
4x (RCA); 2x
balanced XLR; RCA
processor loop;
phono (MM/MC);
sub RCAs
● Digital inputs:
HDMI-ARC; USB
(DAC); 2x coaxial;
2x optical
● 2x digital
expansion ports

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma AV

WEBSITE
emotiva.com
karma-av.co.uk

these days, cost-effective manufacturing in China. The idea is that it all adds up to more for less and must be good news for everyone interested in the perpetuation of real separates hi-fi and not just the impecuniously inclined.

Now we move to the other end of the company's amp portfolio and its flagship X-series' new XSP-2 Differential Reference preamp joined by the 'we have a Hulk' of Emotiva power amplifiers, the Differential Reference XPA-DR2. And it's here that Walter Schofield's words should really put the frighteners on the competition. This is where Emotiva goes for the six-figure high-end jugular and, in this endeavour, its spec sheet assets are nothing short of extraordinary.

Take the XPA-DR2 power amp. It's a weapon in a plain wrapper. No, it doesn't look much: quite okay in a neat and functional, zero frills kind of way. Impressively large and heavy for sure. And it's well put together with a satin-finish, milled aluminium front plate sporting a tasteful smattering of small, blue LEDs. Indeed, build and finish are about right for the asking price – reassuringly competent rather than couture. The reach and capability of what's under that plain black folded metal lid, though... Well that's something else. Its two modules use fully discreet, dual differential, high-current Class A/B output stages fed by Emotiva's Soft Switching Class H power supply. Independently measured, the bridged two channels of the XPA-DR2 power amp comfortably exceed the prodigious 550W quoted spec, delivering a frankly outrageous 650W a side of continuous power into 8ohm, 1.02kW into 4 and 2.06kW of dynamic power into 2 at 1 percent THD.

The XSP-2 Differential Reference preamp replaces the long-running XSP-1 and retains that model's welcome duality of analogue purity and digital connectivity, but with somewhat more emphasis given to the latter. Like the third-generation XPA power amp, the preamp is a sizeable affair, but a much lighter one weighing just 5.9kg – which is a little less than the superseded XSP-1. The fascia design is well considered with a large OLED display dominating a layout which otherwise comprises a chunky but not oversized volume knob with a precise, well-oiled action and a group of four small buttons for navigation scrolling. Talking of chunky, the all-metal remote is almost heavy enough to hammer a nail into concrete, perhaps another unsuitable hint that such luxuries shouldn't be

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Emotiva XPA-DR2

ORIGIN
USA/China

TYPE
Stereo power amplifier

WEIGHT
19.3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 203 x 483mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 550W RMS (8ohm)
• Class A/B output
• Inputs: RCA; balanced XLR

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma AV

WEBSITE
emotiva.com
karma-av.co.uk



The thirst for room-filling loudness is sated before any sign of strain

the preserve of the uber expensive, to which I'd just add 'if only'.

Rear panel connectivity shows where most of the Mk 2 update is concentrated and gifts the preamp its remarkable versatility and flexibility. There are four pairs of RCA line inputs, two balanced XLR inputs, an MM/MC phono stage, processor loop connections, balanced and single-ended main outputs, ditto subwoofer outputs plus a Home Theatre bypass. The modular architecture with its two expansion slots is both a nod to

digital future proofing and keeping the analogue signal paths pure and separate. As supplied, a balanced ESS DAC module fills one while the other is waiting for a streaming module that Emotiva says is in development.

The ESS ES9038Q2M-based DAC module is bang up to date and provides HDMI ARC, USB, two coaxial and two optical inputs. USB supports PCM up to 32-bit/768kHz and native DSD512, while the coaxial and optical inputs accept PCM up to 24-bit/192kHz. As the preamp's full name suggests, the principal signal path remains fully differential and fully balanced, including the volume control and bass management circuitry. Emotiva claims THD+N

below 0.0005 percent and a balanced signal-to-noise ratio greater than 119dB. All digital circuitry is shielded while input switching is handled by miniature relays. Volume control is via a ladder-resistor arrangement operating in 0.5dB steps. All in all, a spotless spec.

Sound quality

There are two manifestations of traditional 'high-end'. One revolves around low-powered tubes and high-sensitivity speakers, the holy grail being the quality level of the first Watt. The other power-crazed, solid-state, self-sustaining eco system where amplifier makers service the requirements of vast, multi-driver





towers, some desperately inefficient, some with perilous impedance plots, some featuring all the above.

So gargantuan grunt XPA-DR2 style. What's it for? Well, as Emotiva would have it, you don't have to sell members of your family to afford an amplifier that can drive Apogee Scintillas – or similarly diabolical loads – with visceral verve and confidence. Then there's the question of what constitutes 'adequate' amplifier power in the first place. I remember Musical Fidelity founder

The all-metal remote is almost heavy enough to hammer a nail into concrete

Antony Michaelson's contention that even with speakers boasting 90dB sensitivity, you need at least 500W to even get close to reproducing the loudness and dynamics of live music realistically. Hence the MF behemoths produced on his watch.

Naturally, expectations for the American duo are sky high and include effortlessly raised dynamic realism, the complete removable of the moment when, coaxing up the volume, what you're hearing hardens and is no longer comfortable to listen to because the thirst for room-filling loudness is sated before any sign of strain.

With an Arcam Radia ST25 streamer and MoFi Studiodeck turntable (HFC 529 and 505 respectively) supplying the tunes and a handful of speakers introduced to the tender mercies of the Emotiva power couple – from

insensitive LS3/5a standmounts to benignly efficient Opera Classica Grand Messa v2 floorstanders – in every case, the same overriding impression emerges. Seemingly tangible presence without an overt sense of volume or 'loudness'. What feels like unfettered dynamic reach – at least within the absolute limit of the chosen speaker. Likewise, bass capability that is fully exploited in weight, articulation, extension, tunefulness and texture, no matter the speaker. It all leads to a greater sense of natural acoustic energy without lesser hi-fi's glare and electronic artifice. Emotiva boss Dan Laufman reckons high-current delivery is an absolute necessity for high-end sound, delivering an energy that carries weight, body, drive and structure less well-endowed amps can't match, especially with speakers that require high levels of control and grip. Mission accomplished, I reckon.

Of course, I can decide just how pinned to the wall I want to be playing Deep Purple's *Smoke On The Water* from the *Made In Japan* album with Revival Audio's Sprint 4 (HFC 531) floorstanders hooked up. But perhaps a better display of the XSP-2/XPA-DR2's precisely judged fusion of force and finesse is with the Opera floorstanders in situ. Playing a Qobuz stream of Randy Newman's *The Great Debate* from his *Dark Matter* album, there's a broad spectrum of shades in the tonal palette that may initially appear to lack a little 'sparkle', but what I'm not hearing is any undue form of brightness or exaggeration, a more natural-sounding balance that I could listen to almost indefinitely without tiring. The



For £3,880, the Emotiva pairing really is in a class of its own. Nothing gets remotely close on paper. The astonishing thing is, substitute the XPA-DR2's power and distortion figures for, say, those of Dan D'Agostino's latest Momentum Z monoblocks – £64k a pop, £128,000 for stereo – and hardly anyone will spot the difference, except maybe for the Emotiva's slightly lower distortion and noise stats. True, the Zees have more ultimate grunt responding to a 1ohm impedance dip, but that's mostly because the XPA-DR2 is a bridged design and its amplifier modules therefore 'see' half the actual load impedance. As such, it's protected at 255W into a nominal 1ohm which it 'sees' as 0.5ohm. Whatever the sonic outcome, bragging rights are nailed.

'architecture' of Newman's performance is brilliantly preserved, too. In fact, in recent reviewing memory, the Grand Mezzas have seldom sounded so clear, smooth, low in colouration and nimble on their feet. Without seeming overblown or in any way over the top, I'm appreciating the big picture imbued with enough detail, warmth and texture to be believable, immersed in the music without giving a single thought to its reproduction.

The XSP-2's onboard phono stage, far from being a box tick, is damn good as well. Playing a less than pristine copy of *Kind Of Blue*, Miles Davis' trumpet has a sumptuous sonority and stereo perspectives are superbly handled with almost uncanny reproduction of acoustic cues and truly three-dimensional imaging.

Conclusion

Many products are marketed as 'affordable high-end'. I've reviewed quite a few. Some get closer to fulfilling the brief than others, but most offer fine value for money and cheers to that. This Emotiva pre-power combo, however, truly is the real deal – giving the full tasting menu of 'high-end' advantages in an unpretentious package for comfortably under £4k. They said it couldn't be done, but no one told Emotiva •

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: XPA-DR2

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

LIKE: Massive power, control, grip and timing; musically compelling

DISLIKE: It's not a glamour model

WE SAY: Outrageous power and grip meets delicious detail and finesse. Spectacular!

OVERALL

★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: XSP-2

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

LIKE: Accessible design; flexibility; connectivity; sound quality; phono stage

DISLIKE: Nothing of note at the price

WE SAY: A preamp that does it all and delivers excellence in both digital and analogue domains

OVERALL

★★★★★

