

Consonance Linear 1 preamplifier, Cyber 211 mono power amps

By Alan Sircom
Photography by James Wilkinson

Consonance is one of those companies that everyone skips over. The brand makes some of the most consistently excellent products in any line up, and yet all of us keep choosing the same old high-end famous names. This is a crying shame, because the Linear 1 line preamp and Cyber 211 mono power amps offer truly stunning performance at a price that makes a huge amount of sense. They are made in China, and maybe that highlights the anti-Chinese rhetoric that sometimes goes on in hi-fi circles.

The Linear 1 is a fully transformer-coupled line preamplifier, with a very impressive valve line-up – a pair of 2A3 as input triodes, a 6SL7 double triode in the phase splitter stage and a pair of 101Ds in the gain stage. This is an odd choice of tubes in some respects, possibly more commonly seen in low-power single-ended triode power amps in their own right, they work well to give the preamp the linearity and gain to drive almost any amplifier well. It's a simple but not

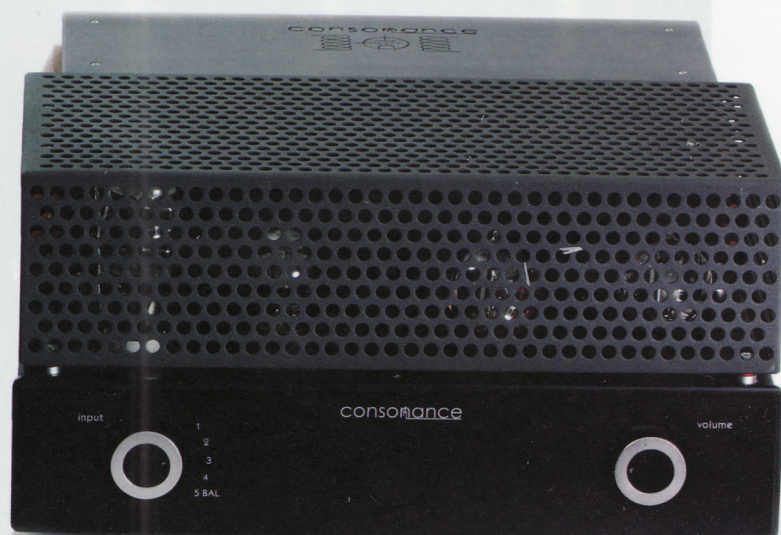
basic design, with the standard issue Consonance small but handy remote handset, four phono and one XLR input, phono and

XLR output and the selection and volume controlled from front panel and remote alike. Balance is not adjustable. With its matt black finish, dark grey case valve case and matt wooden side cheeks at the back of the of the amp, it's all about refined elegance.

Its look is echoed in the Cyber 211 amps. These tall, stubby amps sit on four outrigger feet, and look like some kind of CGI cutesy robot from Wall-E. Each amp has an E88CC input triode, a 5687 line driver, a pair of 5AR4 as rectifiers and a whopping great 211 power tube per side. This delivers a healthy 16W per side (an almost identical version with 845 power tubes is also available in the same chassis and at the same price, delivering 28W per channel).

These are easy amps to use, with a bias control and front-mounted biasing dial in easy access (as there's only the one power tube to bias, it's easy to operate). Behind this is a transformer hum control, designed to overcome hum from any potential DC offset – a neater way of doing things than DC blocking potentially.

Opera recommends a heavy run in, but it's not that important. They sound excellent from the outset. As they bed ▶





► in, there's a very slight touch of top-end hardness (almost like a grainy tube grunge) that goes away. But it's nothing to hold back over. What you hear day one is what you get, with very little change, just a slight opening out as time goes by.

What I like about these amps is it brings really top-banana single-ended triode sound to a whole new audience. Really, the only other player in town here is Pure Sound, and while it sounds fantastic too, the look is a little more 'agricultural' than the Consonance models, in my opinion. And bringing Single Ended Triode sound to a wide audience means it's going to be a shock to some when first hearing this kind of amplifier combination. It's unlike most audio sounds, the immediacy and direct-coupling to the sound is generally quite remarkable, and makes a lot of good audio sound artificial, slow and arch by comparison.

And then there's the dynamic range. I'd like to see a set of these amplifiers (with a friendly set of speakers) installed in every A&R person's home, so the next time they decide to push up the gain to 0dBFS on a CD, they hang their head in shame. This shows what's possible in natural sounding dynamic range. If your discs have the measure of a full dynamic range, the Cyber 211 will dig that range out of your music.

I always like to invert things a touch. Gritty sounding amps get plinky plonky jazz played through them, where smooth, detailed and dynamic amps get something really gnarly. This time, they got 'Debaser' from the Pixies *Doolittle* album. The album is dynamic, but mixed in that late 1980s way that manages to forget there's any music below about 100Hz. Nevertheless, what was there was portrayed in a sublime manner.

It's the speed of transient attack that gets you with this combination. 'Teardrop' by Massive Attack has that slow build coupled with some fast snare rim shots. If not well handled, it can sound ambient and big, but a bit slow. Here, all the ambience and speed were in full-effect. This also highlighted one of the few shortcomings of the amps; if there's any sibilance at the top end, this set-up will find it and expose it. Some of this is mitigated by use of soft dome tweeters, but it's always there. But it's a worthwhile trade when you consider the way the sound envelops you with these amplifiers.

There was a moment when listening to the classic 1962 Decca recording of the Nelson Mass, I felt like I was whisked away to King's College Cambridge. The layering of voices, the way those voices soared away, the way they were clearly ►

- differentiated from one another, all makes for a sound more like the real thing. The sense of harmonic structure and separation left me transfixed for a lot longer than writing a review should allow.

I tried the amps separated, and the gain structure of one really benefits the other. The preamp gives the power amp the chance to breathe properly and the preamp sounds masterful through the powers. It all goes together beautifully. It's an infectious sound. You don't just like it, you invite friends round to like it too. The irresistible charm and speed of the amps wins friends and influences people.

The limitations of SET amps are fairly well known and apply equally here. There are only as good as the transformers

driving them, which means a big, unevenly heavy amp (breaking it up into mono amps and putting two big carry-handle bars across the top is a good plan. You need efficient, easy load loudspeakers to take advantage of the 16 W on offer and unless you have speaker sensitivity in the 100dB+ range, playing loud in big rooms is never going to happen. It does go surprisingly loud for 16W, in part because the way it distorts is so clean and attractive. So, you may be playing into clipping and still loving the sound. There's also the largely intellectual issue about SET designs and measured response, which bothers some people greatly, while others just enjoy the sound of SET amps.

The Consonance Linear 1 and Cyber 211 are important amps. If these amps were made in the UK or the USA, their level of fit and finish coupled with the fine sound would have people lining up to shout loud about them. However, they would cost about three times as much, and people would not bat an eyelid. This is a combination you have to take seriously. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Consonance Linear 1

Zero negative, transformer coupled preamp

Inputs: 4x RCA, 1x XLR

Outputs: 2x RCA, 1x XLR

Valves: 2x 2A3, 1x 6SL7, 2x 101D

Harmonic Distortion (for 2V RMS at output): less than 1%

Frequency Response (@ -1dB): 5Hz-60kHz (Gain=9.5dB),

5Hz-40kHz (Gain=15.5dB)

Input Impedance: 600ohms

Signal/Noise Ratio: 90dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 40x22.5x43cm

Weight: 25kg

Cyber 211 Mono power amplifier

Valves: 1x E88CC, 1x 5687, 2x 5AR4, 1x 211 per side

Warm up time: 3 minutes

Power Output: 16 watts (@1kHz) RMS

Total harmonic distortion: less than 1% (10watt, 1kHz)

Frequency response: 5Hz - 47kHz (-3dB)

Input sensitivity: 0.6V

Input impedance: 100k ohms

Input: 1x RCA per side

Output: four and eight ohm taps, user selectable

Signal/Noise Ratio: 90dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 18.5x33x42cm per channel

Weight: 15kg per channel

Price: £4,495 (Linear 1), £4,995/pair (Cyber 211)

Manufacturer: Opera Consonance

URL: www.opera-consonance.com

Distributed by: Alium Audio

URL: www.aliumaudio.com

Tel: +44(0)1273 325901

