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Theta Enterprise

An enterprising addition to the roll-call of ball-breaking, US-made high-end power amplification

PRICE: £4,144 each (£8,888 per stereo pair) CONTACT: Absolute Sounds Ltd, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.thetaaudio.com

Theta's history goes back over fifteen years, in which time the North American company has built up a particularly fearsome reputation for high-end digital processing. Yet it also boasts more than a passing interest in high-grade power amps, the most noted of which are the Dreadnaught, a modular multichannel design, and the range-topping Citadel monoblock. The company's amp expertise comes mainly from the pen of David Reich, who previously worked for McCormack and for Classé, where he was responsible for the original Classé amp, the DR-2, back in 1981. This, by the way, was recognised as a solid state amplifier with some of the aural qualities of valve amps.

The Enterprise is directly descended from the Citadel. As you can see from our picture, it's a monoblock that inhabits a vertically oriented case, roughly similar in form factor to a standard PC case. Internal heatsinks dissipate heat to the outside world through mesh screens let into the case. Each 19kg monoblock measures 35x60x23cm, and a pair is supplied in left and right-handed enclosures, the front panel furniture being shifted around to suit its location.

A single Enterprise is rated at 300 watts into eight ohms, and 500 watts into four ohms, with 'typical' outputs said to be 350 and 525 watts respectively. Bi-wire connections are available as an option, and another option is Reich (Dorlin) output connection, which was not examined for the purpose of our test, but which carries a dire warning in the manual about over-tightening or cross threading of the hex stud (sic), which "will not be covered under warranty". Inputs are single-ended (phono) or balanced (XLR). Other rear panel furniture includes LEDs for the +ve and -ve rail fuses, another LED for overheat protection, a power fuse, an RS232 interface in RJ45 and DB9 flavours, a remote trigger and a mains power switch. On/standby switching is accomplished using a front panel switch, which is associated with a discreet LED. Build quality and finish are good, but the Theta lacks the battleship solidity of the bigger Krells, or the precision of a Classé Delta range component.

In Theta's own words, the Enterprise is a fully balanced, zero feedback monaural amplifier. Fully balanced means single-ended inputs are concerted to balanced at the input by synthesising a signal with opposite polarity to the input signal, and that the signal path remains balanced up to the summing stage at the output, where common mode artefacts

(noise, distortion and so on) are cancelled out and subtracted from the output. Zero feedback is not quite what it seems. This is not a feedback-free amplifier, but one where each gain stage (there are three) has its own local feedback to minimise loop delays that can undermine global feedback strategies.

Each Enterprise is built around a 500-watt toroidal transformer. The amp is built onto a four-layer board (not unlike a computer

“There's a strong sense of grip, a feeling that the speaker is being told firmly what to do, while steering on the right side of sterility.”

motherboard), one each for positive and negative power supply lines, one for ground, and one for the signal path (not at all like computer motherboards in other words). The Enterprise employs the same 'ultra-fast' bipolars used in the Citadel and Dreadnaught II power amps, and the same bridge rectifier and output capacitor bank as the Citadel, and the motherboard is the same too. The message is that the Enterprise is a Citadel-lite, with a little less power – for a lot less money – but it is designed to offer similar sound quality.

SOUND QUALITY

We found the sound of the Enterprise not altogether easy to pin down. It was clear from the outset that it is a great solid state amplifier, among the best we've ever encountered. In the first place it has an airy and open cleanliness, and an unusual ability to paint wide open spaces, the subtle sound of a large concert hall for example. In this area, the Enterprise has few peers.

We also liked its basic tonality, which is not quite neutral as far as we can judge. We've heard it described as more valve-like than other well known solid state amps, perhaps like a scaled up version of the original Classé, and this may be true – but we suspect not. The comments on the Theta's tonality arose when it was substituted for the Krell KAV-2250, reviewed on p110 of this issue. Both power amplifiers were driven by the same Krell KAV-280P preamp, chosen by default in the absence of a matching Theta preamp. Both amps were interconnected using balanced Nordost Valhalla interconnects, though I heard little difference between balanced and single-ended using the same cable type, hopefully because single-ended

performance was being levelled up by the balanced internal circuitry, as Theta claims, rather than the other way around.

The immediate impression was that the Theta delivers a more expansive soundstage, and a subtly darker, richer tonality. The Krell sounds a little tighter, drier and more constrained – more disciplined if you like. As for which of the two is more transparent, it's hard to say. I lean in favour of the Krell, which

if it is not directly more transparent, is at least more consistent, at different volume levels, and with different speakers.

It's the Enterprise's slight edge of inconsistency that ultimately makes it so hard to nail down. It certainly appeared to favour some speakers over others – it was little short of mesmerising driving the Revel Ultima Studio, for instance. There is a strong sense of grip, a feeling that the speaker is being told firmly what to do, which nevertheless steers distinctly on the right side of anything that could be described as flat or sterile. This, if you like, is an amp with a human face. Yet with the MartinLogan Summit (see p62), the effect was rather different. Here there was a suggestion of something approaching midrange 'glare' and the bass registers seemed less secure than when the Krell was in charge.

There was also a trace of level dependency, the objectively less powerful Krell holding on with greater consistency as the volume was racked up in my new, fairly power-hungry listening room. In the final analysis, the Krell also has a more solid and stable bass, even though the Theta's low frequency voicing has a touch of richness and muscularity that Krell only really matches with its heavyweight (and hugely costly) FPB range, though most models in that series will do so at volume levels and with a devastating authority that lie outside the compass of the Enterprise. Still, the Theta managed to convey a sense of scale and architecture better than the KAV-2250, and there was a loose-limbed quality in the way it worked that somehow seemed better able to convey a feeling of relaxation and ease when the music called for these qualities. A great amplifier then – and a true individual. **HFC**

Alvin Gold