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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

DarTZeel NHB-458 monoblocks

by Alan Sircom

Sometimes a product just demands a large gasp. The NHB-458 is once such product, the weight, the physical size, the finish, the power on tap... and the price tag are all gaspworthy.

In a way, the NHB-458 is a sign of just how good the first DarTZeel product – the NHB-108 stereo power amp – really is. This 100 watt stereo chassis is one of the best amplifiers you can buy. To improve upon it is not easy – simply making bridged mono versions of the NHB-108 doesn't cut it – it would potentially improve upon the stereo chassis, but not provide the same jump in performance the 108 has above its peers. To make an amplifier that was demonstrably better than the NHB-108 without losing something in the process was the motivation behind the NHB-458 monos. And it goes some way to explain just

why these things cost so much; it's not two NHB-108s, it's more like the exponential of the power amp.

The first thing you notice about the NHB-458 is their sheer physicality. The chassis itself is not much larger than an Apple Mac Pro or similar tower computer. Except it weighs as much as a truck load of Apple Macs and is made out of solid aluminium billets that take 150 hours to machine before sent for some of the richest anodizing around. The distinctive gold and red colour scheme used in other DarTZeel products gets its full expression here, and it looks more elegant in the flesh ▶



▶ than it might first appear. Two smoked glass side panels show off what's going on inside the amp.

In fact, like the NHB-108, what's going on inside the amp is deceptively simple. No contacts, no switches and just a single gas-filled relay per side. No negative feedback in either input or output stages and only three junctions in the signal path from input to input. As you might expect from so expensive an amplifier, it involves a lot of astoundingly expensive components and incredible amounts of power reserve, and a custom-made toroidal transformer about the size of a car tyre. Which is why the amplifier weighs so much, and why a notionally 450 watt per channel amplifier tops out at something closer to 1.4kW at full tilt.

The exciting thing about a pair of power amplifiers built to such a high specification – and at such a high price – is it immediately side-steps all the normal limitations and considerations about context. Someone spending the equivalent of the price of an entry-level Cessna on a pair of power amplifiers is not going to be limited in their choice of source component, preamp, loudspeakers, room, room acoustic treatment, stands, tables and cables. This is always going to be partnered with the very best, so discussions of compatibility seem at best pointless. Nevertheless, there's a natural partner in the DarTZeel NHB-18NS preamplifier and Zeel connections. The rest is expected to be of a similarly high calibre.

Suitably partnered, the experience is a remarkable one. Although it's capable of playing the sort of nice, safe music usually heard at hi-fi shows, it's hardly a test for an amplifier this capable; the NHB-458 is the kind of amplifier that's wasted on simple music and can take anything you throw at it.

That being said, at first you should handle with care; not because it's fragile, but because this kind of dynamic range is not usually found in audio equipment and you might suffer because of it. This is the audio equivalent of a classic Lamborghini Countach. Hit the throttle (or in this case, the 'pleasure control') and remember to buckle up. Waaaaarrrrroaaaaarrrrrrggggghhhhh! This isn't just a dynamic-sounding amp, it's a dynamic amplifier with a super-charger, nitrous oxide injection, twin warp engines and it's own particle accelerator. All those years with CERN being built under the Alps patently rubbed off on the Swiss, and this is the sort of amp that can go from a fraction of a watt to picking loudspeaker drivers out of the wall in an eyeblink.

And like an old Lambo, this unlimited power at your fingertips comes with responsibility demands upon the listener. As it warms up, it's twitchy

before it is responsive. But even when it's at full throat, you need to handle with care; there's no single happy place volume level, you need to fine-tune each record or you'll overload. That's not the speaker or the room overloading, and it's certainly not the amp, but you. You can't take the information overload.

This is perhaps an example of how audio should be. Each recording has its own level and if you like to play these at something approaching real-world levels in the listening room, you have to act like a bit of a safecracker at the controls. Yet, for all that endless dynamic range and ability to go from mild to wild and back again as fast as the music played, it's not just about dynamic range. It's a surprisingly subtle amplifier for something that vast. ▶

▶ Vast, and fast. It's virtually psychic. Transients like rim-shots appear with a directness and impact that makes almost everything else sound like it's got a 'thing' against drum kits. Yet the amps are some of the most sweet and relaxing amps around. And for all that, it's not the sort of psychotic sound that tries to be all things to all people, and ends being nothing for anyone.

What the DarTZeel goes for is the musical enjoyment and entertainment first and foremost, and it does that through the dynamic freedom of having almost instant, almost total power. Playing 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat' on *Mingus Ah Um*, you get to hear this in the way the sax is there, living and breathing in front of you. It will bring out the majesty in music, even if that majesty is not easy to find.

There's a lot of the sound of the original DarTZeel stereo power amp here, just with seemingly endless power. The speed, the harmonic richness, the sound of an amp getting out of the way were all functions of the original stereo. They are just here in full effect; where the stereo chassis hits its functional limits of dynamic headroom, sheer driving power for big speakers and big rooms and stereo separation, is where the monos begin to let their hair down.

"This is the Bruce Lee of amps; light on its feet, but capable of kicking you through a door. You don't just listen, you hang on"

We are all children of the soundbyte today. Everything needs to be pinned down in a pithy sentence, no matter how much that trivializes matters. The DarTZeel soundbyte works, though – it's a flea-powered amplifier that brought a really big friend along. This has all the romance, dynamic freedom and sparkle of a three-watt triode design coupled with the sort of effortless power delivery you might expect from a kilowatt design. From a sonic perspective alone, this is the Bruce Lee of amps; light on its feet, but capable of kicking you through a door. You don't just listen, you hang on. It's a rush, it's a hell of a ride!

Let's 'man up'. There's no getting away from that price; can any power amplifier, no matter how good, be worth more than a top Porsche Panamera Turbo with all the trimmings? In some respects, the question is an invalid one – you aren't going to splash out six figures on an amp without having a heck of a lot of wealth behind you. If you want the most majestic sounding, most romantic, most musically beguiling sound yet produced, but with lightning quick reflexes and the sort of dynamic range that will leave most speakers feeling like they went ten rounds with a before-the-griller George Foreman, this is the place. And if you have the folding to make the price question irrelevant, you'll buy it. And I envy you, for owning something that passed fleeting through my fingers (except weighing as much as the amps do, they wouldn't pass through fingers, they'd tear a few off in the plummet to the ground).

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power Output: 450 watts into 8 ohms; 600 watts on peak program music 720 watts under 4 ohms; 1,200 watts on peak program music

Inputs: phono (single-ended), XLR, Zeel
No global negative feedback
No feedback at input
Full open loop output stage
Constant propagation time from 2 Hz to 200 kHz

Phase rotation less than 1 degree from 20Hz to 20kHz

Dimensions (WxHxD): 65 x 82 x 31 cm

Weight: 67.5kg each

Price: £135,000 per pair

Manufactured by:

DarTZeel

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In all bar my wildest fantasies (OK, not those fantasies; the printable ones), there's no way I could ever dream of even thinking about affording this product, even if I could sprinkle the most special reviewer magic keen-pricing dust over the NHB-458. But if I could, I would. The rare handful of incredibly well-heeled audiophiles who can afford this masterpiece will be buying a true audio legend. I'm jealous. I really am. +