

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER AND CD PLAYER COMBOS

Perreux Eloquence 250i And CDT

Command performance

I'd never heard of New Zealand high-end audio company Perreux until Mike Blake of The Listening Room added the marque to his portfolio of imports, and the two components under review here arrived on the AVSA doorstep.

In fact, Perreux sounds more French, and certainly Continental, so to find out that the brand harks from Dunedin in New Zealand came as something of a surprise. The only reference to Dunedin I have is that they play some pretty fine rugby at Dunedin's Carisbrook stadium, also known as 'The House Of Pain' – as our Springboks have found out on various occasions...

But as it turns out there's nothing painful about spending time in the company of the Perreux Eloquence gear under review here: the 250i integrated amplifier and CDT transport are both beautifully engineered

and a real pleasure to listen to.

The Perreux components look the high-end part, with massive all-metal chassis with thick anodised aluminium faceplates, while the craftsmanship is visually and tangibly apparent. They're heavy, too!

Given that the 250i integrated amplifier is rated at 250 watts RMS per channel into 8 ohm, and 500 watts into 4 ohm, that should not come as any surprise. Output voltage is 52 Volts RMS, and the short-duration current peak is 45 Amps RMS.

Under the covers, you'll find a 1000VA toroidal power transformer with an XQ core and magnetic shielding in the interests of low noise operation, and ample supplies of regulated voltage and current, while the power supply is a low-impedance design. The 250i operates in Class AB mode, but the signal stages are full Class A.

The 250i does without any capacitors in its signal path, employing DC-coupled inputs instead. The output stages are MOSFET designs, and the volume control is a sealed, solid-state stepped attenuator without mechanical contacts in the interests of longevity and accuracy.

The 250i's fascia is dominated by a backlit LCD display and a large rotary controller, accompanied by a small scattering of buttons, a headphone jack, and a 3.5 mm stereo input jack for use with an external portable source, such as an iPod.

There's also remote control handset, although it doesn't look and feel as top-class as the rest of the package. In functional terms, it works well enough, though.

The display provides visual confirmation of volume level and the source selected by default, and also hosts a menu-based user



■ Vital Stats ■

Eloquence 250i

Power output 250 watts per channel
(8 ohm)

Frequency response.... 5 Hz – 60 kHz
(+0 dB, -0,5 dB)

Signal-to-noise ratio >98 dB
(rated output, into 8 ohms)

D/A conversion 192 kHz/24-bit

Inputs 1x balanced XLR,
5x single-ended RCA,
1x main direct RCA,

Digital inputs 2x coaxial BNC,
1x USB Type B, 2x Toslink optical

Outputs 1x pre-amp out RCA,
2x speaker binding post sets,
1x tape out RCA

Dimensions (WxHxD)
..... 426x149x344 mm

Weight 25,0 kg

Eloquence CDt

Sample rate 44,1 kHz, 16-bit

Digital outputs 1x coaxial RCA,
1x coaxial BNC, 1x optical Toslink

Disc compatibility CD-DA,
CD-R/W, CD-MP3

Dimensions (WxHxD)
..... 425x100x340 mm

Weight 7,9 kg

Eloquence DAC/ADC Module

DAC section:

Digital conversion..... 192 kHz/24-bit
upsampling

Frequency response 20 Hz – 20 kHz
+0 dB/-0,1 dB (at 44,1 kHz)

Signal-to-noise ratio >115 dB
(unweighted, 2.0 Vrms)

ADC section:

Sample rate 8 kHz to 48 kHz

Signal-to-noise ratio >89 dB
(unweighted, 2.0 Vrms)

Operating systems.... Windows Vista,
XP, 2000, Max OSX

Hardware:

Digital outputs..... Coaxial BNC,

coaxial RCA, Toslink optical,
USB Type B

Digital inputs USB Type B
(also serves as output)

Dimensions 120x80 mm (PCB)

Weight 500 g

PRICE

250i R38 500

DAC module R2 200

Phono module R4 200

CDt R18 500

VERDICT

Rock-solid build quality linked to an eloquent and musically satisfying performance and intelligent control systems. In-built DAC module adds convenience.

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031-701-8425

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interface that allows several aspects of the amplifier to be adjusted and customised.

These adjustments include volume, balance and source selection (there are no tone controls), while set-up customisation includes level and balance trim for each source input. Each input can be renamed, and unused inputs can be deleted.

The pre-amp and power amplifier sections of the 250i can be separated, allowing the inclusion of, for instance, a room correction equaliser, into the signal loop.

Any of the source inputs can be set to bypass mode, transforming it into a unity gain input that can pass through a signal from a component with its own volume control, such as a surround sound processor, for instance.

Customisation even extends to setting up the volume ramp-up speed, trimming the headphone volume and balance, and adjusting the amount of attenuation when the mute mode is activated.

In other words: don't be fooled by the seemingly simple, almost minimalist front panel: the control interface is comprehensive, allows exceptional customisation and, best of all, is intuitive and easy to use.

The rear panel provides more specific clues to the 250i's capabilities. The inputs and outputs are arranged symmetrically. There are six inputs, one of which is balanced, while there is provision for one recording output.

Also offered are an amp-in input, and a pre-amp output, both RCA, to be used in conjunction with the 'Separate' setting already mentioned. Various trigger inputs and outputs allow centralised system switch-on of system components, while there is also provision for IR repeater systems.

Two sets of robust binding posts for each channel complete the rear panel picture.

At this stage, it's important to mention that the 250i can be further customised by fitting up two optional audio modules, which slot, computer card-like into the amplifier's circuitry. Both a D/A conversion board and a MM/MC phono stage can be installed.

The DAC board employs a Burr-Brown D/A conversion chip, which upsamples the incoming digital signal to 192 kHz/24-bit by default. The board offers a choice of two coaxial and two Toslink optical digital inputs.

The Type B USB port can act as both a digital input to receive music files from a

computer, or as a digital output using A/D conversion, which will allow any of the source signals being played back by the 250i to be digitally recorded onto a computer-based hard drive in the digital domain. The USB interface sample rate and word length is restricted to a maximum of 48 kHz and 16 bits, however.

Once installed in the 250i, the DAC board's set-up options appear on the amp's configuration menu. These include bypassing the upsampling mode, changing absolute polarity, and invoking one of two digital filter settings. These allow a choice of sharp or slow roll-off from pass-band to stop-band.

The accompanying Perreaux CDt disc transport is a good aesthetic match for the 250i, with similar dimensions and finishes. It too has the clearly legible LCD display, and the same small, round buttons. The control and set-up interface is also the same, and a remote control is supplied.

But the most interesting aspect is that it eschews the more usual motorised transport tray for a disc loading slot. There's no explanation about the choice, but it operates smoothly enough, and accepts CD and CD/RW discs,

including CD/RWs with MP3 files, but won't accept SACDs.

The CDt features a choice of transformer-coupled BNC and RCA coaxial digital outputs, as well as an optical Toslink optical output. Each output gets a separate digital transmitter in the interests of signal integrity, while particular attention has been paid to power supply filtering to prevent clock signal interference and noise-induced jitter.

Like the 250i, the CDt is equipped with voltage trigger and IR repeater jacks to allow seamless system integration, while there is also a RS232 port for custom installations.

The Perreaux combo was installed in the AVSA listening room, accompanied by the magnificent Paradigm Reference Studio 100V5s reviewed in last month's issue. Cabling was by StraightWire and XLO. I also ran my usual Esoteric UX-03 SE reference universal player in the system.

Discs employed for the review included The Fry Street Quartet's Isomike recording of

Beethoven String Quartets, French balladeer Francis Cabrel's 'Hors Saison', Madeleine Peyroux's wistful 'Bare Bones', the all-time great Buena Vista Social Club 'Live At Carnegie Hall', local blues hero Dan Patlansky's 'Move My Soul', and acoustic guitar aces Philippe Petit and Miroslav Vitous on 'Impressions of Paris'.

From the outset, the 250i sounded effortless, smooth and incisive, with that authoritative thrust so typical of a big-balls of amplifier, but all the dainty detail, air and stage space expected of a top-end integrated amplifier.

The Perreaux never sounded overbearing or bullying, and was able to resolve as much emotional as musical content, really digging into the life and soul of a recording and extracting the very core of the performance.

I liked the clean, structured and muscular delivery of the amplifier, and also ability to tackle a wide range of genres. It was very comfortable with the sweet but taxing strings of the Fry Street Quartet, faithfully

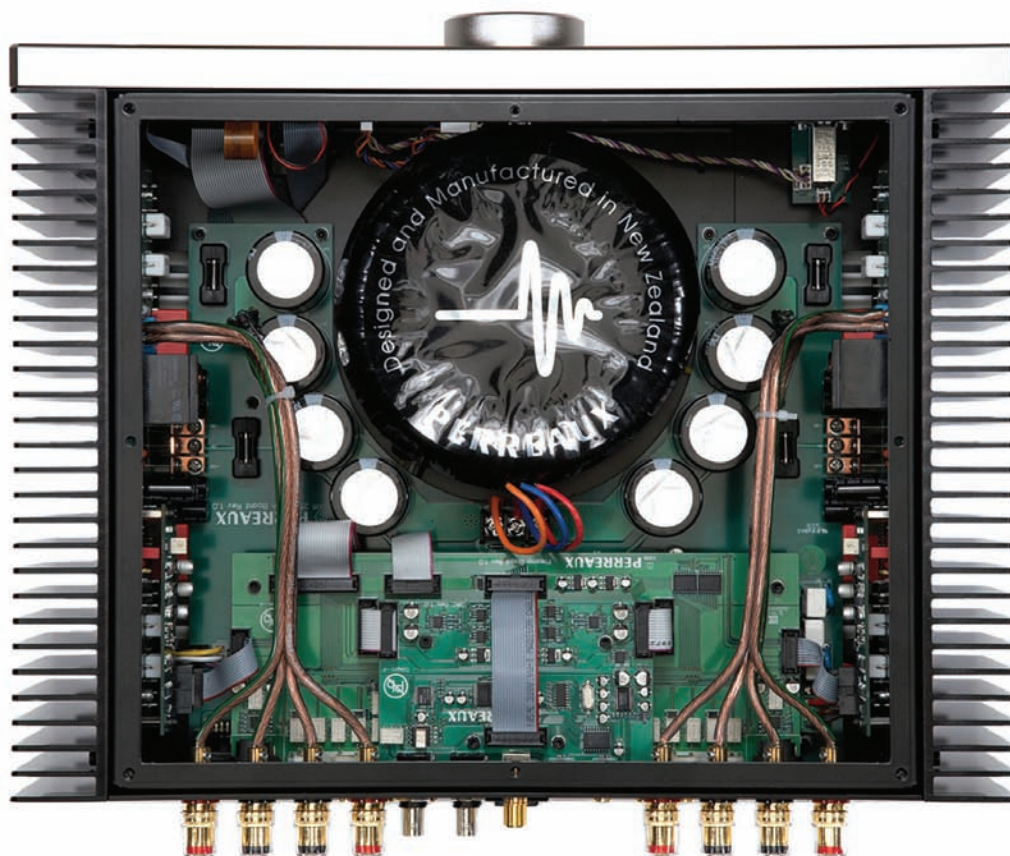
representing the timbre and harmonics of the beautifully recorded instruments, while also communicating the emotional content of the renditions.

Madeleine Peyroux's soulful voice was delivered with presence and realism, against a truthfully recreated ambient backdrop that allowed an almost holographic illusion.

The Perreaux had not trouble creating a believable soundstage that was true to the parameters of the original recording: it didn't exaggerate, nor understate, but seemed able to grasp the intent and scope of the original recording, and faithfully present the result accordingly.

Tonal spread was impressive, and did much to ensure that the big, exquisite Paradigms got a decent workout. The bass was deep and resonant, but always punchy and carefully controlled, progressing into a smooth, silky midrange with an almost tangible presence.

Treble was clean and neutral, and could be considered a little on the unforgiving side



when asked to interpret poorer recordings, but rewarding decent discs (and ancillaries) with clarity and definition.

Detail was treated with respect, but never too analytically, with a greater emphasis on cohesion and contextual relevance than outright dissection. The overall result was an enchanting, musically believably and mostly insightful performance that made the most of the input signal.

On that note, the CDt seemed to match the 250i's penchant for quality and musicality, and partnered well with the amplifier's DAC module. The transport read discs speedily, and was also adept at navigating the folders of MP3-encoded discs.

Sonically, the most notable elements were an extremely low noise floor, close attention to detail, and an ability to extract the intent and impetus of a recording.

I liked the way it made the most of the ambience and electricity captured on the Buena Vista Social Club's live performance

in the Carnegie Hall: it somehow captured the energy and enthusiasm of the performers with vivid believability.

This music-friendly approach was a common element during all the listening sessions. I tried both digital filter settings, but found that the default 'sharp' setting was the most believable: the softer roll-off sounded less incisive, and somehow less credible.

Using the Esoteric universal deck as source, and employing the 250i's balanced inputs, provided some insight to both the quality of the amplifier, and the abilities of the transport/DAC module.

The Esoteric sounded fuller, and more detailed, but also a little more analytical, presenting its harvest of musical information with greater insight, but also less restraint. It made more of the atmospheric and ambient information on the Petit/Vitous 'Impressions Of Paris' disc, but was less tolerant of the high-frequency glare heard on the Patlansky 'Move My Soul' disc.

That's not necessarily an indictment of the CDt/DAC duo, but rather a comment on outright resolution, which isn't the only measure of musicality and listener satisfaction. Certainly, the Perreux duo always sounded thoroughly absorbing and convincing.

The 250i is a thriller in every respect. It has a huge reserve of power to play with, and does so with restraint, never sounding overbearing or dictatorial, but using its authority to the most benign, most musical of effects.

I also liked its simple, seamless operation, both in terms of day-to-day use, and as far as initial set-up was concerned. And the notion of an in-built DAC (and phono stage, for that matter) makes a lot of sense, while cutting down on the number of boxes in your equipment rack.

Add the admirable build quality, the versatility on offer, and the general commitment to enjoyable audio, and this Kiwi kit deserves to be on any discerning audio buyer's shopping list.

Deon Schoeman

