

Perreaux Eloquence 150i Integrated Amplifier Review

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Written by Andre Marc

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In years past, I've usually rolled with an integrated amplifier. Reasons included less space, fewer cables, tons of inputs, conveniences like headphone jacks, remote controls, and even subwoofer connectivity. But there are integrated amps and there are *integrated amps*. I was in the budget component and midfi camp during my college days. At that point, integrated amps were not known for being state of the art. Things have changed quite a bit since then. Integrated amplifiers have approached, if not crossed into the state of the art. Most exalted high end audio manufacturers are currently offering battleship integrated amps along side their flagship separates. Many designers are even offering built in world class phono stages, Digital Audio Converters and digital inputs.



It has been a number of years since I have had any experience with a high grade integrated amp in my *own* set up, since I use tube separates most of the time. I was quite excited to receive delivery of the Perreaux Eloquence 150i integrated amplifier from Gene Rubin of *Gene Rubin Audio*, a well known California dealer, and one of the business's true gentlemen.

Background:

Perreaux was founded in 1974 in New Zealand, and soon began working towards perfecting solid state amplifiers using MOSFET designs. They quickly developed a reputation as being innovative and began exporting their products worldwide. A good thing too, since the total population of New Zealand is just under four million; certainly not enough to sustain a high end electronics business! Today the company sells components in 30 countries. Perreaux products became known as great sounding, but also as super reliable. But Perreaux at one point disappeared from the North American market for a few years.



Now that has changed as highly respected importer *Fidelis AV* of Derry, New Hampshire has picked up the line for exclusive distribution in the United States. Fidelis's Walter Swanborn is known to be very choosy about his brands, and when I saw a press release earlier in the year about the deal, I took note. Previously, I had only been exposed to the Perreaux brand through reviews in foreign audio magazines.

Design:

The Eloquence 150i is not your father's integrated amp. It is a very sophisticated component with cutting edge and proprietary technology. Sophisticated, but incredibly easy to use. The technology enhances the user experience, in my opinion, rather than making it more cumbersome.

The 150i is specified at 150 Watts Per Channel into 8 Ohms and 300 Watts Per Channel into 4 Ohms. It features four RCA inputs, and one set of XLR inputs. There is one set of preamplifier outputs, for use with an active subwoofer and more. There is a Tape Out, which I used for headphone listening, and most interestingly a user selectable function for Separates. This disconnects the preamplifier and amplifier sections in the unit. It allows you to use an outboard preamp to drive the amplifier section and vice versa. Very clever indeed. Lastly, there is an included infra red remote control.



The sophistication comes in for form of the user programmable interface. You can decide what the initial default volume is for each input. You can select the maximum volume output and custom label each input. You can disable the volume control completely for unity gain. The balance can be customized for each channel as well, a great inclusion. It's obvious that a great deal of thought went into making this amp easy to personalize.

To add to all that, there is an optional phono stage, and an optional DAC module available for purchase that includes a 24 bit/192khz chip that allows for 2 Coaxial, 2 TosLink, and a 1 USB connection. Talk about a one box solution. Lastly, the 150i is visually stunning, with the Perreaux logo notched onto the thick faceplate, a large, centered volume knob, and a well lit display, and six small selector buttons. The unit itself is built like a tank, and like previous generations of Perreaux products, should last a lifetime.

Listening:

All of the very clever bits would be pretty meaningless if the Eloquence 150i did not sound great. And I can assure you, in the weeks I spent with the amp it never ceased to amaze me. As noted, I have only had mid-fi level integrated amps in years past. But in the last year or so, I have demoed flagship integrated amps in various setups, apart from my own, from a number of well known companies that market stratospherically priced components. So I have broad points of comparison to utilize in my own demo. The Perreaux, based on my memory of those auditions, held its own and then some, and was even superior in musicality and enjoyment.

I have had tube separates for a few years now. The 150i did not suffer in comparison in any way to my separates, much to my great surprise. It was accurate harmonically, spatially, tonally, and most importantly, musically. I did not feel short changed, which is a typical feeling, even if just imagined, when comparing an integrated amp to a very good separate preamp and power amplifier set up.



The biggest surprise for me was how wide the soundstage was. It made my speakers seem like they were spaced a few feet wider than they really were, but without any loss of focus and locked center image. If that was the biggest surprise, then the most delightful aspect of this component was that it did absolutely nothing to give away that you were listening to either solid state or tube amplification. It was so grain free, so natural sounding, so musical, and refined, that that question never entered my mind. From my experience, it is one of the few components that transcend the comparison. It just delivers the goods, in spades.

I enjoyed so many musical moments with the 150i, that I won't bother to describe the performance in the usual compartmentalized aspects of bass, midrange, treble, etc. With the Perreaux, I don't see a point. It offers such a coherent presentation, and did not have me shying away from any genre of music. That is a rarity. I was able to use the 150i in my secondary system first, and in my main system with consistent results. It worked immaculately with my Spondor S5R mini monitors, and with my Harbeth Compact 7's. I would have loved to have had it with the DAC module installed so I could have used it my music server and Logitech Squeezebox. But I can't imagine the module quality is not commensurate with the rest of the 150i.



I recently bought a copy of the *30th Anniversary Edition* of Bruce Springsteens' *Born to Run*. I have never heard the album in such a fleshed out, lifelike manor. I also have a copy of the mid 90's Gold Disc version of this, and the differences were easy to hear. The recent remaster has a bit more sparkle, and bit more detail, but the *Gold Disc* holds up well I must say. Moving forward to 2009, I also spun the latest offering from Springsteen, *Working on a Dream*. It is much better sounding than his previous trio of albums, *The Rising*, *Devils & Dust*, and especially the horrible sounding *Magic*. Not only does it sound great, the songs are first rate. Springsteen specifically was looking to tap into some of his earlier, more romantic work like *Born to Run*, and he pulls it off in spades, without sounding like a cheap effort to capitalize on his classic, most celebrated period. The Perreaux made listening to the dense, beautifully crafted arrangements heavenly.

I also had on hand a few Police remasters as well. I was shocked at how well these albums were recorded and through Perreaux everything sounded so lifelike, so much so it transported me back to my early teens when these albums were new and how excited I was to hear them for the first time. I also put on quite a few singer songwriters like Ray Lamontagne, Paolo Nutini, and Lisa Hannigan. These artists are obviously big fans of an earlier, analog dominated era, and the Perreaux was superb at offering up an organic, musical portrait of each of these artists.

In addition, I recently purchased the *40th Anniversary Edition* of King Crimson's *In the Court of the Crimson King*. This one of my all time favorites and the Perreaux brought me closer to the music than before. The same goes for the 2009 double disc remaster of the David Bowie mega classic *Space Oddity*. One more rock example is the 2001 remaster of the Guess Who's *American Woman*. Only a great component can make a 39 year old recording sparkle, and rock out to the point that its age is utterly irrelevant.

I also had some pleasant listening sessions with classical and jazz. The RCA Living Stereo recording of *Dvorak: New World Symphony* is an all time favorite. The entire spectrum of colors was reproduced gorgeously through the 150i. Strings, brass, percussion, and woodwinds retained all their natural timbres, and dynamic contrasts. It was quite the stunning presentation. The opening of the 4th movement was a goose bump inducing experience. Acoustic jazz was just as remarkably rendered. Classic Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and McCoy Tyner recordings sounded ageless and agile.

Quibbles:

It would surprise me greatly if any audiophile found issue with the Eloquence 150i's build quality, sound, functionality, or flexibility. I did not. I should mention two minor annoyances though. I was not thrilled with the small plastic remote control. I found myself holding it upside down on many occasions. For a \$5000 plus component, a more substantial remote would be more appropriate. Secondly, the ground plug above the IEC connector will limit the type of after market AC power cords you can experiment with. I was only able to fit my Shunyata Venom, but not my Transparent or Acoustic Zen cables with Wattgate round body connectors. However, I got great results with the Venom, but I did not like being limited by size.

Conclusion:

To quote from Perreaux's own website "After much study and experimental work had been completed, the company began to realize that the power MOSFET could, if used correctly, go a long way towards achieving the sonic warmth, sweetness and realism of valves combined with the physical practicalities of transistors." I believe they have achieved this goal with flying colors. Yes, there is a sweetness, warmth, and sonic realism to this integrated amplifier. One that I wish I could enjoy well beyond the review period!

The 150i exudes class, does so many things right, has world class build quality, and more than enough power for any real world listening situation. The channel separation was superb, among the best I have heard. It ran cool, barely producing any heat, and requires relatively little warm up time to sound its best. If I were setting up a system from scratch, the Perreaux would be at the top of my list as the centerpiece. I am now very interested in hearing other Perreaux products.

Walter Swanborn, of Fidelis AV, summed it up perfectly when he offered " Finally, a product that offers all the modern conveniences of a user customizable interface and expandability in a beautiful package, that approaches the sonic performances of the best separates, from a company with a 36 year history of making well designed and reliable products." I would have nothing to add after spending a good amount of hours with the Eloquence 150i.

Importer: Fidelis AV LLC / www.fidelisav.com

Reviewers Associated Equipment System 1:

- CD Player: Naim CD5x and CD5 XS with Flatcap 2X
- Preamp: Audio Research SP16
- Amplifier: Audio Research VS55, Perreaux Eloquence 150i.
- Speaker: Harbeth Compact 7ES3
- Cables: Kimber/QED/Acoustic Zen (AC)/Transparent (AC), RS Cables, Element Cables,
- DH Labs, DecWare.
- Accessories: Symposium Rollerblocks, Shakti Stone, Sound Anchors stands.

Reviewers Associated Equipment 2:

- CD Player: Marantz 5003
- Music Server: Squeezebox 3
- DAC: CIA VDA-2 with XPS
- Preamp: Belles Soloist
- Amplifier: Revox A722
- Speaker: Spendor S5e, Spendor S5R
- Cables: Kimber/QED/Transparent/Shunyata(AC)/PS Audio(AC), Pangea Audio
- Accessories: Atacama Stands