

## PERREUX AUDIANT 80I INTEGRATED AMP

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The term “integrated” amp used to mean the relatively simple combination within one box of both the preamplifier and power amplification stages of signal transmission. Obvious advantages pertain to integration of these stages, not least the reduced cable connections and shorter signal paths involved in a one-box design. More recently, the concept of integration has taken on extended meaning, embracing increased connectivity and greater functionality within a single product. The Audiant 80i integrated amp from New Zealand’s Perreux is a perfect example of this trend, combining not only the usual pre and power amp functions but offering an upsampling DAC, a moving magnet phono stage, and connections for USB and TOSLINK. Add in a home-theater bypass and remote control, and you have a one-box engine that can integrate most products that a typical audiophile might assemble into a single system.



The physical design of the Audiant 80i is simple and elegant. One large (and satisfyingly ergonomic) volume knob dominates the front, and the dimmable, backlit soft-press “buttons” for input selection running flush across the face respond to your finger press with subtle resistance. You can control almost every function (at least all I could imagine, there may be some I could not) from the remote, including iTunes track playing and pausing on your computer when using the USB input. The rear handles all connections, offering a single pair of speaker terminals and detachable power cord receptacle. The amp is surprisingly heavy for its size, over 25 lbs naked, no doubt in part due to the custom toroidal transformer inside, and runs in Class A/B, heating up noticeably when in use with the top serving as a heatsink (never too hot to touch but I wouldn’t leave an LP lying there).

The Audiant 80i, as the name suggests, puts out 80w into 8 ohm loads (or 140w into 4 ohm), which is enough for most folks, though I realize bigger power specs often make people feel more comfortable. Across three different speakers on which I ran the amp, it never felt short of power, and I could crank each far louder than I would consider comfortable for regular listening.

As the heart of an audio rig in my house (I don’t do home theater), this one box displaced a two-box pre-amp, a phono stage, and a pair of mono amps, not to mention several meters of accompanying cables, the combined price of which alone would now cost more than the amp. If you want an argument for convenience or just a tidier rack (you know, the kind that you see in adverts for audio gear where cables are invisible), it’s pretty hard to resist the clutter-reducing nature of a simple integrated. But then, simple it might look but the Audiant 80i’s abilities are not apparent from looks alone.

### Listening

As with most review gear here, I initially tried the amp driving my old KEF 103/2s in my bedroom system. These are not the most sensitive loudspeakers, no matter the specs, and while I drove them cheerfully for years with a little Naim Nait II, they do respond positively to power. Playing CDs on a Denon 2900, the Audiant gave these KEFs the much-needed kick in the pants they deserve. Oomph and punch aplenty, I smiled at the sonics from this mixed-bag of components and concluded, once again, that despite what we are often told, amplifiers really do not all sound alike.

I don’t think anyone buying the Audiant integrated would cobble together a system such as this (with home-made wires too), but the baseline was established: the Audiant 80i was clearly capable and worthy of pairing with far better gear. Satisfied that all was working as it should – and that the amp was broken in for real use – I placed it in my main rig in early May and left it there for 6 weeks to handle all the music listening at my house. Using a Grover Hoffman power cord rather than the stock cord supplied, the amp received digital source material from my PS Audio PWT/PWD combo, and drove my Von Schweikert VR5SEs through VSA biwire cables. Over that time I played every type of music I usually do, from rock to chamber, and on occasion listened very closely to familiar tracks to get a sense of what this rig was doing. Twice during that period I went back to my reference setup for comparison, but most of the time the Audiant 80i remained plugged in and delivered the tunes for all.

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### SEARCH

If you want to stop reading here, let me just tell you that I enjoyed the amp a lot and so did most people who heard it during that time. The resulting sonics were musical, warm, sufficiently detailed to allow for analytical listening if warranted, and generally offering up the type of sonics one felt did justice to the accompanying components – not bad for a \$3k integrated amp.

For all the pleasures, however, there is a definite sonic picture that the Audiant provides that contrasts clearly with the SMC Audio VRE-1 preamp and Spectron Musican III Mk 3SE monoblocks it replaced. Most noticeable from the moment of installation was the character of the upper registers. The Audiant 80i seemed to give an almost lush quality to the treble region that was audibly different and perhaps more pleasing in some respects upon first exposure. My reference is ultra-clean; a sharply-focused window into the sonics that some might find a little cold that, to my ears, offers a non-distorting presentation that gets the equipment out of the way of the recording. The integrated amp certainly seemed to color the presentation, coming across consistently as slightly veiled and softer. I could imagine others thinking what I found veiled to be a warmer, easier-going sound than my reference. On Tord Gustavsen's *Being There*, for example, the Audiant 80i drew attention to the ongoing percussive use of cymbals that float over and even across the piano and bass. My reference rig tends to highlight the attack but shorten the decay of such percussion, in so doing allowing for easier discrimination of crash from ride cymbals for example. With the Audiant 80i this distinction was blurred, and one heard cymbal activity coming at you in a sea of tingly metal, impressively attention-grabbing when you first hear it; but over time I found this quality less enjoyable than it might otherwise sound.

At the other frequency extreme, the Audiant 80i was softer in the bass, providing less precise articulation of deep notes and reminding me in many ways of tube amps that I've used in this rig, such as the wonderful Audio Space Reference 3.1 I reviewed for Affordable Audio in 2008. Now this is not to say the bass is blubby or loose, it's definitely not. Both electric and acoustic bass instruments are easily discriminated and tracked, the lines can certainly be followed but without the sense of start-and-stop delineation you have with the best amplification, which I find carves out space in a musical piece through cleaner articulation of transients. That said, I feel this is only really noticeable in direct comparison between the Audiant 80i and the far more expensive reference gear. Taken on its own, and listened to routinely, the Audiant 80i does not leave you wanting more or cleaner bass on most recordings unless you've heard them regularly with that region controlled to the utmost. On the debut self-titled album of British collective (I can't bring myself to use 'supergroup' seriously) *Black Country Communion*, Glenn Hughes's rapidly plectrumed bass line at the start of the opening track comes at you with serious intent, you just know something loud is kicking off here, and when the rest of the band join in (Jason Bonham on drums, Joe Bonamassa on guitar, Derek Sherinian on keyboards) you feel the visceral force of a real rock band playing it hard and loud. The thrills are all there with the Audiant 80i and I never felt wanting for power or dynamics. This is hard rock in a 1970s vein with modern production and while there's no doubt you can gain an extra bit of resolution with my far more expensive reference gear, you pay disproportionately for relatively small gains here.

The midrange is, of course, where we are most sensitive to timbre and articulation, and if it seems I've been anything less than glowing in my praise of Perreux up to this point, then perhaps you will be happy to know that the mids are the integrated amp's strong point. My simplest test is whether or not a piano sounds like a piano in its appropriate registers or if a singer comes across as alive and breathing, assuming the recording is up to snuff. Here is where the comparison with tubes plays to the latter's strengths and not their limitations. The Audiant 80i really does give you a sense of what a good amp can deliver. Female vocals float, the middle register of the piano resonates, and acoustic guitar strings have pluck and vibrato that you can almost see. In this area, the Audiant 80i gets close enough to the sonics of my reference to make a solid case for saving money on amplification and putting your hard earned cash where it will have greater impact.

In fact, I concluded pretty early in my extended audition that the Audiant 80i partnered seriously well with the Von Schweikert VR5s, this combo being the pick of the bunch across the speaker pairings that I tried. Let me be clear, the amp worked fine with every speaker but with the Vons one starts to hear the real magic of a great setup. The VR5S are an easy enough load for any amp and while they love power, they can sound magical with small tube amps too. As a combo, I more than once sat back and thought, this is a system that works. Using my PS Audio PWT/PWD combo as the front end, the Audiant 80i was by some margin the affordable link in this chain, but the resulting synergy spoke well to putting most of your money into your speakers and front-end, and letting your ears do the rest. At no point did I think the sub-\$3k integrated was out of its depth as the engine for a \$6k digital front-end and \$20k+ speaker set up. With album after album I just found myself listening to music and admiring just how much pleasure one can get from a well-designed integrated amp. But pleasure is not the full story here. Putting familiar albums such as Holly Cole's *Temptation* or Ronnie Earl's *Grateful Heart* on didn't just mean a little softening of my usual level of articulation, I actually found that I was hearing in this particular mix a little detail here, or an emphasis there, that more than once made me appreciate the music anew. In doing what it does, the Audiant 80i cast light on some aspects of the music that were not so obvious in my reference rig, hence its particular design trade-offs come with some gains. Go figure!

## Audiant as DAC

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Of course, amplification is not the full story here. The Audiant 80i inbuilt DAC is a neat extra that allows your amp to also upgrade your old cd player or to give you the capability of including computer audio in your rig. Upfront, it improved the 8-year-old Denon 2900's clarity on most recordings when the latter was used as a transport, as you might expect, but for the most direct and telling comparison I exploited the capability of the PS Audio PWT to feed two DACs, running a coaxial cable (the excellent WyWires digital connector chiefly, review forthcoming) from the transport into the coaxial input on the Audiant, and running the simultaneously connected PS Audio PWD line output into a regular RCA input stage on the amp. Playing CDs then allowed me to flip instantly between the PS Audio DAC and the Audiant's internal 24/96 upsampling DAC using the well-functioning remote control.

Now one might think straight A-B switching in real time will tell you all you need to hear differences, but I find such comparisons are never simple. I began playing whole tracks and then repeating them across inputs. I tried on occasion to do fast back-and-forths to see if I could tell a difference, and I came to the conclusion over several sessions that indeed, the PWD sounded just that bit cleaner, a bit more detailed and resolving, and ultimately more pleasing to my ears. But – and it's another big one – these were subtle differences, the kind that makes me think that even though the Audiant 80i packed in multiple features, Perreux did not just throw in a DAC as an afterthought. Exploiting the ESS Sabre chip, the design team has done a really excellent job, producing a digital converter stage that is sonically excellent. Nobody in their right mind would buy the Audiant just to use the DAC, I am sure, but really, you are getting a serious piece of equipment here with power, inputs galore, and sonics that make you wonder just where the corners were cut to get it all done for this price. Rather than think of this as a multifunction integrated amp, you might justifiably consider this a very good DAC with built in amplification!

As a non-dedicated computer audio guy I cannot offer too critical a review of the USB input, but I found that my Mac laptop recognized the connection without fuss each time I connected it, and playing back the lossless files that I'd put on my hard drive

sounded about as good as I've heard in my home from such connections – that is, definitely acceptable but not as good as my regular digital front end. I imagine a serious computer audiophile would incorporate a dedicated USB-SPDIF converter, but for me, given the type of rig I'd build around the Audiant 80i in my house, the inclusion of the USB input would be a definite plus. That the remote control can also exploit this input to allow you to stop, start and move between tracks on iTunes adds another feature that I found really useful once I'd discovered it, giving me another push down what I now see as the inevitable path towards incorporation of a computer in my rig.

As my cartridge is a low output MC I did not have a chance to use the MM phono stage, which is a pity as I would like to have heard the results, but I just don't have the resources to keep a range of cartridge types around (though tell that to my wife who thinks I keep multiple components of all types in untidy piles around the house!).

## Tweaks and extras

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Given the overlap of items in for review at this time, I had the opportunity before returning the Audiant 80i to play with various cables and speakers. Everything I said about the slightly veiled nature of the amp's sonic picture compared to my reference seemed consistent across speakers, including the Harbeth P3ESR, but I learned late in the game that you could gain interesting improvements in this regard by experimenting with power cords and cables, particularly the coaxial link. The Wywires digital and power cord worked particularly well in this regard, most noticeably when the Audiant 80i was driving the Harbeths. Though I had been enjoying the midrange of a specially set up small system in a bedroom consisting of my older components mentioned above, bypassing the Parasound DAC with the Wywires cable direct to the amp, and then powering both the Denon and the Audiant with Wywires power cords, gave the combo an easily heard improvement (meaning even my wife commented, it was that clear) in resolution. Just for kicks I then tried a few other power cords I had lying around on this little rig, including an older MAC braided cord, a PS Audio Prelude and the over achieving Pangea 9 AWG cord, but it was the Wywires that really seemed a synergistic match here. Don't ask me why but I take it from all this that the amp is sufficiently good to benefit from an investment in cords and cables.

## Conclusion

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This smallish, heavy, elegant box offers you an on-ramp to musical enjoyment without the hassle of multiple purchases and match-making. If simplifying your cable connections, having the ability to wed both analog and digital components while getting excellent sonics appeal to you, then I'd suggest an integrated amp might be on your shopping list. And if you are willing to take that step, then the Audiant 80i is a worthy contender. I rate it above my much-loved Naim Nait II, not only in terms of functionality, and while my memory of the truly wonderful Audio Space Reference 3.1 suggests that even better sonics can be found near this price, the convenience and capability of the Audiant 80i offers something of benchmark product for those needing the power, sonics, and connectivity on offer. Throw in the ease of use, fuss-free maintenance, slim footprint, and good looks (to my eyes), and you have a tidy package that will serve you well for years to come while you put your money into the parts of your rig where it matters most. This is truly a 21st century integrated amp with old-fashioned audiophile qualities. Well done Perreaux.

## Associated equipment

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- Digital: Denon 2900, Parasound Dac Ultra 2000, PS Audio Perfect Wave Transport and Perfect Wave DAC
- Amplification: Naim Nait 2, Elekit Tube Integrated. SMCaudio VRE-1 and Spectron Musician III Mk 2 monos in reference.
- Speakers: Von Schweikert VR5SE, Kef 103/2, Harbeth P3ESR, Tangband 3.1 kit speakers
- Cables: WyWires interconnects, digital coaxial and speaker cables and power cords, Von Schweikert Audio biwires, Speltz Anti-Cables, home made 14awg, Pangea AWG9, MAC HC, and PS Audio Prelude power cords.

## General Specifications

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**Dimensions:** W: 431mm (17.0"), D: 309mm(12.2"), H: 67mm (2.6")

**Weight:** 11.5kg (25.3lb)

**Power Output** (*per channel, <0.05% THD+N*): 80W into 8Ω into 8Ω, 130Wrms into 4Ω

### Connections

- Analogue Inputs: 3 Line-level, 1 Phono
- Home Theatre Input: Yes (*selectable*)
- Digital Inputs: 1 Coax (*RCA*), 2 Optical (*TOSLINK*), 1 USB (*Type B*)
- Analogue Outputs: 1 Pre Out, 1 line out

### Digital to Analogue Converter (DAC)

- Input Sample Rate (*maximum*): 96kHz (*Coax, Optical*) 48kHz (*USB*),
- Input Word Length (*maximum*): 24-bit (coax), 16-bit (USB)
- Digital to Analogue Conversion: 24-bit/96kHz (*upsampled*)
- Output Voltage: 1.95Vrms @ 0dBFS

### Phono Stage

- Gain: 40 dB
- Input Impedance: 47 kΩ