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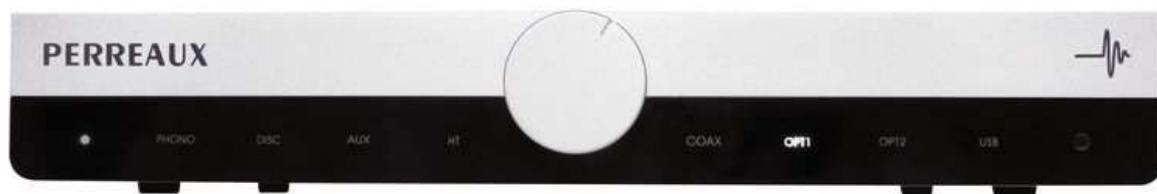
Perreaux Audiant 80i Integrated Amplifier (TAS 213)

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The Right Amp at the Right Time

June 27th, 2011 – by Neil Gader

Source: The Absolute Sound



Perreaux Audiant 80i Integrated Amplifier

Perreaux electronics sightings in North America have been infrequent in recent years. A sign of the times to be sure. But as Dylan sang, the times they are a changin'. Perreaux, based in New Zealand, has recently acquired a capable new distributor in Fidelis AV. But more importantly it's launched a new amp. And the Audiant 80i integrated amplifier is, in my view, the right amp at the right time. Admittedly, assessing trends in a roiling marketplace is a lot like predicting the weather—I mean, who *really* knew LPs would be cool again and that downloads would bury the compact disc? But Perreaux has carefully tapped the market's pulse and come up with more than just another face in the crowd. The \$2995 Audiant 80i is a refreshing mix of old-school cred and cool shout-outs to the current zeitgeist.

There are two key factors that distinguish the Audiant from its competition. First, it's a true "hub" integrated, enriched with an abundance of inputs to support three generations of formats—analogue, compact disc and hard drive (an arrangement that should become more prevalent given contemporary server/streaming reality). Specifically there's a phonostage for moving-magnet cartridges, an input for a CD player, optical and coaxial digital inputs for satellite receiver or other digital source, and an upsampling USB DAC for music stored on a computer. The back panel offers a line out (once known as a tape out, alas) for recording from a selected source plus a selectable home-theater input. A full-function remote control is standard and, for the energy conscious, in Standby mode power consumption is less than a watt.

The second factor is the integrity of its visual design. Taking its cue from the smart phone/tablet market it sports a touch-control interface, whereby power and inputs use dimmable LED back-lighting across the bottom half of the split front panel, leaving only smooth surfaces below and a big-boy volume control above. The input indicator glows bright when selected and gently pulsates in intensity when muted. With Perreaux's logo deeply engraved on top of the chassis, the Audiant looks similar to the aluminum laptop case of a MacBook Pro, its Apple icon glowing proudly.

On the technical side, the 80i outputs 80Wpc into 8 ohms (130W into 4 ohms) and features a custom-designed 400VA toroidal power transformer. The compact chassis is rigid and, at 25 pounds, heavy for an integrated in this range. Perreaux goes a step further by producing a massive top plate and front panel as a single six-and-a-half-pound extrusion of aluminum. This extrusion acts as a heat sink with all the critical internals mounted upside-down beneath the top plate. (Would that mean right-side up in New Zealand? Never mind.)



For the techno-phobic it's worth mentioning that Perreaux's USB input is operationally a breeze to use. It was instantly identified by name within the Settings menu of my MacBook, and I was off and running. Although it upsamples in the D/A conversion stage, its input is restricted to a native rate of 16-bit/48.1kHz. While this might jibe with Perreaux's mainstream approach, I think it's a bit near-sighted given the number of high-resolution downloads coming on line.

My sonic expectations for Perreaux gear runs high. The company is an

old hand around the high end. Historically its sound tends to be balanced, rock-solid, and high impact. Like they say down-under, "No worries, Mate." The Audiant 80i reproduced music with a sense of ease and honesty, throwing its full focus on midrange saturation. Essentially neutral, as most competently designed solid-state amps tend to be, it has a subtle yet

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unmistakably darkly romantic side—thus transient information and presence aren't filed to a hard gleaming edge, distinct from the overall presentation. Rather percussive attack and other upper harmonic minutiae have a more rounded, softer dimension.

Symphonic perspective is naturalistic, neither overly laid-back nor aggressively forward. Images simply exist as a part of the whole body of sound, distinct yet united to the performance. Large-scale dynamics derived from dense groupings of images have vitality and drive. And vocals in particular are full-bodied. Especially enthralling were the expressive personalities and cavernous vibratos of The Fairfield Four vocalists and their talk-singing intro to Natalie Merchant's "Peppery Man" [Nonesuch]. There are moments on this recording of such jarring realism that it creates the (eerie) sense of musicians actually sitting in the room. With some amps, the harmonics of female voice can reveal small bursts of upper-frequency grain or harshness, but for the Audiant 80i treble reproduction is smooth and grain-free. Yes, I could wish for a little more upper-octave air, push, and extension, but all things considered this was a good balance to achieve in this price range.



When reproducing bass dynamics the 80i had little problem controlling a low-sensitivity compact like my own ATC SCM20-2. These are speakers that are always sniffing around for more power, but the Perreaux was more than persuasive at conveying

the liveliness, the sheer musical joy of Arnold's *Scottish Dances* [Lyrita]. It also reminds you that, when assembling a system, *room size* plays just as vital a role as amplifier power output and speaker sensitivity. That's not to say you'd want to give the Audiant a steady diet of 83dB sensitivity loudspeakers. Its comfort zone is found with a higher-sensitivity loudspeaker like the Vienna Acoustics Mozart Grand SE, a 2.5-way floorstander that is capable of highly articulate midbass response and greater low-frequency dynamic output. The Mozart Grands proved a great match with the 80i, the amp allowing the Mozart Grands to make the most of their key gifts—speed and coherence—during the challenging and explosive "I Hope Gabriel Likes My Music" from Dick Hyman's *Swing is Here* [Reference].

The Audiant doesn't have an additive signature; rather its sonic nature is mildly subtractive and then in only a couple key areas. On large-scale symphonic works like Vaughn Williams *Antartica* [Naxos], the lateral spread of the orchestra, the reverberant wingspan if you will of the soundstage, is reduced in comparison to larger solid-state amps like the ARC DSI200 or the recently reviewed tube-driven PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium (Issue 212). Rather than extending images to the farthest edges of the loudspeakers and beyond, the 80i reproduced a soundstage that was more restricted to the area between the speakers. As a result, individual images—wind, strings, and percussion sections—lose a little bit of sonic elbowroom on the stage and imaging suffers a little smudging.

Keith O. Johnson's Reference recordings balance acoustics, ambience, and imaging specifics like few others I've ever heard, but during "O Vazio" from *Tropic Affair* I sensed slightly thinner harmonic textures, not quite as resolved or as tactile as through some other amps. As I listened to the clarinet player modulating his breath output and sending the air coursing through the instrument, I felt that the 80i was leaving just a bit of these details on the table. As I said, just a bit.

The Audiant 80i embodies a new wave of integrated amplification, one that doesn't play favorites with sources—it plays *everything*. It will surely skew the grading curve for all others in this class of integrated amplifiers. If the Audiant 80i is any indication of the road forward, this New Zealander is poised to make some big moves. Well priced, well executed, well appointed. Welcome back Perreaux.

SPECS & PRICING

Power Output: 80Wpc into 8 ohms

Inputs: Analog, three line level, one phono; digital, two optical, one coax, one USB

Outputs: One pre-out, one line

Dimensions: 17" x 2.6" x 12.2"

Weight: 25.3 lbs.

Price: \$2995

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Questions for Clinton Jensen, Engineering Manager, Perreaux Industries

The Audiant 80i could be described as a digital hub given its mix of inputs. Is this the direction you see the market is going?

In this day and age it seems difficult to predict with authority any particular direction the market may take. This is evident by the continued popularity of vinyl—who would have thought it? You just need to look at the prevalence of digital devices hitting the streets today. The days of the CD are certainly numbered and as high-resolution downloads garner mainstream support the sun further sets on CD, or any tangible medium for that matter. I feel the market will increasingly support more digital inputs and fewer analog.

Speaking of trends, is the demand for separates shrinking?

Definitely not. In fact, the past 24 months have seen us do some of our largest numbers of high-power separates. Interest in integrated solutions is certainly increasing. Partly because traditional prejudices against integrations are being broken as they garner the respect that well-implemented integrations should receive. But mostly because integrated solutions represent excellent value for money in the economic climate that has plagued us for the last two-and-a-half years.

Power savings is on everyone's mind. Going forward, is Perreaux examining Class D topologies? Are there other ways to address power consumption?

I agree that energy conservation is a consideration for many as the world continues to become environmentally conscious,

although, I believe, switching amplifiers (Class D or otherwise) are not the answer. Power savings are not to be had when the amplifier is in use, but instead when it is in standby. The Audiant 80i addresses this by conforming to Energy Star's requirement of standby power consumption below 1W. That being said, yes, we have examined Class D and have dedicated over three years of time and resources to developing a switching amplifier and power supply solution, though not to address energy conservation but rather the possibility of future global restrictions on electronic waste.

The Audiant 80i is the first member of the Audiant line. What else is planned?

This may seem to contradict what I said earlier about the CD, but the next product is likely to be a CD player. You're probably asking, "Why invest in a dying format?" And rightly so. But in our experience most people aren't ready for digital streamers, computers, and the like yet. For the majority, these digital platforms are largely still too complicated to facilitate the transition from their humble CD player. The real question will be what do we embark on after the CD player? A high-resolution DAC? A digital streamer? Separates, including a digital preamp? Taking into account the prevalence of music available via the Internet, the ever-increasing catalog of high-resolution downloads, and the number of streaming devices at CES/T.H.E. Show, we'd be foolish not to get on the streamer bandwagon. Watch this space...

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