Having experienced Perreaux’s smaller offering, the 80W/ch Audiant 80i, just a year ago [HFN Jul ‘11], I learned that the New Zealand house was adept at offering upscale integrated amplifiers. That’s not as naïve or idiotic as it may sound, because audiophiles have long been conditioned to expect more of separate pre/power combinations: say ‘integrated amp’ and most people think of 50W/ch NADs, Rotels, Marantz, et al. The Audiant 80i is an ‘entry level’ product only in terms of the high-end sector.

Double the price and triple the power and you’re looking at the Eloquence 250i integrated. Its factory rating of 250W/ch implies that it’s a ‘serious’ high-end offering despite its single-chassis form, while a price of £5695 eliminates the words ‘budget product’ from any description.

Amusingly, the Audiant 80I at half its price includes items that are optional on the Eloquence, like a decent onboard DAC, but that’s where any comparisons end. Perreaux throws down the gauntlet with the Eloquence 250i by proclaiming it ‘The World’s Most Powerful Integrated Amplifier’: a red rag to the audiophile bull.

MOSFETS PREFERRED

The high power rating in a modest-sized unit weighing a not unmanageable 25kg is due as much to intelligent design as any efficiency savings offered by MOSFETs. It could be the poster child for integrated amplifiers and the space savings that they can offer over separates.

As mentioned in the Audiant review, Perreaux favours high power MOSFET amps, packaged with microprocessor convenience and (for the power rating as applied to the Eloquence 250i) operating in Class AB mode. The company has been MOSFET-centric since 1974, and those who have hands-on experience of decent MOSFET designs almost always refer to a ‘valve-like sound’, something that’s not lost on Perreaux’s designers.

A handsome beast dominated by the glow of the blue LCD on the right-hand side of the fascia, the 250i is disarmingly minimalist. Its front bears so little that you might at first scratch your head, wondering how it replicates all of the operations of either of the two supplied remotes: a slim model controlling only the 250i’s functions; and a comprehensive remote that adds to that complement the control of any sibling components, plus alphanumeric input.

At the left of the fascia is the on/off button to take it out of stand-by mode; the main AC rocker switch is on the back panel. Above the standby button is a tiny LED that flashes when powering up, because the 250i goes through a safety-check and boot-up procedure, thanks to its microprocessor control. Dead centre is the rotary volume control that also navigates the menus. To its right are the infrared sensor, a mini-jack input for MP3 players or other auxiliary sources, and a 1¼ inch headphone socket, followed by the all-important display and its five buttons to access everything on the menu, from muting to source select.

In addition to reading out the selected source and the playback level, displayed as ‘–XXdB’ relative to full volume, the menu allows the user to set all manner of function and parameters, including balance, timer functions, volume trimming, naming the sources, brightness and contrast levels of the display, timeout for the display, sleep mode and much more.

If you find all these options a bit overwhelming, the owner’s manual includes a quick-start guide and the menu adds something that proved invaluable on more than one occasion: a ‘reset to factory default’ command for all parameters. I say invaluable because I wanted to review this in its most pure form, once I stopped

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**Perreaux Eloquence 250i (£5695)**

Billing the 250i as ‘The World’s Most Powerful Integrated (Class AB) Amplifier’, Perreaux is going all-out to impress with its microprocessor-controlled MOSFET flagship. Review: Ken Kessler  Lab: Paul Miller

**RIGHT:** Interior of the chassis is dominated by a huge toroidal mains transformer feeding L/R MOSFET power amps bolted to heatsinks on its side. Note the thick multi-strand speaker cabling.
any music. The Perreaux certainly didn't behave like any integrated I've used of late, though the much-vaunted power was less impressive than the sound quality... after all, a headbanger I am not.

Reassuringly, the way the volume control operates ensures that you have to be an idiot to blow your speakers: there's a slow climb in gain, which – in addition to preventing the rapid arrival of dangerous SPLs – allows you to fine-tune the playback levels even if you're normally clumsy with a rotary control or remote: those 0.5dB steps come up languidly.

Connecting both the Marantz CD player with Kimber balanced cables and the Musical Fidelity kW25 combination with Kimber phono leads, I completed the system with YTER cables and Kimber balanced cables. Even from cold, I knew I was in for a treat, the wailing guitar on The Elvin Bishop Band's 'Fooled Around And Fell In Love' soaring with a grace that recalled the VTL I reviewed in July. Unlike the anticipated sonic constraints of a 'cold' amplifier, this sounded like it had been powered up all day long.

POWER, BUT SUBTLETY TOO

This unit was measured by the Editor before it reached me and came with a warning: 'It's a beast – take care of your speakers!' So I made certain that the level was turned down all the way before playing any music. The Perreaux certainly didn't sound like any integrated I've used of late, but the much-vaunted power was less impressive than the sound quality... after all, a headbanger I am not.

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MONSTER INTEGRATEDS

With the high-end threatened by the financial crisis and the ascent of the iPod, you'd think that upscale integrated amps would enjoy a renaissance. They address two of the complaints unbelievers level at the high-end - but it was the major Japanese players who realised this in the 1960s and '70s, before Western makers introduced integrated amps with audiophile cred in the '80s. Firstly, integrated amps represent better value than separates; and secondly, they take up half the space. The only downside – a possible drop in quality compared to the equivalent separates – matters only to diehard audiophiles. Bearing this in mind, the field is pregnant with offerings to tempt those who want to save space and money: Perreaux's own Audiant 80i at half the price, size and power of the Eloquence 250i; the 200W/ch Musical Fidelity M6i and darTZeel CTH-8550; Krell's 150W/ch S-300i; the new Storms and countless valve integrateds from Italy and China. Who says you need two boxes?
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

ABOVE: Reflecting the dual-mono layout, the balanced XLR input, four line (phono is an option) RCA inputs, tape, pre-out/amp-in connections are split between left and right. Dual 4mm speaker outlets are fitted along with RS232 for system integration


tings, Kodo drummers. Admittedly, no sane person would expect to experience the majesty of Kodo drums through headphones, let alone open-backed cans not known for their lower octave prowess.

Despite this seemingly unfair testing of the Perreaux, it delivered the Kodo experience in a manner that was convincing for its realism. And it did this without forcing the Sennheisers to emulate the sort of aftermarket sector with bass so exaggerated that you wonder if the designers’ ears have built-in high-pass filters.

Bass quality, impact and control fitted somewhere in between the valve-like and the solid-state, with the Sennheisers to emulate the sort of quality exploited with aplomb. Therefore, attack and decay were convincingly natural and ‘real’, while the Sophia ‘signature’ lifelike spatial reproduction suffered only a minor reduction in stage width: the soundstage hadn’t quite turned anorexic, but neither was it anthropomorphically the reincarnation of a Mike Todd production. Their big-bass-from-a-compact-enclosure was as well-defined and palpable as if the Perreaux had been designed for and with them. Never did I get the impression that they were being under-served.

WARM EMBRACE

Lyle Lovett’s latest CD, Release Me, is a delicious set of cover versions that provided an opportunity to try the Perreaux with a distinctive voice and, on the title track, some fluid vocals. A freedom from brittleness or sibilance reminded me why MOSFETs have such devoted followers, the absence of glassware in my system not causing any withdrawal systems.

A warmth embraced the entire album, even though its iconic title refers to Lovett ending his contract with the Curb label, which could have tainted the set with cynicism. Instead, as the Perreaux lets you know, Lovett unashamedly adores this material.

Throughout the listening sessions, the 250i behaved impeccably, never once splitting, acting up, misfiring or doing anything untoward. Once, that is, I stopped messing with the settings. It’s far too easy to be seduced by trimming and adjusting and tweaking. Untainted by my fiddling about, the Wilsons welcomed whatever the Perreaux fed them, all of their inherent qualities exploited with aplomb.

Transformer noise from the chassis at sustained power levels above 50W, its A-wtd SN is respectable enough at 82dB (re. 0dBW). Distortion, too, is very low indeed and admirably consistent at ~0.003% through the bass and midrange from 1W to 380W/8ohm, a ‘flatness’ that’s also visible in the dynamic profile (Graph 1). There’s inevitably an increase in THD with frequency, but this is relatively mild from 0.005% at 20kHz and 0.008% at 40kHz (see Graph 2). There is evidently a deal of compensation (NF) at work here and this is also reflected in the low 0.013ohm output impedance, increasing to 0.05ohm at 20kHz and 0.35ohm at 100kHz. The response is also very flat from a ludicrously low 1Hz up to 20kHz (~0.05dB) and 100kHz (~1.3dB) with very little drop-off into low impedances (just ~0.5dB/20kHz into 1ohm).

The overall gain is sensibly low at +29dB (balanced input), drop-off into low impedances (just –0.5dB/20kHz into 1ohm). Finally, the overall gain is sensibly low at +29dB (balanced input) allowing a good range of the volume control to be employed. Readers can view an in-depth QC Suite report for Perreaux’s Eloquence 250i integrated amp by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red ‘download’ button.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

If you’ve made the spiritual leap back to integrateds and can deal with it the way mature car buffs wedded to manual gearboxes can appreciate automatics, then this joins a select group of single-box amps that will never betray its non-separates status. It behaves, unapologetically, in exactly the manner you’d demand of any high-end unit with vast reserves of power: with grace and guts. And eloquence.

Sound Quality: 80%

0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 100

LAB REPORT

PERREAX ELOQUENCE 250i (£5695)

Those manufacturers who insist on specifying their amplifiers rather too closely to the wind could learn a thing or two from Perreaux. This ‘250W’ Eloquence 250i integrated will, in fact, deliver far closer to 2x420W/8ohm and 2x670W/4ohm with a thundering 545W and 1kW, respectively, under dynamic conditions. Protection circuitry limits its maximum current delivery to 28.5A at 1% THD (Perreaux suggests a 45A ‘short duration’ capability) which is sufficient to maintain 1.2kW/1ohm (see Graph 1, below). So the 250i is no shrinking violet and while there’s an increase in audible, mechanical transformer noise from the chassis at sustained power levels above 50W, its A-wtd SN is respectable enough at 82dB (re. 0dBW). Distortion, too, is very low indeed and admirably consistent at ~0.003% through the bass and midrange from 1W to 380W/8ohm, a ‘flatness’ that’s also visible in the dynamic profile (Graph 1). There’s inevitably an increase in THD with frequency, but this is relatively mild from 0.005% at 20kHz and 0.008% at 40kHz (see Graph 2). There is evidently a deal of compensation (NF) at work here and this is also reflected in the low 0.013ohm output impedance, increasing to 0.05ohm at 20kHz and 0.35ohm at 100kHz. The response is also very flat from a ludicrously low 1Hz up to 20kHz (~0.05dB) and 100kHz (~1.3dB) with very little drop-off into low impedances (just ~0.5dB/20kHz into 1ohm).

The overall gain is sensibly low at +29dB (balanced input) allowing a good range of the volume control to be employed. Readers can view an in-depth QC Suite report for Perreaux’s Eloquence 250i integrated amp by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red ‘download’ button.

ABOVE: Dynamic power versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (cyan) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Protected into 2/1ohm

ABOVE: Distortion versus extended frequency from 5Hz-40kHz at 10W/8ohm. Impressively ‘flat’ profile

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specification</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<tr>
<td>Power output (&lt;1% THD, 8/4ohm)</td>
<td>420W / 670W</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power dynamic (&lt;1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)</td>
<td>545W / 1010W / 1180W / 810W</td>
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<td>Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)</td>
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<td>Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)</td>
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<td>Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/250W)</td>
<td>100mV / 1610mV (balanced)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-wtd SN ratio (re. 0dBW/250W)</td>
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<td>Distortion (20Hz–20kHz)</td>
<td>0.0017–0.005%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power consumption (idle/Rated o/p)</td>
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<td>Dimensions (WHD)</td>
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