



Atoll's HD120 and MA100

Petit Miracle

By Jeff Dorgay

Want great sound with a small footprint? Atoll's HD120 DAC/Preamplifier/Headphone amplifier mated to their MA100 power amplifier is magnificent. Years ago, small components usually meant small sound, but no more. Utilizing a pair of high current MOSFETs for the output stage, much like the far more expensive GamuT D150i integrated we just reviewed, this compact power amplifier delivers 60 watts per channel (into 8 ohms, 80 WPC into 4 ohms.) It does so in a very smooth, natural way that goes way beyond what you would ever expect for \$849. The companion preamplifier tips the scale for a mere \$995.

Staying in the French motif, listening begins with the spectacular Focal Sopra no.3 speakers. These \$20k/pair floor standers, with their 92db/1 watt sensitivity rating, are a perfect match for the MA100 and even at a high listening level does not tax the amplifier, or push it into clipping at all. Grooving on the 24-bit remaster of The Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* proves appropriately trippy, with plenty of ping pong stereo trickery bouncing the Fab Four's vocals around the listening room.

Part of the secret? No op amps inside the box, both the amplifier and preamplifier use discrete components. A quick inspection reveals a high-quality ALPS pot to control the volume and a relatively beefy power supply in both amp and pre. Bottom line; nothing terribly exotic, but it's carefully chosen and implemented with care.

The Sopras have a lot of high-frequency extension, and substandard electronics can prove a harsh experience. The Atoll/Focal combination proves lovely, with not a hint of high-frequency glare or harshness. A quick swap to my reference GamuT RS5is is equally exciting; this is quite the pair of electronics for well under \$2,000 to deliver such and incredible performance with world-class speakers. The Bee Gees classic, "Gotta Get a

Message to You" is earnestly rendered. And of course, a little bit of Serge Gainsbourg proves playful as well.

Moving in the house, with one component in each arm, the Atoll combination proves equally adept at driving my Quad 2812s, which is usually an epic fail for a budget amplifier. Again the MA100 shows its versatility and composure, delivering an expansive sound field with these ESLs.

Leveling the playing field

Using the Atoll combo with some more realistically priced speakers, along with the latest cable from Cardas Audio, their new Iridium line, again proves fantastic. Whether using the recently reviewed ProAc Tablette 10s, my trusty Vandersteen 1Cis or the (also recently reviewed) SVS Prime Bookshelf speakers were all well within the sonic and fiscal parameters to make a great system. With the HD120 only having one variable level output, I could not take advantage of the SVS SB-2000 subwoofer but had no problem going to a small REL sub on hand, utilizing speaker level outputs. This made for a great sat/sub system and showed off the LF drive of this combination in impressive fashion. *(continued)*



REVIEW



The HD120 offers a built-in 24/192 DAC, allowing access via USB, Bluetooth, coaxial, or optical input. A Burr Brown PCM 5102 DAC is well implemented here, and personally, I'd much rather see an excellent 24/192 DAC than a mediocre DSD DAC. Those of you with 12 DSD albums will need to look elsewhere.

Running through some tracks from my high-resolution library via the Aurender D100, connected via USB is sublime, and switching between Redbook resolution and high res is easily discerned. If you have a major existing library of CD-quality tracks you will not be disappointed; 16/44.1 is carried out to excellent effect.

Mating the Atoll pair to premium speakers and sources instantly proves how much music these di-

minutive components are capable of delivering of. In the context of \$1,000 - \$3,000/pair speakers, they will floor you. Moving back to the onboard DAC is equally enjoyable. Incorporating so much for such a reasonable price makes it easy to put together an incredibly musical system on a tight budget. Streaming a wide gamut of TIDAL tracks of all genres proves the Atoll combo to do it all well.

Both components are particularly refined, and the only thing lacking here is a massive three-dimensional soundstage that you don't get until spending five figures anyway, so this is no fault of the HD120 or MA100. However, the smoothness, tonal accuracy and freedom of grain more than make up for the last bit of resolution unavailable. Snow falling in the Northwest

at the end of this review made it a perfect time to queue up George Winston's *Winter*. No matter what pianist you prefer, you will be excited by the delicacy and complete lack of harshness available, with excellent transient attack. Acoustic instruments all feel real and enticing.

Even when pushed through the relatively low-efficiency Graham LS5/9s, the MA100 still delivers high volume levels before running out of steam. Blasting Slayer, Metallica, and Tool finally pushed this little amp to its limits, but to its credit, the soundstage merely flattens out. You'll know when you've gone too far. If you need more volume than the MA100 can deliver, it can be bridged with the flip of a switch to become a compact monoblock amplifier. Pretty cool. (continued)

Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



We know. Sorting through the jungle that is pre-owned hi-fi gear can be tough. Myriad Internet forums and online shopping sites just don't offer the expertise required to make sound decisions.

That's where Echo Audio comes in. We have more than 20 years of retail experience in selling hi-fi equipment the way it should be sold: In a brick-and-mortar environment that provides you with personalized attention.

While we will certainly ship any of our gently used classics directly to your door, we invite you to stop by our shop in beautiful downtown Portland, Oregon to browse our inventory in person. Thanks to an in-house service department, we not only service everything we sell, but every piece of used gear is thoroughly checked before being put on display. Consider our white-gloves treatment your guarantee against potential problems.

So, when you are looking for high-quality, lightly used hi-fi gear, look no further than Echo Audio. Be sure to check out our Web site for current products and new arrivals.

echo
audio

www.echohifi.com 888.248.echo



An incredible desktop system

The HD120/MA100 combination is out of this world as a desktop system. Whether partnered with the small Dynaudios we have in the studio, the ProAc Tablettes or a vintage pair of ADS speakers; this is an excellent setup. Or you could just use the HD120 with phones or a pair of powered monitors too.

And for apartment dwellers, the pair of headphone outputs on the front panel makes the HD120 a fantastic bedside audio machine. Stream your favorite online music source from your laptop or via Bluetooth, plug in your phones, and your neighbors will never know what party animals you are.

Running the HD120 with a wide range of headphones from AKG, Audeze, Hifi Man and even my old Koss Pro 4AA's the sound delivered is big. The sound field produced goes well beyond your ears and the built-in headphone amplifier does well with any recording. Having all of this in one compact box makes it easy to place and easy to operate.

Working with these components is wonderfully uncomplicated. They stack neatly; everything is clearly labeled, and the controls are intuitive. I love the green LEDs, and inputs are selected by a pair of buttons, with a single, central volume control placed in the middle of the front panel.

Small in size only

The Atoll HD120 and MA100 both offer outstanding performance on their own, yet the synergy is tough to ignore, and together they make a perfect pair to anchor a small yet potent audio system, taking up a minimal footprint. They even make a very cool, compact phonostage, so all the bases are covered.

Watch for some more Atoll reviews in the future. We are anxious to uncover more of what they have to offer. ●

Atoll
HD120 DAC/Preamp/
Headphone Amp and
MA100 Power Amplifier

MSRP: \$995, \$849,
respectively

MANUFACTURER
 Atoll Electronique

CONTACT
www.atoll-electronique.com
 (factory)
www.audioexcellent.com
 (US Distributor)

PERIPHERALS
Analog Source
 REGA Planar 3

Digital source
 Mac Mini with TIDAL

Speakers
 Quad 2812,
 Graham Audio LS5/9

Cable Cardas iridium