



► **DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**  
HiFi Rose RA180  
**ORIGIN**  
South Korea  
**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier  
**WEIGHT**  
16.7kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 110 x 350mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Claimed power output: 4x 200W (8ohm)  
• Inputs: 3x RCA line-level; balanced XLR; MM/MC phono stage  
• Outputs: subwoofer; 16x 4mm speaker binding posts  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Audio Ltd.  
**WEBSITE**  
hifirose.com  
henleyaudio.co.uk

# Here's looking at you, punk!

Steampunk styling meets luxury audio as the master of touchscreen streaming launches one of the most eccentric-looking, tactile and flexible all-analogue integrated amplifiers **HFC** has ever seen

**S**ay what you will about HiFi Rose, the fledgling brand hailing from Seoul in South Korea, it sure knows how to capture the attention of audiophiles. First by launching a range of remarkable do-it-all streaming players featuring huge touchscreens and options galore, and now this 'steampunk' integrated amplifier, which left internet forums speechless for about 15 seconds. Quite an achievement in this day and age... and those pundits hadn't even seen the baffling rear of the RA180 with its 16 loudspeaker terminals! But unlikely as it seems, the slick RS150 (*HFC 477*) network player, with its massive 14in display, and this brand-new all-analogue RA180 amplifier both share a common denominator. The giveaway is the 17 buttons, knobs and sliders on the front fascia, together with some VU meters and cogs thrown in for good measure. Whatever industrial design eccentricities HiFi Rose might embrace, the brand is all about

offering a multitude of features and functions. However, with its £5,500 price tag, the RA180 also marks a significant move upmarket.

**Class of its own**  
It's also offering something 'different' by housing no fewer than four GaN (gallium nitride) transistor-based Class D amp modules under its precision-milled bonnet. The higher switching speed and power handling of these new transistors improves the linearity of HiFi Rose's homebrew modules, a claim further reinforced by its invention of the term 'Class AD' operation. Class A distortion at low levels with the efficiency of Class D? At least that seems to be what the creative licence would suggest.

Otherwise, the RA180's front panel includes a veritable smörgåsbord of influences. There's a hint of Nagra here, with dials and controls from the golden age of hi-fi, combined as if by a Swiss watchmaker's atelier taken over by a Red Bull promotional team. As for the volume control... turn the

large and finely crafted dial and it engages a gear that moves two smaller cogs marked 'L' and 'R'. Above, there's a backlit mechanical indicator that ratchets to the right as the output increases. If you raise or lower the volume level with the remote, the whole gearing mechanism is driven by a motor and moves quite loudly. It's brazenly over engineered.

HiFi Rose's Sean Kim references 'retro-futurism' in the RA180's appearance. This is a design movement nostalgically hailing back to a non-existent and more human-centric technology. 'Steampunk' is an expression of the movement, imagining present-day devices but powered by steam-based Babbage computers. Luckily, HiFi Rose hasn't taken it that far.

One of the tenets of retro-futurism is that advanced technology should be made more accessible and user friendly. That's not necessarily the first impression made by the RA180, but we soon come to appreciate that the diversity of control types, which

initially look a tad chaotic, introduces a form of organisation and divides the front panel into functional zones. We'll dive into that directly, but safe to say that if HiFi Rose had chosen to use 17 identical knobs it would be a usability nightmare – and a lot less pleasing on the eye, too.

This might appear gimmicky, but form and fit are quite superb, and every aspect of the amplifier looks and feels premium. That last feature really is important, as the RA180 offers far more of a tactile experience than its contemporaries.

As for those 'zones' on the fascia, each groups the buttons linked to a particular function. Some are typical, such as the recessed dial for input selection on the left and the aforementioned volume control on the right. There are tone controls too, all defeatable should you want to trim down the RA180 to its essence. In fact, you can even engage a 'pure direct' power amplifier mode, alongside warnings on the fascia about switching to full gain with a live (playing) input.

**HOW IT COMPARES**

Quite frankly, there are no other amps that compete head-on with HiFi Rose's smörgåsbord of niche, analogue functionality (while the RA180 has a built-in wi-fi receiver, this is for app control, not digital streaming). There are one or two phono preamps – the £17,000 Nagra Classic Phono and £17,500 Audio Research REF Phono 3SE – that cater for legacy LP de-emphasis curves, and rare power amps like the £4,500 Primare A35.8 with eight channels that may be configured for bridged/bi-amp operation. But there are no others that put all this, and more, together into one densely integrated solution. Otherwise, foregoing many of these features, £5,500 still opens up a world of very high power, high performance amps. Top of the tree are Rotel's supremely capable £4,300 Michi X3 (*HFC 475*) and £6,300 Michi X5 (*HFC 478*), both including phono and digital inputs. They sound superb even if they look positively sober against the RA180!

Equally unusual are the RA180's controls in the zones dedicated to the phono stage and the high-pass crossover function. Both feature two dials – in different styles, of course. These phono controls will be appealing to a vanishingly small, niche market, as they allow you to dial in a variety of pre-RIAA equalisation curves – although we can't help but wonder if it would have been more useful to offer variable moving-coil loading?

The high-pass crossover function allows you to filter the output of one of each amplifier pair – there are two amplifier modules per channel in the RA180 – above 600Hz-6kHz. You might choose to use this function to limit the bandwidth of the amplifier feeding the treble arm of a bi-amped speaker, for example, or set it to the top 6kHz filter before driving a supertweeter.

**The RA180 offers a far more tactile experience than its contemporaries**

A typical stereo amplifier features four loudspeaker terminals. The RA180 has 16, which is astonishing even if you consider the A/B speaker option (note that's an 'either', not an 'and', option, as you cannot enable the A and B pair at the same time). As previously mentioned, there are four identical amplifier modules in the RA180 for a claimed total of 4x 200W. But you'll only use the four together when utilising one of its specialised speaker modes, either to bi-amp a pair of speakers (two amplifiers per channel) or bridging each pair into a higher-powered stereo configuration where the claimed output becomes a whopping 2x 400W.

While the RA180 does partner with an app via an internal wi-fi network,

this doesn't introduce any streaming options. Instead, it serves purely as a remote control and conduit for firmware updates. Of course, HiFi Rose has a pre-existing range of networked separates to choose from – and there's a promise of a new streaming amp coming down the line.

**Sound quality**  
The out-of-left-field design and feature-rich specification of the RA180 almost hide the fact that this is, at its heart, a punchy, authoritative and thrilling-sounding amplifier. Used initially with a Primare PRE35 as a digital source – HiFi Rose's RS150 would be an interesting stylistic counterpoint to the RA180 – and Focal Sopra No2, it reveals a slightly warm character that pairs nicely with such a revealing loudspeaker and a strong sense of driving ability. For an integrated design, there's plenty of power on tap, and a sound signature that's somewhat reminiscent of the pre-Hyex Marantz units of yore.

When a manufacturer claims to deliver huge amounts of grunt, Massive Attack's *Angel* from the *Mezzanine* album and Modeselektor's *Wake Me Up When It's Over* remain favoured tracks to challenge the assertion. The RA180 handles these moody electronic pieces and their complex deep percussion without seeming to stress.

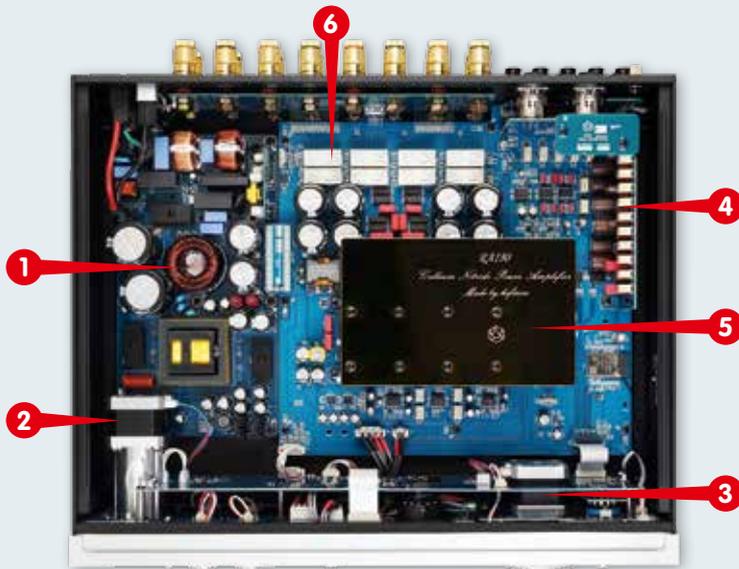
And there is certainly no lack of energy when playing Jack White's *Fear Of The Dawn*. Featuring fat, overdriven guitars and a relentless drumkit, the temptation is there to crank the volume high and just let the RA180 rock out – which it does, ably. The following track *The White Raven* is equally rowdy and up-tempo, and finds the amplifier again sounding unflustered, this time also displaying an admirable midrange focus ideal for White's exuberant guitar playing.

Spinning up a Pro-Ject X1 (*HFC 453*) with a mid-output MM pick-up, ▶

**CONNECTIONS**



**IN SIGHT**



- 1 800W-rated switchmode power supply
- 2 High-quality input selector is accessible via remote control as is the...
- 3 ... uniquely geared volume control
- 4 Bespoke MM/MC phono PCB is edge-mounted onto the RA180's main board
- 5 Four Class D 'CoolGaN'-based amp modules are screened under a polished plate
- 6 Speaker outputs are relay-switched

**WATCH THIS SPACE**

HiFi Rose's new RA180 has everyone talking about it, not least for the attractively retro and beautifully finished 'Steampunk' aesthetic that the company has adopted. Wondering what the thought process and inspiration were behind this mind-bogglingly fascinating fascia design, who better to question than HiFi Rose's Marketing/Sales Executive Director, Sean Kim?

"We wanted to show the analogue signal path flowing across the front panel of the RA180," he notes, before adding: "It's like a schematic diagram from left to right – the input feeding the pre/control stage, to the volume and speaker selection – expressed with lighting and a beautiful, retro design". Aside from the fascia, it must be said that the other myriad niche features of the RA180 are also attracting intrigue. "Hi-fi enthusiasts will frequently upgrade, so if they buy a turntable they will need a phono amp and if they replace or add speakers they need flexibility in amplification. We wanted to make

a definitive amplifier so everything could be done with one RA180", explains Mr Kim. "And although there are many functions, every part was developed and tested as an independent module – we are proud of the overall performance".

So, with that in mind, is the RA180 a one-off or a flagship that will head up an entire range?

"The RA180 is a reference 'multi-device' so our next models will use the same GaN amplifier module, but in simpler and more specialised products," says Mr Kim. "We will soon have the RA280, with less functions, but at a lower price and the all-in-one RS520 that combines the amplifier performance of the RA180 with a network streamer."

All of which seems to suggest that HiFi Rose is well on the journey towards providing a complete system? "Yes," Mr Kim confirms: "We will also have a standalone loudspeaker capable of reproducing high-quality sound no matter where you place it." Exciting stuff to come, then. Watch this space...

and utilising the regular RIAA EQ (only avid vinyl collectors will encounter pressings requiring the legacy equalisations), the amplifier's phono stage steers the vinyl version of White's album with confidence. Tracks are presented on a quiet background, dynamically and rhythmically assured, with good separation.

Granted, this cacophonous collection of blues stomps, distorted electric guitars and White's characteristic howling isn't the most sophisticated work you can listen to, but also playing Max Richter's take on Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* on a 180g Deutsche Grammophon pressing, we're not inclined to change our opinion of the RA180's phono preamp.

There is no faulting the rich presentation of Daniel Hope's violin on *Spring 3* and *Summer 1*, to the point where bettering it would likely require a change of cartridge, not amp.

Note that Richter is planning a further re-imagining of the same Vivaldi suite, which begs the question: will the neoclassical composer be 'recomposing' from the original or 'recomposing' the, er, 'recomposition'?

A disadvantage of the otherwise splendid Focal Sopra No2 is that it doesn't have the required terminals for bi-amping. So it's out with one set of floorstanders and in with another in the (large) shape of Canton's Reference 7K. We're a bit on the fence concerning the added value of running twice as much loudspeaker cable, so we initially opt to compare tracks in single and bi-wire mode.

The William Baker Festival Singers & Chamber Orchestra's rendition of *Requiem: III Pie Jesu* is captivating and emotional, a perfect mix of soloist and choral singing, with subtle organ playing and the large church space captured in such a way it nearly

becomes tangible. It's the very definition of 'well-recorded', and while never likely to push the RA180 in terms of power output – the organ never dives deep into the low Hz – it's a litmus test of resolution and timing, which in turn ensures a good transmission of spatial information.

Too muddy or slow and you lose that sense of 'being there' in the church hall, but thankfully HiFi Rose's integrated amp renders the track superbly. There is a real evocation of

**The amp's phono stage steers our test albums with supreme confidence**

three-dimensionality, even on this Canton speaker that is more about painting a big picture than serving up lashings of fine detail.

**Conclusion**

Changing over to the discrete, bi-amp (separate bass/treble amp) configuration doesn't add very much to our enjoyment of the *Requiem* pieces, but the difference is much more apparent when listening to the contemporary folk of Lizz Wright's 2017 LP *Grace*.

Here a full four amps within the RA180 drive the mid/bass-happy Canton 7K with ease, ensuring the bass drum in *Barley* resounds throughout the entire room, while also drawing attention to the singer's gritty but alluring voice. Additionally, the RA180's bi-amp mode also seems to increase soundstage scale and separation in this case, placing the crisp acoustic guitar playing even more in the limelight.

Which leads us to conclude that HiFi Rose's bold quest to provide extreme versatility has turned out to be a real success on every level ●

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Well thought-out front fascia; supreme performance

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing of any real note

**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** An eccentric-looking integrated with oodles of power

**FEATURES** ★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★