

REVIEW PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

HiFi Rose RA280

The second integrated amplifier from the Korean company is a simpler design than its original RA180, but still combines solidity of build with a powerful, involving sound

HIFI ROSE RA280

Type Stereo integrated amplifier

Price £2999

Inputs MM phono, three line unbalanced, one XLR balanced

Outputs One pair of speakers, subwoofer

Other connection 12V trigger in/out, Wi-Fi (for control only)

Output 250Wpc, into 4ohms or 8ohms

Accessories supplied Remote handset

Dimensions (WxHxD) 43x10.3x25.5cm

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Having set out its stall with a range of competitively priced high-end network audio players, Korean company HiFi Rose took something of a leap with its first integrated amplifier, the £5500 RA180. The performance was, and is, excellent, combining superb clarity with a muscular delivery ensuring the full dynamics of a recording were presented in a convincing fashion, but the styling was to prove more divisive.

The RA180 has no fewer than 16 speaker terminals on its rear panel, testament to the four channels of amplification it uses to provide a bi-amplification option for owners of suitable loudspeakers, but the real talking-point is the front panel, with an apparent random collection of control shapes and sizes, and even visible cogs and pinions to drive various functions. It has some of the air of a mad science experiment, put together from the odds and ends found on a hobbyist's workbench.

Work your way round the 17 controls, plus the VU meters flicking away on the front, and you could just about get the hang of using the thing – no surprise that the reaction to the RA180 split just about evenly between delight at the designers'

original approach, and total bafflement. The company may have described the styling as 'retro futurism', but it's hard not to conclude that the amplifier, while beautifully engineered, looks a long way from the company's network players, with their clean fascias dominated by huge touchscreen display panels.

By contrast, the latest HiFi Rose integrated amplifier, the £2999 RA280, is

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a much simpler-looking device: yes, it may still have those illuminated VU meters, the lighting of which you can dim or switch off using a selector beside them, but otherwise all is pretty conventional here. A volume control is to the right of the front panel, and a selector for the inputs – three line, one balanced XLR and a moving magnet phono stage – at the opposite end. Tone controls are also provided, with a bypass

switch beside them, and that's about it, apart from a very minimalist remote-control handset to cover volume up/down, muting and on/standby.

To the rear there's a single set of speaker outputs for each channel plus an unfiltered subwoofer output, 12V trigger in/out sockets, and a circuit breaker reset button beside the mains input in case the internal breaker should be triggered for any reason. All very simple ...

Except this being a HiFi Rose product means there's slightly more to it than meets the eye: press and hold the front panel power switch and the amplifier resets, then starts broadcasting a Wi-Fi hotspot which one can access via a phone or tablet running the company's Rose Amp Connect app, and then connect the RA280 to a home Wi-Fi network. That done, it's possible to set up various aspects of the amplifier's functionality, such as the standby mode and the delay before the amplifier shuts down automatically when it detects no signal – or indeed whether you don't want it to do so.

To be honest, there's not a lot more to this app functionality, apart from a couple of status readout screens, but at least these are functions you'll probably only ever set

SUGGESTED PARTNERS

The RA280 is an exceptional all-analogue amplifier – maximise its performance with these source components

RS250 NETWORK STREAMER

Both a network player and a high-performance DAC, the HiFi Rose RS250 is a fine match for the amplifier, whether playing hi-res music or even videos



PRO-JECT X1 B TURNTABLE

Make the most of an LP collection with the latest version of the original Pro-ject turntable: the X1 B arrives ready for swift set-up and use



once, and this app approach at least keeps both the front panel of the amp, and its remote, clean and neat.

Described by its maker as a 'Top-notch Master Integrated Amplifier', the RA280 is as beautifully built as the rest of the company's products, with its casework constructed from thick, high-quality aluminium, and the controls operating with smooth precision. And it's as impressive within, with a clear, logical layout from the heavily shielded power supply, which is designed for less heat and greater output, to the dual-mono power amplification, which delivers 250W per channel.

The amps use what the company calls Class AD working, using Gallium Nitride to replace the more common silicon in the output transistors to give the purity of Class A amplification plus the energy efficiency and cool operation of Class D. It's the same technology employed in the RA180, and results in a compact, yet powerful amplifier design which claims exceptional linearity thanks to much faster switching and thus less 'dead time' in the devices' cycles.

Completing the design is the moving magnet phono stage, which defies expectations that it might, given the company's commitment to streaming

technology, be no more than a makeweight or a specification box-ticker. The RA180's phono stage was as exceptional as the rest of the amplifier – at least once you got its parameters set up correctly – and the RA280's simpler record-player input is both fuss-free and fine-sounding.

PERFORMANCE

The simple design of the new amplifier makes it simple to set-up and use, and the quality of its construction makes it a delight to operate, from the precise fit and finish of the casework, which really sets no standards at the price, to the subtle effect of the volume and tone controls, which are well-spaced for simplicity of operation, and the skill with which even the damping of these and the power button has been judged.

This is an amplifier that looks and feels much more expensive than its price would suggest, and has a feel of quality about it sufficient to shame quite a few much more expensive designs. Even the metal-cased remote has a tactile appeal all of its own.

The RA180 may be relatively compact – at just 10cm tall it will be loomed over by some of the company's network players – but it always sounds big, able to drive just about any speakers you could imagine, and seemingly with massive reserves of power

for even the most dynamic music. Not only that, but it's also exceptionally fast, really hitting transients hard, whether they're great orchestral tuttis or the simple strike of hammer on string in a solo piano piece. For devoted Wagnerians meanwhile, it will also drive hard, well beyond the limits of comfortable listening, not only with no signs of distress, but also with no change whatsoever in the tonal quality of the music – it just gets louder.

The RA180 delivers a lovely rich tonality with Max Lilja's 'Six Shades of Bach' album, and its ability to bring out the scale and speed of an accompanied piano is much in evidence with Judith Jáuregui's 'Homeland' set of Grieg and de Falla, while the presence of the solo piano on Yundi's Mozart 'The Sonata Project' is startling at first but soon becomes totally captivating.

At the same time the amplifier is just as adept with the slightly dreamy twilight ambience of the Magdalen Choir, Cambridge's 'Peace I leave with you' programme of 'Music for the Evening Hour', the voices ebbing and flowing around the spacious acoustic, but can then turn on the attack with Marin Alsop's Vienna recording of John Adams's *City Noir*, to thrilling effect. **G**

Or you could try ...

The RA280 is, at heart, an ultra-simple amplifier built for performance, and sets new standards at its price. But there are alternatives, such as...

NAD M33

NAD's M33 has built-in network streaming thanks to BluOS integration. It's powerful, too, with 200W per channel of Hybrid Digital amplification onboard. Find out more at nadelectronics.com

Naim Supernait 3

Amplifiers don't come much simpler than the Naim Supernait 3, the latest version of the company's upmarket integrated. The scale of sound on offer belies its 80Wpc

rated output, and it has both an extremely good mm phono stage and a fine headphone amplifier built-in. More details at naimaudio.com

Cyrus i9-XR

Extremely compact, the Cyrus i9-XR packs a lot into its 'shoebbox' casework. It delivers 90W per channel, and has both digital and analogue inputs, including a phono stage and a USB-Type B port for connection to a computer for streamed music. For more information, see cyrusaudio.com

