



Stereo type

Onkyo is back in the world of two-channel and, based on its latest offering, **Ed Selley** suspects that it means business

Quite a few issues have elapsed since I last looked at an Onkyo product – more than I’d probably care to put a figure to. For many people, it has always been an AV brand, but it has released some interesting and extremely capable stereo products over the years as well. Now part of Premium Audio Company, the A-50 represents Onkyo’s take on a modern amplifier.

The traditional aspects of amp specification are well represented. The core of the A-50 is a Class AB power amp section that boasts an unusually hefty 110W into 8ohm, rising to 180W into 4. This should ensure that it will handle any speaker it’s likely to encounter. If you want to access this power in the traditional way, Onkyo fits the A-50 with three RCA line inputs and a phono stage that, unusually for the price, also supports moving-coil cartridges. The output is made available to a single set of speaker terminals, stereo pre out and 6.35mm headphone socket.

The good news is that the A-50 is only just getting started... The analogue inputs are supported by a digital board built around an AKM AK4452 DAC, supporting up to 768kHz PCM and DSD512. This is accessible via a single coaxial and optical input as well as HDMI ARC,

with a USB-A socket fitted for hard drives as well as a USB power source. The main event is a UPnP streaming module that can access the outside world via wired or wireless connection. If I’m being at my most judgmental, this module and its accompanying app is not a masterpiece. There are rivals around this price that offer a better browsing experience for a large local library. The caveat to this is I’m in a minority having an actual ripped library of music these days. For regular

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streamers, the fact that the Onkyo supports Spotify connect, Tidal connect and Qobuz connect (plus Amazon Music) as well as both AirPlay2 and Chromecast, means it is highly likely that many owners will barely use the control app. Included in the asking price is both support for the Dirac Live room optimisation software and a license for use up to 400Hz. Customers can pay extra for the full bandwidth, but many will find their room gremlins are sorted by the bundled version.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Onkyo A-50

ORIGIN
Japan/Malaysia

TYPE
Integrated streaming amplifier

WEIGHT
13kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
435 x 135 x 355mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 110W RMS (8ohm)
- Inputs: 3x stereo RCA; MM/MC phono stage; optical; coaxial; USB-A; HDMI ARC
- Supports PCM to 768kHz and DSD512

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

WEBSITE
onkyo.com
henleyaudio.co.uk

While Dirac is becoming more common at this sort of price, the inclusion of the license is a very definite statement of intent. Operationally, the A-50 is impressive. I have some minor problems during setup and start off using it without the app – meaning it can’t update to the latest firmware, resulting in it going a bit wayward. However, when I reset it and do it ‘properly,’ it remains unconditionally stable. This means the gamble to omit a screen pays off and the result feels more like an integrated amp with some extra talents than an all-in-one. This is helped by the inclusion of a large, system-driving remote handset. The styling receives mixed responses from visitors, but I feel that the Black option is well-finished and unobtrusive compared with the Silver. Anything costing the same as the A-50 that does remotely similar things doesn’t feel as solidly put together, while similarly equipped devices that feel fractionally more hefty will inevitably set you back at least a few hundred pounds more.



Sound quality

Connecting the A-50 up to Nead’s Petite Classic (HFC 495) standmount yields an impressive performance. The Neat is a usefully sensitive speaker, but even allowing for this, I need very little of its considerable output. It’s far more than a blunt instrument too. My initial listening is based around using the A-50 like a conventional integrated amp with a Bluesound Node Nano connected via RCA and it keeps more straightforward rivals honest. Listening to Goldfrapp’s *Felt Mountain* sees the Onkyo deliver Alison Goldfrapp’s vocals with presence and richness that locks them as the focal point, hanging the shimmering electronic soundscapes off them to create something expansive and consistently immersive.

It bridges the gap between a more purist amp and a streaming all-in-one

The surprisingly deep bass in the opening *Lovely Head* has a proper ‘felt as well as heard’ quality to it too. Moving to the phono stage – in this case partnered with the similarly priced and deeply capable Technics SL-1500CS (HFC 540) – is no less accomplished. This is more than just a convenience feature and delivers a very respectable performance. Thanks to no shortage of gain from the amplifier section, the phono stage is impressively quiet and, running some brief tests with an Ortofon MC20X moving-coil cartridge, the results are pretty impressive. Switching to the internal digital board doesn’t provide night-and-day differences over the perfectly capable Node Nano, but the AKM-based implementation seems to yield a slight improvement to the top end,

HOW IT COMPARES

The Onkyo is £300 cheaper than the NAD C700 V2, which offers a similar concept – albeit one that leans closer to the all-in-one ideal. The NAD has a display and the BluOS app is a much superior experience to the rather bare-bones effort the Onkyo uses. From here, though, the A-50 scores the points. It has more inputs, better sample rate support, can handle moving-coil cartridges and has the license for basic Dirac where NAD invites you to pay more money. More importantly than any of these things, the A-50 has the sonic edge over the C700 V2. For less money, the Onkyo is a better specified and far higher performing product.



which means that listening to a rip of the original CD version of Muse’s *Absolution* (a peak loudness war recording and actively unpleasant at points) sounds a little happier via the Onkyo’s own board than the external streamer. Most impressive about this is that it doesn’t come at the expense of performance with higher quality material. A run through of Dead Can Dance’s *Spiritchaser* is unquestionably an entirely hi-fi experience. More than simply being at home unmangling distressed recordings, the Onkyo demonstrates a nice level of sufficiency via the internal streaming module. It can be taken as damning with faint praise to describe something as ‘easy to listen to’, but in the A-50’s case it reflects that nothing I throw at it across a huge spread of music so much as gets close to unsettling it. And then, when you’re done with listening, you can flick on the telly and watch the attractive input indicator ping over to HDMI and be won over by an effortless ability to handle TV material of pretty much any scale going – locking dialogue to the screen and expanding effects around it in a way that feels natural and compellingly real.

Conclusion
In case you haven’t already guessed from this pretty much unrelenting wave of positivity, Onkyo has built a bit of a winner in the A-50. It is likely to prove a headache for rivals, but is unquestionably good news for customers. It bridges the gap between the performance of the more purist integrated amps used via traditional inputs and then goes on to be no less proficient used as a streaming all-in-one. Plus, there is still that Dirac license to consider as well. All in all, it’s a formidable bit of kit ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Excellent performance across all inputs; connectivity; solid build

DISLIKE: No dedicated sub out; not everyone will like the looks

WE SAY: An absolutely brilliant take on the smart integrated at a very competitive price