

Michi P5/S5

THEY MAY BE RATHER DIFFERENT FROM THE MINIMALIST MICHİ OFFERINGS OF THE PAST, WITH BEST BASIC BLACK REPLACING BRUSHED METAL AND JAPANESE LACQUER, BUT THIS NEW PREAMP AND POWER AMPLIFIER PROMISE GREAT THINGS

While I'm not usually a big fan of companies outboarding – exhibiting off the main exhibition site – during major hi-fi shows, not least because visiting them involves time-consuming travel when I'd rather be taking in a few more exhibits on-site, something drew me to the Bowers & Wilkins event during last year's High End show in Munich.

Maybe it was the chance to hear the whole Formation range in action, perhaps it was a chance to find out the truth behind the rumour that several of the former staff of the shuttered Sound United operation in Belfast had found their way to Worthing, but the trip to the penthouse venue on a Munich industrial estate – like the MOC, where the main show is held, part of a building populated by fashion wholesalers – looked likely to be interesting.

It lived up to expectations on all fronts, not least because here was my first chance to hear the much-discussed 'new Michi' products in action, inevitably run into a pair of Bowers & Wilkins 800 Series Diamond speakers. And though this was more a chance to hear than a serious demonstration – with assembled press and retailers, plus snacks and drinks on offer, this was mainly a social event –, it was immediately clear that the new products sounded as good as they looked, and were definitely worthy of further investigation.

Ah yes, the styling: although there is a clear line of descent from the original Michi range of the early 1990s, which was principally designed for the Japanese domestic high-end market, the new models couldn't look much more different. Gone is the understated, almost austere, brushed metal with lacquered side-cheeks, and slender components such as the RHC-10 passive control amp, along with the evocative Japanese naming of the various elements of the system, from *takumi* (craftsmanship) for the control amp to *kokoro* (heart) for the RHB-10 power amplifier. Michi, by the way, means direction.

In place of all these Japanese cultural references, the new Michi line-up has a much more global look, reflecting its ambitions: this may be an upmarket line-up from the team behind the current Rotel range, but like Toyota's Lexus, Honda's Acura and Nissan's Infiniti, Michi is clearly designed to stand as a brand in its own right. Thus the only brand name you'll find on the sleek black fascias of the new

products is Michi – you'll need to peer round the back to see the 'by Rotel' legend.

What's more, with a view to the current hi-fi landscape, in which the minimalist passive preamp and separate phono stage of the original range might only address the needs of some users, the new models are rather more comprehensively equipped. The launch offering consists of the £3299 P5 preamp, catering for just about every input need one could imagine, from phono to an extended range of digital



options, and a brace of power amplifiers, priced at £5399 apiece: the S5 stereo model we have here is rated at 500W per channel, while the M8 monobloc claims 1080W into an 8ohm load and 1800W into 4ohms. I think one could safely say that either would be more than adequate for most needs.

What's more, the company says it plans to extend the range in the future, including more products later this year, and digital sources further into the future.

Examination of either the rear panel of the P5 or its internals reveals that this is a remarkably well-equipped preamplifier, despite the simplicity of its fascia. Aside from the phono stage, switchable in the menu system between moving magnet and moving coil operation, there are four analogue ins on RCA phono sockets, and two on balanced XLRs, while the two sets of preamp outputs apiece on RCAs and XLRs – handy should you be considering biamping suitable speakers with multiple power amps – is supplemented with two mono subwoofer outputs.

There's also a line-out should you need it, and a headphone output below the volume control on the front panel, and the menu system allows naming and gain to be adjusted to be set for each inputs, lets one input to be set at fixed level for AV use, and enables or bypasses the tone controls.

Not all they seem

The digital section is located beneath the analogue, and offers what seems to be a wide range of inputs – although a couple aren't what they seem. Three optical and three coaxial digital ins are provided, along with a USB Type B to allow the direct connection of a computer, and the P5 also has Bluetooth with aptX. However, the USB Type A socket is only there to allow external devices – such as the phone or tablet you might be using with that Bluetooth connection – to be charged, and doesn't carry audio, while the Ethernet port is there purely to allow control of the preamp over a network and firmware updates, and doesn't accommodate streaming.

Maybe we'll have to wait for those future digital sources for a network player in the range: for now the preamp is more than adequate for those who play their music using a computer, or indeed a music server able to deliver a USB output.

In addition to that Ethernet control, the P5 also has other 'custom installation' alternatives to its own rather classy metal-cased remote handset: there's an input for a remote infrared sensor, 12V trigger sockets and an RS232 port.

Dual AKM DACs allow support for file formats up to 384kHz/32bit, DSD64 and 128 either in native or DoP form, and also MQA-encoded files, via the USB input. Dual toroidal transformers, wound in-house in the company's Zuhai factory and shielded, are mounted to left and right behind the front panel, and feed 17

separate stages of regulation for the digital section and the Class A analogue preamp circuitry.

The power amp also uses two in-house toroidal transformers, and also mounted to the front of the chassis, but these are rather larger: they're 2200VA devices, feeding 188,000uF of massive British-made DNM capacitors. The amp is of symmetrical, dual mono design, with heatsinks along each side of the casework, and each channel in its own 'tunnel', complete with rear-venting temperature-sensing fans to shift heat from the 16 output devices used for each channel. Inputs are provided on both RCAs and XLRs, and there's both 12V trigger switching and optional signal sensing for on/standby. Again the power amp has an Ethernet port, and again it's only for control and updates.

So, the S5 power amp is a simple and to-the-point powerhouse – well almost. Someone in the styling department clearly thought a big plain gloss and matt black front panel wasn't enough, and decided that if there was a display to show when the amp was powering up, they might as well do something with it. So you can have a virtual VU meter with peak hold, or a choice of 8-, 12- or 16-band spectrum analyser display. The display can be dimmed in five steps, as can the LED power indication, and all of this can also be turned off.

If the preamp is a pretty solid-looking piece of equipment, at 48.5cm wide and 15cm tall and weighing 22.9kg, the power amp takes this to another level, at just under 24cm tall and a not inconsiderable 59.9kg. True, that's not exactly massive by the standards of some high-end amps – 258kg for a single Dan D'Agostino Relentless monobloc, anyone? – but it still demands the S5 is used either on the floor or a dedicated power amp stand able to handle its weight.

Unsurprisingly, the M8 mono power amp, which is essentially the same product but configured so the two channels work together to drive a single set of outputs, is no larger or heavier than the stereo amp – in fact, with its simpler input and output connections, it's actually 800g lighter.

The styling of the new Michi range is very different from that of its predecessors, and while I liked the simplicity of the originals, I have to say that the looks of the new line-up are sufficiently distinctive to make it stand out in a high-end market that's not exactly underpopulated. I really like the design, which I feel looks even better 'in the flesh' than it does in the photographs on these pages: the mix of matt and gloss black is effective, and the new logo is both striking and understated.

It must also be noted that, while pitched well above the mainstream products in parent company Rotel's catalogue, the Michi models are at the less exotic end of the high-end spectrum, and there's

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Specifications

Michi P5 Preamplifier
Price £3299

Analogue inputs mm/mc phono,
two line ins on balanced XLR,
four line ins on RCA phonos

Digital inputs USB Type B,
three optical, three coaxial
Bluetooth with aptX

Digital file formats
PCM to 384kHz/32bit,
DSD64/128 (native and DoP),
MQA (all via USB);

Analogue outputs Two sets of
preouts, each on XLRs
and RCAs, line out, two mono
subwoofer outs, headphones

Digital outs Optical, coaxial

Other connections
Ethernet/RS232 for network
control, 5v USB power, infrared
receiver, 12V trigger

Dimensions (WxHxD)
485 x 150 x 452mm

Michi S5 Stereo power amplifier
Price £5399

Output power 500W into 8ohms,
800W into 4ohms

Inputs RCA unbalanced,
XLR balanced

Outputs 2 sets speaker terminals
per channel

Other connections
Ethernet/RS232 control,
12V trigger

Dimensions (WxHxD)
485 x 238 x 465mm

rotel.com/en-gb/michi

many a preamp up there in the stratosphere costing more than the Michi pre/power combination.

Now some may have you believe that this places these new arrivals in an awkward hinterland between what could be viewed as upper mass-market hi-fi and the true high-end, being too pricey for some and just not expensive enough for others, but I'd like to think that the Rotel design team has found itself a niche in the market. And that would be especially so if the new components have the performance to put some clear water between themselves and less expensive products.

They do, even if the sound here isn't one to pin you to the wall in amazement right from the off. All-out attack isn't what these new amplifiers are about: instead they take a more subtle approach to impressing the listener, delivering a slow-burn revelation of just how mature, controlled and totally enjoyable is the way they play music. Having listened to much high-end hi-fi of late where the delineation of detail is tempered after a while by a realisation of the jaw beginning to ache from the tightness with which one's teeth are clamped together, the Michi pre-power comes as complete change. Some amplifiers can be nothing short of hard work, in the way they demand total concentration – none of that here.

In fact, I think it's safe to say that the way the Michi pre/power played music took precisely zero familiarisation, and no need to make any allowances; from the off I was simply enjoying what was being played, and all but forgetting the system being used to present it. That's not to say the ability here is in any way forgettable or matter of fact; it's just that what it does is so enjoyably effortless that it has immediate appeal.

This is a big, powerful and seemingly unburstable amplifier combination, able to drive speakers hard and with total confidence, yet with

apparently plenty left to give with the dynamics of everything from orchestral and choral music to the slam and deep, deep basslines of the good Dr. Dre's debut album, *The Chronic*. If you were thinking that the ease of listening the Michi duo offers would also make it slow and overlush, this should put that one to bed once and for all.

If you needed more convincing, listen to it playing a complex classical recording such as the all-star live Beethoven Triple Concerto with Anne-Sophie Mutter, Yo-Yo Ma, Daniel Barenboim and the East West Divan Orchestra, and it's clear that, while the Michis may lack the slightest nuance of the space and air in the recorded venue, what it does is focus the attention directly on the contributions of the musicians, and sweep you straight into the music. It's not analysing or picking the performance apart as might more overtly forward amplification, but instead delivering it in that rich, big-boned manner that's its forte, while at the same time giving you more than enough of the clever hi-fi stuff.

Scale and depth

Especially striking is the scale and depth of soundstage cast, and the unerring focus to the elements within that sonic picture, without creating that annoying 'cardboard cut-out' effect, in which all the artifice is laid bare. Rather the sound all the hallmarks of having been created by sympathetic designers who listen to real music, and it's all the better for that.

So deceptive is the ease with which the Michi pre/power plays even demanding music that one is rocked back by moments when it unleashes a sudden blast, such as with the great explosion of 'light' for full choir and orchestra at the opening of Haydn's *The Creation*, or the headlong charge of the all too short 'W.M.B' in Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, with the LSO under Sir Adrian Boult. This mixture of easygoing listening coupled to those confident surges of clean, seemingly limitless power is both thrilling and totally addictive, hinting that within that cultured, refined presentation is something of the hooligan, just waiting to be unleashed in crowd-pleasing style.

And then, just when you think it's all about crash and bang, it brings out all the tenderness and poignancy of Lilian Elkington's funereal *Out of the Mist*, surges in oh so stately a manner through 'Nimrod' or a closely detailed jazz recording, and once again its control and maturity is to the fore.

Yes, this second flush of Michi is a very different display to the first blooming of the brand the better part of three decades ago, but it's also a confident and assured statement of the new intentions for the range. Far from just being a revival of the past, it has much to offer in the current high-end audio landscape, and is definitely one to watch.

