



A little goes a long way

David Price samples the latest in compact half-width hi-fi components with this jack-of-all-trades headphone amplifier

Hi-fi as we know it is changing. For many years, Exposure Electronics has been synonymous with traditional full-size components and the chunky power supplies associated with them. The company was started in 1974 by John Farlowe, who had a pro audio background working with the likes of Jethro Tull and Pink Floyd. Exposure products were designed to keep “the complexity on the inside”, the front panels typically being stark affairs with the minimum of frills. Now, though, we have something which is almost the diametric opposite – a half-width design that’s absolutely jam-packed with features and has (in one finish option at least) a bright silver front panel. How times have changed!

The £1,299 XM HP is an interesting component, because it’s extremely versatile, more than its official designation as a headphone amplifier would suggest. Indeed, for much of the review period, I use it as a high-quality preamplifier, which is jolly useful because it sports a

moving-magnet phono stage and DAC built-in, plus of course line inputs. In effect, it obviates the need to have lots of other small boxes lying around, and the spaghetti-like mess of endless cables. The XM HP is effectively a ‘greatest hits’ of the company’s full-size 2010 component series, sandwiched into a little box. This British designed and built product is just one of the rapidly growing number of XM (eXposure Mini) series

Every aspect of this versatile product is done to a good standard

components. Measuring just 218 x 89 x 363mm, its siblings include the £1,236 XM5 integrated amplifier (HFC 424), £1,236 XM7 preamplifier and £1,399 per pair XM9 mono block power amps (HFC 429). There’s also the £660 XM3 phono amplifier and we can expect an XM CD player to join the party soon too.

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Exposure XM HP
- ORIGIN**
UK
- TYPE**
Headphone amplifier/DAC
- WEIGHT**
4kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
218 x 89 x 363mm
- FEATURES**
 - 24-bit/192kHz and DSD64-capable DAC
 - Analogue inputs: 2x RCA; 1x MM phono
 - Digital inputs: 2x BNC coaxial; 2x optical Toslink; Class 2 USB
 - Headphone outputs: 2x 6.35mm; 2x XLR
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Exposure Electronics Ltd.
- TELEPHONE**
01273 423877
- WEBSITE**
exposurehifi.com

The chunky brushed alloy front panel (available in either black or titanium finish) is dotted with LEDs, which denote the input selected. There’s a pair of 6.35mm headphone sockets beneath, alongside twin XLR outputs. Two pairs of headphones can be used at the same time, but no more. Things are a little bit cramped on the front panel and left handers such as myself have to contort their hand around to get to the large volume control, although it feels decent enough to use.

There’s certainly a lot going on inside (see opposite). The toroidal power transformer is as large as the company can squeeze in, given all the other circuitry. The audio output stage is by discrete transistors, and there’s a Wolfson WM8742 DAC chip fitted (running PCM up to 24-bit/192kHz and DSD64 via the asynchronous USB) that handles digital signals from the two coaxial BNC inputs, two Toslink optical inputs and a Class 2 USB digital input. Three analogue inputs are fitted, including two line inputs as well as a moving-magnet phono, complete with ground terminal. Exposure quotes the sensitivity at a decent 2.5mV (1kHz, 47kohm). What’s really useful is the choice of variable or fixed RCA outputs – meaning that the XM HP could, if you wanted to, work as a phono stage, a DAC or a preamplifier – or all – in addition to its headphone amplifier duties of course.

Sound quality

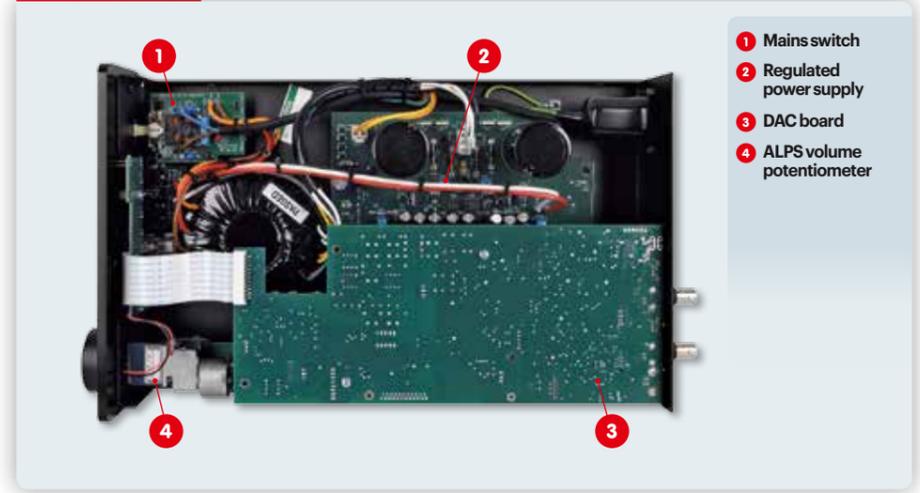
Just a few minutes spent listening to the XM HP shows that the half-width dimensions haven’t sacrificed any of the brand’s musical capabilities and the little box sounds very good

indeed, with a grown-up sound that belies its diminutive dimensions. I start off the listening session with Oppo’s PM-1 headphone plugged in and run from the line output of a high-end dCS Debussy DAC fed by a TEAC VRDS-T1 transport. I am greeted by a really rather fine sound – better than expected. It is powerful and smooth, yet detailed and musical; there’s no sense that it’s really colouring the music, but nor does it strip it of its natural tone. Wings’ *London Town* is first on, and I am impressed by the sumptuous bass guitar and piano line kicking off the track. The XM HP does not have that archetypal mid-forward solid-state sound; it’s not chromium plated in the upper midband and treble. Instead there’s lots of smoothness and a general lack of fizz. However, just because it’s tonally smooth doesn’t make it bland. The Exposure is able to grab onto the bassline, for

In addition to being a headphone amp it will work as a phono stage, DAC or preamp

example, and articulate it well. Things sound supple and musical and start and stop on time. Guns N’ Roses *Paradise City* ups the pace, and I am pleased by how this headphone stage ‘picks up its skirts and runs’, so to speak. There’s plenty of speed and energy to it, and it strings the different instruments together in a deftly syncopated way. The full impact of the tune is conveyed, even at pretty high listening levels – the XM HP shows no lack of grunt even when driving serious hi-fi headphones. Switching to the variable output and connected to an Arcam P49 power

IN SIGHT



- 1 Mains switch
- 2 Regulated power supply
- 3 DAC board
- 4 ALPS volume potentiometer

amplifier (HFC 409) driving Quad ESL-989 electrostatic loudspeakers, I am no less pleased. Much of the unit’s character on show via headphones carries over when working as a preamplifier. This means a big, strong sound that’s tonally pretty neutral, but nicely nuanced with a fair smattering of detail. Moving on to the onboard DAC, I am surprised by how well Exposure has implemented the Wolfson converter chip. Randy Crawford’s *Secret Combination* delivers a direct sound with plenty of gusto and only a slight increase in edginess over the dCS Debussy DAC at seven or so times its price. Soundstaging is impressive and things seem immediate and well placed in space, delivering a spacious and enjoyable sound that is sufficiently animated to really keep my attention. Its high treble is just a touch too crisp for my liking, lacking real finesse, but still there’s no denying its great sound-per-pound quotient. Built-in phono stages can sometimes be something of a non-entity on this sort of versatile product and so I am

not prepared for the gloriously big sound that comes from Nu Era’s *Space Above Us*. This is a great retro-style electronic dance track that positively bubbles with energy. My trusty Michell GyroDec turntable/Rega RB300 tonearm and Audio-Technica VM530EN moving-magnet cartridge (HFC 433) really does itself proud, serving up some beautifully supple, gliding beats full of texture and feeling. Either via the preamp outputs or headphones, the Exposure is a pleasure to listen to, with just the slightest hint of vagueness across the midband to give away the fact that this is actually a modest phono stage in the great scheme of things.

Conclusion

There’s a lot to like about the XM HP, but what’s so impressive is that every aspect of this versatile product is done to a good standard. It brings a seamlessness to its performance across the board, which is rare in products of this price. This means that, like its super-mini siblings, it comes highly recommended – headphones or not ●

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Asynchronous Class 2 USB port
- 2 Coaxial BNC input
- 3 Toslink optical input
- 4 Pre output
- 5 Moving-magnet phono stage and grounding post

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Bouncy, musical sound across all inputs; huge flexibility

DISLIKE: Slightly fiddly ergonomics

WE SAY: This fine do-it-all headphone amp proves that less can be so much more