



Value judgement

David Vivian discovers if this affordable pre-power combo from a brand that's new to the UK can make the grade

The affordable high-end is a familiar concept to us all by now. Although the term is obvious fodder for lazy marketers in search of a sexy strapline, the existence of audio components that offer an unusually high performance-to-price ratio is real enough. It's also true that the makers of such products often use them to ridicule the motives of those that build hi-fi that's so expensive only the very wealthy can afford to buy it. In truth, the two camps exist in perfect

harmony. The affordable high-enders need the un-affordable high-enders to make their case and the cost-no-object practitioners can mischievously regard the budget wannabes' efforts as a form of flattery and a springboard to make the equally valid point that the best of the best always costs a mint. That said, Emotiva, seems to be on a mission to recalibrate the whole affordable high-end paradigm to the point where the word 'affordable' might reasonably be replaced by 'downright cheap'. And when it

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Emotiva BasX PT-100
ORIGIN
USA/China
TYPE
Preamplifier
WEIGHT
4.1kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 67 x 317mm
FEATURES
• 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC
• Inputs: 2x RCAs; 1x coaxial digital; 1x optical digital; 1x USB Type-B port
• MM/MC phono stage
• FM tuner
DISTRIBUTOR
Karma Audio Visual
TELEPHONE
01423 358846
WEBSITE
karma-av.co.uk; emotiva.com

comes to amplifiers, those with high-end aping aspirations usually have price tags that reach well into the thousands while still claiming to offer great value when they're benchmarked against far more lavishly engineered exotica.

Admittedly from the entry-level end of the Emotiva catalogue, the BasX PT-100 preamp incorporates an FM tuner, a full complement of line-level analogue inputs, a built-in USB DAC with multiple digital inputs, MM/MC phono stage and provision for an aptX Bluetooth module (£60). It's slim, black, metal, packs a large, easy-to-read blue VFD display and has the sort of finely stepped volume control that smacks of a commitment to precision. It costs £399.

Equipped with a fashionably oversized toroidal transformer, the BasX A-300 power amplifier claims 2x 150W into 8ohm (2x 300W into 4ohm), draws on a heavy-duty linear power supply and high current, short signal path, Class A/B output stage, with advanced, microprocessor-controlled monitoring and protection circuitry. It's built around a substantial steel chassis and, like the PT-100

preamplifier, has a solid milled aluminium front plate. It costs £529.

So that's £928 for a muscular pre-power combo that claims to challenge the sonic chops of kit many multiples its price. And it's imported from America. How is that even possible? Emotiva explains its *modus*

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Emotiva BasX A-300
ORIGIN
USA/China
TYPE
Power amplifier
WEIGHT
11.4kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 102 x 394mm
FEATURES
• Class A/B output
• Quoted power output: 2x 150W (8ohm)
• RCA inputs
DISTRIBUTOR
Karma Audio Visual
TELEPHONE
01423 358846
WEBSITE
karma-av.co.uk; emotiva.com

operandi thus: it works smarter, not harder. Before he started the company, CEO Dan Laufman was an OEM (original equipment manufacturer) to some of the industry's biggest hitters and observed what he considered to be manufacturing inefficiencies in the system that contributed to price escalation and diluted value for money. He thought he could do better and, to cut a long story short, Emotiva is the outcome.

The company is staffed by audio enthusiasts and music lovers after his own heart and the result is low overheads, no redundant layers of

The sound is more palpable, more in the room – more in control of the room

management, an intelligent mix of inhouse and OEM components and cost-effective manufacturing in China. The idea is that it all adds up to more for less and that has to be good news for anyone that's interested in the perpetuation of real separates hi-fi, and not just those looking to save cash.

The PT-100 is nearly as slick to use as it is to look at. It can be operated by the small, palm-friendly remote or the controls on the front panel (an on-from-standby button, a finely stepped volume control and two tiny pimples to scroll through the inputs and access the FM tuner and tone controls). This has 50 station presets and a mono mode to make weak stations more listenable. Handling all digital job lists – whether via coaxial, optical or USB inputs – is the AD1955 24/192 DAC from Analog Devices, which although perfectly adequate for

CD and more modest hi-res files, is a little short of 'full fat' by current asynchronous USB standards. The preamp also features a subwoofer output and a built-in high-current, direct-coupled headphone amp.

Given the lofty extent of the combo's sonic ambition, it's only fair it gets some quality company in the shape of a Cambridge CXC CD transport (*HFC* 401) and Chord Hugo 2 DAC (*HFC* 428) at the front (the CXC is also used to feed the preamp's Analog Devices DAC) and, to stretch the power amp, ATC's floorstanding SCM40 loudspeaker (*HFC* 389) – not an especially difficult load, but a challenge to drive properly.

Sound quality

Amplifiers shouldn't have a sonic signature, merely an ability to amplify. This is easier said than done, of course. In practice, even the most meticulously designed pre-power rigs tend to expose their own sonic personalities, contenders ranging from flea-powered tube designs with exquisite naturalness, transparency, detail and microdynamic sensitivity to battleship-build solid-state behemoths that can blast chunks out of your sofa at 30 paces. And we mustn't forget representatives from the church of pace, rhythm and timing or the holy house of holographic imaging.

Maybe the ideal is a design that ties the best of these traits together as a coherent whole. Unfortunately, and rather depressingly, there's also the assumption that there isn't much chance of finding the right level of global competence unless you have very deep pockets. Well, all I can say is: no one told Emotiva.

Listening to the PT-100/A-300 after even a gifted and significantly pricier ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 MM/MC phono stage input
- 2 Coaxial digital input
- 3 Optical digital input
- 4 USB Type-B port
- 5 Loudspeaker binding posts
- 6 12V trigger input and output

Q&A

Walter Schofield

Vice president Emotiva
Audio Corporation



DV: The notion of affordable high-end suggests that high-end is a mindset rather than a price point. But can it ever be as good as un-affordable high-end?

WS: High-end to us represents anything outside of the norm of what people may purchase at a non-enthusiast level. For example, for many in the market for wrist watches, the high-end is a \$200 Seiko, but for the enthusiast it's a \$20,000 Vacheron Constantin. Yes, we strive to make our components sound like ones costing several times more, therefore, we believe that Emotiva competes well with what may be construed as 'un-affordable' high-end.

Is part of the secret to being able to achieve a high performance-to-price ratio doing away with manufacturing inhouse?

Not necessarily... we manufacture many components inhouse, including our flagship X Series, and many we design inhouse and have manufactured offshore. It is all about the design and component quality, and then careful listening and testing to achieve the best balance of performance and price, which for Emotiva swings a long way in favour of performance.

What, in your view, constitutes high-end sound?

Current delivery for maximum dynamics, smooth, earthy, organic sound quality and a spatial perspective that allows the listener to envision the performance as recorded. Musicality and realism are very important factors for Emotiva.



The solid milled aluminium front panels certainly look the part

super-integrated like the Rotel RA-1572 (HFC 428) is a bit of a jaw-dropper. Playing Alison Moyet's enjoyably OTT but immaculately produced *Beautiful Gun* from her recent *Other* album, a decently scaled, finely resolved and expressively dynamic portrayal of the musical event on the Rotel is made to seem subtly shrunken and paler by comparison with the Emotiva duo – a little like a Polaroid snap that's been left in the sun too long, contrasts

Listening to the Emotiva after a significantly pricier rival is jaw dropping

and colour saturation dimmed, while all drama appears diminished.

Emotiva boss Dan Laufman reckons that high-current delivery is an absolute necessity for high-end sound, delivering an energy that carries weight, body, drive and structure that less well-endowed amps struggle to match, especially with speakers that require high levels of control and grip. And this certainly seems to be the case with the big ATC in situ. Trying out the preamp's own Analog Devices DAC, the results with Eels' *Susan's House* are similarly telling: the sound is more palpable, more in the room – indeed more in control of the room, which means soundstage perspectives that can extend way beyond its walls. And it does all of these things to such a degree that turns heads with its combination of satisfyingly nailed pace, rhythm, timing and added sense of air and dimensionality.

Conclusion

Occasionally, products come along that force you to re-evaluate what you understand by arguably the most crucial of all evaluation considerations: value for money. This remarkable pair is exactly that – a new pre-power amp price benchmark, the most convincing evocation of 'affordable high-end' that I've yet encountered and as a result an unequivocal great buy ●



Serious audiophile-grade pre-power combos with built-in FM tuners for under a grand aren't exactly abundant. But there are plenty of talented integrated amps to consider for similar money that will take up less rack space. My hot list would comprise Rega's masterfully musical and agile Elex-R (HFC 420), Naim's irrepressibly engaging Nait 5si (HFC 420) and the impressively fast and transparent Cyrus ONE (HFC 420). All can carry a tune every bit as well as the Emotiva pre-power duo, but none can quite match its room-filling scale, authority and presence paired with suitably commanding speakers.

HI-FIChoice

OUR VERDICT: BASX PT-100

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Crisp design; functionality; fine-step volume control

DISLIKE: Limited resolution USB DAC function

WE SAY: Good-looking, skillfully designed preamp whose performance belies its price

HI-FIChoice

OUR VERDICT: BASX A-300

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Terrific power, control, grip and timing; musically compelling

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Does exactly what a power amp should do, with conviction and flair