

Audionet AMP I

Review by Robin Lybeck

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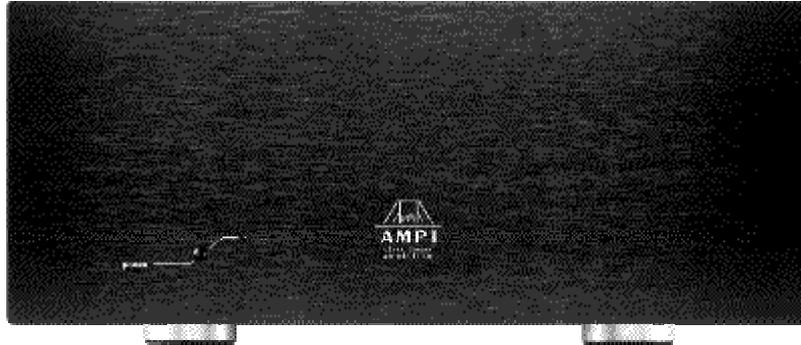


Photo by Audionet

Bochum-based company Audionet has in quite a short time gained a respectable reputation in Europe for producing high quality gear at reasonable prices. Particularly their CD player, the ART V2, has received a lot of positive feedback by different reviewers. My own previous longer term experience was limited to the AMP III, but judging from the other Audionet components I've heard, the overall reputation is well deserved. Moving on upwards in the product range, it was now time to review the next power amp in line, the AMP I.

Design

As already mentioned in my test of the smaller, 100w per channel AMP III, the AMP I has been a "visitor" in my system earlier, although only for a short period of time. So, when the chance to do a more thorough test presented itself, I didn't hesitate. After all, the first impressions of the previous unit had been very positive. Due to this, expectations were also very high. Suffice to say that the power amp didn't disappoint me, quite the contrary, but more on that below.

The AMP I is the most powerful stereo amplifier in the product range of the manufacturer, producing a hefty 200w per channel into an 8-ohm load. It is a solidly built, very stylish package. Weighing in at 28 kg, with quite sharp cooling fins, the unit took some work in order to get it placed in my Target rack. Once there, I couldn't but marvel at the simple yet very classy exterior, with its brushed aluminium front and blue LED-light indicating if the amp is switched on or off.

Even though the AMP I normally features only single ended inputs this unit was equipped solely with balanced ones, making a slight difference from the unit I listened to earlier.. For me and my system the balanced inputs were a great plus, as my cd player and Sphinx Project Two mk.II preamp work a lot better when using balanced connections. Other than the XLR inputs, the back plate of the AMP I features two pairs of high quality speaker posts by WBT as well as a socket for the detachable power cord and one optical input and output for the Audionet Link, to be used with an Audionet preamp or another power amp.

The output of the AMP I is 200 W per channel into 8 Ohms, and due to a high current delivery capability increases to 300 W into 4 Ohms and up to 450 W into a 2 Ohm load. This proved to be quite enough to drive my Dunlavy SC-IV's, which have a nominal impedance of 4 Ohms, dropping to 3 Ohms at some frequencies.

As a whole the technical specifications for the AMP I are very impressive to say the least. The microprocessor-controlled unit employs an 80 VA toroidal transformer for the input stage alone and one massive 700 VA transformer per channel (for a total of 1,4 kVA) for the output stages, which consist of four MOSFETs per channel. Total capacitance is a high 132000 uF. The microprocessor-based control unit continuously monitors the operation of the amp. Any troubles in operation are indicated by the blue LED-light on the front plate of the amp flashing.

Another characteristic of the amp is its high damping factor from 1000 to over 4000 and extremely high operating bandwidth (0-300000 Hz). These features probably have an influence on the extremely clean and fast sound of the unit and also on the excellent bass control.

Setup

I placed the amp in my system consisting of an Adcom GCD-750 CD player and a Sphinx Project Two mk.II preamp. Interconnects were all balanced Siltech, the speaker cables were at this point biwired Audioquest Midnight 3's, connected to Dunlavy SC-IV's.

I could also mention that the speakers were placed about 110 cm into the 26m² room, 340 cm from each other and 320 cm from the listening seat. This setup can, depending on electronics, produce a wide and stable soundstage with ample depth and focus.

First Impressions

The unit I reviewed was lifted right out of the box, and Audionet's local distributor recommended a burn-in period of about 100 hours before commencing with any critical listening. Due to this, I let the system play in the background for several weeks, but even though I wasn't supposed to listen attentively, the seductive sound delivered by the AMP I had me sitting in the listening seat long before the unit was burned-in. No real "critical listening" was done at this point, though.

It should also be noted that the AMP I sounded considerably better when it had been "warmed up" over some time. At first I wasn't sure what to believe, but after several listening sessions it became clear that the overall sound did get better after the amp had been running for some time. In my opinion, the sound became somewhat more transparent and did get some added depth.

The slight midrange glare and harshness in the treble reduced gradually, until they seemed to have disappeared almost completely over the span of a hundred something hours.

What really struck me as special about the AMP I was its speed, clarity and control. Some might initially perceive this as being a sign of a component's analytical nature, but partnered with the

Dunlavys the sound was far closer to being neutral than anything I'd heard in my system before, with exceptional accuracy but without being unnaturally analytical.

In the beginning I couldn't quite shake the feeling of a certain "Loudness-effect" in the overall sound. At first I didn't quite know which component to blame, as I've never perceived the Audionet "house sound" as exhibiting anything close to loudness. About halfway through the review period I changed my speaker cables, the Audioquest Midnight 3's were replaced by two pairs of Dunlavy Z6 speaker cable. The "loudness-effect" vanished without a trace. Suddenly the system sounded more open, more detailed, more unhindered and most important of all, more neutral. It seems the Z6 cable was a very good match in this setup, letting the crystal clear signal of the AMP I through without hindrance. I'm sure the difference between cables might not be as noticeable in all systems, but with the Dunlavys being quite detailed and the AMP I even more so, I could really "hear the difference".

M u s i c a l E x p e r i e n c e

So, what's so special about the AMP I? As in all areas of audio and sound reproduction, it's a matter of individual tastes and preferences, but the AMP I has definitely hit the mark close to my ideals. One of the standard "torture tests" for power amps and speakers is the excellent and extremely dynamic recording of Hugh Masekela's "Stimela" (Triloka GCT80232). The crescendo at the end is quite often enough to drive a power amp to its knees, severely compressing and distorting the sound. With the AMP I, we played the whole song at something that must have been close to the level of a live event, and the amp handled it with aplomb.

Although there was some midrange glare at these high levels, the sound remained focused, coherent and still exhibited seemingly endless dynamic capabilities. Very impressive indeed. It must also be noted that the live atmosphere was captured very well in this case, with the crowd very present in the room.

Another favorite of mine is the airy and detailed recording of Charles Lloyd's "The Water is Wide" (ECM 1734 549 043-2). With the AMP I, I felt the whole scene of the recording venue unravel before me, with excellent detail and coherence. With my own "standard" power amp as well as with many others, I've been left unaware of the wealth of detail on this recording. With the AMP I and the Dunlavy cables I was able to clearly hear the plucking of bass and guitar strings, as well as some soft exclamations made by the band members while playing. This record also has quite a prominent sizzle that remains after a cymbal has been struck; with lesser amps this sound easily becomes too prominent and very distracting. Even though the AMP I is anything but shy in the treble I never perceived this sound as fatiguing or annoying, although a person who prefers a softer, warmer treble might do so.

The third recording I want to mention in this context is the fantastic "Sheherazade", performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Fritz Reiner (JMCXR-0015). With a good system every instrument can be clearly heard and distinguished, the strings exhibiting an extraordinary amount of "body" and the brass sounding very lifelike. Also, this recording contains quite a fair amount of spatial information from the concert hall. While the AMP I reproduced the scale, width, dynamics and detail of the whole orchestra beautifully, I missed the last bit in layered depth. It must be pointed out, though,

that the AMP I has so far been bested only by the Audio Research VT-100 tube power amp in this area. This recording might also have benefited from a slightly warmer sound, especially in the upper bass and midrange, as the basses now sounded a bit too dry and distant.

Often accurate high-end equipment is seen as unsuitable for heavier rock music, but I couldn't resist trying out the AMP I's limits in this area. While some less well made recordings sounded really bad, the better ones lacked none of the expected power, impact or "slam", and neither did they exhibit an overly bright top-end. For example, when playing Rammstein's brutal "Mutter" album (Universal 5496392) through the Dunlavys at high levels, the wall of pure sound hitting the listener was nothing less than overwhelming, yet very well controlled. An exhilarating experience, not only according to myself, but also according to those friends unaccustomed to high-end equipment who spent some time on my sofa, listening to the massive onslaught that is Rammstein's music.

The AMP I seemed at home with all kinds of music, but not with all kinds of recordings. The unit is certainly not forgiving to bad recordings, which is exactly the way I like it, but someone accustomed to a "kinder", more forgiving sound might find this objectionable. Accurate to a fault, this is an amp for those who really want to hear what's on the record, nothing more and certainly nothing less.

S o u n d

Overall impression: Accurate, fast and detailed sound. Closer to being analytical than warm or overly forgiving.

Balance: Very close to neutral, perhaps leaning ever so slightly to the bright side.

Resolution: Excellent throughout the whole frequency range, even very small and quiet sounds become audible, thus increasing the musical experience. If forced to make a choice, I'd say the resolution is the best in the treble, with the midrange and bass close behind.

Transparency: Also excellent, images are solid and yet the overall delivery remains very transparent. Among the best I've heard if not quite "the best".

Realism: Very good, the amp doesn't favour one area over another, resulting in a very natural and balanced tonal character. Throughout the frequency range voices and instruments are reproduced very realistically.

Treble: As with the AMP III, the treble region was one of the amp's really strong suits. Accurate, clean and sweet, the treble reproduction of the AMP I was certainly one of the best I've heard in my listening room so far.

Midrange: Voices were reproduced naturally, with great detail but without excess warmth. On some recordings, the singer seemed a tad distant, maybe just because of this.

At high levels there was a hint of a slightly hard edge, but I must stress the fact that I'm talking about sound levels above "normal" listening volume. In all fairness it must also be pointed out that the Siltech interconnects I use might contribute to this, unfortunately I was unable to try the AMP I with other cables during the review period. Also, the sound of a concert piano was excellent, with no extra softness whatsoever audible in the hammer's impact.

Bass: Even though the Dunlavys feature a sealed, overdamped enclosure, it takes some power to really control the 10-inch bass drivers and deliver their full potential without excess boom. The AMP I was up to this task like no other amplifier I've heard so far. This might be attributed to the high damping factor or the 300 watts available, I heard bass notes below what I've heard with my standard power amp. The bass was dry, tight and controlled, with an extremely "linear" delivery. By this I mean that all bass notes were delivered without emphasis, from the upper bass down to 30Hz rumbles. Like I mentioned before, the only time I felt something lacking was when listening to some classical recordings, which could have benefited from a softer, rounder bass delivery. But then again, this isn't the amp's fault, is it?

Dynamics: Very good, even very large dynamic swings are delivered in an impressive manner. The overall positive impression is heightened by the fact that the AMP I doesn't lose anything during the softer, more quiet passages, which makes the crescendos all the more impressive.

Soundstaging: The combination of the AMP I and the Dunlavy SC-IV's produced an exceptionally wide, stable soundstage. As mentioned earlier, depth was also very good, so far second only to the VT-100 tested earlier. The soundstaging ability of the AMP I was also evident in the focus of different instruments and voices, which were pinpointed in different locations of the stage.

Visceral impact: Closely related to dynamics, the reproduction of scale is very important for a natural and convincing sound reproduction. The AMP I was able to create something very real in this sense, with small ensembles sounding as large in their own right as a symphony orchestra.

S u m m a r y

Strengths:

- Neutral delivery
- Bass control, uncolored midrange and excellent treble.
- Overall detail and image focus

Points to develop:

- A slight hard edge in the midrange when playing loud (with a reservation about the Siltech cables, which might attribute a bit to this "edge", thus not making it a fault of the amp itself)
- Soundstage depth (with a slight reservation, only evident when taking into account the excellent width and focus of the soundstage)

As I said, the AMP I was awaited with very high expectations and it certainly didn't disappoint. Of all the amplifiers in this price range I've heard so far this one probably hits the mark closest to my personal preferences. It is not a cheap piece of audio equipment, but as with the smaller AMP III, I feel it still gives a lot of value for the money.

As far as my individual preferences go, I had a hard time finding any faults in the sound produced by this unit. Based on my previous experience with the AMP III, the AMP I was definitely a step up, even though both had something of the same character.

I would unhesitatingly recommend the AMP I to anyone looking for accurate, detailed, clean and dynamic sound on a real high-end level but without a high-end price tag. In fact, I think many more expensive components might find themselves faced with serious competition from this unit. But as stated earlier, the choice of audio components is a very individual matter and every component should be tried out before purchase.

An excellent amplifier by any measure, and definitely one for the shortlist.

Associated equipment

- **Room:** 26m², quite heavy furniture and shelves, thick rug on floor and smaller rug on back wall. Speakers placed against longer wall.
- **CD player:** Adcom GCD-750
- **Preamp:** Sphinx Project Two Mk. II.
- **Power Amp:** Anthem MCA-2 (other references Audio Research VT-100 Mk. I, Proceed BPA-3, Mark Levinson no.27)
- **Speakers:** Dunlavy SC-IV
- **Interconnects:** Siltech SQ-38 XLR and Siltech SQ-58 XLR
- **Speaker Cable:** Audioquest Midnight 3 Hyperlitz biwire, Dunlavy Z6 (2 pairs, biwire)
- **Others:** Target VR-4 rack, Ringmat Developments "Statmat".

Records used during the review

- Hugh Masekela: Hope (Triloka GCT80232; 2000)
- Charles Lloyd: The Water is Wide (ECM 1734 549 043-2; 2000)
- Béla Fleck and the Flecktones; Flight of the Cosmic Hippo (Warner 9265622; 1991)
- Eberhard Weber: Endless Days (ECM 0134202; 2001)
- Jacques Loussier: The Bach Book (Telarc CD83474; 1997)
- George Duke: After Hours (Warner 9362470732; 1998)
- Rimsky-Korsakoff, Nikolai: Scheherazade; Fritz Reiner, Chicago Symphony Orchestra (JMCXR-0015; 2002)
- Copland 100; Fanfare for the Common Man etc: Eiji Que; Minnesota Symphony Orchestra (Reference Recordings RR-93CD; 2000)
- Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition; Eiji Que, Minnesota Symphony Orchestra (Reference Recordings RR-79CD; 1997)
- Rammstein: Mutter (Universal 5496392; 2001)
- Nightwish: Century Child (Spinefarm SPI149CD; 2002)
- + others (Dire Straits, Pink Floyd, etc.etc)

Technical Details

- Output power 2 * 200 Watts into 8 ohms
 - 2 * 300 Watts into 4 ohms
 - 2 * 450 Watts into 2 ohms
 - 1 * 600 Watts into 8 ohms (bridged)
 - 1 * 900 Watts into 4 ohms (bridged)
- Frequency range 0 - 300.000 Hz (-3 dB)
- Damping factor > 1000 at 10 kHz > 4000 at 500 Hz
- Intermodulation < -110 dB SMPTE 100 Hz : 20 kHz, 4 : 1, 50 W/4 ohms
- THD + N < -100 dB at 1 kHz, 35 Watts into 2 ohms between 20 Hz and 20 kHz
- Harmonic distortion k2 typ. -120 dB for 25 Watts into 4 ohms k3 typ. -123 dB for 25 Watts into 4 ohms
- Signal to noise ratio > 106 dB at 10 Veff
- Input impedance 37 kohms, 220 pF
- Inputs 1 pair RCA line, gold-plated for left and right input signal 1 Audionet link (optical)
- Outputs 1 stereo loudspeaker terminal
- Mains 120 V or 230 V, 50...60 Hz
- Power dissipation 5 W Stand by, max. 1500 W
- Dimensions 430 mm * 175 mm * 315 mm (W * H * D)
- Weight 28 kg
- Finish Front brushed aluminum, black anodized, white printing or aluminum nature, anodized, black printing
- Cover and heat sink Chassis aluminum, black anodized sheet-steel, black varnished
- Optional inputs XLR symmetric, gold-plated

Manufacturer: Audionet, Bochum, Germany

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Audionet products are developed, produced and manufactured by:
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