

THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

Est 1923 · JANUARY 2024

GRAMOPHONE

gramophone.co.uk

BRUCKNER

200th
ANNIVERSARY
SPECIAL

The leading
conductors of his
music explore
the symphonies

PLUS A history
of Bruckner
interpretation
on record



9 770017 310201
01 >
UNITED KINGDOM £6.95

PLUS



Stravinsky's
Firebird: the
best recordings
to hear



Ravel's Gaspard
de la nuit
from Behzod
Abduraimov



Thomas Larcher:
the composer's
haunting
landscapes

REVIEW PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

Arcam ST5/A15

A new look, new network and CD players and a trio of amplifiers spearhead the latest reinvention of Arcam, how do they shape up in a competitive market?



ARCAM A15

Type Integrated amplifier

Price £1099

Digital inputs Two coaxial, one optical, Bluetooth with aptX Adaptive

Analogue inputs Three (RCA pairs)

Analogue outputs One pair of speakers, preouts

Power output 80W per channel into 8ohms

Headphone outputs 3.5mm analogue on front panel; Bluetooth for wireless connection

Accessories supplied Remote handset

Dimensions (WxHxD) 43.1x9.8x34.4cm

ARCAM ST5

Type Network player

Price £799

Networking Ethernet/Wi-Fi

Digital input USB Type A

Outputs Analogue (fixed/variable level), optical and coaxial digital

Services supported include Spotify/Tidal Connect, internet radio, UPnP, AirPlay2, Chromecast, Roon

Control Radia app or remote handset

Accessories supplied Remote handset, control cable for Radia amplifiers

Dimensions (WxHxD) 43.1x8.3x34.4cm

arcam.co.uk

For what is one of the longer-established British hi-fi brands, having launched its first product back in 1976, Arcam has undergone quite a few changes in more recent years. The original A60 amplifier, launched under the A&R Cambridge brand – it stood for Amplification and Recording, and acknowledged the university roots of the company – ran for a decade with only a few detail changes along the way.

Over its near-50-year history, Arcam has developed a wide range of product lines, including its original Alpha and Delta ranges, the FMJ and DiVA line-ups, while innovations have included its Black Box, the first digital-to-analogue converter add-on for a CD player, the first DAB radio tuner, and even the first – and

only – British-built Dolby S cassette deck. And the style has evolved from the rather utilitarian models of the past, with their clear echoes of that original A60 amp, to the softer styling of its Solo all-in-one systems, which clearly influence its most recent separates line-up.

Now, with the arrival of the new Radia collection, we have another new look for Arcam, not to mention a rebrand: with the slogan ‘Be The Centre Of The Music’, the company aims to build itself on three tenets: ‘amazing sound, British heritage and luxury within reach.’ Furthermore, the new look is designed to ‘appeal to a new and younger segment of customers with a more affordable, sleek and attractive design without compromising on advances in audio innovation.’

Central to all of that is the use of Radia Yellow highlights around the principal controls, echoed in matching detailing to the products’ sides and top panels, while the designs are kept clean and simple: the amplifiers have just two rotary controllers on the front panel, straddling a central OLED display, and are styled as much to be seen as to blend into a domestic environment.

There are five products in the launch range: the CD5 CD player, which is also capable of playback from USB storage, is £699, while the ST5 network player is £799. Each of the three amplifiers has both analogue inputs, including a moving magnet phono stage, and digital inputs including Bluetooth wireless connectivity with aptX Adaptive capability, both for

SUGGESTED PARTNERS

Here are some suggestions for partnering equipment to make the most of the new Arcams

ARCAM RADIA CD5

If you want to add CD playback to your Radia set-up, the obvious solution is the sensibly-priced partnering CD5 player



BOWERS & WILKINS 606 S3

With fine weight from compact enclosures, and excellent openness and detail, the Bowers & Wilkins 606 S3 standmount speakers will be a fine match



input from portable devices and output to wireless headphones, and with hidden wireless antenna to preserve the clean lines. The range starts with the 50W per channel A5, at £749; the £1099 A15 increases the output power to 80Wpc, while the £1499 A25 is a 100Wpc design, using a fifth-generation version of the Class G amplification Arcam has employed in some of its previous designs, including the massive US-built ‘49’ series amps of a few years back. The A25 also gains upgraded digital-to-analogue conversion, and a USB-C input for higher resolution music files.

PERFORMANCE

To sample the new range, I chose the ST5 network player and midrange A15 amplifier, and was immediately impressed by the quality of fit and finish in evidence, and the style of the products; they manage to look different and contemporary, without that Radia detailing being over the top or garish, and the display on the amplifier is big, crisp and easily-read. Also neat is the way the player and amplifier integrate, with a control link between the two effected using a multicore cable supplied with the player. This enables the ST5 remote handset to control the A15’s volume, for example, but for the smoothest operation you’ll need to download the free Radia app for iOS and Android, which puts

the main controls of the ST5 quite literally in the palm of your hand.

The A15 amplifier is entirely conventional, that striking visual detailing aside, and the balance will be familiar from Arcam designs of the past: it’s smooth and warm, making this an exceptionally easy listen, whether via the analogue inputs, of which there are four including that moving magnet phono stage, or the three digital ins – two coaxial and one optical.

There’s a definite gain in openness and space to the sound, really bringing out the ambience of a recording

You can even try some sound-tuning with the digital filter options available in the amplifier’s menu, though the differences between them are sufficiently small to make sticking with the default setting a fairly sensible option.

However, there’s a spark more life here than in some previous Arcam amplifiers, as though the designers have decided to unleash the music a little: the result is the familiar refinement, but with some heightening of involvement, especially noticeable when playing atmospheric choral or orchestral music, but also in improved openness with the cut and thrust

of small chamber ensembles, or the timbres of solo piano. It’s a very commercial balance, agreed, but this brings an ability to be used with a wide range of speakers: I tried the amplifier with both the little Bowers & Wilkins 607 S3 model and PMC’s weighty, thrilling Prodigy 5, and in both cases the Arcam delivered a highly attractive sound.

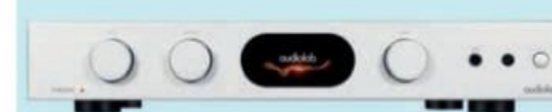
The same goes for the ST5 network player, which will play file formats up to 192kHz/24bit and DSD128: like the amplifier it uses an ESS Sabre DAC and, connected to the amplifier using conventional analogue interconnects, it proves flattering enough to low-bitrate services such as some internet radio stations, while revealing the advantages of playing music at CD quality and beyond. With ‘hi-res’ content from my NAS over the network, or from USB storage, there’s a definite gain in openness and space to the sound, really bringing out the ambience of a recording while at the same time maintaining that rich, comfortable warmth that has stood Arcam in such good stead over multiple generations of products.

So, a new face to broaden the appeal, and a familiar sound to ensure the performance here will please the maximum spread of listeners: it’s hard not to form the impression that Arcam might be onto something with its new Radia series. **G**

Or you could try ...

The new Radia series may be designed to bring the Arcam range to a wider range of buyers, but it’s hardly alone in the modern hi-fi market.

Audiolab 7000A



For example, the Audiolab 7000A amplifier is the same price as the Arcam A15, offers a similar output, and has a simple, logical front panel layout in either black or silver. Both analogue and digital inputs are provided, including a USB-B for computer input, and an HDMI to connect your TV sound. Find out more at audiolab.co.uk

Marantz Stereo 70s



Less expensive than either Arcam or Audiolab, yet offering both a built-in radio tuner and onboard multiroom streaming via the HEOS system, plus switching for multiple HDMI video sources, the Marantz Stereo 70s is a relative rarity – a two-channel AV receiver. It delivers 75W per channel and the crisp, detailed sound that’s a Marantz hallmark, and comes in black or silver versions of the company’s striking new styling. More details at marantz.com

WiiM Pro Plus

Want to add streaming to an existing amplifier? At its bargain price, the



WiiM Pro Plus offers sensational value, plus extreme ease of use via the company’s dedicated control app, and will play just about anything from computer-stored music to a wide range of online services. It’s a great introduction to what streaming can do for you, but much more than that – start using it and it becomes rather addictive. Explore what it can do at wiimhome.com