



Cheap thrills

Nick Tate steps out of the boardroom and is pleasantly surprised by Edwards Audio's new entry-level integrated amplifier

In case you hadn't noticed, we're living through some pretty hard times at the moment. The cost of living has skyrocketed, with price inflation in both the UK and EU running at around 10 percent year-on-year. In some countries, food prices have risen at over twice that rate. Times are tough, so who on earth would be a hi-fi manufacturer in 2023?

Kevin Edwards doesn't seem to have got the memo. He's just opened a new factory in Wiltshire and is busy churning out large amounts of affordable turntables. He's in the electronics market too, with the new Apprentice IA integrated before you. This is by no means an austerity special. A half-width, pint-sized amp with a minimum of facilities, it's designed to appeal to people just getting into proper separates hi-fi, or those coming back to it. Either way, they're on a limited budget.

Given the associated difficulty of manufacturing in the UK – with comparatively high energy prices,

factory rental and labour costs – even just making the Apprentice IA here is an achievement in itself. But its £370 price point is super keen; this is pretty much the entry point for separates hi-fi, and has been for nearly 50 years. Warp back to 1980 for example, and you'd find the hugely popular NAD 3020 amp retailing for £89, precisely the same (when adjusted for inflation) as the Apprentice IA now. Even then though, to keep costs low, the NAD was made in Taiwan.

This explains why it's nowhere near as lavish looking as the next tier up of budget integrations. The Apprentice IA is smaller and stripped down to the bone in terms of facilities, with no display or remote. Yet it still squeezes in a moving-magnet phono stage and 3.5mm headphone socket on the front, driven by a dedicated high current output driver circuit. Power output is quoted at a modest 30W RMS per channel into 8ohm. This is relatively low, but modern speakers are more efficient than ever, so it's not so much of an issue these days.

DETAILS
PRODUCT
 Edwards Audio Apprentice IA
ORIGIN
 UK
TYPE
 Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
 2kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
 220 x 60 x 210mm
FEATURES
 • Quoted power: 2x 30W RMS (8ohm)
 • Inputs: 1x MM phono; 2x RCA; 1x 3.5mm
 • Optional preamp output or line out
 • Optional aptX HD Bluetooth
DISTRIBUTOR
 Talk Electronics
WEBSITE
 talkelectronics.com

The Apprentice IA is a discrete Class AB design. Kevin Edwards says it's solely for reasons of sound quality; he simply prefers it this way. Its discrete Sanken bipolar output devices are more expensive than you'd expect in an amp of this price.

The version here is the entry-level model, but you can also buy the more expensive £430 IA1, which adds wireless infrared remote control. There's also a £500 IA1 with aptX HD Bluetooth, and you can specify either a preamp output on the rear to connect additional external power amps or a

It gives a taste of what a seriously good high-end amp can do but at a budget price

fixed output, for an extra £25. In standard form you get an MM phono input, plus RCA phono aux input and another front-panel 3.5mm mini-jack auxiliary in. These are switched by the left-hand front panel rotary knob, while the right takes care of volume. Lively white, red, blue and green finishes are also available.

Sound quality

The Apprentice IA is such a petite looking thing that your brain almost fools you that it will sound meek and mild. Actually, it's quite the reverse. This dinky integrated doesn't seem lacking in output power in normal use, and my choice of Cambridge Audio Aero 6 floorstander (HFC 382), with its 90dB sensitivity, serves up a fast and feisty sound.

Tonally the Apprentice IA is perhaps a little light; you don't get a thick, fat,

full-bodied sound. Cueing up the pounding art rock of Japan's *Quiet Life*, it lacks the visceral impact of more expensive rivals but the sheer pace means that the music is still enjoyable. David Sylvian's voice isn't as tonally rich and clear as it is with more expensive hi-fi, but it's still convincingly expressive and has great phrasing. The overall effect is one of a great late-Seventies rock band playing in perfect time with one another, and enjoying it. If a £370 amp can do that, there's definitely hope for hi-fi's future.

It sets up a decently expansive soundstage too. Again, we're not talking about the sort of thing you'll get from a £3,000 integrated, but it's still respectably large and there's a reasonable amount of depth. It makes listening to Kate Bush's *Snowflake* lovely. Much of the body of the piano is communicated and the recording comes across as immediate and immersive. Those icy vocals are well carried too; again you can do better if you've got more cash to spend, but the Apprentice IA performs very well in the circumstances. The result is a genuinely affecting and intimate rendition of a lovely song.

The phono stage is about as good as you can expect for an amplifier costing less than a good night out on the town. With a Rega Planar 3 tracking an Audio-Technica AT-VM95E (HFC 411 and 444 respectively), the Apprentice IA makes a decent fist of Lloyd Cole's *Rattlesnakes*. The sense of musical flow is there before your very ears, and there's a gentle naturalness to the sound that digital sources just seem to be short of. Even through this modest little amp, things sound more tangible and tactile than I'd expect – especially the lovely string backing.

The Apprentice IA is at its best with relatively simple recordings, such as Randy Crawford's *Secret Combination* where there are no heavy tracts of bass to reproduce. With soft jazz rock such as this, it glides along – serving



The fact that Rega's cheapest io (HFC 492) amp costs £50 more than the Apprentice IA, reminds us just how well priced it is. Like the Edwards Audio, Rega designers opted for a conventional Class AB design. Slightly larger and half as heavy again as the Apprentice IA, the io is a fine-sounding little amp. It's a little tonally warmer and has slightly stronger bass, but it's close. Both amps are far more fun than you'd expect at the price – and represent the state-of-the-art in ultra budget integrations. Hear both if you can.



A choice of red, white, blue and green finishes are also available

up the music with a gentle, relaxed charm. Move to gut-thumping electronica, however, and it's still lots of fun but at high levels you can tell it's doing some heavy lifting. Tom & Jerry's breakbeat classic *I Surrender* proves highly entertaining, but the monstrous sub-bass certainly gives the amp something to deal with.

The trick is to put its performance into proper context. Most people coming from more basic 'audio' systems will be bowled over by the Apprentice IA. It's a real, grown-up, 'proper' hi-fi amp that's 'shrunk in the washing machine', so to speak. So it may fit more tightly, but it does all the essentials. To my ear, it has true class; it's obviously been designed by someone who knows what a seriously good high-end amplifier can do, and is trying to give a taste of that to a more cash-strapped market. So, whether you're playing Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* or some mid-Nineties Britpop in the shape of Blur's *Tracy Jacks*, this amp just has fun.

In absolute terms, the recorded acoustic sounds a little constrained, the bass lacks power and the upper midband is ever so slightly brittle. Also, there's just a smidge of noise from the moving-magnet phono input at higher volumes. Yet this is all excusable at the price. Indeed, some amplifiers at over twice the money of the Apprentice IA do little better. So in real terms, it offers great value – especially when properly partnered by efficient loudspeakers.

Conclusion

This is one of the very best entry-level stereo amplifiers on sale right now. Those used to running integrations costing 10 times more might find it crude, but it does great for its super keen price. The main thing is that it's fun to listen to, yet not so unrefined that it will have you running for your listening room door. Cheap and cheerful summarises it perfectly well – two highly desirable attributes, in these troubled economic times ●



Inputs include 2x RCA, an MM phono stage and 3.5mm headphone jack on the front

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: Lively, fun sound; phono input
DISLIKE: Nothing at the price
WE SAY: A super entry-level integrated