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BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM

Sensational T+A digital setup brings joy to our ears



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30

PRODUCTS ON TEST:

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That's entertainment

T+A may make equipment that is exactly engineered, but that doesn't stop it from being fun to listen to as **Ed Selley** discovers

National stereotypes are pernicious things. Whatever grain of truth might exist at their core, they generally omit some of the more significant caveats. Perhaps the most unfair of any I'm aware of is that the citizens of Germany are somehow lacking in a sense of fun. Anyone who has had a night out in Berlin will be all too aware that this statement is entirely without foundation. The Germans are in fact, very keen on fun. It is simply the case that they take the business of having fun very seriously.

This rigour is no less apparent with hi-fi. What you see here is a system comprised of phenomenal engineering. It has an incredibly flexible spec and some lovely design touches, all directed solely at your enjoyment. T+A has been ploughing its own furrow since its founding in 1978. Unusually, it doesn't limit itself to a specific category of products. Across several ranges, it makes almost every type of equipment and does so almost exclusively in house.

The R Series is the longest-running range and the MP 2000 R MkII multi-source player and PA 2000R integrated amplifier look like the archetypal classic combination, but there is more to them

COMPONENTS

T+A MP 2000 R MKII

The MP 2000 R MkII combines a CD player, digital inputs and a UPnP streaming module into a single slimline chassis. It can be used in any combination from standalone compact disc to Roon endpoint, acting to collate any other digital sources you might have.

T+A PA 2000 R

A slimline integrated amplifier that matches the MP 2000 R MkII, the PA 2000 R delivers 100W into 8ohm via resistor ladder volume available to six line inputs, one of which can be a phono stage. It also features a useful display showing the selected input and current volume level.

T+A CRITERION S 2000 CTL

A three-way transmission line design with a pair of 150mm bass drivers acting on a custom transmission line with a 120mm midrange driver and 25mm tweeter operating together as a dedicated 'module' that is intended to offer very even dispersion across a wide angle.

Picture credit: Shutterstock.com



than meets the eye. The MP 2000 R MkII can be utilised not only as a compact disc player, but also houses a streaming module with internet radio, additional digital inputs and Bluetooth all linked into the same sophisticated DAC that has a 1-Bit conversion mode for DSD. With Roon compatibility also built in, it is a deceptively ingenious piece of kit that can work with an owner as they move away from optical disc.

Input friendly

The PA 2000 R is notionally a little more straightforward, but looks can be deceiving. It offers six line inputs, three RCA and three XLR, one of which can be converted to a phono stage, and provides 100W into 8ohm for all of them. It is an elegant riposte to the idea that high-end integrated amps have to be the size of a freezer.

This system stays in house with the speakers. The S 2000 CTL is the smallest floorstander in the Criterion range, but features all of T+A's main design points. The two 150mm bass drivers vent into a carefully matched transmission line that ensures that despite being less than 1m tall, they

can extend down to 30Hz. The tweeter and midrange unit are positioned to form an 'acoustic unit' that disperses sound extremely consistently. Like the partnering electronics the result is simple enough to look at, but with considerable hidden depths.

It has to be said that it is all beautifully made as well despite the design of the R Series breaking almost

The technical rigour that has gone into all the components is beyond reproach

every 'rule' of making products feel hefty. The casework is made from several pieces, there are multiple controls and conventional displays. The speakers are no less fastidiously assembled and the whitewashed oak is one of a number of finishes we've featured over the years that really does make more sense in the flesh than it might do in still images.

Everything makes still more sense when you turn it on. It takes about 40

Above left: the baby Criterion in whitewashed oak makes perfect sense in the flesh

Above: Every aspect of the T+A system is immaculately assembled

Above right: The compact dimensions don't affect the range of flexibility that's on offer

seconds of *Colors* by the Black Pumas to realise that this system focuses its considerable technical potential to deliver the sheer unbridled joy that is woven into the fabric of the song. This is not a terribly sophisticated piece of music. In technical terms it does nothing that wouldn't have been largely familiar to listeners in 1970. It is all about capturing the loping time signature, the lovely vocal turn and innate euphoria of the piece itself and the T+A is outstanding at it.

Total authority

The reason for this is a threefold relationship that these components have with one another. The MP 2000 R MkII is a wonderfully unforced performer that delivers an effortlessly rich and natural tonality that leaves vocals rich and their supporting instruments sounding detailed and believable. Passing the baton to the PA 2000 R, this doesn't impinge on the tonality of the source in any way. It's a remarkably self-effacing device, extremely close to the 'straight wire with gain' ideal. What it does do is grip the speakers with nigh-on total authority. Without this, transmission

line speakers can often fall slightly wide of their notional ideals, never quite sitting on the beat, but instead fractionally behind it.

Viscerally engaged

To listen to the T+A for any length of time is to have the technical sophistication fall away as sheer, unbridled musicality takes its place. Pick up the tempo and play Thom Yorke's electronically underpinned *Not The News*, and the T+A is an absolute delight. It's technically excellent, capturing the flurry of sounds and effects and leaving Yorke's voice sitting rich and clear at the top of it, but more than that it is viscerally engaging. This is a system that doesn't sit playing background music. It doesn't demand your attention, it consistently and justifiably earns it.

This sheer enjoyment isn't tied to speed and energy either. It makes Hayden Thorpe's *Diviner* come alive in a way that even having listened to the album quite a bit since it was released, still has me ambitiously attempting the seldom seen 'air piano' manoeuvre. It is more than just rhythmic energy that creates this



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response. It is ensuring that every aspect of the music is delivered with almost nothing added to muddy or interfere with the process.

The 'almost' in that sentence is important, though, because the system does impart a degree of influence over what you hear – it's simply that the effect is almost impossibly benign. *Cool Car*, the

The MP 2000 R MkII sounds unforced and has effortlessly rich and natural tonality

debut album from Canadian band Girlfriend Material has an entirely deliberate bedroom studio vibe to its mastering and presentation. On many systems at this price, the crudeness of the production would be borderline unlistenable. Here, opening track *Peace Sign* is as raw and immediate as the band intends and yet the S 2000 CTL is absolutely steadfast in avoiding becoming harsh or forward. Not only will this system accept music in a number of different formats, no less

importantly, it will accept it in a great many forms too.

This then, is German fun manifest in audio. The attention to detail is exquisite and the technical rigour that has gone into all the components is absolutely beyond reproach.

Joy to the world

The reason why it has been done isn't the pursuit of technical plaudits or a desire to know what the artist had for breakfast that morning – although it's no slouch in either regard it has to be said. The real reason that T+A has gone to the design lengths it has is the pursuit of joy. Moreover, this is textbook, well-planned German joy. This is a sensibly sized, impressively flexible system that won't overpower the space it is in and, based on the level of fit and finish on display, it will do so for a very long time indeed. The moment that you turn it on, though, none of that matters. This is a fabulously entertaining system that never feels its message is more important than that of the music it is playing and it is sure to delight anyone in the fortunate position of being able to own it ●