

HIFICRITIC

£20 (UK)

THE AUDIO REVIEW MAGAZINE

Volume 15 / Number 2 Apr - Jun 2021

ROY GANDY

Rega's founder on not just surviving, but thriving, over the last year: and why he's buying another factory

WILSON SABRINA X

This substantial floorstander is even better than the original model

TALKING ABOUT TAPE NOISE

Keith Howard explains why reel-to-reel really isn't 'ultimate analogue'

NAIM UNITI ATOM HEADPHONE EDITION

New arrival takes personal listening very seriously

KEF REINVENTS THE SUBWOOFER

The new KC62 is tiny – and astounding, says Martin Colloms

MONSTER MACHI

The X3 may be all the amp you'll ever need

TESTED

Speakers from KEF, Dali, Dynaudio and more, plus a revived Rogers valve amp

PLUS

Classical music, jazz and more – and has Audirvana got its reinvention right?

CLEARLY SUPERIOR

Vertere's SG-1 record player gains a new digital-based 'motor drive', the Tempo – Martin Colloms listens, and is highly impressed





High-end headphones

T+A Solitaire P-SE £3000

ED SELLEY FINDS MUCH TO LIKE IN THE MORE AFFORDABLE DERIVATIVE OF GERMAN MANUFACTURER T+A'S DÉBUT HEADPHONE OFFERING

Last year's entry of T+A into the headphone arena was nothing if not ambitious. Companies frequently adopt a top-down approach to product development but the company's Solitaire P was pitched straight into the most rarefied level of the headphone market. That it more than holds its own is a reflection of the effort the company had put into the project and it remains one of the most singular headphones I've ever tested.

The idea of top down of course is that other models follow at lower price points, engineered with technology from the flagship, but simplified. However, start with a £5000 model, and your

first rung down is still going to be a fairly serious proposition: the Solitaire P-SE may be 40% less expensive cheaper than the P, that still puts it up against many other companies' flagships.

The basic design closely follows that of the more expensive model, in being an open-back, planar magnetic headphone designed entirely for home use. The TPM2500 drivers are the same size as before (80 x 110mm), but here use only a single-sided set of magnets rather than the double-sided arrangement in the TPM3000 inside the Solitaire P. The material of the driver itself and the process of applying the conductive material is similar, but again simplified,

the reduction in the number of magnets has some benefits in terms of the sensitivity and impedance.

The P-SE presents a load of 45 ohms – down from the 80 ohms of the P – and while I never found the Solitaire P to be difficult to drive, this does suggest that the P-SE should prove a sympathetic load for most headphone amps, particularly when judged against other planar magnetic designs.

The behaviour of the air behind the driver has changed, too, with a different 'Draught control system' to better manage this flow. However, there's still no real attenuation of noise coming in or sound going out, so there won't be an ideal choice for anyone looking to listen in the same room as somebody doing something else.

Connection between the T+A and your amp is made via a choice of cables, two supplied and one that is available optionally. Standard are both 6.35mm, and 4.4mm 'Pentaconn', connections, both on 3m cables, the latter being a relative newcomer in audio circles – notably on the T+A HA200 headphone amplifier. However, a four-pin single XLR fitting is also available as an option. At the headphone end of the cables, a pair of 3.5mm jacks insert into deep, partially recessed housings.

Where the Solitaire P uses aircraft grade aluminium, the P-SE uses plastic, which sounds more alarming than it turns out to be. However, T+A has prioritised engineering and practicality over pure aesthetics and this does mean that if you plonk the P-SE down next to the Focal Clear MG, at less than half the price, the Focal looks and feels more expensive. This extends to stowage, too: T+A's large box is rather less practical than Focal's case.

That said, the more time you live with the T+A, the more sense it makes. Plastic or no plastic, these 'phones are still immaculately bolted together, with everything feeling assembled with a view to staying together indefinitely, and to a logical design.

The earcups have a significant range of horizontal and vertical movement, this combining with the well judged headband clamping force to give exceptional comfort over extended periods.

And the sonic performance mirrors the appearance: the more time you spend with these 'phones, the more sense they make. Even these simplified planar magnetic drivers are closer to achieving the ideals of the technology that almost anything else I've heard, and the transient speed is truly outstanding, for example with Robert Plant's genre-defying *Little Maggie*.

This is combined with a bass response of both a depth and control – something with which many planar magnetic drivers can struggle. Weight is effortlessly present, but no less impressive is its effortless integration with the rest of the frequency response. Low piano notes or plucked bass strings,

for example, are palpable but never overplayed – while a fraction of the Solitaire P's truly subsonic heft has been lost, this is still phenomenal low end.

In terms of detail retrieval, the T+A doesn't give away much to its bigger brother – or anything else on the market. It's not that you are continuously treated to little snippets of information in pieces of music you though you knew well, more that this is never a distraction. These headphones are able to present vast amounts of information without ever feeling congested or overwhelming, and it's hard to overstate the effect this has on ease of listening over extended periods. It never feels like you are having to process the information you are being given, it simply feels right on arrival.

The open back nature of the design is very helpful here too because it ensures that the soundstage that the P-SE creates is something that extends far beyond the constraints of the headphone itself. There will be points in a moderately noisy environment where you might bemoan the lack of isolation but, in quieter spaces, the T+A is spacious in a way that even most open back rivals can only dream of. Audio arrives at the ear with little or no solid evidence as to how it got there, and while this can be augmented further with the addition of crossfeed, either at the playback software or headphone amp level, even without it, this the P-SE creates genuinely immersive images.

This is not a headphone you'll buy for the looks and even a twenty minute listen might not completely sell you on the level of ability here. The more time you spend with the P-SE, though, the more that understated but hugely effective design begins to win you over as the sheer effortlessness of the performance makes itself felt. For sixty percent of the price of the Solitaire P, this is considerably more than two thirds of the performance and that makes it something of a bargain, even at the asking price. T+A's headphone range is up and running – I'm very interested to see where it goes next.

HIFICRITIC
AUDIO EXCELLENCE

T+A Solitaire P-SE

Type	Open-back headphones
Price	£3000
Drivers	11x8cm Planar magnetostatic
Frequency response	8Hz-45kHz
Impedance	40ohms
Weight	440g
Accessories supplied	3mm cable with 6.3mm plug, 3m balanced cable with 4.4mm Pentacon plug

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