

LISTENING ROOM

SUGDEN A21SE



Say, didn't we just *do* this amplifier? Not quite.

In *UHF* No. 82, didn't we review the A21a, the new version of this classic amplifier? And wasn't the original A21 on the cover of *UHF* No. 28?

All true, but this is yet another incarnation of the classic British manufacturer's long running series. The "a" on the previous one indicates a second version, coming long after the original (if it were a computer product it would have been called "2.0"). The "SE" designation is commonly used to indicate a "special edition," usually one with fancier parts and a few extra tweaks. Fair enough, except that this new A21 is \$1750 more expensive than the one we reviewed (and which remains on the market). What's up with that?

Very simply, this is not merely a tweaked version of the A21a. First of all, it has somewhat more power, 30 watts per channel into 8 ohms, compared to 25 for the A21a. The heat sinks are therefore heftier, and the power supply needs to be as well. And then its bandwidth has been broadened to three-and-half octaves

beyond audibility, in order to accommodate transients and avoid slew-rate distortion. All of this adds to the cost.

We have often mentioned the reasons behind class A operation, but they may possibly bear repeating. In a class A amplifier, the complementary amplifying devices (transistors or tubes), which operate in push-pull, work flat out during the entire positive and negative cycle, throwing away unneeded energy as heat. This is not exactly a "green" choice, but it eliminates a possible discontinuity when a device amplifying the positive half of the wave hands off to the one amplifying the negative half. The other advantage — or disadvantage depending on your point of view — is that the amplifier always draws the same current from its power supply no matter the signal level, and so you don't get the signal modulated by variations in power supply voltage, as you may with some conventional (class AB) amplifiers.

The tradeoff? There's heat, and lots of it, more than this amplifier's heat sinks alone can handle. The front panel is

not disconnected from the heat dissipation system, and so it too gets hot. And so, by the way, do the knobs. We were happy that the amplifier comes with a remote control.

We *did* wish the remote were a nicer one, befitting a luxury product. It looks like the ones with \$30 DVD players, and it even comes with leak-prone "super heavy duty" batteries that should be banned. We would teach its commands to a good universal remote.

The build quality of the amp itself, is gorgeous. We did wish Sugden had used better jacks. Don't they believe that matters? The output posts, on the other hand, are in keeping with an amplifier of this price. There is a "tape output," which of course bypasses the volume control, and a "pre output," which doesn't. This is all to the good.

Unlike the A21a this amp doesn't have the option of a phono stage. It does, however, have an LTVS low-voltage output, which can run Sugden's own outboard phono stage.

We did the listening test in our Alpha room, figuring that our Living Voice Avatar speakers could be happy with the relatively modest power output of this amplifier. Of course we began by listen-

ing to our selected recordings with our reference electronics: a Moon W-5LE power amplifier driven by a Copland CTA-305 tube preamp.

The first recording in the set was our constant favorite, *Now the Green Blade Riseth* (PRSACD-9093) in its Super Audio version.

We selected the volume as we usually do, by adjusting it until all three of us were happy with what we heard. Once we had listened to the recording, however, we were less happy. Did the amplifier need more volume to wake it up?

Now we should mention that, at one time, 30 watts were enough to make a muscle amp, and 50 watts were the audio equivalent of a V-8 engine. But we are more demanding today, aren't we? We hunted around for the "right" volume. Too much and we could feel the amplifier working hard. Too little and we were left cold. There had to be a happy medium, and there was, though it took a little experimentation to find it.

And then it all worked pretty well. There still wasn't the wraparound sound of our far more powerful Moon amplifier, and there was some foreshortening of the depth, with the singers seeming more forward. What we concentrated on, though, was the beauty of the voices, which were clear but without undue emphasis. Subtler instruments, like the flute, and the organ which comes in at the very end, were well served, though Reine was surprised by the sound of the flute.

Well, how about a larger, harder-to-miss organ? We put on the Opus 3 disc *Organ Treasures* (Opus 3 CD22031), and specifically the famous Bach *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*. This SACD is a challenge for any amplifier, and for speakers too.

The huge low-pitched chords came through wonderfully well, with no sign that the amplifier needed to work hard. Oddly, it was with the smaller pipes that there was the slightest sign of strain. The reverberation and the fine details all came through. "The bass is there," said Reine, "so is the majesty, and so is the pomp."

Of course the Sugden wasn't about to put our reference electronics in the shade. Our reference had put us *right in*



the church, with sound seeming to come from all about us. "With this amplifier we're standing in the *doorway* of the church," said Albert.

The next recording was the opposite, a very soft solo harp. Well, it's soft part of the time, but harpist Susann McDonald (*Caprice*, Klavier K11133) sometimes shows off the impressive dynamic power of her superb instrument. We played Tournier's *Vers la source dans le bois*, which alternates between gossamer notes at the threshold of audibility, and strong swooping chords which remind us that this is a *very large* instrument.

Both ends of the dynamic envelope came through convincingly. Oh, the harp wasn't quite as touching as with our reference, but the big chords had plenty of energy, and the tiny notes meant to evoke a gently flowing brook were clear and delightful, with none of the fogginess we have often heard on this recording. "I can't really say there's anything missing," said Reine. "If I hadn't just heard our own reference, I would have been perfectly content."

But we had a bigger challenge in mind, one of classic rock's most iconic recordings: the SACD version of Pink

Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. We listened to *On the Run*, followed by *Time*. We're familiar with this justly famous electroacoustic suite from the LP (which we keep precious), but the new digital remix of the original multitrack tape has emphasized some details that were in the background in the original.

We were stunned by how well this amplifier did on this challenging rock recording, and that was despite the fact that we didn't go easy on the horsepower. There was tremendous energy and detail. The rhythm, which is the key to both the pieces, was strong. "You can follow the runner and hear him breathe," said Reine. "This is the sound of life beating."

There were some alterations in timbre, notably in the complex alarm clock introduction of *Time*, but it was hard to be sure which version was intended by the producers, and it remained startlingly clear and lifelike. We had no reservations, however, and we were surprised to conclude that this Sugden *is* a rock'n'roll amplifier after all.

But of course we wanted to hear a female voice through this amplifier, because that's a challenge many amplifiers (and speakers, and CD players...) fail to take up. Over to Margie Gibson and *You Keep Coming Back Like a Song* from her *Say It With Music* album (Sheffield CD-36). You'd think it would be impossible to muck up a recording so touchingly beautiful, but of course our long experience has taught us otherwise.

As with the Pink Floyd, this final recording left us with not a single reservation. The piano introduction was perfect, and Margie was *there* in our room, with a three-dimensional presence. Her lyrics were clear, but without exaggeration. At the bottom end, the

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Sugden A21SE
Price: C\$4999
Size (WDH): 43 x 31 x 12 cm
Rated power: 30 watts/channel into 8 ohms, 40 watts into 4 ohms
High-level inputs: 5, no tape loop
Most liked: Finesse and grace
Least liked: Hot front panel, cheap remote, crosstalk between inputs
Verdict: For those with the system to take advantage of it, this is it.



25.2 watts. At 20 Hz it produced considerable distortion at any level beyond 22 watts.

A class A amplifier should do well at very low level, and this one does. At a level barely above the noise, at 0.005 milliwatts, the signal wave looked perfect.

We figured that crosstalk between adjacent inputs would be very low, since switching is done with relays. We were wrong. From 20 Hz to 1 kHz the leakage was at -51 dB, an unexpectedly poor figure. At 10 kHz the crosstalk dropped to a more acceptable -64 dB. That was only slightly better than we had measured on the A21a. You won't want to allow one input to be fed, by a tuner or digital player, while you're listening to another.

If you listen to this amplifier alongside the much more affordable A21a, you may be left wondering what in the world Sugden was thinking of. This amplifier was designed for those who don't need to move the walls, but want to be moved by the music. If you're the right sort of music lover, and if you have a system that is appropriate, you may conclude that Sugden had you in mind.



cello and the bass were gorgeous. Yet independently of these separate aspects, the song just worked. We were delighted to be ending on such a high note.

We took the Sugden into the lab for a look at what the instruments would tell us.

Would the A21SE meet its rated power? It might have, had it been aligned correctly, but the negative half of the wave clipped before the positive half did. That limited the useful power at 1 kHz to 24.9 watts. It actually did marginally better at 20 kHz, where it delivered

CROSSTALK

If you're looking for tons of power, this is obviously the wrong amplifier to buy, because its game is quality, not quantity. Still, it has adequate power for most purposes, and considerably more power than some far more expensive amps I could name.

Sugden's biggest problem with this amp is that the A21a costs much less but is so good. Indeed, I suspect that, in many systems, the extra finesse of the SE version would not be apparent. For most systems, therefore, the other amp is the one to get. Re-read our review in *UHF* No. 82, and compare.

Sugden was long underestimated, perhaps because it became famous for small amplifiers for modest systems. But here's a reminder: Sugden also once produced a preamp that, for several years, was our reference. On the evidence, the Sugden engineers haven't forgotten what they've learned.

If the A21SE is for you, you'll know it.
—Gerard Rejskind

This amplifier is excellent. Yes, our refer-

ence components outperform it, depending on the instrumental complement and the volume selected.

The volume is in fact very important. It's worth taking the time to choose the setting that will do justice both to this magnificent amplifier and to the artists on the recording. Do that, and I think you'll be more than satisfied.

You'll find a large pipe organ that is most impressive, though its highest notes could be smoother. Strings will soothe your ear. You'll appreciate the quality of the image, and the clarity that lets through even the subtlest details and effects. As for the dynamic range exploited by the musicians, it is magnificently reproduced by the Sugden.

I must admit that I'm not one to seek out the loudest possible music, but I do at times listen to recordings that feature incisive percussion, impact that borders on the surrealistic, and a thousand dynamic effects. All of this, reproduced by this amplifier, far from displeasing me, had an irresistible effect. It

was, for me, the most pleasant of surprises.

—Reine Lessard

This amplifier kind of grew on me and by the end of the listening session, I loved it.

In case you wish to upgrade and find a level of accuracy and finesse that is lacking in your system, my suggestion to you is to take the time to discover what it can really do. Don't *expect* anything, just listen — though not too critically at first — to a wide variety of music, and let this amplifier do what it does best. You may notice a slightly less forward presence than you might be accustomed to. Let it be, don't wish it were otherwise, and listen some more. You may then notice...

Well, nothing. Just simple, clean sound; music the way it was intended, not meant to impress anyone but to enjoy, no extremes to get your knitted socks to unravel but pure, lively performances, having shed layers of unnecessary stuff.

—Albert Simon