



Sugden A21 SE Signature £3,300

With roots going back nearly 60 years, this stunner likes to keep things simple. Just don't let it get too hot...

For a British specialist hi-fi company that started in 1967 – by James Edward Sugden – this brand has a pretty low profile. But while it hasn't spread its net especially widely, its popularity goes very deep. Many Sugden customers swear by their amplifiers, especially the A21 which was the world's first-ever commercial pure Class A amp, it started as a 12W-per-channel stereo integrated, and has slowly grown in power over the years that followed.

Jim Sugden wrote many technical articles, including for *HFC* sister mag *Hi-Fi News*. His highly respected design has been gently updated over the years and the 30W A21 SE you see here is one of its offspring. Sugden's thinking was conventional Class AB amps suffer from switching distortion, as the output transistors are turned on and off at high speed as they trace the musical signal. Running them at all times eliminates this distortion – which is what Class A does – fixes this problem, but creates others, not least heat dissipation.

That's why the A21 SE is an absolute tank. It may be relatively compact size-wise, but it has chunky heatsinks that get very hot – almost too hot to touch, after a few minutes of being switched on. So, it's essential to keep this amp on a well-ventilated rack or similar. In other ways, it's more user friendly. The almost total lack of features makes it an 'old-school' design with just five line inputs, one preamp output and a remote control. No streaming, DAC, headphone amp or phono stage for this – the volume-only remote control is a godsend. The SE offering is basically a beefier base model A21 with a 50 percent upgraded power supply for increased power output and a tweaked preamp stage. Finish is very good, generally.

Sound quality
A superb-sounding integrated, this beats the class-leading Rega in some respects, but falls behind in others. It is closest to the Synthesis valve amp in its highly musical character, but less tonally sweet. It makes every

► **DETAILS**

PRODUCT
Sugden A21 SE Signature

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
15kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 115 x 360mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power: 2x 30W RMS (8ohm)
• 5x RCA line inputs
• Preamp output

DISTRIBUTOR
Sugden Audio

piece of music a sonic adventure, as it serves up a really vibrant, emotional and engaging sound. Whether it's the soul/funk groove of Lynx or the first movement of Vaughan Williams' *A London Symphony*, the A21 SE absolutely goes for the musical jugular, so to speak.

How well it succeeds depends on what questions the partnering speakers ask of it. This is also true of the two valve amps featured here, of course, and to a lesser extent the Cyrus solid-stater. The problem is that the Sugden does not have limitless reserves of power, and you can hear it begin to compress transients on bass-heavy tracks like *You're No Good*, when the volume is really turned up. This won't be an issue if you've got sensitive speakers, but will if you don't – and you have a largish room and/or like playing your music loud.

The A21 SE sounds superb at low volumes, even better than the Rega or PrimaLuna. It comes across as naturally expressive and interested in

Regardless of the music, the A21 SE absolutely goes for the musical jugular

the music. Tonally it produces vibrant vocals and carries the grain of acoustic instruments beautifully – they never sound airbrushed. The PrimaLuna and Synthesis do this too, but add more warmth that slightly gets in the way of low-level detail. There's little sense of the Sugden adding too much sugar to the midband for example, although bass guitars and bass synths can sound somewhat rounded-off – especially when compared with the Rega. Overall, though, this a great amplifier and it's no surprise it has a cult following. Not the perfect all-rounder, but sublime at what it does best ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
LIKE: Sublimely musical; sweet tonality

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
DISLIKE: Soft bass; limited power

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
WE SAY: Charismatic charmer

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★