



A-level music

Yorkshire's finest beefs up its classic Class A amp and gives it a makeover in the process

PRODUCT Sugden A21SE

TYPE Integrated amplifier

PRICE £1,995

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43x11.5x31.5cm

• Weight: 12.5kg • Rated power output: 30W (pure Class A) per channel into eight ohms • Four line-level inputs, one tape input/output • remote control

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Shhh, wanna know a secret? One of the best-sounding products money can buy is virtually unknown. The £1,100 Sugden A21 has been delivering a sound that is hard to match at more than three times the price. It's little-known in part because the power output is so low (just 25 watts) it becomes hard to partner with some loudspeakers, in part because it lacks a remote control but mostly because it looks like a bit of a minger. The styling seems to skip the last 18 years of product design.

So, Heckmondwike's longest-running amp needed a bit of a makeover, and it's called the A21SE. Fuelled by the success of the Bijou and Masterclass lines (that look more attractive than the A21 series), Sugden took the basic amplifier design, gave it a boost (to 30 watts for an eight-ohm load, 40 watts for a four-ohm speaker), a new preamp, remote and the sort of styling exercise that brings it right up to date.

This has a thick gunmetal fascia and a big, bold finish that gives the A21SE an almost Scandinavian look. The black rear panel is also extremely thick and has high-quality WBT-style speaker terminals, although the gold-plated phono sockets for the four line inputs and tape and preamp line outputs are all of standard quality. There's also no provision for a phono stage or a headphone socket.

This improves upon the bluff styling of the A21, but the amplifier is still not quite 'there' when it comes to ease of use. The logic of the remote control is a bit, er, twisty. For example,

to operate volume control from the remote only happens when you press the 'CD' function key, which seems odd. The input selector and volume knobs – and the power button – don't feel as beefy as some similarly priced integrated's control surfaces. Some labelling of inputs would be nice, too, although this might break up the minimalist lines of the A21SE and is forgivable.

Sugden has made this an amplifier to suit the new generation of sources, thanks to an extremely wide frequency response and even wider bandwidth. It delivers sound from 12Hz-141kHz and a potential bandwidth of 6Hz-280kHz, according to Sugden.

Peer through the circular grill holes on the top panel and you will see four separate PCBs (an input block at the back of the amp, a main amp stage and power supply board and two power amplifier stages tacked onto the heatsinks on either side of the amplifier). In the middle of the amplifier is a dirty great big

toroidal transformer, which accounts for a pretty large proportion of the weight of this chunky Sugden.

Heatsinks and vents on the top and bottom of the amplifier should suggest a lot of heat dissipation going on. The Class A operation confirms this. Remember those Holsten Pils adverts where Donald Pleasence intoned "most of the sugar turns to alcohol"? Well Class A needs its own vaguely creepy actor saying "most of the power turns to heat". There's no getting around it, the A21SE runs hot, uncomfortably hot to the touch. If you leave it powered up continually, it will behave like a small radiator, warming up the room – and your electricity bill – considerably. Sugden is not unmindful of the Class A nature of this amp; the first page of the manual comes with a warning about placing things near or on top of the amplifier. Putting anything other than a shelf within 10cm of the A21SE is not recommended, probably because what you put near the A21SE will slowly melt.

It sounds ironic given all this heat dissipation, but the amplifier still needs a substantial warm up period, both as a run-in and before each play time. The sound gets better and better over the first month or so, and it takes about 20-30minutes after each power up of the amplifier for it to come on song. But there's no need to set your stopwatch – turn the thing on, wait for the room to become a sauna and it's ready.

SOUND QUALITY

All that dissipated heat from running this amplifier in Class A seems to boil off lots of the negative aspects of most other amplifiers. Grain, brightness, any form of etched quality and colorations all disappear in the heatwave, leaving instead a sound that is remarkably clean and open. Given the amount of heat, paradoxically, it's not a warm sound. But nor is it a cool sound – it's just very, very clean and entirely free from grain. The two are not a tautology; it has that just-scrubbed clean sound of good transistor amplifier amps and the lack of grain that is hard to find this side of a single-ended triode design.

The A21SE delivers some of the best soundstaging in the business. It is wide, deep and even has height. But there's more; the sound is so very three-dimensional that it makes it seem like the studio space is recreated in your living room. Not too small, not too big, just a soundstage at precisely the right scale and size, making the boundaries of room and speaker disappear at a stroke. This is, of course, dependent on the quality of the soundstage recorded on the disc, but if there is a hint of soundstaging, the Sugden will dig it out.

Perhaps the biggest feather in the A21SE's cap is the coherence of the sound. This is an almost forgotten, overlooked aspect of a product's presentation, but is in fact more crucial than we give it credit. It's all very well



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having a beautifully detailed delivery, with perfect rhythm and first-rate dynamics, but if the piano sounds like a marimba for the bass and someone playing the spoons in the upper registers, everything soon falls apart. Starting with one of the best midbands around, the Sugden manages to keep every sound coherent and tonally accurate into the highest treble and well into the regions where most speakers give up the ghost. It's that midband that leads you in, of course. The midband has a richness and clarity that can sound breathtaking, effectively sounding like the amplifier has been removed from the audio chain.

Of course, this is not to say the A21SE lacks detail or dynamic range. Far from it, in fact. The dynamic capabilities of this amplifier are particularly quicksilver, shifting from quiet to loud with no sense of artifice. Also, the detailing is first-rate, with plenty of information peeled from the source. But good dynamics and detail are not that uncommon, especially at the more stratospheric price levels; good midband coherence is another matter and is usually only a factor at the sort of level where you'd happily pay two grand on a mains lead, not a whole amplifier. At the price, you will not find Sugden's equal. ▣

Q & A

We talk to Tony Miller, director of Sugden about the long-standing success of the A21 amplifier, why Class A is so important to Sugden and how to update a classic.



HFC: What is the history of the A21?

TM: Jim Sugden's original A21 10 watt Class A design was first introduced in late 1967. It originally sold for £56; of course, that's equivalent to more than £650 today. This lasted until 1973 in Class A mode and until 1976 in Class AB. Twenty years later, we decided to revisit those early Class A designs. The development had to retain the main design aspects of the A21, such as single voltage rail and the 'push pull' load-sharing output transistors in correct Class A design. No 'B...' configurations here. We increased from 10 watts to 25 because we considered that sufficient to project a large enough soundstage to fill a reasonable living room. The A21a was born and is still in production, today.

How do the A21a and A21SE differ?

The A21SE is more than just an up-rated A21a. It is a new amplifier with increased power availability and stiffness with low-impedance characteristics to give the amplifier greater load tolerance. A major contributor to the performance of the A21SE is the completely new preamplifier with a cascode input stage, current feedback, with the input and output in phase. To cope with the increased power, the A21SE uses larger, more efficient heatsinks to absorb the 50 per cent increase in installed power as part of a new thermally designed case. Quite a number of the improvements were the result of developments encompassed in Sugden's 'Masterclass' range.

What's the advantage of Class A operation?

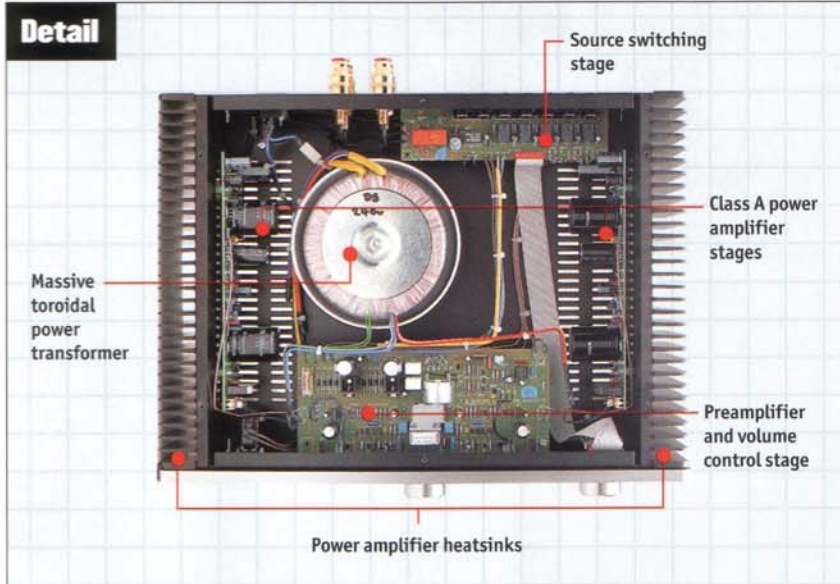
Sound quality. We prefer the euphonic performance of good Class A to the more favoured dry clinical and 'detailed' performance of some of the more popular solid state amplifiers on the market. The development of more efficient loudspeakers with more stable load characteristics has been of great assistance. The requirement for amplifiers of maximum grunt to control recalcitrant speakers is no longer a major necessity. We can now utilise all the advantages of Class A design, at reasonable power levels.

What's next for the SE range?

Since the development of the A21SE, a matching SE CD player has been released and a separate phono stage is about to go into production. Sugden's future development will be associated with a pure Class A, such as a DC-coupled esoteric amplifier and an associated preamplifier.

Early experience of these new products has thoroughly whetted our appetites and only outstanding performance will satisfy us. Creating a product of the ultimate musicality from a combination of new and trusted circuits consolidated by discreet components is our way of 'Rescuing music from technology'.

Detail



There is one thing to note with the A21SE. Although it is considerably more speaker compatible now, thanks to the increase in power, don't think this is the sort of amplifier that can be partnered with any old boxes. A speaker too demanding, too soft or too insensitive will be a poor partner for the Sugden. Instead, it responds best to an easy to drive, reasonably sensitive speaker that has a clean, perhaps forward treble and exciting, dry bass. As a consequence, the ProAc Tablette Reference Eight Signature speakers (tested in HFC 267) are a perfect match for the Sugden. This is not 'two wrongs making a right', more like 'two rights making a fantastic'.

If there is a mild short-coming to the Sugden's performance, it's in the timing. The thorny subject of whether a product 'times' is difficult; many find this an unimportant, or even undetectable feature of a product; others choose their hi-fi on the basis of this and this alone. The Sugden is about average in it's ability to keep a beat – it certainly doesn't make you want to pump out the likes of LCD Soundsystem at full tilt like the best, which may mean the A21SE is less good at keeping the beat intact than the likes of a good Naim amplifier, for example. But, if the trade-off is between a perfect sense of rhythm and the spacious and clean sound of the A21SE, many people will choose the latter.

What Sugden has done is boosted the power of its A21 without any negatives occurring. This is a rarity, as many upscaled low-powered products lose some of the magic in the scaling process. Sugden has simply made a bigger, small amp. It's still no headbanger amplifier, but that's like saying a Bentley is no good for drag racing – it simply doesn't matter.

A hot-running, comparatively low-powered amplifier is a hard product to justify in a world of global warming and energy conservation. It's also a hard product to sell to a generation of buyers who have been programmed into believing the best sound only comes from forcing half a grillion watts up your speaker sockets. But this is about hi-fi not specifications or practical considerations like heat dissipation. The sound is everything, and the Sugden A21SE sounds so good, it may make you want to tear up the Kyoto Agreement. The sound is Class A, all the way. **HFC**

Alan Sircom



VERDICT

SOUND >> 91%

PRO

A truly magical sound with a soundstage and transparency to die for. Almost everything else at the price sounds grainy by comparison.

FEATURES >> 79%

CON
Can double up as a space heater and toaster. Needs careful speaker matching. Perhaps not the amplifier for the rhythm kings or those wanting headbanging levels.

BUILD >> 83%

VALUE >> 89%

CONCLUSION

Sugden has managed to upgrade the A21 without losing any of its magic. Although it may still lack raw power and doesn't follow the rhythm method, if you want to lose yourself in unforced, uncolored music, put this at the top of the list.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 90%