



Budget... exposed

Exposure has dipped its toes into the budget waters with a new CD player and integrated amplifier under the newly created 1010 series. Paul Rigby wonders if the company can retain its reputation for quality.

Normally, you pay for what you get. In today's arena, however, 'budget' is subject to ever moving goalposts so today's budget sound is superior to the budget sound of, say, five years ago. Now that audiophile outfit, Exposure, has been attracted to this sector, the competition has just heated up by several degrees. So just how hot are the company's new integrated amplifier and CD player?

Before we get to that point, however, what I really wanted to know was: why? Why do these lower priced Exposure units exist at all? Why did the company feel the need to enter the budget market? "Because we had customers looking

for cheaper hi-fi. To do that, we couldn't make them in England which was why we decided to make these in Malaysia," said Tony Brady, designer for both units, calling from that very country because, of course, Exposure is Malaysian owned. "We have a lot less features on these than on our usual products. We used cheaper casework – steel cases with an aluminium front – we retain the quality of parts, though. We don't skimp on the transformer, for example. We have taken the more expensive features out like Pre Out, Bi-Wire Out, a simpler remote and so on but the rest is the same, such as the CD mechanism".

These products lower the price of the Exposure entry-level product.

"Before, that would have been a 2010 S2 but that's something like £800 a box these days. These new products sound like a smaller version of the larger products. But the less features you have, the more money you save and what we have done is to produce common tooling to reduce costs further so the lid, chassis and front panel is common between the CD player and amp. This means that we can spend more money elsewhere," continued Brady.

So just what do you get for your money? For the amp, measuring 90 x 420 x 300mm and weighing in at 5kg, you have five line inputs, including one that features fixed gain for AV. You also get just the one set of speaker outputs plus a tape out.

“Inside we have a reasonably big transformer for the money, a 120VA toroid, using the same manufacturer as our other products and it’s nice and quiet. The volume control is also the same, an ALPS. Here, it’s not worth buying cheap samples and inviting trouble. You’ll also see a single sided PCB with relay input switching – again, the same as on our other models – and two surface mounted power amp modules.”

On that PCB, there are minimum signal paths which helps to reduce distortion while Brady also declared that he uses fairly big boards to help maintain relatively large separation distances between components to further aid a lack of cross-contamination.

The CD player, also weighing in at 5kg but spanning 90 x 420 x

“lean and mean products that provide the ultimate in value for money.”

300mm, features standard, basic controls and sockets all around the chassis. Inside, there is a minimal power supply (a more expensive CD player would have included separate power supplies to various operations in the chassis) and an optical digital output exists. The transformer remains of a high quality, though, as does the CD mechanism and display. The DAC is a PCMI716 – the same as the 2010.

Once the units are constructed in Malaysia, they are shipped to England whereupon, “We test them again – we are doing 100% checking at the moment which costs us money but I’d rather we did that now and iron out the problems than send it out and then find that you have a problem later”.

As far as the range is concerned,

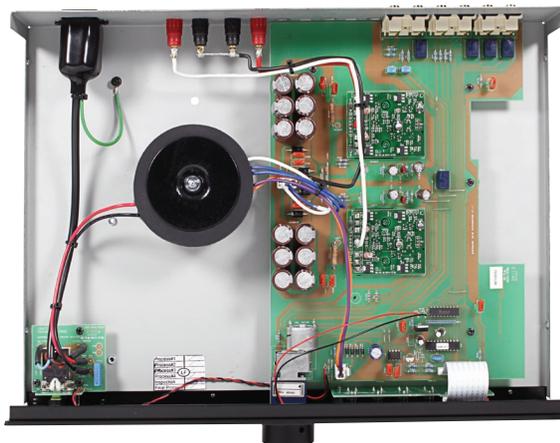
the 1010 is constricted to just the amp and the CD player with no immediate plans to extend the range, but that could change in the future.

SOUND QUALITY

So what do these ‘basic’ designs sound like? Turning firstly to the Exposure amplifier, I hooked up my Icon Audio CD-XI CD player

and span Gabrielle’s ‘Rise’ disc. Comparing it first to my reference Rotel RA-06, this integrated amplifier dampened the sonics with a heavy blanket of bass as opposed to the Exposure, which lifted the dynamics and the soundstage, elevating it above the speakers. Bass was not as dense or as powerful as the Rotel but the Exposure’s lower frequencies were more precise while the upper mids were wash with new detail. The Exposure lacks a richness of depth and maturity but this is a facet of the price point and the cut corners during the design stage.

The Exposure is an efficient machine that digs deep into the mix. In this case, it managed to bring a large basket of new sonic elements which were largely invisible via the Rotel. The backing singers where



Internal view Exposure 1010 amplifier

brought forward on the Exposure, providing an improved portrait of their performances while teasing apart the chorus, illuminating individual voices and Gabrielle’s vocal displayed more texture.

Moving to jazz and the XRCD version of Dexter Gordon’s ‘Doin’ Alright’ where the Exposure showed a lightness of touch that was absent from the Rotel. The double bass had more prominence on the Rotel but the Exposure provided greater tonal balance with a tremendously detailed upper midrange that gave character and emotion to the piano but also a more reedy nature to the sax. Treble work, via the cymbals was light, feathered, with a shimmer that provided a frisson to the entire track.

Hooking up my T+A G10 turntable, I played the title track from Anita O’Day’s original LP, ‘Trav’lin Light’, on Verve. The Exposure corrected the slightly unbalanced nature of the Rotel, by pushing O’Day’s vocal forward, into the lap of the listener. Providing a much more open and natural soundstage, the Exposure expanded the boundaries of detail, giving the backing brass greater pizzazz. The double bass did recede somewhat, on the Exposure, but that was generally for the good as the reduction in the bass provided space for the upper midrange frequencies.

Flipping over to Kraftwerk’s ‘Radioactivity’, despite the Rotel having the edge on the Exposure in bass terms, the Exposure exhibited a cleaner, punchier set of lower frequencies. Also, the Exposure’s midrange-generated percussive synth effects had a greater bounce, providing more life and energy, while the synth-based choral backing exhibited more atmosphere and presence.

Moving boxes and plugging in the Exposure CD player, what was eyebrow raising when listening to



Internal view Exposure 1010 CD player

Dexter Gordon, was just how close it was, in sonic terms, to my reference CD player. The soundstage was just as broad and expansive while the upper mids allows Gordon's sax to soar. OK, the Exposure didn't have the Icon's richness and maturity of tone and there wasn't quite the same degree of excavation of detail. That said, for the price, the performance of the Exposure was quite remarkable. The piano managed to convey much of this instrument's complexity while the treble offered a lightness of touch. Upper mids, in general terms, were informative and 'undigital' in their presentation. There was none of the expected coldness or hardness of this price range for which the company should be congratulated.

Playing Barclay James Harvest's 'Slideshow' from the 'Victims Of Circumstance' CD, this well recorded eighties disc reflected many of the same facets of the Dexter Gordon CD: the Exposure lacked some of the Icon's richness but excelled in detail retrieval. I did notice a slight lifting of the Exposure's upper frequencies when compared to the Icon. This was mostly down to the 'solid



state vs. valve' comparison though. There were no excessive frequency extremes visible. What was visible, at least aurally, was the Exposure's heavier, weightier bass response which was both grippier and crisper.

CONCLUSION

Both Exposure units performed well during all areas of my tests. As a duo, the pair would grace any budget system. Within their limits, the CD player and amp prioritise the most important aspects of musical production, committing resources where they are needed most: the retrieval of detail while offering a toe-tappingly enjoyable

performance. You never feel that the hardware is trading water or that the designer wasted any of his valuable design budget on fripperies. These are lean and mean products that provide the ultimate in value for money.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

- Avid Acutus turntable
- T + A G10 turntable
- Icon PS3 phono amp
- Aesthetix Calypso Preamp
- Icon 845 power amps
- Rotel RA06 integrated amplifier
- Quad 57 Electrostatics (One Thing upgraded)
- AE Radiance One speakers
- Atacama HMS 1 speaker stands
- Tellurium O Graphite speaker cables
- Chord Epic Twin speaker cables

VERDICT ●●●●●
EXPOSURE 1010 CD PLAYER £395
 Holding its head high during sound tests, the 1010 CD player, for the price, is an essential entry on any demo list.

FOR
 - transparency
 - punchy bass
 - timing
 - musicality

AGAINST
 - nothing

VERDICT ●●●●●
EXPOSURE 1010 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER £425
 The 1010 Amplifier excelled, particularly in its upper mid performance, which was magnificent, lending an almost valve-like response.

FOR
 - upper mids
 - clarity
 - detail
 - efficient design

AGAINST
 - nothing

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MEASURED PERFORMANCE

EXPOSURE 1010 CD PLAYER

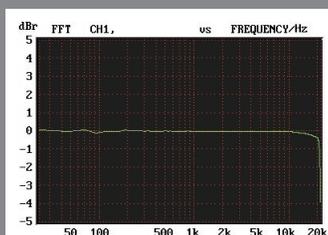
Frequency response shows a smooth output right up to 21.2kHz our analysis shows, with no peaking or excessive roll off, so the 1010 CD player will have an even tonal balance.

Distortion levels were very low throughout the player's dynamic range, the critical -60dB figure being a low 0.17%. However, there is some noise in the convertor circuitry and this degraded the EIAJ Dynamic Range value to 96dB, where 98dB or so is common. Noise measurement with a notched out -60dB tone to avoid muting was high at -96dB. However, this is still well below audibility and as the convertor was very linear the 1010 should have an easy sound, free of obvious CD type distortion. Analogue output level was a normal 2V.

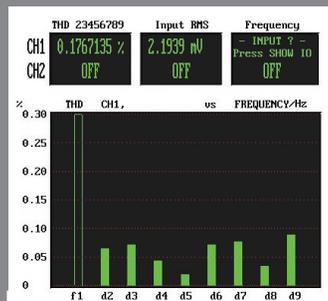
The Exposure 1010 CD player turned in a neat measured performance and has no major weaknesses. NK

Frequency response (-1dB)	
CD	2Hz-21.1kHz
Distortion	%
0dB	0.0016
-6dB	0.0005
-60dB	0.17
-80dB	1.6
Separation (1kHz)	102dB
Noise (IEC A)	-96dB
Dynamic range	97dB
Output	2.2V

FREQUENCY RESPONSE CD



DISTORTION CD



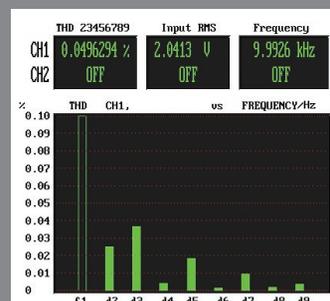
The Exposure 1010 amplifier produced 55 Watts into an 8 Ohm load, rising to 90 Watts into 4 Ohms. As most loudspeakers hover around 6 Ohms these days, and use 4 Ohm bass units, the 1010 will in use give close to the 90 Watt level of output, not bad for a budget amplifier. Damping factor was a healthy 48 so the amplifier will exert good control over loudspeaker bass cones.

Frequency response of Exposure amplifiers always was limited, like that of Naims, and

this contributes to an easy top end. The 1010 reached just 18kHz (-1dB) at half volume, and just a little more at full volume - 23kHz. In conjunction with low levels of high frequency crossover distortion at 10kHz the 1010 will likely sound smooth, even a little mild. Only at high power did high frequency distortion rise to around 0.2%, mainly crossover with extended harmonics our analysis shows. However, this is a good result, especially as budget amplifiers go.

Input sensitivity was low at 470mV so low gain/output phono stages will not match so well. Silver disc players will be fine though.

The 1010 is neatly engineered with no weaknesses. It produces plenty of power and will have a smooth sound, measurement suggests. NK



DISTORTION EXPOSURE 1010 AMPLIFIER

