

audition

equipment review

Audiolab 8000 Series CD Player/Pre/Power Amplifier

Back in February of last year, I first met Nick Clarke, Audiolab's director of engineering and the man responsible for redesigning one of the UK's best known and most loved range of hi-fi electronics. The brand is now part of the International Audio Group (IAG) and joins Wharfedale, Quad and mostly recently Mission loudspeakers as part of its expanding product portfolio.

Audiolab harks back to 1983 when its legendary 8000A amplifier was launched and proved to be one of the most versatile and bombproof

integrated amp designs known to man. I used to sell them and the only one that I can remember gave any trouble at all was an 8000A sold to a record producer, who was driving it so hard the amplifier was clipping. He wanted loud volume all day long, so we sold him an Audiolab 8000P power amplifier to go with it and the problem was solved.

The integrated was joined by a pre/power then monoblocs, while Audiolab source components included a tuner, CD player and D/A converter. Things then changed dramatically in 1997 when the company was bought by TAG McLaren. It then went from being a serious value brand to a designer one and prices skyrocketed. The equipment was still very good, but lost one of the fundamentals of Audiolab's original philosophy - affordability.

IAG acquired the Audiolab brand in 2004 and set about redesigning and reinventing the products that made Audiolab what it was - the 8000 Series. Recently launched here in Australia, this system for review comprises the new 8000 CD player, 8000Q preamp and 8000P stereo power amplifier. The originals of these products are still highly prized as second-hand purchases, but is there any reason why you should still track down Audiolab of old, or is this new gear able to carry on where it left off? That's precisely what I was keen to discover.

Audiolab gear was always extremely well built. It was engineered to perform with ultra reliability and the sound

**Audiolab's
famous 8000
Series returns
once more and
it's better than
ever**

By Nic Tatham

Vital Statistics

Dimensions:

445 x 74 x 335mm

Weight:

Not stated

Price:

\$4,697 (complete, as tested)

Distributor:

IAG Australia Pty Ltd
Unit 30, 398 The Boulevard
Kirrawee, NSW 2232

Telephone:

(02) 9521 4844

Facsimile:

(02) 9521 4222

Website:

www.audiolab.co.uk



quality was crisp and detailed, but above all, neutral. The products worked with a wide variety of loudspeakers and the system upgrade path was an easy one to travel. Unpacking this new Audiolab, the build quality's certainly up to scratch, with the same weight and solidity of feel. It looks very much like Audiolab of old, having dispensed of the TAG McLaren aesthetics completely.

Nick Clarke has been involved with Audiolab for the last 20 years. He worked for the original company and helped design products such as the 8000S remote controlled integrated amplifier, then he was heavily involved with the design work on the crop of AV products that came about during TAG McLaren Audio's reign. A lot of the work that was done on those TMA products are still used in the new Audiolabs as Nick has pointed out, the cosmetic changes were what really pushed the price up. So combined with IAG's manufacturing prowess and facilities, Audiolab has now entered it's third generation.

One product that has been redesigned from the ground up is the 8000CD (\$1,699) compact disc player. The original machine's workings are well and truly obsolete by now, so the new 8000CD incorporates a dedicated CD transport mechanism and 192kHz/24-bit fifth order Delta/Sigma digital-to-analogue converter (DAC).

The 8000Q preamplifier (\$1,699) has long been a stalwart of the 8000 Series and its design is one of impartiality when it comes to the signal path. It offers six line-level inputs (there's a phono preamplifier in the works) plus a five position gain switch (from 0-15dB) which allows you to equalise levels between different source components. Partnering the pre is the 8000P power amplifier (\$1,299), a simple looking piece of kit, with just a power switch and small LED for show, but what counts is all under the lid. It's peak current output is rated at over 40 Amps, which is very healthy and sufficient to drive most loudspeaker loads. Output is rated at 100 watts per channel into 8 ohms and 150 into 4 ohms. Two pairs of heavy-duty 4mm binding posts make biwiring easy and the amp offers both input and load level RCA inputs for further power amplifier expansion and system integration.

But enough of all this - does it still sound like Audiolab is what you want to know? Yes, emphatically so, is the simple answer. I tried them with my usual three loudspeakers - Quad 11Ls, the new KEF iQ9s and Ambience Reference 1600s and straightaway with the small Quads I was immediately reminded why Audiolab had such a dedicated following during its bygone heydays. That characteristic control and neutrality is there, especially from the amps, but there's nothing staid or

sluggish about the system's performance. Quite the opposite is true with the new 8000CD design bringing the CD performance bang up to date. It's a superbly smooth and quiet CD player in operation that gets on with the job at hand - playing music. Load up the Audiolab with anything from acoustic-based tracks to driving rock or rhythmic dance and it plays them all with consistent authority. Well recorded dance music such as Faithless' *No Roots* simply flows out of this machine without any harshness or dominating bass as is often the case. Source and amplification combine to produce a wonderfully well proportioned sound which has the sort of calm, effortless control that really suits this sort of music. You can relax listening to the music, enjoying the detail, but at no time does it become fatiguing.

One of Audiolab's prior claims to fame was that an entire system (well, two in fact) were used by UK magazine *What Hi-Fi?* as its reviewing reference. This was back when I was part of that reviewing team, so I got to know the 'Audiolab sound' intimately, spending nearly every working day listening to it. I'm amazed that some 12 years later that same workhorse amplification and neutral sound that made the brand's name has been completely and utterly replicated and certainly in the case of the 8000CD compact disc player, much improved.

Having just taken delivery of a new pair of KEF iQ9 floorstanders (also reviewed this issue) I was keen to get them running in and did so on the ends of the Audiolabs. The combination was a match designed in England, but made in China. Even fresh out of the box the system sounded electric, with that instantaneous sparkle that grabs you and you know you're listening to something rather special. The KEFs are an easy load - 8 ohms and 91dB, not that the 8000P minds a challenge, and the system really opened these speakers up. I was really liking what I was hearing, with all manner of music, both at low pootling in the background levels as well as with the volume cranked.

Switching to my big Ambience ribbons, which have the ability to devour current, the Audiolab system proved no less enjoyable. It opened up the ribbons with great control and mastery, plus the bass was full, rounded and equally well mannered. I was able to achieve a serious SPL from the system and driving the speakers to quite uncomfortably loud levels, the Audiolab as a system remained completely in check with no audible distortion or any other sonic anomaly creeping into proceedings. I certainly couldn't get the power amp to clip.

Technotalk

Product Type:

CD player/pre/power amplifier

Frequency Response:

20Hz-20kHz (± 0.5 dB, 8000CD)

Signal To Noise Ratio:

Greater than 100dBA (8000CD)

D/A Conversion:

24-bit, 192kHz, 5th order

Delta/Sigma (8000CD)

Frequency Response:

0.1Hz-75kHz (-3dB, 8000Q&P)

Channel Separation:

More than 100dB @1kHz (8000Q)

Crosstalk Rejection:

More than 100dB @1kHz (8000Q)

Total Harmonic Distortion:

Less than 0.05% (8000P)

Power Output (8000P):

2 x 100 watts RMS (into 8 ohms)

2 x 150 watts RMS (into 4 ohms)

Gain:

29.0dB @ 1kHz (8000P)

Technotalk specifications and recommended retail prices are supplied by the manufacturer

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One other quite drastic demonstration we used to do selling the old Audiolab amps was to short the speaker wires to show just how indestructible they were. Most amps would blow something or other, but not the Audiolabs and I can testify nothing unpleasant happened when I tried it again with this 8000P. But kids, it's not something I'd recommend you try at home.

With all the favourite models relaunched and the promise of many new things in the pipeline, Audiolab is back, and back big time. The pricing is great, the products have all their former attributes and more, so it's a fond 'welcome back' from this former fan, that's for sure. **AVL**

Ancillary Equipment: Quad 11L loudspeakers, Ambience Reference 1600 hybrid ribbon loudspeakers, KEF iQ9 floorstanding loudspeakers, SAP Relaxa 1 isolation platform, Wasatch Cable Works interconnects, Nordost Silver Flatline loudspeaker cables, Concorde equipment support, Black Box mains conditioner

Opinion

The 'Opinion' expressed here is that of the reviewer, summarised in the form of a 5-star rating system, and should be considered as an integral part of the full contents of this Audition Equipment Review. As such, each category should be judged on its own merits and not necessarily used as a comparison with other equipment reviews in this, or other editions of Audio & Video Lifestyle magazine.

- ★ Shocker
- ★★ Average
- ★★★ Good
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★★★ Perfection

“...does it still sound like Audiolab is what you want to know? Yes, emphatically so, is the simple answer.”

Performance

★★★★★

Build Quality

★★★★★

Compatibility

★★★★★

Value For Money

★★★★★