

# Audio Analogue Puccini Anniversary

The Italian manufacturer is in celebratory mood, with a new product designed to mark two decades of what is most certainly its best-known amplifier – the Puccini integrated  
 Review: **James Parker** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**W**hat is it with the Italians? While resisting the temptation to indulge in a Kessleresque reverie extending from fine wines to Lambrettas to classic Bugattis, I have to admit that Italian designers and engineers have long had the ability to come up with something – well, different.

Maybe it's the connection with great music, but Italian-made audio has always had that ability to set itself apart, from the relatively simple Audio Analogue Puccini amplifier, the 20th birthday of which is celebrated in the £2999 Puccini Anniversary here, right up to behemoths such as the massive Sonus faber Fenice speakers [*HFN* Feb '11]. These were launched amid much hoo-hah in Venice some years back and then quietly renamed as The Sonus faber when some legal obstacle to the name cropped up – in itself, a rather Italian story.

## SYMMETRY INSIDE AND OUT

And then there's the massive Opera Only amplifier, the cause of quite a stir at the Munich High End Show a few years back. Said to cost \$2.2m, apparently weighing 1500kg and delivering 160kW (although admittedly to date editor PM hasn't had his lab gear on it), it was striking as much for its claimed specifications as the way it came to life and unfurled itself to stand an eventual 2.5m tall when switched on. That, too, was an Italian design, the work of one Andrea Pivetto.

From Sonus fabers to Opera loudspeakers to Audio Analogue electronics, over the time I've spent involved in hi-fi, Italian products have always appeared to offer the 'designer alternatives' to the mainstream. These

**RIGHT:** A huge PSU feeds a power amp based on three pairs of bipolar ON Semiconductor transistors per ch. These devices offer a wide SOA and require limited corrective feedback

range from the use of solid chunks of wood and leather trim on speakers to the simplicity of that original Audio Analogue amplifier when compared to its better-known rivals of the time.

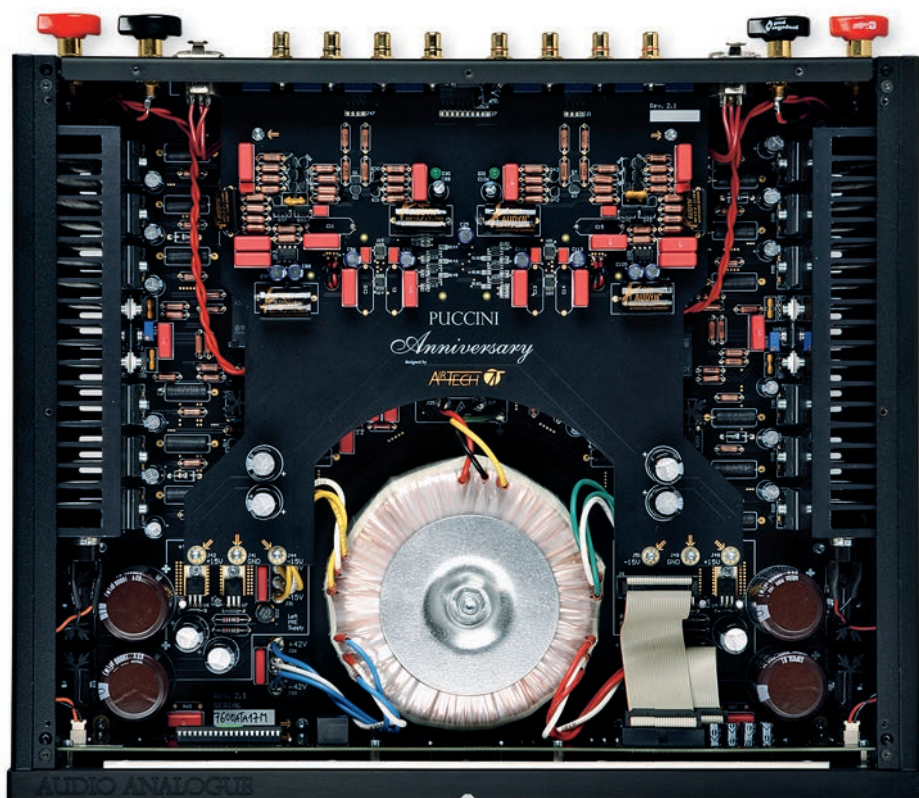
Then, when it was still fashionable to bolt as much as possible onto an amplifier, from tone controls to functions to bypass them(!), outputs for multiple pairs of speakers, tape loops, and even loudness buttons, the Puccini stripped things back to basics in same way as had, say, the original Fiat Nuova 500, launched a couple of years before Britain came up with the Mini.

Now we have the Puccini Anniversary, marking that 20th birthday and described as a 'zero feedback integrated amplifier', although as PM made clear to me, while

this claim may refer to the lack of global feedback, the amplifier must still use some limited local feedback to help keep things on an even keel in its various stages.

As is also clear, this is a dual-mono design, its symmetry not only obvious when you pop open the lid, but also evident in the layout of the rear panel, with inputs and outputs for left and right channels physically separated and mirror-imaged. Reflecting the central location of the toroidal transformer, the IEC mains input is at the centre of the rear panel, while the speaker terminals are out at the extremes, beyond the five line-ins – the 'outer' one of which is on balanced XLRs.

It's worth noting that, unlike the original Puccini models, there's no phono stage





in the Anniversary version: it's line-only. In fact, this new amplifier is actually so far from the first designs to bear the name that describing it as a 'version' is perhaps misleading as it really is an all-new model.

### POWER APLENTY

Within, the left and right channels each have three pairs of output transistors to allow it to deliver more power than any previous Puccini. It's rated at 80W per channel into 8ohm, rising to 300W into 2ohm, suggesting not only good dynamic ability and control, but also the ability to drive speakers of low or wayward impedance.

And as PM's lab report illustrates [see p63], the Anniversary integrated amp not only lives up to its billing but goes beyond it, with an especially impressive dynamic power performance.

Minimal though this latest Puccini may seem from its input/output provision, it's not quite as simple as it looks, using four potentiometers (two per channel) for volume control, driven digitally by the single multifunction knob at the centre of the fascia. In practice, this knob doubles for volume control and input selection, as well

*'I was immediately struck by the velvety rendition of Ella's voice'*

as being the Anniversary's on/off button. A short push powers up the amp, while a five-second push powers it down and a three-second push changes input. Indicators to the left and right of the control indicate the input selected, and volume.

I have to admit to finding all this rather more complicated than necessary, and can't help but feel the designers have allowed themselves to get a bit carried away here. Fortunately the remote control handset – which, by the way, lights

when you pick it up – offers rather more conventional access to these adjustments. It also controls other AA components, and allows the user to adjust balance, the brightness of fascia LEDs, and the

setting of the volume control.

This last element is unusual, indeed it's the first time I've encountered such a thing, providing as it does the choice between four 'curves' for volume, allowing an optimum range of level adjustment with speakers of different sensitivity. Of the four, settings B and C seem of the most interest. 'A' offers a 'standard' operation and D an entirely linear volume increase while, by contrast, B gives a slower increase in the

**ABOVE:** Fascia is simplified by the use of one control for on/standby, volume and input selection. LEDs to its left show the input chosen, those to the right volume: all are dimmable


initial steps of the control's 'travel', being suited to speakers of higher sensitivity. 'C' gives a faster 'take-off' from the zero volume level, then flattens out in the midrange of the scale, and is designed for speakers of low or medium sensitivity.

### AN ENJOYABLE BUSINESS

I spent a while playing with the adjustable volume scaling, noting the differences but not coming to any real conclusion as to which setting I preferred. Instead I found myself enjoying the smooth yet clean balance of the Anniversary so much that I finally decided to stop being distracted faffing around with volume curves, and get on with the seriously enjoyable business of playing some music.

And enjoyable this latest Puccini undoubtedly is, for firing up some Ella Fitzgerald via my Mac mini and a T+A DAC 8 DSD [HFN May '16] – her *Easy Living* set with Joe Pass [88.2kHz/24-bit from HDTracks; Pablo 0888072328419] – I was immediately struck by the velvety rendition of the singer's voice, still characterful if admittedly past her prime, and the easy-going rendition of Pass's guitar. The Puccini doesn't ever overlay things, but rather uses its warmth and control to convey the charm and technique of the two musicians, set in a fairly dry studio acoustic.

But before you get the impression that this is one of those lush, over-honeyed amplifiers best suited to chill-out listening and dinner party background music, I'm bound to say it's more than capable of bringing out all the drive and rhythm of music, even if it's not the most attacking piece of equipment available at this price.

So while it's perfect at wallowing in nostalgia with the remixed Beatles tracks on the *Love* album [Apple/Parlophone 0946 3 79810 2 3], what's also striking is the 

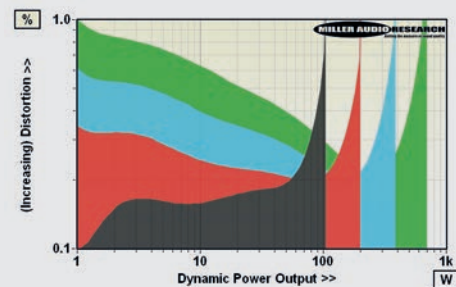
### BIRTHDAY BOYS

**As the first product from Audio Analogue, the original Puccini could be seen as a statement of intent: it had little more than an input selector and a volume control on offer, along with a very decent phono stage. It was pretty affordable, and if you craved more power there was always the 'SE' version, increasing the output from 40W a side to 55W. However, what really set the Puccini apart from its competition at the time was the sound: it was almost impossible to provoke the little Italian amp into sounding rough or harsh, and as a result it was soon acclaimed as an intriguing alternative to the rather more complex, and rather more 'obvious-sounding', competition of the time. Over the years, the Puccini has gone through a variety of iterations, always keeping the same no-frills design, even if the SE Remote version gained a 'designer' handset back around the turn of the millennium. The power on offer increased, too: the Settanta version of 2009 took its name from the heady 70W per channel output available.**

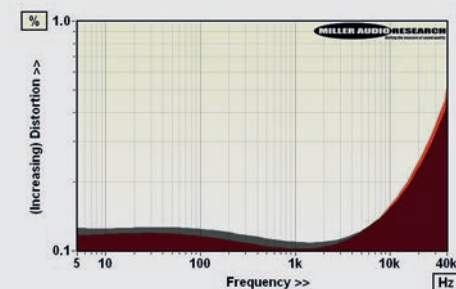
## AUDIO ANALOGUE PUCCINI ANN.

While claims of 'zero feedback' are not uncommon with specialist audio products this usually refers to 'global feedback' as some local compensation is always necessary to manage the gain bandwidth of the various stages. Nevertheless, the lab results here certainly reflect a very limited level of self-correction as distortion *decreases* with increasing output and falling load impedance [see Graph 1, below]. Into a high 8ohm load, however, distortion is impressively consistent at 0.1-0.3% across the audioband over its full 80W dynamic range [see Graph 2, below]. Noise is well maintained too, the A-wtd S/N ratio still slightly above average at 88dB (re. 0dBW). All this promises a uniform tonal colour, with high impedance speakers at least, with slightly greater variation in distortion and system response into lower impedances, the latter in line with the amplifier's moderate 0.2-0.3ohm source impedance. Into a non-reactive 8ohm load the response falls by -0.3dB/20kHz and -4.5dB/100kHz, which is a near-ideal performance.

Power output, and the Puccini's ability to drive low impedance loads, is very impressive indeed thanks to its 25.6A dynamic current capacity (<1% THD/10msec). Rated at 70W or 80W/8ohm, depending on where you get your information, the amp actually delivers a full 2x100W/8ohm and 2x185W/4ohm at <1% THD. Reflecting the very stiff PSU regulation, dynamic power output is not much higher but it does increase magnificently into low impedance loads from 102W and 200W into 8/4ohm to 385W and 655W into 2/1ohm [see Graph 1]. Readers may view an in-depth QC Suite report for Audio Analogue's Puccini Anniversary amplifier by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (cyan) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Maximum current is 25.6A



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency at 1W/8ohm (5Hz-40kHz; black, left channel; red, right channel)

## HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	100W / 185W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	102W / 200W / 385W / 655W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.21-0.25ohm
Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.02dB to -0.3dB/-4.5dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/80W)	56mV / 510mV (balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/80W)	88.1dB / 107.1dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.11-0.23%
Power consumption (Idle/Max. o/p)	30W / 310W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	445x120x390mm / 18kg



ABOVE: There's no MM/MC phono stage here but the five line inputs include one balanced on XLR. Single speaker outlets feature substantial gold-plated terminals

way it delivers the emphasised bass and drums in this new version, reworked by the late George Martin for the Las Vegas Cirque du Soleil show. There's snap and drive a-plenty here, and the amplifier's dynamic ability is much in evidence when driving large speakers, creating a sound that's far from the stereotype of a huge wash of audio, but instead big, bold and dramatic.

### PRECISE STOP AND START

With the stripped-down rock of John Moreland's *High On Tulsa Heat* in 96kHz/24-bit [Old Omens 0001], the Anniversary does a fine job of conveying the often gritty, always plaintive atmosphere of Moreland's songwriting and the performance of the musicians gathered here. The warmth of the amplifier doesn't romanticise the sound, but does give scale to the parched, rootsy ambience while bringing out both the weight of Moreland's voice and its angry, yearning edge.

What is beyond a doubt is that the Puccini Anniversary keeps your speakers under strict control. It uses its power to ensure they start and stop in a precise manner, and thus enhances their ability to image and focus a soundstage, while at the same time keeping rhythm sections as tight as they are rich.

Kick-drums are delivered with suitable thump, shifting plenty of air if the speakers are up to the job, but the Anniversary is just as adept with the crisper impacts on snares or toms, while the snap of stick on rim is precise and clean.

Only in the higher reaches of the kit can things sound a bit soft as cymbals shimmer rather than sizzle, even when a rock drummer is giving things some welly. Even the likes of Carl Palmer can sound just a shade polite through the Puccini Anniversary, although the impetus of

ELP's massive 'Karn Evil No 9' [*Brain Salad Surgery*, Manticore MC6669] remains undiminished.

The same attributes serve classical music well, with the rhythms of both orchestra and solo instrument in the new Hyperion release of Elgar and Walton cello concertos [see p108] tautly defined. The Philharmonia Orchestra under Paavo Järvi has wonderful weight and slam, while the cello of Steven Isslerlis is treated to a beautifully resonant and rosy presentation, bringing all its character out to thrilling effect.

This Anniversary edition of the Puccini is significantly more expensive than the 1996 original, even while allowing for inflation, but just as that amplifier found itself up against significant competition when it was launched, so the new model is hardly alone in its sector of the market.

It's up against the likes of Arcam's mighty A49 and the fast, tight Naim Supernait 2 [HFN Nov '13] but, as has always been the case with the Puccini, manages to offer something different, from its looks and operational interface to its sound. It's an interesting alternative to the more obvious choices of integrated amps, and more than worthy of an extensive audition. ☺

## HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

It's a very long way from the original Puccini of 20 years ago: while the latest anniversary version has similarly simple input and output options, it goes about servicing them in a rather more complex fashion, and is also able to deploy plenty of power to drive and control speakers. However, what is unchanged is the essential Audio Analogue balance: a mix of richness and detail that's easy to enjoy and a very rewarding listen.

Sound Quality: 84%

