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# The Bonnec Timpano Pre-amplifier and Alto Power Amplifier

by Chris Binns

Daring to be different?

Not since the days of using a Lecson AC 1 and AP3 have I used a solid state amplifier that has provoked so many comments about its appearance. Regarding the Bonnec, these have ranged from the mildly derogatory – ‘it looks like a bomb’ - to compliments likening it to a piece of modern architecture and applauding it for being refreshingly different. Me? I am firmly in the latter camp; apart from anything else it makes a change from the rather mundane black and silver boxes that I see so many of, and that has to be a good thing. The Alto power amplifier is not just about being a dramatic visual statement. Its most striking feature, the multitude of turrets, or knobs, that grace the side panels are a case of form following function. They deliver extensive heat sinking to increase the amplifiers thermal capacity, and thus allow the electronics to run relatively cool, which being a class AB design they do, most of the time.

The partnering pre-amplifier, the Timpano, is almost the opposite in terms of its aesthetics: indeed it is an exercise in minimalism. Quite conventional in shape it presents a simple front to the world, with a single rotary control and one push button. The rest of the panel is taken up by an elegant and clear display, which can be programmed to switch off a few seconds after receiving the last command. Together, they form a very attractive and interesting looking combination that stands out from the crowd, and I was interested to see whether the performance matched

up to the looks.

The Alto power amp is rated at a nominal 95 Watts into 8 Ohms with 190 available into four; Bonnec claim a high degree of load tolerance so awkward loudspeakers should not present a problem. The front panel is featureless save for a couple of LEDs that indicate the status of each channel. Normally green, they will turn red under a fault condition. The easily accessible connections on the rear



allow unbalanced input only, along with three sets of 4mm sockets (not binding posts) for loudspeaker output, while the power switch can be overridden by a DC remote signal to activate the unit.

Internally, the left and right amplifiers ‘hinge down’ on the heat sinks to provide access, each main board having two plug in encapsulated modules which are quite heavy and held in place only by the connecting pins. I know this because the amplifier

didn’t work when it first arrived, due to one of the modules being disconnected; there really should be some additional anchoring to prevent this. Common to both channels is a large 940 VA mains transformer at the rear of the unit that feeds no less than 12 regulators. Generally construction quality, although not the tidiest I have seen, is good, with high quality components used throughout.

The Timpano pre-amp is (unusually these days) fully equipped for phono use, although it can be supplied as a line only unit for £1500 less.

If that seems like a lot of money for a phono stage, a quick look inside the unit should convince you otherwise; there are more high quality electronics on this board than in the majority of stand alone units I have seen. With both moving coil and moving magnet cartridges catered for, input loading and sensitivity is adjustable by the changing of internal resistors; your dealer should be able to do this if you cannot. All in all, it seems as if Bonnec take vinyl pretty seriously. The rest of the pre-amp is to a similarly high standard, with four toroidal transformers feeding the multitude (22!) regulators. All functions of the unit are overseen by two microprocessors, and signal switching is carried out by means of high quality relays. Remote control is available, and although no handset is supplied, it is RC5 compatible so will work with a range of units. The two controllers I tried would only operate the volume and mute functions however. The digital control circuitry is switched off unless a command is being undertaken, which



► minimises any form of corruption through the power supplies. The Timpano is reasonably well equipped with four line and two tape inputs, plus the MM/MC phono options, while three outputs are provided, these have a low impedance of 15 Ohms which makes them suitable for driving long interconnects if necessary.

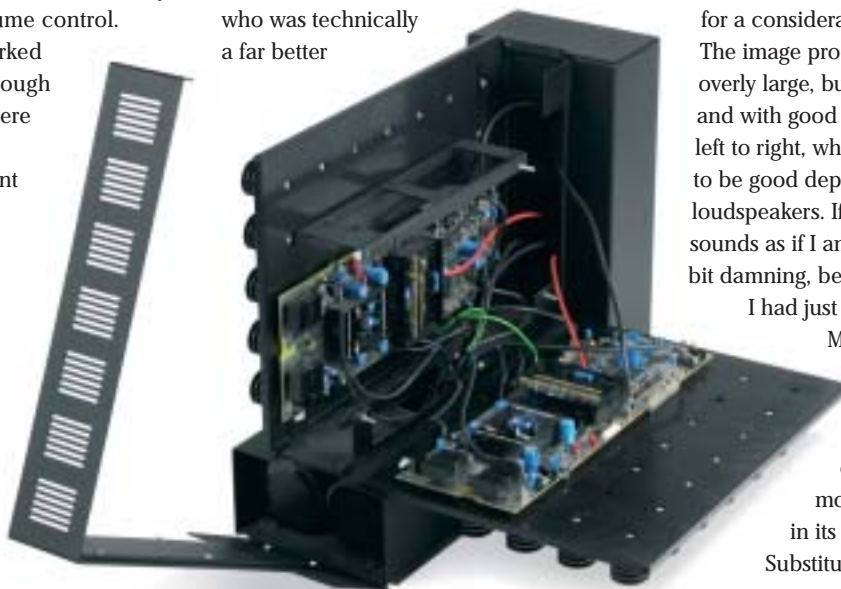


With just the two controls, operation is straightforward; but takes a little getting used to. Accessing a menu is achieved by pushing the button, while the rotary control goes through the options, which apart from input selection are record out, balance, stereo/ mono and finally display on/off. Once the set up on the appropriate input has been carried out, the rotary knob reverts to volume control. In practice it all worked very effectively, although it is a shame that there is no individual sensitivity adjustment for the line inputs.

The sound of the Bonnec is characterised by a very firm, deep bass, more or less what you would expect from a competent solid-state amplifier. All well and good, but what

really sets it apart from the mainstream is its capabilities with rhythm and timing, and a willingness to lay down the groove where necessary. Whenever I have played guitar in a band I have always had the attitude that no matter how well I play, or how

good the singer is, unless the bass player is working with the drummer to create an effective foundation then nobody will notice. A dance band I played in had one of the best drummers I have ever worked with – he had the intelligence of a demented liver fluke, but when he played, it was from the hip and the heart. And there would be not a single person sitting down. In situations where he couldn't make a gig ('cos he'd walked into a wall or something), we had a stand in drummer who was technically a far better



player, and had all the fancy fills and technique – but no one would get up and dance.

The Bonnec is in every way the good drummer. Particularly noticeable with vinyl, music was infused with an enthusiasm that really got your foot tapping, in much the same way that the older Linn/Naim systems used to. The Bonnec proved to be a bit of a Godsend while I was using the JM Labs Utopia loudspeakers, where its definition and tightness really came into their own by controlling the rather generous bass response in my room. If any loudspeaker was going to show up shortcomings at the bottom end, this was it. With this well established foundation to work on, the mid range and top fitted in very comfortably. Again, very dynamic and immediate in its delivery, it did tend toward being a bit dry, and although I could not pinpoint it, vocals lacked some 'liquidity', while it seemed as if by being a bit forward there was no room left in the window to allow much of the background information, such as ambience to come through. Easy going? No, the Bonnec always gave you the impression that it just wanted to get on with things, and I admit that my foot was beginning to ache where it had been tapping away for a considerable time.

The image produced was not overly large, but very precise and with good definition from left to right, while there seemed to be good depth behind the loudspeakers. If all of this sounds as if I am being a little bit damning, bear in mind that

I had just been using the MacIntosh C2200 pre-amp for quite some time, which could not be more different in its presentation. Substituting it for the

► Timpani, the character of the sound changed dramatically. All of the apparent dryness had gone, while the soundstage became much bigger, but at the same time there was a considerable lack of impact to the sound, and much of the snap had gone; as a friend of mine (who works in the recording



industry) remarked, it sounded as if the bass player was wearing rubber gloves.

With the Timpano once again back in place, one or two things regarding the system came to light. The phono input really is rather good, its performance confirmed by feeding the Pass Labs phono stage that I have been using for a while into a line input. It sounded rather heavy and smudged by comparison, and using the low output Helikon SL confirmed that the Bonnec is very quiet. The pre-amp also responded well to some additional support under it, my feeling was that it sounded a good bit more open and 'airy' with the use of isolation cones: some RDC ones that were at hand seemed to do the trick.

Meanwhile, the Alto power amplifier sounds considerably more powerful than its 95 Watts would suggest, in part I suspect because it is a genuinely dynamic performer. Responsible for many of the spectacular sessions I had with the Nova Utopia, its use with the Primary monitors verified the manufacturer's claims regarding its load tolerance.

The Alto never lost its grip under pretty demanding conditions, even at pretty high listening levels, although it did get pretty hot... But drums and percussion were hurled out of the loudspeakers with dynamics and precision that was genuinely exciting, particularly with vinyl.

I like the Bonnec combination. Possessing a very distinctive character, it is not perhaps the last word if you are after the attributes that seem

to come easily to some valve amplifiers; there are other products in this sort of price range that do those things better. But then they probably have the timing capabilities of a bath sponge...and little of the coherence that enables the Bonnec to do its job so well. Its strengths seem to lie more naturally with rock music, where it endows performances with a great sense of vitality and rhythmic

communication. What it lacks is possibly some of the romance that can be so seductive with, say, a string quartet.



But then again... I had originally thought that the Alto was being let down by the Timpano in some ways, but further use and a bit of experimentation has convinced me otherwise, as the two complement each other very well. In particular, performance via the phono stage is impressive, and the latter looks like pretty good value when you consider the price of a top notch stand alone unit. The Alto is a very capable amplifier. It happens to be good looking, and unlike the Lecson, doesn't blow up. A welcome addition to the marketplace



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Timpano pre-amplifier

Line inputs:	four
Input sensitivity:	200mV
Input impedance:	10K Ohms
	MC input
	250µV or 500 µV
Input impedance:	130 Ohms (adjustable)
	MM input
Input impedance:	47 K Ohms
Input sensitivity:	2 mV
Output level:	10 Volts peak
Output impedance:	15 Ohms
Dimensions (WxDxH):	450x350x70mm
Weight:	14Kg
Price:	£3000 Line only
	£4500 inc. phono

##### Alto power amplifier

Power output:	95 Watts / 8 Ohms
	190 Watts / 4 Ohms
Input sensitivity:	1 Volt
Input impedance:	6.8 K Ohms
Dimensions (WxDxH):	163x480x380mm
Weight:	26Kg
Price:	£4500

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