



## SUGDEN A21a SERIES 2 £1,299

**A** perennial favorite with the whole *Hi-Fi World* team, the A21a Series 2 is the latest incarnation of the classic A21 class A integrated amplifier that can trace its heritage back to the late 1960s. Since then, the A21a has lost its teak case and mono switch, but gained much more, including more power, new power supplies and remote control!

Build quality is also superb, with a 10mm thick metal fascia, available in titanium or graphite, plus control knobs directly descended from the Masterclass series. The A21a Series 2 has five line level inputs, although one is labelled 'phono'. If you spend an extra £100, however, this can be internally converted to an MM/MC phono stage.

The sides of the amplifier are dominated by large heatsinks, necessary to dissipate the heat generated by Class A operation. These go a long way to explaining the fact that it weighs in at 11kg, despite modest dimensions of 92x430x50mm (HxVxD). This heat generation also means that it needs to be kept in a well ventilated location and away from inquisitive young fingers.

### SOUND QUALITY

The Sugden is, in many ways, a quite different sounding beast to the other contenders on test, as it has eerie smoothness and insight. Midrange was open, inviting and emotive, endowing performers with a strong sense of stability in a soundstage that projects well out from the

loudspeakers and is impressively wide beyond them.

To back this up, the Sugden has a sweetness and clarity to its treble that is a delight to behold. The A21a really does offer startling insight into recordings but without the glacial hardness that can sometimes accompany this type of nature. It also has an almost intimate quality to its performances; you really do feel that you are alone with the musicians and that nothing should be allowed to interrupt their private performance

for you.

Bass is deep and tuneful but, thanks to its low damping factor, it can be a little bloated with underdamped loudspeakers such as the Spendors. Connecting the Kibri Naimas, however, removed this problem completely, and the A21a Series 2 proved to be a healthy groover when matched to the right partner. Bass lines were confident and flowing, with a spot-on sense of timing.

### MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The A21a Series 2 is similar in performance to the original A21a, producing just 20 Watts into 8 Ohms over short periods; it was tested with tone bursts to avoid its overload protection. This is much as before, but power into 4 Ohms has risen to 32 Watts, twice as much as its predecessor. As loudspeakers commonly use 4 Ohm bass units these days, improved power output here is a help. Otherwise, the A21a Series 2 looks much like before. Sensitivity seems to have sunk a little, but it is still high at 200mV, meaning the amplifier continues to work with any source, even old valve tuners like the Leak Troughline. Lower gain has reduced measured noise levels.

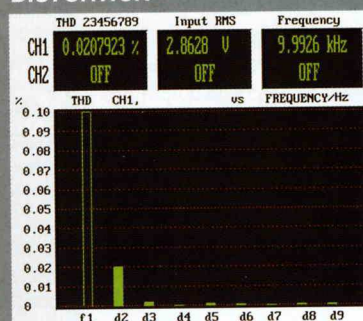
The amplifier still produces more distortion at higher levels than is common nowadays, especially into a low 4 Ohm load where THD reaches around 0.4% near full output. However, second harmonic dominates most of the time, as our analysis shows, and upper harmonics fall away smoothly in a natural decay pattern similar to that of musical instruments, which makes its presence difficult to detect. Interestingly, damping factor is on the low side at 16, much like Naim

amplifiers. This tends to make bass a little more obvious from most loudspeakers.

The A21a Series 2 offers much the same performance as before, but with greater current delivery into low loads. NK

Power	20 Watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	5Hz- 32kHz
Separation	80dB
Noise	-95dB
Distortion	0.02%
Sensitivity	200mV
Damping factor	16

### DISTORTION



### VERDICT

Sumptuous sounding amplifier with an open and inviting nature allied to an innate musicality that makes listening a pleasure.

**SUGDEN A21A S2 £1,299**

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### FOR

- treble sweetness
- midrange insight
- revealing nature

### AGAINST

- runs very hot



So the first question has to be - should you just save your money for a nice pre/power amplifier? On the evidence presented by the candidates in our test, my advice is don't be hasty. Yes, pre/power amplifiers have distinct advantages in terms of upgradeability and mixing and matching, but it would appear that the integrated amplifier is indeed alive and kicking...

The only complaints I can think of apply to all the amplifiers here and concern their remote controls - I cannot remember when I last saw a more depressing selection of cheap and plasticky units. Regular readers will know what I'm going to say next and so I shall merely issue a reminder that the cheapest unit here costs £800, and a Cambridge Azur 640A, with a proper custom-designed, metal-faced handset costs £300 - enough said, let's move on!

As far as the important stuff is concerned, namely the sound, this is a different matter. All the amplifiers in this test are fine units - there isn't a real duffer amongst them and all will do sterling service at the heart of a high quality hi-fi system. However, some are obviously better than others so let's go into more detail.

First to consider is the Cyrus 8vs2, the least expensive model on test. This is a very solid and well designed unit with a useful set of features and a fine performance. The fact that it can hold its own against contenders up to twice the price is of great credit to it but, ultimately, it does have one or two rough edges in terms of a loose bottom end and a slightly forward midrange that mean it needs sympathetic partnering to give of its best.

Next up is the NuForce IA-7 V2. In the current situation regarding carbon footprints and the like, this would be an obvious contender to

go for, on account of its efficient and powerful Class D amplification. It also sounds excellent; fast and dynamic with an enveloping soundstage and impressive midrange and treble clarity. Where it stumbles is in its rather lightweight bass performance which just fails to underpin that dynamic nature with a solid low end. Still, it is very worthy of serious consideration, given its overall performance and connection flexibility. Providing you can put up with that irritatingly slow volume control of course!

Next up is the Roksan Caspian. I always like reviewing Roksan equipment because you know exactly what you are going to end up with - a solidly designed, well built and fine sounding piece of machinery that offers a thoroughly enjoyable performance. The Caspian remains true to this theory and really does love to play a tune - pure and simple. Once again it does have a couple of mild rough edges but, through careful partnering, they can be accommodated. Take this carefully and you will be left with a fine amplifier.

However, there are two designs that stand out in this group, namely the Anatek A50R and, yes, our old friend the Sugden A21a S2. Considering the Anatek first, the A50R serves up the low end weight that others, notably the Roksan, come close to, but the it adds in a sense of grip, control and poise that puts it comfortably ahead of the pack. The Sugden, on the other hand, scores over the

A50R by offering that almost valve-like midrange and openness, but without the glossing over of some high frequency details that even the very best valve amplifiers can suffer from. Its bass is much improved over the older A21a but it still requires a modicum of care in loudspeaker matching to really optimise, whereas the Anatek will happily perform with virtually whatever you care to connect to it.

So which to choose? The grip, pace and verve of the Anatek, or the sheer, all-enveloping atmospheric loveliness of the Sugden? Ultimately, as I swapped between the two in order to decide, I realised the answer was staring me in the face. Every time I listened to the Anatek, I thought what a truly brilliant amplifier it was. When I plugged in the Sugden, I realised I was simply enjoying the music. The boys from Heckmondwike have done it again!

#### AND DON'T FORGET...

Just to complicate your decision even further, an honourable mention should also go to the Shanling STP-80. If you like your valves, you'll love it as it has that thermionic addictiveness and atmosphere by the bucketful. Add in excellent build quality and styling and a user-friendly layout and even valve doubters are highly likely to be persuaded; you would be daft to ignore it.

It does lack the bass control of the Anatek, requiring a degree of careful partnering due to a very low damping factor, and it misses out on the sheer lucidity and top end clarity of the Sugden but it's a lovely machine. It also happens to have a high quality metal remote control handset which gives it an advantage straightaway in my book...

