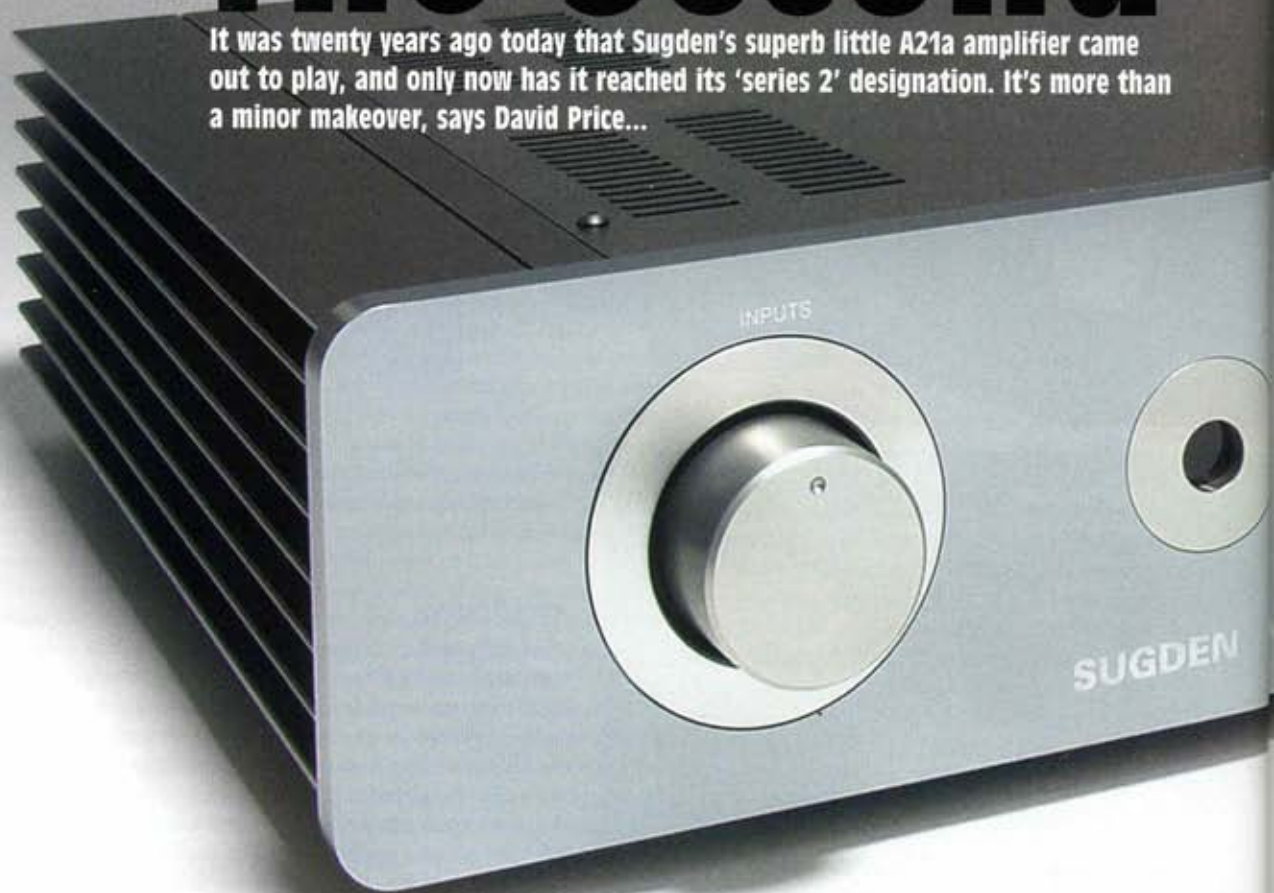


The Second

It was twenty years ago today that Sugden's superb little A21a amplifier came out to play, and only now has it reached its 'series 2' designation. It's more than a minor makeover, says David Price...



There is one product that we here at Hi-Fi World recommend with depressing regularity. Depressing for us, because it suggests to readers that we can't be bothered to think of anything else. The sad truth is though that it is surely one of the most capable 'standout' designs of the modern hi-fi age. Its circa £1,000 retail price buys you sound that – in some respects – is unsurpassed by many designs at five times the cost.

Don't think for a minute that the Sugden A21a is a brilliant all rounder though. Its very limited output power means it will roll over and die (metaphorically speaking) with difficult, power hungry loudspeakers. Unlike every other modern solid-state amplifier on sale, you'll have to build your system around it, choosing speakers to suit its unusual proclivities. If you're able to do this, however, then great sonic rewards beckon...

For this reason, the little A21a hasn't really changed much since it got its 'a' suffix in 1987. Whilst in sonic terms, its wonderful glassy clarity hasn't gone out of fashion, there are various other aspects of

the amplifier's design that were no longer contemporary, not least some facilities. Taking a critical look at what's really needed in today's mid-price integrations, Sugden began a two year process of evolutionary change [see IN THEIR OWN WRITE boxout, P.17].

The 'plane Jane' styling of the old model has gone, and it now has the same front panel finish as the Masterclass and A21SE models – and very nice it looks too with a choice of titanium or graphite finishes. The chassis and top plate are now fifty percent thicker, and the fascia is a chunky 10mm thick piece of aluminium. Control knobs and adornments have also been included from the more expensive Masterclass series. The amplifier now comes with remote volume control, using a high quality Alps volume control driven by a motor, as opposed to the CMOS electronic switching devices used by some rivals. An optional, internally-fitted MM/MC phono stage can be specified for £100 extra, or this input can be used at line level, making five in total. Loudspeaker terminals are three-way designs accepting 4mm plugs, bare wire and spades.

Surprisingly perhaps, the quality

of finish is superb. Sugden is a brand I associate with no-compromise sonics, so I wasn't expecting such a beautifully hewn product – one that gives away nothing to any product from Britain, Japan or elsewhere at the price. Indeed, sitting next to the exquisite SME Model 10 on my equipment rack, it didn't feel cheap, which is no small feat! Inside the story is the same – it's beautifully laid out with immaculate wiring, superbly finished circuit boards and simple, crisp topography. The front panel controls move with silky precision and, compared to the JungSon JA-88D, which being full Class A at £800 is a kind of Sugden rival, the A21a blows it away for build and finish. Like the JungSon, it does run very hot, but you never get the impression that things are going to go up in smoke like Cheech and Chong!

SOUND QUALITY

In my review of the £2,000 Sugden A21SE back in May 2005, I said it was one of the best integrated amplifiers I have ever heard at any price, and the A21a Series 2 isn't far off, despite being only half as expensive. What I got from the SE, I got from the A21a S2, albeit a tiny bit less. Still, it

Coming



the A21a S2 is a joy with almost any type of music

puts it pretty close to perfection as far as solid-state amplifiers go – for me, this is one of the few transistor integrations I would actually want to use on a regular basis, and I'd use it with glee.

When I first wrote for Hi-Fi World in 1994, I had never heard a valve amplifier (lest we forget, they were still viewed as an extreme, fringe pursuit back then and virtually impossible to audition at any dealer in this country). Unsurprisingly perhaps, I soon caught the bug and have never looked back. When I do 'look back', aside from a few Class D designs such as the NuForces and the Channel Islands reviewed recently, plus the occasional Naim, I am not really minded to go back to solid-state. However, the A21a Series 2, like the A21SE before it, is one of the few things that would get me reaching for my chequebook...

What this amplifier gives you is tremendous 'hear through' clarity – clarity that is sufficient for even the most transparent and demanding loudspeakers. It's one of the few integrations at any price that are less coloured than most high end loudspeakers, meaning you can use it with the very best transducers (providing they're sensitive enough) and get superb results.

The common myth is that Class A transistor is somehow warm and euphonic, but this is a complete misconception. Class A, Sugden-style, has glassy transparency – it's like the

proverbial sunny but frosty autumn morning, the reflections of the sky on that absolutely still millpond. You're not getting lots of fat, sumptuous bass bloom or rose tinted treble – quite the reverse, as if anything the Sugden sounds quite 'brightly lit' across the upper midband. This isn't to say it's bass light or tiring in the treble, because it isn't. Instead, you get a vivid midband that sounds uncannily distortion-free.

The best exemplar of this is piano driven music, and Kate Bush's 'Feel It' is a perfect case in point. Anyone who's heard this classic track from her first album ('The Kick Inside') will know how beautifully recorded it is (at Abbey Road, naturally!), and hearing it through the A21a S2 showcases it at its very best. From vinyl – and to hear the Sugden at its best I'm afraid you need the resolution of a serious vinyl source – those piano cadences chime like Big Ben. The harmonics coming off the recording are intoxicating and the Sugden is one of the very few transistor amplifiers I've ever heard that can capture this. Even the £1,500 Channel Islands D100 power amplifiers, which impressed us all, sound muffled and somehow compromised by comparison.

Okay, all well and good. The problem with the A21a is when you give it something with serious bass transients, right? Well what better torture track than Alex Reece's 'Feel The Sunshine', classic drum'n'bass

at its best? The old A21a would show serious discomfort with this, especially at high levels, with the bass letting go and turning into a marshmallow-like mess. Not so the Series 2, which – although not quite Naim Nait 5-like, showed no pain when asked to drive my 91dB efficient Yamaha NS1000Ms. In fact – and this is amazing to find myself writing this about a Sugden – the bass actually sounded quite tight.

Things down below aren't quite as vice-like as the Naim, but they're not in any way embarrassing. Best of all, basslines are truly tuneful, the amplifier making up in musicality with what it lacks in absolute visceral power and grip. Speaking of which, the A21a S2 actually managed some! Again, it's not exactly a 584W Rotel RB-1092, but it proved itself perfectly



able to tell the Yams' big bass drivers when to start and stop, and even gave some detailed information as to how loud to go in the process. I never thought I'd use an A21a for drum and bass, but I did, and it sounded lovely, with that sublime midband there to behold but without any of the (feared) nasties in the bass.

As for the Sugden's treble, it is not as creamy or silky as my World Audio K5881 tube power amplifier, but it sounds totally unlike any Class AB transistor amplifier I've heard. Rush's 'Subdivisions' showed its hi hat sound to be delicate, detailed, subtle and crisp. There was no grain, hardness or zing, but likewise no Japanese high end amp-style sugar. It's a lovely thing to behold and, once again, your loudspeakers' tweeter will be the limiting factor, not the Sugden, however expensive your speakers may be.

The upshot is that the A21a S2 is a joy with almost any type of music. True, you can't use it as a PA amp, but for most sensible audiophiles who value their hearing, with reasonably sensitive loudspeakers, it's a far more sensible purchasing proposition than the old Series one. Its tremendous innate clarity and

sometimes slightly forward. Still, it's an expansive stereo image from left to right, and it locates instruments very confidently – far more so than the old A21a. Also, the Sugden can't quite catch that last few percent of dynamic accents, but this is only compared with products at twice the price or more. In general, it is so fast and open that it comes over as a very punchy and pacy performer.

CONCLUSION

Keen readers of this review may have cottoned on to the fact that I rather liked the new Sugden A21a S2, and so once again I find myself feeling a tad apologetic. By way

IN THEIR OWN WRITE – DAVID PRICE TALKS TO SUGDEN'S PATRICK MILLER.

DP: WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT THE NEW AMP?

PM: The A21a Series 2 is not just the old amp with a mild make over. It was a large design project for us that took twenty two months to complete. Because the A21a was so popular with our retailers and distributors, it was important to retain all the strengths without altering the way it played music. We therefore looked at each part of the A21a and set about redesigning it without altering the fundamental circuitry.

WHY CHANGE IT?

The original A21a was introduced in 1987 and has remained almost unchanged. We were getting reports that there was growing resistance to the dated looks and lack of a remote control. Since the introduction of the A21SE in 2005 the A21a was looking out of place and had room for performance upgrades. As you may have noticed we are not a company that introduces a new product every other month to chase sales.

WHAT ARE THE MODS?

We now have a new power supply with a more efficient transformer and better regulation. It now has higher current delivery in to 4 Ohms. Removing certain functions in the preamplifier, then relocating and relaying it has reduced the signal path considerably. The distance from input to output is much shorter with several large passive components being removed. The effect on the input signal is clearly noticeable. The quality of the case and case materials have been substantially upgraded and it has put on a significant amount of weight to bring it in line with its stable mates. We still operate our own custom engineering shop, and all elements of fine finishing are carried out in house. All circuit boards are populated by us, by hand and all electrical and mechanical design work is our own. We are very proud to say designed and manufactured in England.



REFERENCE SYSTEM

- SME Model 10/Series V/Koetsu Red K Signature turntable
- Note Products PhoNote phonostage
- Marantz CD63 KI DP CD player
- MF Audio Silver Passive Preamplifier
- World Audio K5881 (modified) power amplifier
- Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers
- Mission 752 loudspeakers

musicality means that however poor the recording is, the Sugden digs deep into it and lets the good things get out to your speakers. T Rex's 'Metal Guru' – a bit of a dirge by any standards – proved surprisingly listenable, and I found myself sat there in awe of the genius of Marc Bolan, rather than the incompetence of the recording engineer. Supertramp's 'School' had me pinned to the sofa, revelling in that stunning Ken Scott production that sounds as fresh today as it did in January 1974.

Aside from basic watts per channel figures, there is nothing to criticise about the A21a S2 at the price, but in absolute terms it isn't quite as dimensional as it could be. Things don't hang quite so far back as they do with more expensive pre-power combinations, the Sugden preferring to 'bring the fight' to around the plane of the speakers, and

of riposte, I would urge anyone who has only ever heard Class AB transistor amplification to go and hear this, and then make

your mind up about my motives. Likewise, those who've ended up with lesser tube amplifiers in their despair with solid-state might find this just what they've always wanted. It inhabits a strange 'nether world' between solid-state and tubes, and sounds like neither. The old A21a attempted to bring the best of both worlds and did an impressive job, but the new one does it with far fewer signs of distress. As such it's a gem, and unless you think you need to swim around in kilowatts of solid-state power, you really should take a listen.

VERDICT

Class A without tears, this new incarnation adds power and control to the A21a's traditional transparency and musical ease. Gorgeous.

SUGDEN A21A S2 £1,299
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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	20watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	5Hz-32kHz
Separation	80dB
Noise	-95dB
Distortion	0.02%
Sensitivity	200mV
Damping factor	16

DISTORTION

