



Halo effect

David Price thinks Parasound's new Halo amplifier has what it takes to shine a light on this emerging US hi-fi brand

This American company is on the ascendent, with a wide range of fine-sounding products. The Halo line is the company's 'premier' range, and is largely the work of John Curl, whose previously work includes the highly respected Mark Levinson JC-2 and SOTA head amplifier, and his own Vendetta phono preamp. Something of a whiz, he began his career designing tape recorders, spent time building sound systems for Grateful Dead concerts and then met Parasound's Richard Schram in 1989. They've proved a fine partnership, and the brand has steadily grown since – even if it is fairly new to British shores.

The Halo Integrated amplifier is the company's 'do-it-all' device. If there was ever a product that personifies the modern integrated amplifier, this is it. It does everything it can be reasonably expected to, including connecting up to a variety of digital and analogue sources, delivering a fair whack of power into a wide range of loads and not being too big. The Halo is hardly small, but then again it negates the need for separate preamp, power amp, DAC and phono stage boxes. But can it bring all of these competencies under one roof and still sound good?

Parasound certainly hasn't scrimped on the build. It's a heavy device, and

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Parasound Halo Integrated
- ORIGIN**
USA/Taiwan
- TYPE**
2.1 integrated amplifier & DAC
- WEIGHT**
15kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**
437 x 150 x 413mm
- FEATURES**
 - Quoted power: 2x 160W RMS per channel (8ohm)
 - Analogue inputs: 5x RCA, 1x balanced XLR, MM/MC phono
 - Digital inputs: coaxial, optical, USB
 - ESS Sabre32 ES9018K2M DAC
 - PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz; DSD64; DSD128; DSD256; DoP DSD
- DISTRIBUTOR**
The Multi-Room Company
- TELEPHONE**
01242 511133
- WEBSITE**
parasound.co.uk

when you take the lid off you'll see the two chunky heatsinks, onto which the 12 high-current Sanken 2SA1386/2SC3519 bipolar output transistors are set. The power amplifier has full dual mono construction and is said to work in Class A mode at lower levels, switching into Class AB when called on to deliver more power. The preamp stage has matched J-FET input stages and MOSFET driver stages, and sports its own MM/MC phono preamplifier. The large shielded 1kVA toroidal power transformer gets 40,000uF of power supply filter capacitance. The amplifier feeds out through chunky 24k gold-plated speaker binding posts, and protection relays click in if it gets too hot or the speaker wires short circuit.

The preamp section sports the increasingly popular ESS Sabre32 ES9018K2M DAC, as seen in Audiolab's M-DAC (HFC 368). It has an asynchronous USB 2.0 input that supports PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz, and decodes native DSD64, DSD128, DSD256 and DoP DSD. There are Toslink and coaxial digital inputs too,

working up to 24/192. All this shows that the DAC functionality isn't just an afterthought; it has been done thoroughly. The amp also features switchable loading for the MC phono input (100ohm or 47kohm), and there are five line-level analogue ins via RCA, plus one via balanced XLR.

The gorgeously finished brushed aluminium Halo Integrated is a sight to behold

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Balanced XLR inputs
- 2 Gold-plated speaker terminals
- 3 Digital inputs
- 4 Preamplifier output
- 5 Subwoofer outputs
- 6 Analogue line-level inputs

The fascia is hewn from finely brushed aluminium, and its controls turn and respond nicely and there's a good-quality backlit remote control handset supplied. Standby power consumption is quoted at 0.5W, but the fun starts when you switch on and tap the (quoted) 160W RMS per channel (into 8ohm, 240W into 4) under – as they say – dynamic load conditions (ie playing music!). Current capacity is quoted at 45A peak, and this doesn't seem overly optimistic when you hear the Halo Integrated driving difficult loads.

Sound quality

Fed by one of its various RCA line level inputs, the Parasound gives a powerful and confident presentation; it is crisp and clear, and puts out a large and capacious soundstage that's peppered with detail. It shows little fear of driving difficult loads, and proves an excellent match for the ATC SCM40s (HFC 389) I have to hand. This amplifier is not obviously compromised in any way, and doesn't have such a distinct sound as rivals such as Naim's SuperNait 2. It's even handed and smooth, yet seems particularly good at delivering fine detail, the musical minutiae that pulls you into a recording.

Steely Dan's *Any Major Dude* is not particularly complex by the band's standards, and succeeds or fails on the hi-fi system's ability to correctly convey the timing and dynamics of the piece. This the Halo Integrated does rather well, giving a lively and open rendition that captures the spirit of the song with relish. This track can sound rather small in scale and anaemic on analytical equipment, but the Parasound instead chooses to give it a widescreen backdrop; the sound

has great scale from left to right, and falls back reasonably well too. Along with such a big presentation, the amplifier captures the delicate strummed acoustic guitar work very well, showing good midband speed and detail. Vocals are smooth and lack the slightly brittle edge of some other rivals.

Asked to play to some classic reggae, the Halo again delivers an impressive sound. Congo Ashanti's *Days Chasing Days* is a powerful piece with huge tracts of bass running beneath the lead vocals, rhythm guitar and percussion. Unsurprisingly,

It's pleasing tonality is slightly on the warm side, but never too sugary

this amplifier is able to wake up the ATC loudspeakers, which are of an infinite baffle design and need real music to get going. The Halo has this, and is able to tickle the speakers sufficiently strongly to get them shifting large amounts of air in the room. In my view there's nothing that sounds quite like a pair of big infinite baffle monitors playing reggae at high volumes, and the Parasound really lets me indulge myself. It has a serious amount of power and it's served up without in anyway compromising other aspects of the sound. Despite so much low frequency work, the midband remains smooth and crisp and nicely rhythmic. By absolute standards, compared with the biggest and best (and considerably more expensive) integrated amplifiers, the Halo doesn't quite have the fastest bass – ▶

Q&A

Bob MacDonald

Parasound director of product development



DP: Who designed the Halo Integrated amplifier?

BM: The power amp section was designed by audio legend John Curl and is based on our successful Halo A 23 and A 21 models. He pioneered measurements to correlate musical accuracy with the materials used in parts, worked with world-class touring companies and has designed highly coveted audio classics, including the original Mark Levinson JC-2, Dennessen JC-80, Vendetta Phono Preamplifier, and CTC Blowtorch preamplifiers. He designed master recorders for Wilson Audio and Mobile Fidelity, and the mixing consoles used in live concerts by Grateful Dead and the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland.

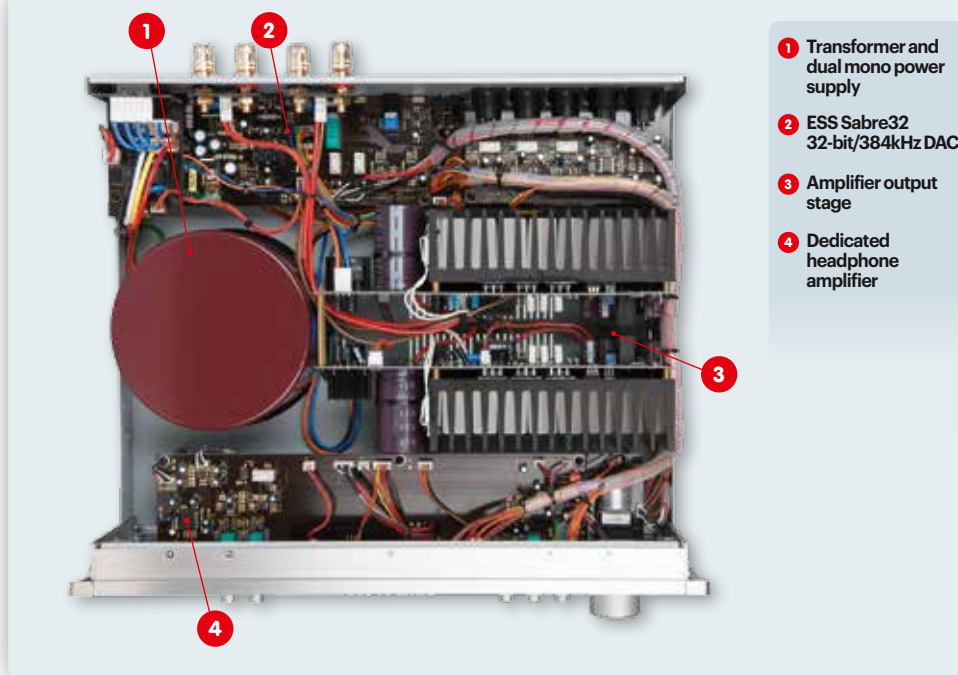
When does it switch from Class A to Class AB?

At about 4W, which might not seem like a very high figure but much of the critical listening for most users will be in this range. With a modern, efficient loudspeaker the Halo Integrated will deliver close to 100dB in Class A mode, making the listening less fatiguing and more natural sounding. Of course, power reserves are huge and in Class AB operation it will comfortably deliver over 160W in 8ohm.

Why did you decide to fit analogue bass management?

Today more people are using subwoofers with their two-channel stereo systems than they used to. Including the bass management on the Halo Integrated gives our customers greater flexibility when integrating subwoofers and smaller bass-limited left and right speakers. Another reason is that many customers are using the Home Theatre Bypass input, which allows for integration with your surround sound system. The analogue bass management in the Halo Integrated can be set up to mimic your surround sound receiver or AVR making for a seamless transition from stereo to surround sound.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Transformer and dual mono power supply
- 2 ESS Sabre32 32-bit/384kHz DAC
- 3 Amplifier output stage
- 4 Dedicated headphone amplifier

right down low – there's a sense that it is doing some heavy heaving, but while not lightning fast it never really sounds strained.

Moving to slower, sweeter soul music in the shape of Isaac Hayes' *I Stand Accused*, and the Parasound is in its absolute element. It has a pleasing tonality that's slightly on the warm side but never too sugary, and is well able to signpost the difference between sweet, lush-sounding productions and drier, more clinical ones. The Isaac Hayes track falls strongly on the former side, and the Halo gets the balance just right. Spacious and with an almost ethereal feel, this recording is brilliantly conveyed. There's a real delicacy to this amplifier's midband, and it captures Hayes' creamy but sonorous voice just right. The accompanying piano is also spot on, sounding like it is there in the room, and the backing brass and strings are similarly rich and vibrant. The music is snappy and rolls along in a natural and engaging way, giving a delightful listening experience that catches the feel of the piece just right.

The onboard digital converter is very well done, too. I try a range of inputs from a Sony Blu-ray player via coaxial to a MacBook Pro via USB, and get a crisp, upfront and lucid presentation. Rush's *Subdivisions* via CD is clean and tight, with lots of detail and energy, and a satisfyingly subtle top end that gives the ride cymbals and hi-hats a great day out. Audirvana via a MacBook makes for a

fantastic rendition of Kate Bush's *Snowflake* at 24/96, and again shows off this amplifier's highly capacious soundstage. The piano sound is rather delightful, close-miked and sparkling with harmonics. The same can be said of Joan Armatrading's *Me, Myself I* from LP via the built-in phono stage; it's obvious that Parasound took some time and trouble on developing this and it isn't just a feature that's there to make up the numbers.

Conclusion

There's nothing not to like about this great value mid-price integrated. It's a jack of all trades and master of some, with a very pleasing and musically enjoyable sound and a welter of facilities. Packed with features and loads of inputs, it easily and seamlessly slots into any middle-priced system to deliver performance and power aplenty ●



Costing a whisker under £3,000, Naim's SuperNait 2 is the latest evolution of the company's top integrated. It puts out 80W RMS per side and combines a big, gutsy sound with considerable finesse, insight and dimensionality. It still has a quintessentially grippy, Naim sound with a very propulsive nature that gets right into the music's very core. It's more pacey and dynamic than the Parasound, but doesn't have the midrange delicacy or soundstage scale. The upshot is that some may strongly prefer the charismatic Naim, but many will warm to the even-handed Parasound.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



WE SAY:

Excellent, general purpose integrated amplifier

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

LIKE: Powerful, spacious, musical sound; facilities; connectivity

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