

PAUL TATARA

Acurus DIA 150 Integrated Amp



A glance at Mondial's Acurus DIA 150 immediately suggests the lucid elegance with which this 150-watt/channel stereo integrated amplifier plays music. It's got a gray/black, jet-set look about it, with a bare minimum of knobs and buttons vying for your attention. The control panel is laid out in a graceful little swoop that somehow reminds me of a well-appointed Frenchman crossing his legs and smoking a cigarette. From a purely physical standpoint, if the DIA 150 were a person, it would be Yves Montand—although I'm sure Yves Montand would have been too low-voltage to drive your speakers.

The DIA 150 is Mondial's latest take on the company's "passive integrated amp" concept, which it pioneered with the earlier 100-watt/channel DIA 100. This time around, the power-amp section has been

beefed up, the entire circuit has been refined for cleaner sound, and, in a welcome touch, a **solid, nicely crafted remote control is included so you can operate the thing from the other side of the room.**

DIA is short for "direct input amplifier": Instead of the active preamplifier circuitry found in most competing integrated amps, the Acurus goes the purist route by using passive volume and balance controls, as well as passive source switching. So the purity of the original signal is maintained right up to the power-amp stage, and you don't have to pay for a lot of extra circuitry that could end up diminishing the sound quality anyway. Mondial claims that through the use of

a high-sensitivity power-amp stage and a separate internal subchassis that shields the passive preamp section it's come close to reaching the "Holy Grail of audio"—a straight wire with gain. In a nutshell, you get more out of leas. More or leas.

I'm exceedingly pleased with the DIA 150's control layout, as I've never been very good at remembering where the individual function buttons are on audio equipment. (Then again, I'm not very good at remembering much of **anything** that doesn't involve me receiving money or getting kissed full on the lips.) It takes me forever to become intimately acquainted with all those controls; I usually have a major problem getting past the "staring like a flounder"

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phase when I want, for instance, to switch from CD to video.

Not so with the DIA 150. Five minutes and even I can figure it out. It has those eight little buttons swooping left to right and two great big gray metal knobs that control the volume and balance. That's it. There are no dials telling you what time it is on planet Zoltar-7, no little lights bouncing around to visually confirm that you're actually hearing music, no burning neck because you've realized that you shelled out

ACURUS

Rated Power: 8 ohms, 150 watts/channel; 4 ohms, 200 watts/channel.

Rated Distortion: 0.09% THD, 20 Hz to 20 kHz, into 8 ohms.

Dimensions: 17 in. W x 5 in. H x 14 in. D (43.2 cm x 12.7 cm x 35.6 cm).

Weight: 35 lbs. (16 kg).

Price: \$1,499.

Company Address: Mondiol Designs, 20 Livingstone Ave., Dobbs Ferry, N.Y. 10522; 914/693-8008; www.mondialdesigns.com.

for features that you'll never, ever use.

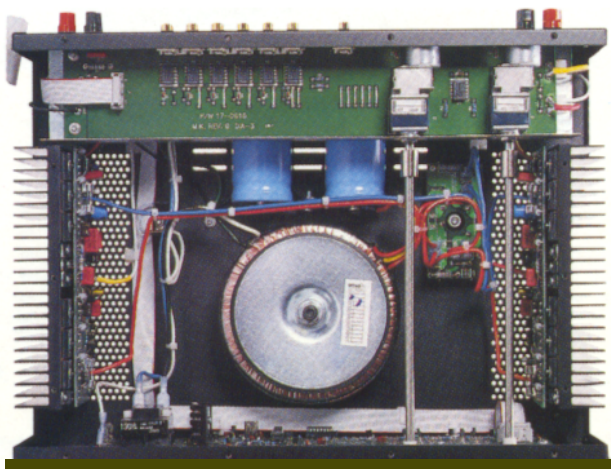
The buttons comprise switches for power and muting plus six for source selection: CD, video, D/A, tuner, auxiliary, and tape monitor. It doesn't get much simpler than that. I also applaud the speaker connectors, which are placed on opposite ends of the back panel so that you don't have to wrestle several wires into a 1-inch space. Your aunt could cope with this baby, though I'd still keep her away from it. It retails at \$1,500, and you know how flighty she can get.

So if you're the kind of person who likes to be seduced by his equipment, the DIA 150 certainly gives you the old amplifier come-hither. But, hey, just for the sake of argument, let's be adults about this. Relationships are more than just looks, otherwise Sophia Loren would never have married Carlo Ponti. No, a healthy attraction is also based on personality, the lusted-after one's ability to communicate his or her inner feelings. Well, the folks at Mondial, those sly dogs, have created a looker with a soul.

I auditioned the Acurus integrated by wedging it between my reference NAD 522 CD player and a pair of NHT SuperTwo full-range floor-standing speakers. Kimber's PBJ audio interconnects and Radio Shack's 16-gauge brown-colored speaker wire tied it all together.

My normal amp is an NAD 310, which is a fine little unit, no doubt about it. It is, however, an altogether different beast from the more cultivated DIA 150. I know the rule is supposed to be that you get what you pay for, but anybody who's attended a movie or bought a car in the past 15 years knows that's an almost amusingly optimistic stance. It's more likely that you'll get whatever the hell they decide to give you, regardless of cost.

Incredibly, however, the DIA 150 delivers on all fronts. The elegance that's so immediately apparent on the outside extends even to the amp's insides. It has hardly any guts, but precision engineering sees to it that that doesn't matter. It's the very definition of inner beauty.



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I was so astounded by the sound, I quickly started plowing through my CDs as I realized which bits of my music collection I'd like to hear iiber-juiced by the amp. These, of course, aren't the discs that you'd be reaching for in the same situation, but if you wanna come on over and write this review, I'll gladly take a nap.

Cedar Walton, Naima. This is a nifty live performance from 1973, recorded at a Manhattan club called Boomer's. I always say that I like to hear the wood creak in my jazz. Keep the electric instruments away from me, and if Monk is stomping on the ground while he solos, I sure as hell wanna know about it. The DIA 150 lends a sonorous mahogany warmth to Walton's keyboard, with cymbal work that sparkles around the edges.

You could argue that more bass would be nice—and with the lack of tone controls, you better like what you get—but one of the best things about the bass on the DIA 150 is that it lays itself down as a backdrop. You don't feel that it's being punched out at you, and you don't get the somewhat soupy lower-register tone that I find when I'm grooving to the NAD 310. The sound is so

convincingly live on this disc, I almost bought a drink for the blonde over by the bar, and she wasn't even there. And neither was the bar. And I'm engaged.

Bob Dylan, *Blonde on Blonde*. It's no scoop that this is one of the greatest rock 'n' roll albums of all time. The surreal wordplay and don't-try-to-tell-me-they're-bad vocals are part and parcel of Dylan's most brilliant '60s output. I just have trouble listening to it because of what Dylan himself calls its "mercury" sound. I

think what he means is that there's something simultaneously organic and tinny about it. As undeniably visionary as the record is, it often winds up giving me a splitting headache.

The DIA 150 doesn't completely solve this problem, but at least it sounds like Mr. Zimmerman is just blowing that damn harmonica directly into your ear, rather than methodically stabbing your timpanic membrane with it. Mostly, though, the sonic palette is much more forgiving than I'm used to it being on this recording. You get to hear it all with the DIA 150—the fog, the amphetamine, and the pearls. Just like Bob intended it, although what he intended remains a little piercing on occasion. Still, tones ring out and die away that you don't even know are there when you play the disc on less formidable machinery.

Rufus Wainwright, *Rufus Wainwright*. This is my favorite pop record from 1998, and it's one of that year's most fascinatingly dense productions, to boot. Wainwright combines an almost Broadway-like musicality with a perverse sense of humor that owes a lot to Randy Newman. That means you get a lot of catchy piano, bizarre key changes, bells ding-a-linging, and slowly mounting arrangements that burst into huge orchestrations when you least expect it. Though my NAD pumps it all out with brio, the DIA 150 does a vastly superior job of separating the many layers of sound.

Too many string and rock recordings can end up sounding like a squall of sound, rather than the more inspiring wall that Phil Spector used to build. The DIA 150

Fig. 2-THD + N vs. frequency at 10 watts (red), 50 watts (blue), and 100 watts (green) into 8 ohms (A) and 4 ohms

aves like a big stereo power amp with a very stiff power supply. And, in fact, I can't help but reasonably regard the DIA 150 as a high-gain power amp with multiple inputs, a source selector, and an input control.

Distortion is very low at frequencies under a few kilohertz and still reasonably so even at the top of the audio range (Fig. 2).

It varies hardly at all with level until the overload point is reached. Noise is also quite low. The only appreciable blip in the noise spectrum (Fig. 3) is a small hump at the 60-Hz power-line

Fig. 3-Crosstalk vs. frequency.

normal circumstances. Frequency response (Fig. 4) is extremely flat, though there is about a quarter-decibel channel imbalance and interchannel crosstalk (Fig. 5) is well controlled.

In short, the Acurus DIA 150 is another lean, quiet bruiser of an amplifier from

(23.5 dbW)/channel into 8 ohms and 290 watts (24.6 dBW)/channel into 4 ohms.
Noise, A-Weighted: -80.3 dBW.

provided the producer was at least a little bit on his toes during the recording process. On Wainwright's most sublime track, "Foolish Love," I even detected a previously unheard swirling organ sound that reminded me of The Band's Garth Hudson, and that was when an entire orchestra was cranking behind it at top volume. And the bass, as usual with this amp, was crisp and fully evident without wrestling the other instruments into submission. I never caught that fairground organ before, and it made

balance, of course, may vary.

Frank Sinatra, *The Capitol Years*. Everything on this three-disc set springs to swagging, finger-popping life through the DIA 150. On "One for My Baby," you'd swear that Frankie is breathing Jack Daniels vapors down your neck. And don't even get me started on "I've Got You Under My Skin"; it's so dazzling I actually yelped. The entire collection sounds like fancy crystal, from beginning to end. When crooned through the DIA 150, Sinatra's way with a

than you've come to expect it to be; you're practically wearing every whisper. Jill, my betrothed (and a major Sinatra fanatic), took one listen and said, "It's like sex for your ears." Nuff said-and that pithiness, coupled with her startling cuteness, explains why I'm marrying Jill.

The DIA 150 sounds spectacular, folks, but all is not completely hunky-dory in Acurus world. First of all, there's no headphone jack. I know it's heresy to some audiophiles to even bother with headphones,