

Gryphon Audio Designs Essence preamp and power amplifier

by Alan Sircom



By most normal standards, the Essence pre/power amplifier combination would represent the uppermost tier of product performance, size, weight and price. In Gryphon Audio Design's world, Essence is the starting place in its pre/power line. There is a long way to the top of the Gryphon tree.

Essence is the new preamplifier and power amplifier line from the Danish brand. It joins the Scorpio S CD player, the Diablo 120

and 300 integrated amplifiers and possibly Mojo S loudspeaker at the start of the line. Although no-one's going to call a preamp costing £20,299 in its full configuration and £17,800 worth of power amplifier 'a bargain', set in the context of the company's Pandora preamp, Legato Legacy phono stage, Kaliope DAC and Mephisto mono amplifier flagship line (which all weighs in at a substantial £156,000), it's hard not to see Essence as 'Gryphon, for non-millionaires'. Of course, that only works if the Essence brings Gryphon standards of design, build and performance, rather than a corner-cutting exercise.

Any notion of corner-cutting evaporates the moment you take the product out of its clever fold-away crate. Gryphon's repete is built on some very well made and nicely designed products, and the Essence rams that reputation ►



► home. These are designed and built to the sort of standards we should expect from high-end audio. Panels that don't flex to the touch. Designs that are at once informative and ergonomic; slab-sided and bold looking black designs with bright blue and red illuminated accents, yes, but laid out sensibly dual mono so confusion need not reign. Everything is custom made, right down to the remote handset; this has an additional side grip making buttons fall more readily to thumb; granted this last isn't quite as successful if you are left-handed but is impressive all the same.

That impressive approach even extends to the manuals, which seem more like slimmed down coffee table art books than hook-up guides. Yes, they meet those needs well too, but the whole package has a sense of 'event' that one should experience when first accessing a high-performance amplifier – given every coffee company has its own distinct 'fot' sound when breaking into a new jar of instant coffee granules and Aston Martin spend considerable amounts of time tuning their exhaust note to sound 'just right', let's not trivialise that need for 'event'.

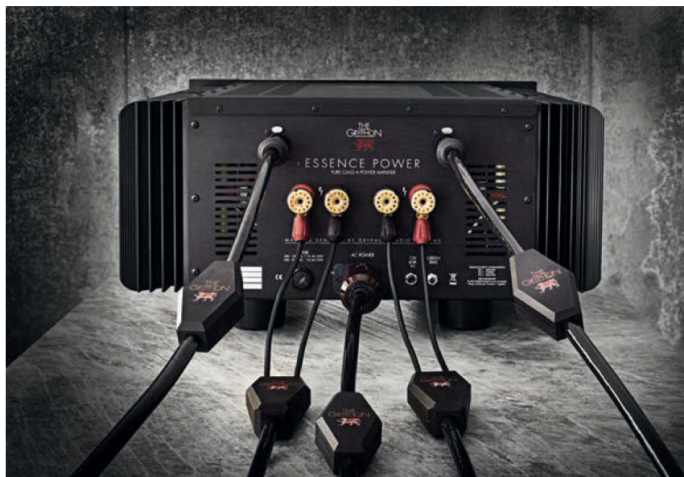
Beyond the boxes, what's underneath is impressive too. The Essence preamp is a zero negative feedback, dual mono Class A design. It's fully relay-driven, microprocessor controlled, with an optional Zena DAC module that supports signals to 384kHz PCM and DSD512 and an optional MM/MC phono stage module based on the Legato (you can specify one, both, or neither). It uses a unique discrete fixed 42-step resistor array volume. The large fluo display allows you to name and trim inputs.

The power amp is simple, yet deceptively clever, and hides a whopping 440,000µF of reservoir capacitance and a 1350VA toroidal transformer inside its 45kg chassis. A pair of underslung buttons control the amp, although its power on status can be controlled using the 'green bias' link between pre and power. As standard it runs 50W in Class A (doubling its power into a four ohm load and almost doubling again into two ohms, thanks to an array of 20 very high current bipolar output transistors). However, you can run the power amplifier either in Class A/B mode (the amp runs cooler, with just the first 8W in Class A, and the front display bar turns green) or a high-bias Class A (in which

case the amp loses power but gains even more sweetness, turns into a space heater, and the display bar turns red). This display bar can also indicate amplifier faults and run in a 'stealth' mode. The power amplifier only runs in fully balanced, dual mono mode.

From the first note played on the first track you play, there's a sense of rightness and authority that pulls you in. Subsequent running in of the amplifiers only cements these opinions, and gradually peels away more layers of the musical onion. In some high-end systems, there is a disconnect between audio and video, for example... whereas the sonic performance of the Essence so easily invites you to experience all sources, you'll start going down the "I wonder what YouTube sounds like through this?" route. Granted many of us will still prefer that wall built between audio and video, but that rightness and authority make you wonder whether the construction of that wall is tissue-thin. This is the first sign of audio greatness; a good system draws you into playing more sound, be it more of what you love, approaching new styles and new genres, or just opening up new sources. Essence does all of these things from the outset.

Another sign of audio greatness is having no feeling to respond to the question 'why?' it does what it does. That makes life a little harder for writing a review, but the Essence's ►



- ▶ consistency (both in terms of ticking all the sound-quality boxes and in terms of creating a similar performance from balanced, single-ended, line, digital... what have you) is central to that need not to question, but to enjoy.

Playing music through the Gryphon combination made it sound like I was self-selecting to play music that sounded good through the Gryphon combination. Track upon track sounded like it was a demonstration disc made for Gryphon. Moreover, some of my go-to tracks I have heard as demo discs in Gryphon demonstrations, so for the purposes of not accidentally triggering some kind of system synergy, I deliberately didn't play those tracks. But it didn't matter... whatever I played if it was well recorded sounded like a demo disc and if it wasn't well recorded, the Gryphons made the very best of a bad job.

For example, Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* [Zinman, Baltimore SO, Telarc]. This is an impressive demonstration disc at the best of times, exercising and showcasing the dynamic range of any system, but hearing this recording through the Gryphon duo was like strapping into Sergei's personal rollercoaster. The energy and passion of the pieces is never far from the front, but here those same elements leave you breathless and craving more. Play Stravinski's 'Right of Spring' after this, and you'll be ready to lob a few chairs in musical revolt... again.

The degree of detail and tonal articulation is first rate. Note that I said 'tonal' and not simply 'vocal' articulation; the ability to resolve the human voice (sung or spoken) is excellent here, but the same applies just as significantly to the 'shape' of the notes of a bass or a piano. Barenboim, Mederos, and Console's 'Mi Buenos Aries Querdo' [from the *Tangos Among Friends* CD, Teldec] demonstrates that perfectly, with both the interplay of the three musicians expressed elegantly, but the expressive and articulate nature of both players and their instruments coming over as if there are not transducers or electronics in the way.

Imaging was first rate, too. The sound presents itself wide and forward of the loudspeakers, more perhaps than it does pushing back the rear wall, but the size and solidity of the soundstage remains among the best. The 'rehearsal'

recording of *Love In Vain* from The Rolling Stones *Stripped* album [Polydor] highlights this well, with not only each band member in their own physical space, but subtle sounds around the room picked up with ease. You need first rate equipment in the chain, but the Gryphon Essence amps could easily be the cheapest part of the system and still not show up their peers.

Some good systems remind you of why you got into audio in the first place and while the Essence does that well, more importantly it reminds you why you got into that piece of music in the first place. This is no small feat; often those of us who have a lot of musical miles on the clock can get a bit jaded by it all (especially when playing test discs); many tracks in your collection have been overplayed to the point where the excitement and the musical intent have been worn away. The Essence strips away those years and presents your music anew. It doesn't trigger memories of that first time you heard Dylan or Joni Mitchell, Led Zep or Beyoncé... it's like it's the first time you heard them, and all that excitement hits you.

A lot of this comes down to the Essence duo's remarkable combination of leading-edge performance, powerful dynamic range, excellent detailing, and that aforementioned authority. Music is vibrant, visceral, and red in ▶

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▶ tooth and claw. This is amplification for people who like to stand and applaud a good performance, and in a year where a good performance is a recording rather than a live event, you might feel a little silly standing up and cheering a CD or a streamed track, but go for it. That’s what the Essence does for you and your music.

Let’s talk about what’s wrong with the Essence amps: nothing. Let me expand on that a bit: N-O-T-H-I-N-G. Yes, an amp that takes 45 minutes to run from ‘good’ to ‘awesome’ every time you turn it on might be a turn-off to seekers of instant gratification and there are going to be people who will be willing to trade some aspects of the overall sonic gestalt for overstated or even exaggerated performance elsewhere. And of those latter types, the people who seem attracted to a very mellow, laid-back-to-the-point-of-unconsciousness, soft-edged dinner jazz presentation might find the expressive, powerful and upfront Essence too far in the other direction. On the other hand, the rest of us will find the Essence copes with audiophile dinner jazz extremely well, and as an added bonus it loses its stultifying, Rohypnol effect.

Alongside the new Essence amps, we received the new flagship VANTA cables from the brand. These cables use Gryphon’s unique silver-gold alloy conductors in a PTFE screen with a silver-plated copper screen and wrapped in a shiny black polyurethane jacket. Like everything else Gryphon, these are built to an exceptional standard (lots of companies say that, but then don’t do things like solder under a microscope to ensure the perfect joint). And also like all things Gryphon, these cables are expensive, but you get what you pay for in sonic terms; more in fact, I’d put these up there with the best of the best, many of which cost considerably more. Like the Essence, they have the same sense of authority and rightness to the presentation, with exceptional detail, precision and speed, making them such a good match for Gryphon’s range, I’d be hard pressed to find a better match. Most reviewers (myself included) have a large crate filled with extraordinarily exotic cables that are used to build systems; while we all have our personal preferences, there is no single cable system that could accommodate all the systems we evaluate (a recent more prosaic example... Hegel amps go well with Nordost Blue Heaven cables, whereas Primare play nicely with Vertere’s Redline cables), but VANTA gets closer than most to being the ‘one’.

This was something of a revelation to me. Although I’ve had experience of Gryphon Audio Designs, it’s always been at one remove. Each time, the sound quality produced has always been at least impressive, but the difference between that one remove and the direct experience is significant. I am a great believer in the concept of ‘different paths up the same mountain’ and – to that extent – the reviewer’s job is that of ‘sherpa’; finding the right path for someone, rather than enforce their own path on others. However, in the Gryphon Audio Design Essence preamp and power amplifier, I found my own path.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Essence preamplifier

Inputs: 2× XLR, 3× RCA (1 optional phono stage) excluding DAC

Outputs: 1× XLR, 2× RCA

Optional DAC module: USB-B, AES/EBU, 2× BNC S/PDIF, 1× Toslink

Gain: +18dB, max

Output impedance: 15Ω XLR, 22.5Ω RCA

Frequency bandwidth (-3 dB): 0.1 Hz–1 MHz

Power supply capacity: 2 × 26,000 μF

Input impedance, balanced
(20 Hz–20 kHz): 50 kΩ

Input impedance, single-ended
(20 Hz–20 kHz): 25 kΩ

Dimensions (W×H×D): 47 × 16.5 × 38.5 cm

Weight: 13.4 kg

Price: from £13,600-£20,299

Essence power amplifier

Inputs:

LR

Power output: 2 × 50W @ 8 Ω, 2 × 100W @ 4 Ω, 2 × 190W @ 2 Ω at 115V/230V AC supply

Output impedance: 0.015 Ω

Bandwidth (-3dB): 0.3 Hz to 350 kHz

Power supply capacity (both channels): 440,000 μF

Gain: +31.0 dB

Input impedance, balanced
(20 Hz-20 kHz): 20 kΩ

Dimensions (W×H×D): 47 × 24 × 46 cm

Weight: 45 kg

Price: £17,900

Manufactured by:

Gryphon Audio Designs

URL: gryphon-audio.dk

Gryphon’s excellent Essence preamp and power amplifiers are the real deal. I can’t help but feel these two boxes, an LP and digital source, a pair of decent loudspeakers and the VANTA cables buys you all the high-end audio you need. There’s ‘more’ to be had, but it’s not always ‘better’. +