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Copland CSA29 integrated amplifier

Sleek, stylish, sanely priced: will this Danish hybrid bring home the bacon?



Copland CSA29

PRICE	£1900
SUPPLIER	Absolute Sounds
CONTACT	020 8971 3909
WEBSITE	www.copland.dk

Amidst the myriad brands that fill the pages of hi-fi magazines are countless that have (seemingly) dropped below the radar. You just don't hear about them as much as you do, say, Linn or Krell. The reality, though, is that they've carved out niches for themselves – 'oddball OTL' or 'low-power solid-state' or other topologies – and they tootle along merrily, knowing that they have what's as close to a captive audience as is possible with audio components. The downside is that some, like Copland, deserve wider exposure.

Copland's niche? It's a double, rather than lone trait that identifies this brand. The most obvious is that the company excels at making sleek and modern solid-state/valve hybrids. Copland certainly wasn't the first to marry the two technologies in equal measure, but it certainly made the marriage viable, credible and desirable; you can see its 'children' in the wonderful amplifiers from Unico, Croft and others. But it's the other forte that marks Copland's turf for some, a group to which it's even more appealing than the tube/tranny nuptials: quite simply, the Danes at Copland have mastered the art of combining styling and construction at sane prices with such



finesse that the products are most often likened (favourably) to the now-departed Cello.

What does this mean to those who don't recall that extreme high-end brand? Cello products were known for their wholly functional yet still elegant appearance and build-quality that reflected five-figure price tags. By my reckoning, the only other marque to achieve this is Nagra. With Copland, you get more than a taste of the high life, and from a catalogue with a price span of only £1299 to £2249. To put it into perspective, that's like Arcam money.

Copland has been regrouping over the past few years, consolidating its line-up and – with the CSA29 integrated amplifier – staking a claim in the hotly-contested 'second upgrade' sector: £1500-£2000. What's tough about it is that this is where you expect to start seeing separate pre- and power amplifiers, so integrations at this price have to be special. And in some ways, remote

control operation and svelte styling are merely icing on the cake. To succeed, the Copland has to sound not just good, but wonderful.

It certainly looks and feels the part, and no audiophile who's moved from, say, a NAD or Rotel will feel like the wardrobe has suddenly been filled with hair shirts. The front panel is very much in the Northern European Minimalist vein, bearing only two knobs (source select and volume), two buttons (tape monitor and power on from stand-by) and a display showing power on or standby and the name of the chosen source. As you can see from the photographs, this is one sexy little amplifier.

Copland's back panel layout is straightforward, starting from the left with a binding post and inputs labelled RIAA for LP playback through the optional plug-in phono module for LP sources. (Note that: the phono input board, expected to sell for around £200, was not yet available as the review was being written, so I used the pre-amp in line-input only form.) Next are two pairs of sockets for Tape In and Out, followed by four more pairs for line sources; they're labelled Tuner, CD and Aux 1 and 2. Next to these are two 12V DC jacks for remote on/off operation of CD player or other devices, a pair of multi-way binding posts and an IEC mains input.

Two minutes out of the box, and I had it driving the Wilson WATT/Puppy System 7 speakers, fed by the Marantz CD-12/DA-12 CD player and the SME 30 turntable, Series V arm and Koetsu



Copland's high standards of 'look' and 'feel' are obvious from the outside the CSA29 amplifier, which still features those classic 'Cello-style' control knobs. Inside, it's a heavyweight, with a massive toroidal transformer and reservoir capacitors as well as substantial heatsinks for the MOSFET output devices. The two input-stage tubes are seen to the right.

Urushi, through the EAR 324 phono stage. (It also loves LS3/5As, and you may want to find a pair of Quad 10Ls for a simply blissful pairing.) Taken out of standby, the unit requires a minute or so for the 'power' label to stop flashing, indicating full operational status. And it sounded good from the get-go. But not in the way that you'd expect.

It's as if Copland had some guy working in the back room, de Paravicini-like, actively pursuing the narrowing of the gap between tube sound and transistor. While the temptation with affordable hybrids is to 'tune' the unit to sound more tube-like and therefore more melodiously euphonic, Copland has opted for a less readily-definable prejudice. As with Unison Research's all-time bargain, the Unico, the CSA29 cannily blends the

only reason I go on about this is to point out that we now have a simply amazing 'pecking order' for those who are tending toward hybrids, a pecking order that proves 'you get what you pay for': Unico, then Croft, then Copland, in ascending order of price. And all three are winners in their respective price classes.

It's mainly about refinement, once you factor out the non-audible differences. Quite unabashedly, the Copland 'wins' in terms of perceived value, so the price is apt. But it's also capable of slightly greater retrieval of low level detail, its soundstage is blessedly large and there's an unmistakable sense of precision, especially its transient attack and the control in the lower registers. I played a lot of live recordings through the system, vinyl Dylan and remastered

throughout, so that wasn't an avenue open to me. Suffice it to say, the Copland needs greater system-matching than the Croft (or the Unico), and, I suspect, it will prove less forgiving of the partnering equipment.

But all of this is unimportant, and for a couple of reasons. For one thing, I don't suspect that many buyers would spend £1898 on an amp, only to use it with cheap ancillaries; for another, it's simply such a joy to operate that you may be willing to trade of a shade of rosy tube tint. And purists may balk at this, but I've no doubt that a major part of the Copland experience is the sheer tactile delight in using an amplifier that makes you think there's a Porsche Carrera 4 in the drive and a Dufour on your wrist. Only this time, you didn't pay Cello money. ■ Ken Kessler

It's as if Copland had some guy working in the back room, actively narrowing the gap between tube sound and transistor...

best of the two technologies, so you get rock-solid (as in solid-state) bass with a warm-to-the-ear mid-band and non-aggressive treble. Copland, however, has upped the ante with the power delivery – this amp has serious grunt – and thus produced a serious challenge for the less-expensive Croft GC-i.

What you get for £1898, or £648 more than the Croft, is a mix of the sonic and sensual. However much improved the GC-i is over its predecessors in terms of looks and build, it's still kinda garage-built funky. The Copland oozes style and grace from every angle, and imparts a feeling not unlike the twiddling of a Leica's (or, more accurately, a Nagra's) controls. And it had a shade more punch, though the Croft is no slouch. The

Allman Brothers on CD, and it was able to convey audience 'mass', a wide-open sense of large venues and concert-like levels. Moving to studio recordings, including the back-to-the-original *Let It Be... Naked* on vinyl, the Copland proved masterly with piano, electric bass and George Harrison's delicious guitar work: the right textures, and perfect decay.

What it's never going to do – and what the Croft can do on occasion – is fool you into thinking you have an all-tube unit. Although the midband is deliriously lifelike – I used Joss Stone's soulful vocals to torment the Copland – the extreme treble is a shade too crisp, and almost enough to send you to your cable vendor to tame a tiny trace of excess sibilance. I used Transparent cables

Technology

Compact dimensions of 430 x 110 x 390mm (whd) disguise a shipping weight of a hefty 15kg. No small part of that is due to CSA29's chunky 600W toroidal transformer and overkill power supply; then again, Copland always uses top-grade parts and the interiors of its amplifiers will not cause agoraphobia amongst the capacitors and resistors. Two 6922 valves operate in the input differential stage, while MOSFETs deliver 85W/ch from the output section; Copland expects users to get around 4000 hours use from the tubes.

Features

- Superb value for money hybrid
- Oozes quality
- Detailed and precise sound