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# MASTER POWER

D'Agostino's 'retro chic' Classic Stereo amplifier



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# D'Agostino Master Power Classic Stereo

For those who cannot aspire to a Momentum amplifier, but who crave some of that D'Agostino magic, the new 300W Classic Stereo is a gift from one of the (audio) gods  
 Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller

Rarely do the words 'affordable' and 'Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems' occur in the same sentence. If, however, we add 'relatively', then the 300W Classic Stereo at £13,498 is 'affordable' in the sense that it costs less than half the price of a 200W D'Agostino Momentum Stereo in black [HFN Aug '12]. One might ask where the other £18k goes: not least is the change from the Momentum's 'functional sculpture' to a not-quite-prosaic cubist box. But cheap it ain't.

## A REAL HEAVYWEIGHT

Before going anywhere near the details, one statistic tells you more about the Classic Stereo than any other, especially if you possess a touch of the tyre-kicker – which all audiophiles do, if truth be told. Bluntly put, this amplifier weighs 50kg, or 110lbs in old money. It is so damn heavy that I had to enlist help in unpacking it, which I didn't require for the not-that-much-lighter Momentum (though PM unpacked it, tested and packed it solo). The difference is that the Classic Stereo is also massive at 483x292x508mm, whereas the Momentum is dense but compact, as if you sliced the Classic horizontally in two.

Unlike the aesthetically innovative Momentum amplifiers, which I cannot believe have not yet been ripped off stylistically by lesser makers, the Classic Stereo comes in a traditional rack-mount case. It features massive front handles that proved essential when unpacking the thing. I only wish that they had fitted handles to the rear as well, because this is one of the most physically challenging amplifiers I have ever had to install, and gripping it without handles is worrying.

**RIGHT:** Classic Stereo comprises two mono amp 'cards', each built onto a pair of heatsinks. A huge toroidal PSU transformer is bolted to the rear of the fascia behind a white cover

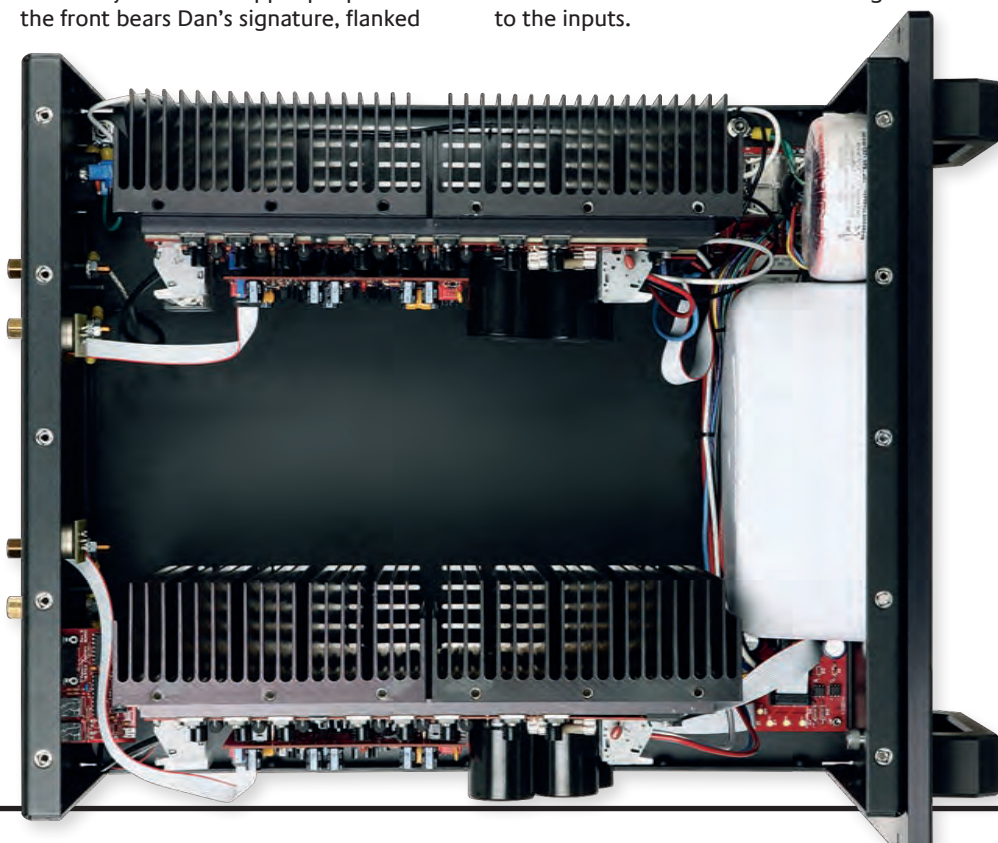
I didn't want to count all the bolts that hold this together, so I stopped at 44. One can quickly surmise, however, that rather than use sheer mass, as in the Momentum with its machined, solid-copper heatsinks, the Classic acquires much of its rigidity with a belt-and-braces approach. The innards contain an enormous toroidal transformer and a pair of amplifier sections consisting of the circuitry and a finned heatsink to which each board is attached, providing both dual-mono topology and a structural support that ensures the lid and side panels do not flex.

Pretty it ain't. If you want the Ava Gardner of amplifiers, then look to the sleek and sexy Momentum. This is more the Roseanne Barr – big, beefy, and, indeed, a bit scary. The bold copper plaque on the front bears Dan's signature, flanked

by the handles. Below, to the right, is the on/off button, a simple plastic affair that turns green when lit. That's it, one of the least cluttered, most purely functional and instinctive fascias you can devise. The only thing that could make it even more austere would be to move the on/off switch sadiistically to the back.

## ONLY BALANCED INPUTS

And the back isn't all that cluttered, either. AC enters via one of those 15A IEC plugs, while an RS232 connector and 12V power trigger inputs will allow users to integrate the Classic Stereo into systems with remote power-on from the preamp or system controller. Speaker terminals are massive multi-way metal posts, and there's a user-accessible fuse at the back. Then we get to the inputs.





As stated in the interview with Dan D'Agostino [see p35], this is balanced because he feels it is imperative for the best performance. This isn't the first instance of amplifiers that are balanced-only, and I wholeheartedly agree with the sentiment, but neither does one want to preclude sales to individuals with single-ended-only preamplifiers.

Although not found in the box with the review sample, the owner's manual says that XLR-to-RCA adapters are supplied. I have it in Dan's own words that, 'We are OK with using high quality RCA-XLR adapters'. So, please, don't let the XLR-only ingress deter you. Whatever it may sound like using RCA-to-XLR, I stuck with balanced operation,

**'This sonovagun sounded like a KSA-50 for the 21st century'**

feeding the Classic Stereo from my Audio Research REF 5SE with Transparent cables.

In addition to the Wilson Alexia loudspeakers [HFN Mar '13], I also drove the Sonus faber Venere S [HFN Mar '16], and used the Marantz DV8300 SACD/

DVD player, SME 30/12 turntable/arm, EAT E-Glo phono stage and Clearaudio Goldfinger MC [HFN Jan '15] as sources. Aside from struggling with the sheer bulk of the Classic Stereo, set-up

was swift. The only caveat is the warm-up time. Stated quite specifically as 30 minutes in the manual, the warm-up is no worse than that for valve amplifiers. While I would need two – one 'cold' and one that had been running for that half-hour – to

**ABOVE:** Just a power-on button that glows green – that's all you see at the front of the Classic Stereo. Build and parts quality defined by one spec: this monster weighs over 100lb

determine quite what the sonic difference is between them, I can with relative certainty say that the sound opened up considerably and the treble sweetened.

Once cooked – and I hate to keep referring back to Dan D'Agostino's past achievements – this sonovagun certainly sounded like a KSA-50 for the 21st century. And that is a very good thing, indeed, because we are talking about an all-time great. And one that has been revisited, as it were, with the efficacy, added experience and authority of, say, Cecil B DeMille doing a remake of *The Ten Commandments* 33 years after the first version. A coincidence? I think not...

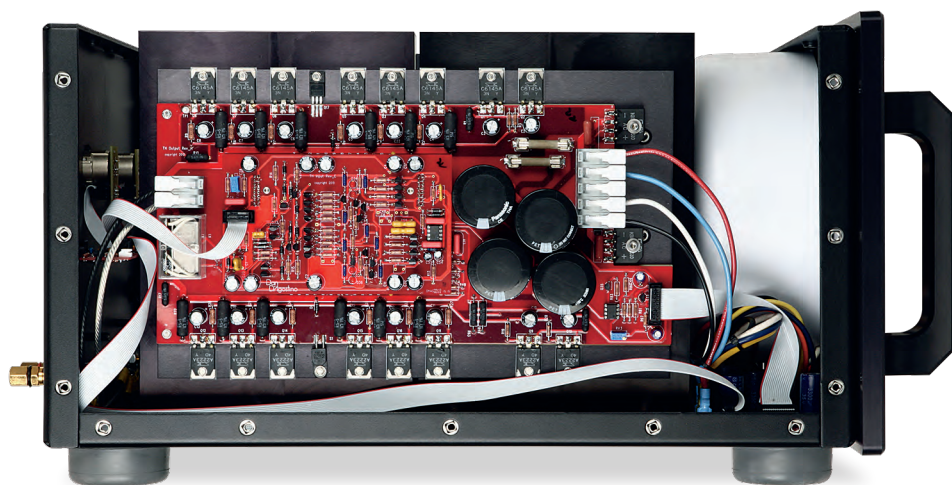
### SHEER CONFIDENCE

Not that this sounds vintage: the refinement possessed by the Classic Stereo owes more to its dearer siblings in the Momentum range than anything born in the 1980s. It possesses the sheer confidence, command and composure that we associate with the likes of the Momentum Stereo, Soulution's hardware, the Continuum amplifiers, that over-the-top darTZeel monster and other no-compromise units. What is so stupefying is the Classic's price point. While it is still eye-wateringly high, £13.5k is 'entry level' compared with these powerhouses. ➔

### BLAST FROM THE PAST?

Reminded of Dan's earlier classics, the original Krell KSA-100 and KSA-50, Editor Miller mused, 'While the Classic Stereo's internal design is quite different, do you think Dan is reliving his past?' Dan was happy to explain both the links to the past and the breaks from it, such as its heavyweight build. 'We wanted to develop an amp that would help more people experience our product line. The Classic Stereo incorporates my core beliefs in amplifier circuitry and required a certain size and scale for the best sound.' He also felt that 'a more streamlined aesthetic was appropriate for this application.' Clearly recalling his work for 40 years is balanced circuitry, 'Imperative for great sound. By only including an XLR option, we are reinforcing the importance. Low impedance drive is also a fundamental element of my amplifiers. The Classic is no different and will double its power output down to 2ohm and can easily handle a 1ohm load.'

## POWER AMPLIFIER



**ABOVE:** Four 6800µF reservoir caps and local regulation feature on each amplifier 'card' – no fewer than eight pairs of high current Sanken output transistors are employed in the power amp stage

Regrettably for some of you I am still fetishising about proto-disco. The Detroit Emeralds' 'Feel The Need' [*Greatest Hits*, Westbound CDSEWD 119 (CD); and *Feel The Need*, Atlantic K50372 (LP)] and 'Rock The Boat' by the Hues Corporation [*The Very Best of The Hues Corporation*, Camden 74321 603422 (CD); and *Freedom For The Stallion* RCA APL 1-0323 (LP)] have been played so many times that I fear I'm acquiring a desire for a metallic onesie jumpsuit with flares, opened to the navel.

Then again, rich bass and punchy brass are precisely the fodder to feed a behemoth like this, while whucka-whucka guitar is ideal for testing transient attack and decay, punch and other speed- or control-related abilities. Lo and behold, the Classic presented both tracks in exactly the manner that defines its own presence, its own form. The Classic's character is embodied in the sound of the music it produces with an uncanny likeness, also evocative of the designer's personality.

In a word, everything about the presentation was 'massive'. There is no other term I can find, and I use it strictly to describe scale and, well, *mass*, as one would apply it to a bull elephant, a dump truck or 48oz soft drink.

Whether using the Sonus fabers or the Wilsons the soundstage was gloriously cavernous, the bass extended, fast and weighty. As ludicrous (and tyre-kickery) as it seems to attribute the traits of an amplifier to its performance, there is no escaping the sensation. These are not the fevered imaginings of an audiophile plagued with wish fulfilment.

'Everything about the presentation was "massive"'

When I turned to the percussive juggernaut that is Kodo drumming, on *Heartbeat: Drummers Of Japan* [Sheffield Lab CD-KODO], the net effect was the movement of air in quantities I had never before extracted from the Alexias, let alone the smaller Venere Signatures. With Levon Helm's kick-drum opening to The Band's 'Up On Cripple Creek' [*The Band*, Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2129], the Classic managed to infuse the dry, crisp thwacks with a visceral quality so convincing that I had one of those reality-check moments. Yup, that good.

Neither man nor woman lives by percussion alone, and I certainly prefer to hear vocals above everything else, so it was on with the ever-dependable call-and-response of Dianne Reeves and Lou Rawls on the latter's *At Last* [Blue Note CDP 7 91937 2]. If you don't have this disc – and I realise it's hard to find – one of the myriad versions of Ella Fitzgerald's duets with Louis Armstrong will provide a nearly-identical set of contrasts.

### MICROSCOPIC DETAIL

And what a torture test it is, the gravelly Lou (or Louis) countering the crystalline vocals of Dianne (or Ella). If you want to hear what 'textures' are, this juxtaposition will – if you think about it – illustrate just how hard a sound system has to work to convey the natural, yet disparate characteristics of human voices. The Classic eschews sibilance unless the recording is poor and the sibilance is inescapable, which is as it should be, yet you hear the breathing, the lips, the microscopic details that suggest reality rather than a ↻

## DAN D'AGOSTINO

With the Classic Stereo being a departure from the Momentum models, released in the same year as the Momentum Phono Stage, the still-young brand is expanding its catalogue vertically as well as laterally. Dan told *HFN* that, 'We recently announced the Momentum M400 Monaural amplifier, which is a major update to the original Momentum amplifier. Power output has been increased to 400W, up from the original 300W. The backbone of the increase is a new ultra-quiet 1800VA transformer that's 20% bigger than the original.'

'Coupled to this larger power source is a new complementary driver and an updated output stage. The new driver stage nearly doubles the current drive necessary to maximize the enhanced output stage that follows. This takes this increased drive and boosts the open loop gain by a factor of two. The result is a sound that is richer, more authoritative and expansive.'

For Momentum owners, further good news is the pending Momentum streamer and headphone amplifier. 'I am still working on Helios,' said Dan. 'At CES, we will unveil the first product in the Progression Series [see *HFN* Mar '16]. It will be a very powerful monaural amplifier that has many aesthetic cues and circuit elements from the Momentum series. It is priced between the Master Power series and our Momentum line-up. Our immediate plans include a Progression series mono, preamplifier, stereo and lifestyle amplifiers.'



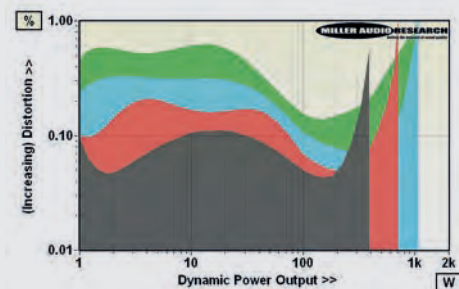
# LAB REPORT

## D'AGOSTINO CLASSIC STEREO

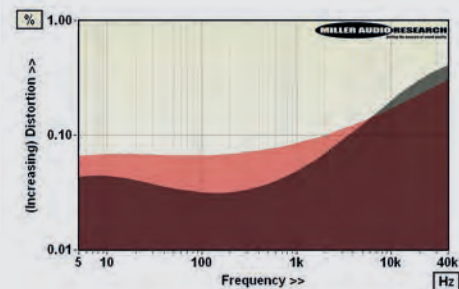
At the time of writing (Dec '15) D'Agostino's website has the power output of the Classic Stereo as 300W/600W/1.2kW into 8/4/2ohm while the downloadable owner's manual specifies 300W/500W/1kW. The latter is the more accurate as the Classic Stereo achieved 2x354W/8ohm and 2x530W/4ohm with a substantial 390W, 705W, 1.05kW and 1.0kW available under dynamic conditions to 1% THD into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads [see Graph 1, below]. So few speakers will faze this 50kg black brick even if its very consistent but moderately high 0.5ohm source impedance will introduce some system response variations in line with big swings in speaker impedance. Into a straight 8ohm load the response is flat from 1Hz-20kHz (-0.1dB) and out to 100kHz (-1.95dB) but gets 'flatter' into lower impedance loads until -0.5dB/100kHz at 1ohm.

Noise is not vanishingly low – that big toroid reaches out to local PSU regulation on each power amp 'card' – but 87-88dB (re. 0dBW) is a respectable enough A-wtd S/N ratio. Distortion is also well managed vs. output power, the Classic Stereo achieving ~0.06-0.1% over a full 1-250W/8ohm range. D'Agostino amps typically operate with only moderate levels of compensation and the Classic Stereo is no exception as distortion increases with frequency from ~0.06% through bass and midrange to ~0.19%/10kHz and ~0.25%/20kHz [all at 10W/8ohm, see Graph 2]. Finally, the 'dual mono' modularity of its design ensures a superb >80dB separation (20Hz-20kHz).

Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for D'Agostino's Master Power Classic Stereo amplifier by navigating to [www.hifinews.com](http://www.hifinews.com) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) loads. Maximum current is 32A



ABOVE: Distortion vs. extended frequency from 5Hz-40kHz at 10W/8ohm (black, left channel; red, right)

## HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	345W / 530W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	390W / 705W / 1.05kW / 1.0kW
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.51-0.52ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.0dB to -1.95dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/300W)	135mV / 2325mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/300W)	87.5dB / 110.8dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.055-0.25%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	111W / 1.03kW
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	483x292x508mm / 50kg



ABOVE: Balanced XLR inputs are joined by solid (not 4mm) screw-down speaker connections best suited for bare wire or spade adapters. Note 12V trigger comms

recording. With this lush-sounding set, there is such a palpable lack of artifice that the potential for voices to exhibit utter authenticity is nothing short of breathtaking. As capable of brutality as the Classic is, with, for example, the most overpowering of sections on the Kodo disc, it is also capable of delicacy reminiscent (to these ears) of no less than the Radford MA-15. But then that shouldn't surprise any seasoned listener: all great amplifiers can deliver both a gentle touch and a fist when required.

### YOUR VANISHING ROOM

Having recently acquired the SHM-CD of The Beatles *Let It Be* [Apple Japan UICY76979] – not my favourite by a long shot – I was stunned by the clarity and detail. This is not the place to debate the quality of the various formats in the Fab Four's catalogue, but the SHM-CDs have a naturalness that sends chills down my spine. Although this is really a naff album – sorry, but it's the sound of a band breaking up – the off-mike chat in studio takes, especially Lennon's farewell remarks, exist in a convincing space that transcends two channels.

Here the Classic Stereo matched the Momentum to the millimetre, with openness that allowed the speakers to disappear as they should. It was enveloping, without any suggestion of boundaries related to the walls of the room. And isn't that the ultimate trick for a decent system – to eliminate the room?

As a last tester, I chose the Blu-spec version of The Byrds' exquisite, complex, hypnotic *Notorious Byrd Brothers* [Sony Music Japan

SICP20042]. It suits listening sessions because the opening brass onslaught in 'Artificial Energy' has a delicious *shine*, for want of a better word, that can splutter if not handled properly. I have no idea what effects were applied in the studio, but the Classic positioned the brass to create a wave over the listener, coming from the left.

Stage right is crisp percussion, in between, the vocals. To my delight, it was revealed with that absolutely perfect balance between a wall of sound – coherent, consistent – and a series of separate events. The brass swelled and faded to a degree that recalled the flanging of 'Itchycoo Park', without the actually trickery. If any audio patois or jargon suits this sensation, it has to be 'liquidity'.

By this time, I knew I was in the presence of a masterpiece. It might even threaten the Momentum. And now that this review has been written, it's time to hook up the Scintillas [see p124]... ☺

## HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Even without waiting for it to warm up, the Classic dazzled from the opening bars of 'Feel The Need.' It swings, it rocks, it grabs the speakers by the waist and dances with them, filling the room with musical energy that creates one of those moments in one's hi-fi life that marks a milestone. I still recall the first time I heard a KSA-50 and I'll never forget the first time I heard its great-granddaughter.

Sound Quality: 90%

