



A for effort

David Price inspects Creek's very latest, multi-talented, user-friendly integrated amplifier, the Evolution 100A

Michael Creek first made a name for himself back in the early eighties, with the CAS4040 integrated amplifier. It cost around £100 and shook the British hi-fi world to its very foundations, because it sounded far better than anyone could have expected given its modest price. A compact, slimline design housed in a hand-painted wooden sleeve, this little amp wasn't as well presented as the rival Japanese products of the day, but one listen soon won you over.

It went on to sell, in Mike's rough estimation, around 30,000 units, which was amazing for a start-up company of the time. The CAS4040 also set the blueprint to which Creek has worked ever since; you might say the company is slightly tweaky, obviously specialist, but not too 'far out' to have mainstream appeal. It has walked the same line for many years,

making affordable, high performance products with an emphasis on sonics.

The Evolution series is appropriately named. Here we are seeing the company take small steps towards broader, mass appeal in an attempt to offer traditional Creek values in a more modern setting. Which is to say that the amps feel sleeker and better finished, as well as having a good deal more facilities. The obvious question then is does the sound suffer? But more on this later...

The Evolution 100A looks just like its 50A sibling first reviewed in *HFC* 370. It uses a pressed steel case with brushed aluminium fascia, and two largish metal knobs providing source selection and volume control. In the middle is a crisp, fine-pitch white-on-black OLED display that can be dimmed or turned off if required. The overall feel is of a classy product, befitting its not inconsiderable £1,500

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Creek Evolution 100A
- ORIGIN**
UK/China
- TYPE**
Integrated amplifier
- WEIGHT**
9kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
430 x 60 x 280mm
- FEATURES**
 - Quoted power: 110W into 8ohm
 - 4x RCA phono line inputs; 1x balanced XLR
 - Dedicated headphone amplifier stage
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Creek Audio Ltd.
- TELEPHONE**
01442 260146
- WEBSITE**
creekaudio.com

price tag – although it's perhaps not as lavishly finished as more expensive equipment from home and away.

One reason for this is the Creek's potential FM tuner functionality. This doesn't come as standard, owners will have to buy the optional Ambit plug-in radio module (£125). It fits into the rear panel's 'Smart-Slot' and replaces line input 5; when installed, effectively turning the amplifier into a receiver. There's also another plug-in module in the pipeline called Ruby; it's a (£400) DAC with twin 24/192-capable S/PDIF inputs, two optical ins, USB, Bluetooth and FM radio inputs, as well as keeping four of the existing line inputs. The optional Sequel 2 module (£120) is a vinyl phono stage that is plugged into a dedicated connector on the preamplifier's printed circuit board. It comes in a choice of 40 MM, 48 MM and 54 MC to match your cartridge. As standard, the 100A's preamp section offers balanced or unbalanced inputs, and has electronic volume, balance and tone controls.

There's a special low impedance headphone amplifier section built in to the preamp circuit board, rather than the usual expedient of taking the signal direct from the power amplifier. The 300W toroidal mains transformer (with multiple windings for high and low voltages and current) has separate feeds for the

power amp, preamp and digital circuitry. Multiple small capacitors are paralleled for low inductance and ultra low impedance. Four Sanken STD03 complementary power Darlington transistors per channel do the heavy lifting, delivering a claimed 110W RMS per channel into 8ohm. Interestingly, the Class G circuit normally runs at a lower voltage up to 25W (into 8ohm), but automatically swings to a higher secondary voltage to increase output power to over 100W (into 8ohm) when needed, says Creek. This helps the amplifier to run cooler and use less power. Two sets of loudspeaker outputs are fitted.

The pressed steel case is available in a choice of black or silver finishes

With twice the rated power output, plus a mains transformer that's a third bigger, it comes as no surprise that the 100A sounds more punchy and dynamic than its little brother. It's not that the 50A is anaemic sounding; it compares very well to its Arcam FMJ A19 (*HFC* 394) price rival in this respect; it's just that the 100A seems a lot less constrained when asked to drive difficult speakers to high levels.

Sound quality

This is one of the most powerful amplifiers I have heard at the price. It doesn't out-punch the gutsiest high-end integrations, but certainly doesn't sound like a budget product.

It's not just a bruiser, though. It's actually a highly finessed performer, with a very attractive nature that doesn't draw attention to any single part of the frequency band. Tonally it is clean and open but nicely rounded. Cue up Kate Bush's *Wow*, and you're greeted with a smooth and warm sound, just as it should be. Her voice is carried beautifully, with real delicacy and intimacy. So many solid-state amplifiers just cannot do this, managing to lose the sense of closeness that the recording offers, as well as freezing out the emotion too.

Another way the 100A betters its sibling is its ability to convey multiple strands in the mix. For example, spin up The Teardrop Explodes' *Treason*, and it seems better able to cut through the densely layered and highly compressed recording, to reveal individual instruments playing. There's a superior sense of the space around those instruments too; they don't seem to be packed together like sardines. It has a commendably wide soundstage that stretches well from left to right. Within this, instruments are tightly located; I'm also impressed by the power of the vocal line. Julian Cope's voice is carried in a confident yet lucid way, just as Kate Bush's is.

Behind this, towards the back of the recorded acoustic, there's a good deal of subtle, low-level detailing.

Give the Creek some powerful electronic music in the shape of Kraftwerk's *Musique Non Stop* and it's in its element. This wonderfully clean recording showcases the innate transparency of the design. Although lacking the out-and-out clarity of a cost-no-object integration, it still does a very good job conveying the music

An extremely versatile yet highly accomplished sounding product

in its entirety. The swinging bass transients do nothing to upset the Creek; it doesn't deflect the overall rhythmic flow one jot. I have heard lesser amplifiers get blown off course by the powerful drum work, but it keeps a grip of it all, as you'd expect from a top integration at this price. Rhythmically it's very good indeed, giving an authoritative sound that always seems in control. It ties this in well with its fine command of dynamics too; going loud very fast when required, and this doesn't just mean when building up to a big crescendo. It also tracks micro dynamics well, thanks to its lithe and sprightly nature. Creek solid-state amplifiers have never not sounded musical, so it's good to see that all the additional operational sophistication hasn't robbed it of its birthright.

The only real criticism you can level at it is that it always puts on a sophisticated face, even when the music doesn't quite demand it. Move over to a similarly priced, tube amp for example, and you're going to get a more louche, emotional sound. The 100A, by contrast, keeps everything so well controlled that it just can't

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Twin 4mm speaker binding posts
- 2 RCA line input/optional Ambit module plug-in slot
- 3 Line/balanced inputs
- 4 RCA line inputs
- 5 Preamplifier output

Q&A

Mike Creek

MD Creek Audio Ltd



DP: What type of customer will this new amplifier appeal to?

MC: It is increasingly hard to imagine what customers want these days. However, in keeping with Creek philosophy, if technology allows it and consumers ask for it, we will try to provide it, within reason. That doesn't mean we follow every trend.

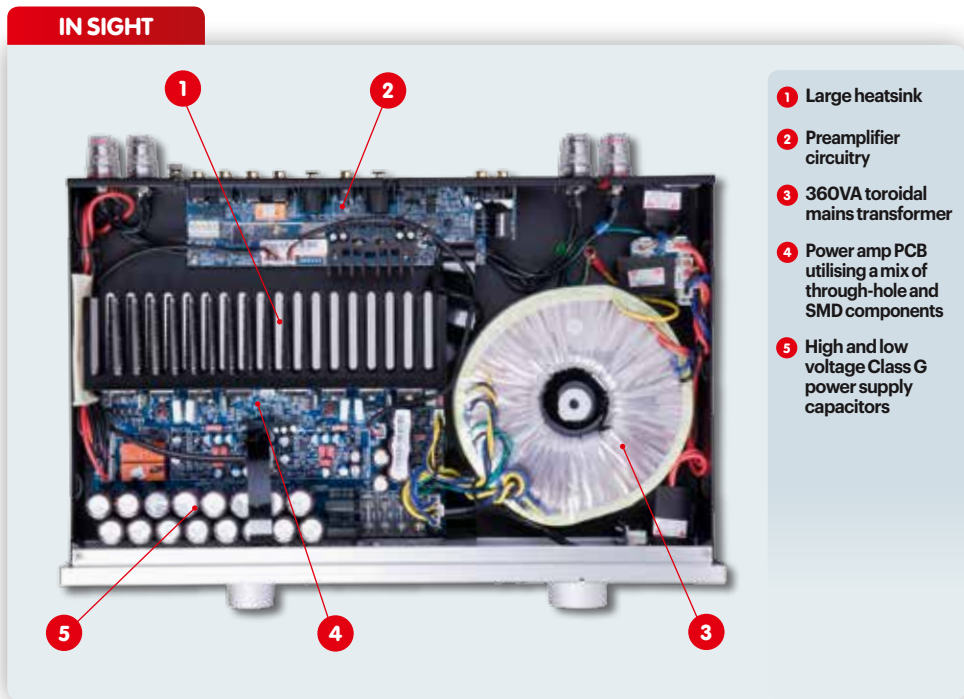
How does it differ, in design terms, to the Evolution 50A?

There is no reason to reinvent the wheel if it already exists, so the Evolution 100A is, as the name suggests, an evolutionary product. The case and external appearance is the same, the option for speaker selection is an obvious change from the outside and from the first revision of the 50A, we fitted a removable plate to the rear (normally carrying Line 5 input) that can be swapped for the Ambient tuner input or the Ruby module. The preamp is similar to the 50A, but has improved circuitry for external and internal balanced inputs. Without compromising its performance, the preamp can select a large number of inputs, including power amp direct. The power amplifier uses a bipolar power output stage, similar to the 50A, but with twice as many power devices. For the first time in Creek history, the Evolution 100A uses a Class G technique to achieve its high power output capability; it's considerably more efficient than regular Class AB or Class A. The net result is a very high performance amp with very low distortion; in fact, the distortion performance is more than five times lower than the 50A.

Is this a serious change of direction?

Our aim is to simplify hi-fi systems to make them more user friendly, without compromising performance. Circuit miniaturisation has enabled us to do that now. I'm sure that if we made a minimalist amp now it would sell to some consumers who still believe that is the best way to achieve high performance, but those consumers are in a minority. Creek has always tried to use cutting-edge techniques, so it's not really a change of direction from our perspective.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Large heatsink
- 2 Preamplifier circuitry
- 3 360VA toroidal mains transformer
- 4 Power amp PCB utilising a mix of through-hole and SMD components
- 5 High and low voltage Class G power supply capacitors

HOW IT COMPARES

Selling for £1,495 and offering 110W RMS per channel into 8ohm, the Exposure 3010S2 shares the same vital stats as the Creek. But the Exposure has no fancy plug-in cards, nor does it even have a display. The 100A appears far more sleek and sophisticated than the 3010S2 and offers more upgradeability.

The Exposure is, however, a superb sonic performer. That's why it won our integrated amp Group Test back in HFC 373. It gives slightly better depth perspective, letting instruments hang back further than the 100A. Although about the same in terms of detail retrieval, the Creek doesn't quite match the Exposure in rhythmic fluency. They are both very classy packages and worth an audition.

quite undo its top button completely. This is most obvious on jazz music; for example, the slippery rhythms of Lou Donaldson's *Alligator Boogaloo* show the Creek to be a great performer, but it doesn't quite get into the groove in the way that say a good tube amp can. Powerful, punchy, clean and enjoyably expressive, it isn't quite ready to let its hair down. In this respect a tube amp may sound better, despite lacking the Creek's power, tonal unevenness, bass grip, etc.

Creek's last top-end integrated – the Destiny 2 – was a wonderfully beguiling listen that was a little soft with some types of music. The 100A seems more deliberately voiced to do extremely well across the board; a sort of jack of all trades and master of some, compared with the Destiny's flawed genius. It's a subtly different approach, but ultimately more successful for today's buyer, I suspect. The acid test of this is, of course, classical music, and my Deutsche Grammophon recording of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* duly serves up a wonderfully capacious acoustic, stretching far left to right, and falling back respectably too. Within this, instrument placement is excellent, and individual sections of the orchestra seem able to play completely independently of whatever else is going on. Massed strings have a warm and full bodied tone, with real vibrancy, yet don't sound dull or opaque in any way. The amplifier tracks the song's dynamic swings convincingly, and the overall effect is a highly enjoyable rendition.

The Creek has few failings then, and what weaknesses it has, it hides well.

Conclusion

They say it's hard to buy a bad car these days. That's as maybe, but it's products like the Evolution 100A that make you think the same might be happening with hi-fi! It's certainly not an inexpensive amplifier, but it is genuinely multi-talented and gives an excellent performance across the board. The idea of the new Evolution series is to offer greater flexibility and operational refinement, while retaining serious sound quality. A year or so ago, the 50A succeeded in this, and now the 100A goes further still. Here is an extremely versatile yet highly accomplished sounding product; factor in the good standard of build and finish, and it is hard not to recommend. It's an essential audition for those looking for a superb sub-£2,000 integrated ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful, musical sound; great flexibility
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing, but competition is stiff!
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent do-it-all premium integrated amp
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL

