

# LISTENING BY ART DUDLEY

THIS ISSUE: ASR Audio's Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier.

## An Exclusive Amplifier

**T**he Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier, from German manufacturer ASR Audio, challenged my idea of what I could expect from a solid-state amplifier *and* my thoughts of what might be the best amp for driving a pair of Quad ESL loudspeakers—revelations that were more or less inseparable. After hearing my friend and former neighbor Neal Newman drive his own ESLs with a *ca* 1975 sample of the Quad 303—a solid-state amplifier rated at 45Wpc into 8 ohms—and after my experiences, in 2016, driving my ESLs with a borrowed sample of the 18Wpc, solid-state Naim Nait 2,<sup>1</sup> I began to think that Quad-friendly transistor amps are easier to find than their tubed counterparts.

The ASR turned supposition into certainty: Of the many tubed amps I've tried with my Quad ESLs, only the Lamm Industries ML2.2 and Miyajima Laboratory 2010—the former a monoblock, the latter a stereo amp that sounds best when strapped for mono—equal or surpass the musicality and the clarity of sound I'm enjoying right now with the ASR.

The Emitter II Exclusive also challenged my ideas of what constitutes an *integrated* amplifier. In choosing electronics for review, I often gravitate toward integrations, if only because I like writing about things that offer a certain level of thrift while taking up as little space as possible—and so it was when I accepted the offer of a review loaner from Gideon Schwartz of Audio Arts, ASR's distributor and sole retailer in North America. I was shocked when Schwartz arrived at my house with four very large boxes, none of which I could lift by myself, and one of which I could scarcely handle with assistance. And that's to say nothing of the price: \$27,000, as configured for this review. This four-box amplification system—*five* boxes, if you count the compact but chunky, Corian-encased remote-control handset—was unlike anything else my system has hosted.

### Description

ASR makes two basic amplifier models, the Emitter I and Emitter II. Both are solid-state ste-

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tereo amplifiers, both have three active stages—input, driver, output—and both are fitted with source-selector switches, stereo volume controls, and multiple pairs of line-level input jacks.

Sounds like an integrated amp, right? That was my thinking—although on ASR's website, Friedrich Schaefer, the company's cofounder and designer of all their products, seems to chafe at that label, instead describing the Emitters as power amplifiers with sensitive front ends and very-high-quality volume controls (more on the latter in a moment).

Consider that ASR's amps also use outboard power supplies—not just wall warts, or little boxes you can hide on

the floor behind your equipment rack, but steel-and-acrylic enclosures each measuring 16.9" wide by 5.9" high by 15.6" deep and weighing 71 lb. The basic version of the Emitter I requires one of those outboard supplies, the Emitter II needs two, and the Emitter II Exclusive presently in my system adds a third—a battery pack, including a built-in automated charging system, that powers only the amp's input stage, and is identical in size and similar in weight to the other two.

The amplifier itself sports an acrylic enclosure with generously sized aluminum-alloy heatsinks and much-larger-than-average dimensions of 22.4" wide by 9.1" high by 17.3" deep. It weighs 103 lb. I don't know if that weight spec includes the three 8'-long, multiple-conductor umbilical cables—each 0.625" in diameter and terminated with its own industrial-style, cast-aluminum-encased, clamp-on connector—that are hardwired to the rear panel and reinforced at that juncture with a massive strain-relief nut. The entire Emitter II Exclusive system weighs over 300 lb and takes up about 4.75 cubic feet. If you're considering buying an integrated amplifier because you want something small and easy to handle, this is perhaps not your

<sup>1</sup> See my May 2016 column: [www.stereophile.com/content/listening-161](http://www.stereophile.com/content/listening-161).



best option.

One of Schaefer's design goals, as stated on ASR's website and in the very comprehensive manual supplied with my review sample, is to avoid contaminating the audio signal with electromagnetic radiation from mains transformers and rectifiers—hence the outboard power supplies. But he also believes in the virtues of *stiff* power-supply circuitry that can supply abundant current with ease, and in which that current is kept clean not only by means of buffering capacitors but by power transformers that are themselves resistant to noise. For that last reason, Schaefer builds his power supplies around *enormous* frame-style transformers made by the Philbert Mantelschmitt company. He says that these step-down transformers are made and wound in such a way that they also act as *isolation* transformers, thus preventing high-frequency AC line noise from breaking through to the audio circuitry.

None of the above explains why the Emitter II amplifier unit is itself so large. Schaefer is on record as favoring signal paths that are as short as possible, yet the amp's main circuit board, made from FR4 glass-reinforced epoxy laminate, measures a healthy 14" square. That said, the board is not only one of the most cleanly laid-out and well-constructed I've ever seen, it's also strangely beautiful, from its gold-plated traces—juxtaposed against the green of the PCB material, they gleam a beautiful mustard yellow—to the neatly executed logo and Schaefer's signature. Its beauty is enhanced by the use, throughout various portions of the circuit, of multicolored LEDs—*dozens* of them. At first I didn't know whether the LEDs were chosen for their electroluminescence or simply their aptness as low-voltage diodes, but as I read through the manual, I learned that each combination of colors tells a story. Several pages of the manual are devoted solely to explaining what each color in each unique position means—associations I'm scarcely capable of comprehending as I read the explanations, let alone of remembering.

In any event, those LEDs are visible through the amp's translucent front, top, and rear panels—as are the lights inside the outboard power supplies, albeit only through their front panels. From my listening seat, especially with the living-room lights dimmed, the effect was charming. I see from their website that ASR offers a version of



The rear panel of the Emitter II Exclusive. The three thick, silver cables near the bottom are power-supply umbilicals, and are not user-removable.

Twenty preamplifier and other Ayre products, the ASR

the Emitter II with a fully transparent acrylic case; were I to spend almost 30 large on an ASR, that's surely the version I'd buy.

#### More Description

The Emitter II Exclusive lacks a phono stage, but does offer far more than the usual number of options for connecting line-output sources. (ASR offers two different outboard phono stages.)

Of the amp's seven inputs, 1 and 2 are for unbalanced sources, and have gold-plated RCA jacks. Inputs 3 and 4, with gold-plated WBT Nextgen RCA jacks, are also for unbalanced sources, and are described as offering "the shortest signal path to the amplifier part." Dual-mono DIP switches on the main circuit board let the user select, for inputs 1–4, one of five input impedances, ranging from 500 to 22k ohms.

Inputs 5 and 6 have XLR jacks (pin 1 ground, pin 2 positive, pin 3 negative), and are for connecting balanced sources. (As Friedrich Schaefer notes, the amp itself is an unbalanced design.) Another dual-mono pair of internal DIPs lets the user choose a balanced-input impedance of 1k or 10k ohms. Input 7 is labeled D, for Direct. Another unbalanced input with WBT Nextgen RCAs, Direct is subject to the same impedance-setting DIP switches that affect unbalanced inputs 1–4. It bypasses the amp's source-selector relays and is connected, via solid-silver wire, straight to the Emitter II's volume-control system.

That volume control is something of a technical tour de force. Similar to the Variable-Gain Transconductance system found in Ayre Acoustics' KX-5

system adjusts the volume not by resistively discarding gain, but by working with the amp's input stage to produce different *amounts* of gain. This volume system, its large control knob connected to an optical rotary encoder with no limit to its travel in either direction, offers the user two ranges of loudness, depending on the setting of the amp's four-position power switch: Set to O, the amp is off. Set to S, it's in standby, in which state its signal-switching and volume-control circuits are active but the output section is not. (Hypothetically, one could record from a source to a tape recorder in this mode.) Set to 1, the Emitter II is in an "energy-saving" mode in which the outputs of the power supplies are reduced, the driver and output stages operate at half their normal voltages, and a volume range of 0–61dB is available. And, set to 2, the amp functions at full power, with a volume range of 0–76dB.

The Emitter II's input stage is built around dual-mono sets of FET-input op-amps mounted on the undersides of chunky brass blocks. The driver stage uses MOSFETs, and the 10 output transistors per channel are also MOSFETs, each with its own ceramic isolator for electrical and mechanical isolation. These are mounted to solid brass bars that run the full depth of the amp and make contact with the large, side-mounted heatsinks, which are available in a variety of colors. (Going by the photos on the ASR website, the chrome-plated sinks are my favorites.) The Emitter II Exclusive's specified output is 250Wpc into 8 ohms, 500Wpc into 4 ohms, 900Wpc into 2 ohms, and 1400Wpc into 1 ohm,

operating in class-AB. Given that the two loudspeakers I used with the ASR were my DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/93s (93dB sensitivity, 10 ohms nominal impedance) and Quad ESLs (low sensitivity and wildly varying impedance, but usually happy with solid-state amps rated between 20 and 100Wpc), I believe that power was not an issue in my system.

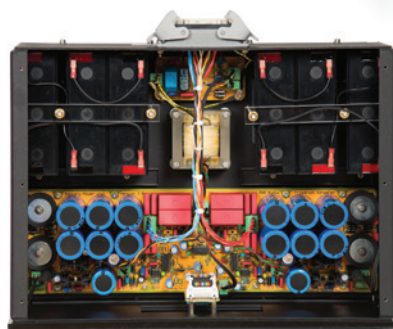
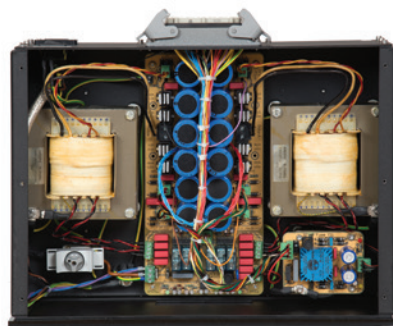
### Setup

Installing the Emitter II Exclusive was no small chore, given the size and weight of the four enclosures, the smallness of my listening room, and the physical stiffness of the power-supply umbilicals. Gideon Schwartz and I wound up placing the three power-supply enclosures on the inner shelves of my Box Furniture rack—they barely fit—but the amplifier itself was too big to fit on the rack's top shelf and still leave room for my turntable, let alone my phono preamp and step-up transformer. Ultimately, we set the amp atop a half-height, half-width Box Furniture rack placed next to the main rack.

Another complication: The living/listening room of my 1936 house has relatively few electrical outlets, and only one double outlet on the wall behind my equipment rack. Each of the three power-supply boxes needs to be connected to the AC—the review system came with three of ASR's Magic AC Cords, in their standard 5' length—so we were forced to rely on my trusty AVOptions outlet strip, in contradiction to Friedrich Schaefer's advice to avoid extension cords of any sort. Later in the review period, Schaefer express-mailed three 14'-long Magic AC Cords, but even those weren't long enough to reach the next-nearest available AC outlet. The AVOptions strip remained on duty.<sup>2</sup>

### Listening

We began by listening to the DeVore O/93s. I was immediately struck by an increase in top-end sparkle and air, compared to when the speakers were driven by my Shindo Laboratory separates. Perhaps for that reason, the ASR made my system sound bigger with some recordings—this was not consistent across all of the listening I did with the ASR-DeVore combination, but never did that combination sound *smaller* than when I used the Shindos. Also with the DeVores, the ASR didn't squeeze out the same degree of timbral-color saturation as the Shindos,



**Top:** A look inside ASR's outboard power supply, with its sturdy capacitor bank and two massive Philbert Mantelschneit power transformers.

**Bottom:** The interior of the ASR outboard battery pack, which is exclusive to the Exclusive.

from any recording. But the ASR never sounded colorless or gray; indeed, after only an hour of warm-up, this transistor amp provided a very good sense of flesh and blood: Instruments and singers seemed infused with life.

Notably, with such numbers as "Lorraine," from Ornette Coleman's *Tomorrow Is the Question!* (LP, Contemporary S7569), and "Shot from Guns," from Country Cooking's *14 Bluegrass Instrumentals* (LP, Rounder 006), the ASR was no less capable than my Shindos of sounding spontaneous—even raucous—when called for. The Emitter II didn't filter out the music's rough edges; with improvised music in particular, it left intact all the edge-of-the-seat randomness. And as for communicating the music's sense of touch, the differences between the Shindos and the ASR presented a *Roshomon*-like narrative comprising different versions of the same stories. Through the tubed Shindos, Tony Trischka's banjo picking on the Country Cooking LP leapt more to the fore. Yet the solid-state ASR gave a better account of the force behind Shelly Manne's floor-tom and bass-drum strokes on the Coleman album—likewise the force behind drummer Billy Higgins's brief solo flourishes in "Angel Voice," from Coleman's *Something Else!!!* (LP,

Contemporary S7551).

Both the Shindos and the ASR had the ability to bring the DeVore O/93s to life—to make the music sound awake and immediate and convincing, albeit in slightly different-sounding ways. That said, the Shindo preamp and amp did a better job of getting across the *sweep* of orchestral music, and of communicating not only the sizes of orchestras, but a sort of humanness in the ensemble playing that's hard to describe, but that kept me hanging on tighter to every note. This was notable while listening to the famously good-sounding recording of Falla's *The Three-Cornered Hat* by Ernest Ansermet and the Swiss Romande Orchestra (LP, London CS 6224). With the ASR steering the DeVores through those sinuous melodies, the music was still effective and enjoyable: the positions of solo singers were clearer, and the castanets and xylophone seemed to come from farther back on a deeper stage. Nonetheless, I found this performance more involving with the Shindos.

### Switching speakers

The time came to swap out the DeVores for my well-worn Quad ESLs, which had been charging up for a few days while tucked away in the corners of my room. I'd heard anecdotal reports of other Quad lovers—Chesky Records' David Chesky among them—getting good results with ASR amplification, so the pairing seemed a must. But because my Shindo Haut-Brion amplifier is *not* a good partner for the Quad—it lacks the global feedback necessary for a tube amplifier to accommodate the ESL's wide-ranging impedance curve (3–33 ohms) and overall capacitive nature—direct comparisons weren't practical.

In general, with the ASR driving them, I heard the snappiest bass I've ever heard from my ESLs. More than that, there was flesh and blood. There was momentum. And there was, in abundance, that hear-around thing: the combined forces of good old-fashioned clarity, and an absence of the electronic gunk that too often fills the spaces between the notes where nothing ought to be.

Surprisingly, the touch and im-

<sup>2</sup> Having a new, audio-system-only circuit installed in this room is at the top of my home-improvement to-do list—but even a quadruple outlet wouldn't have been enough for the three ASR power supplies, my Garrard 301 turntable, and the Sentec EQ11 phono preamplifier I used for this review.

pact I'd heard with the ASR-DeVore combination was little diminished through the ESLs, and very satisfying. Granted, this was in a small room, with the speakers and furniture positioned for nearfield listening (I sat about 7' from the center of each Quad), and the DeVores are capable of sounding much more forceful with recordings that suffer less compression, and of doing so in a larger space and for a larger audience. Yet when I played "Narrow Escape," from Ray LaMontagne's *Trouble* (LP, Sony Legacy 86697 39844 1)—a pop recording with an absolutely amazing drum sound—I didn't find the reproduction at all lacking.

That snare drum, which seems to have been miked somewhat distantly, had its snares engaged, but loosely—a sound we've probably all heard live a hundred times. But this recording captures that sound with Polaroid-caliber awkward truthfulness, and the ASR made that enjoyably clear. On every one of the occasional passing beats when the drummer struck or rolled one of his sticks on the floor-tom head, the sound was breathtakingly deep, touch-y, and surprisingly uncompressed. And this from *Quads*.

All of the above was with the Sentec phono preamp connected to the ASR's Direct input—which I followed up by using my lingering review loaner of the HoloAudio Spring "Kitsuné Tuned Edition" Level 3 DAC into the same inputs. (According to the ASR's operating manual, because the Direct inputs bypass the source-selector switch, the user should connect his or her sources either to inputs 1–6 or to D—but never to both, as that might result in the amplification of signals from two sources at one time, which will sound awful and perhaps even do a bit of damage.) Through this combination—new HoloAudio, new ASR, and 61-year-old Quads—an AIFF file of Hot Rize performing the late Hazel Dickens's "Won't You Come and Sing for Me," from the band's *So Long of a Journey* (CD, Sugar Hill SUG-CD-3943), was musically and sonically stunning. Spatially, the voices were believably arrayed—in the choruses, it was easy to picture lead singer Tim O'Brien and harmony singers Pete Wernick, Nick Forster, and the late Charles Sawtelle all closing in on the single omni vocal mike. And when Wernick's banjo solo rang out from stage right, the effect was electrifying. It's one of the nicest examples I've

heard of stereo trickery serving rather than distracting from the musical message. And this from *Quads*.

Julie Miller's "Ellis County," from her and Buddy Miller's *Written in Chalk* (AIFF from CD, New West NW6158), also has well-recorded drums, including a great moment at the beginning when the drummer tightens his snares just a little bit late for the first stroke, then gets a hair-raising *whap* out of the next. The ASR-Quad combo made that moment sing with believable tone and, again, a surprising amount of force. The piano, acoustic guitar, and harmonium in this track were sweetly colorful and richly textured, and the Millers' voices sounded altogether more real than I'd ever heard them: there was a sense of the singers' physicality behind every note. The performance was so effective that, at one point in the song, when the Millers sing a certain line, I found myself crying.

Around that time, my wife, Janet, came in and sat down on the couch to listen. A minute or so into "So Real," from Jeff Buckley's *Grace*, she said, "I have to tell you, this really sounds fantastic." I replied that, if God ordered me to have no other speakers but Quad ESLs for the rest of my life, I'd buy a smaller, one-box version of the Emitter II in a heartbeat. If such a thing existed.

### Conclusions & Techno-Psychological Analysis

Weeks passed. The sound of the ASR-Quad combination further ingratiated itself, aided by what seemed an opening up of the sound in the treble range: no doubt the amp was still running in. One of the last pages of notes I took on the ASR preserves this observation, made one Saturday morning: *This just gets better and better.*

Pressed to sum up the Emitter II Exclusive in a sentence or two, I'd call it a very complex product that somehow manages to sound very simple. I mean that in the best possible way. The ASR's sound was open, clear, and as inviting as an oasis, while sounding meaty, colorful, and never dry or harsh.

During my time with the Emitter II Exclusive, I tried comparing the sound of its Direct input with the sound of input 4, and input 4 with the sound of input 2. The differences were so tiny that I felt silly for wasting my time on sound instead of focusing on the music. (Still: Through the Direct in-

put, voices and instruments seemed to step forward an inch or two, as those sounds seem to do when a component is switched from inverted to correct signal polarity.) For the same reason, I stayed with ASR's factory-default input impedance (22k ohms)—not to mention the factory-default volume setting at which the amp switches automatically from energy-saving mode to full-power mode, the factory-default setting for a high-frequency compensation circuit that increases amplifier stability into difficult loads, and the factory-default display-brightness setting. Nor did I play around with the remote, buttons on which allow the user to set all inputs so that no source is louder or quieter than the rest, and to adjust channel balance, and so forth.

In terms of user functions, there's even more that the ASR can do: page after page of more. As my colleagues know I'm fond of saying, this is a review, not an owner's manual, and the only people who want or need the latter are those who already have the product in front of them. Suffice it to say, the Emitter II Exclusive is more than just a great-sounding, distinctly musical-sounding amp—it's a well-thought-out product with a massive amount of documentation.

There's just so much one can say in 4000 words. Still, something about this very distinctive amplifier brought out the techno-psychologist in me. The ASR amp strikes me as the product of someone who has, throughout his life, given a great deal of thought to the playback of recorded music, and has consequently developed for himself an *intense* approach to listening. This person is thorough, detail-oriented, and probably punctual. As a child, he

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no doubt spent a lot of time listening to records with friends and/or members of his extended family, and paid close attention to their listening styles as well as to the details of their playback gear. His passion for music was probably nourished by borrowing records from his fellow listeners, and he was surely generous in lending out his own records.

These qualities are apparent because this product is both unapproachable—it is very big, very heavy, very expensive, and perhaps not easy to find in most parts of the world—yet uniquely attractive, and loaded with features designed to *accommodate*. The operating manual supplied with the Emitter II Exclusive follows the same pattern: It is long (24 pages without a lot of blank space

between the paragraphs) and very, very dense. Yet, like almost every facet of the amp itself, its every page shouts *I've made this just for you and I really hope you'll like it*.

I did.

I wasn't kidding when I said I'd probably buy this amp if I had the money and the room—special emphasis on the latter, seeing as how big houses are even more expensive than big amplifiers. And this amp requires a *lot* of space. It didn't run at all hot, and none of its four boxes made even a mouse's sigh of noise. But you'll want access to its rear panel, for plugging and unplugging different sources as needed. You'll also want to unplug those power supplies from time to time—during thunderstorms, or when

you have to clean them—and all those umbilicals are heavy and inflexible, the power cords almost as much so. These are not products that can be squeezed into a rack of modest size, with their rear panels a couple of inches from the wall behind them. They need room.

The ASR Emitter II Exclusive is unlike any other audio product of my experience—and I've experienced a lot. I can't recall a single other product designed and built with so much *love*—not for everyone, but for the relatively few listeners at whom it is aimed. It's like the lover whom not everyone finds attractive, or compelling, or companionable—yet in the heart of that lover's intended, no one else will do. ■

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