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Audio Video

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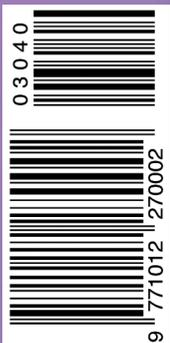


Looking
Back!
2009 Feature



MUSICAL REVELATION

Halcro DM10 Pre-Amp & DM38 Power Amp



Issue 237 ■ R24 Incl VAT



ON DISC • POP, JAZZ AND CLASSICAL

- Norah Jones • Queen • Rod Stewart • Enigma • Leona Lewis •
- Mango Groove • Jet • Guy Buttery • Okayan ...and more!



Gentle Giants

HALCRO DM10 & DM38



Every once in a while, some audio kit finds its way into my listening room that is so absorbing, so thoroughly involving, that I find myself putting everything else aside, simply to listen, and to enjoy.

Frankly, it's not a common occurrence – and perhaps more so because modern timetables and deadlines mitigate against such indulgences. It takes something of extraordinary capability to force me away from the

usual mountain of commitments for any extended period of time.

If that sounds like the confession of a callous reviewer, it's not: I do set up, break in, listen, annotate and eventually write a review on everything AV that comes my way. But sometimes, as in this case, I find it difficult to tear myself away from the equipment installed.

The equipment in question is from Halcro, an Australian high-end audio maker, which in itself sounds

incongruous. And the key figure behind these particular Halcro components is Bruce Candy, an ex-South African who is said to be working on a new flagship product after a sabbatical from the brand he founded.

The Halcro DM10 pre-amp and DM38 power amp are not new – they've been doing the rounds in high-end circles for a good few years. I've even had the opportunity to hear them in other systems on

Cover Feature



occasion. But when the chance arose to try them in my own environment, I wasn't going to say no.

It's almost a high-end tradition that esoteric equipment is endowed with aesthetics and a physical presence to match the price tag.

Certainly, the Halcro kit looks outlandish and imposing, although much of its appearance has been determined by sound engineering principles, rather than fashion appeal.

In the case of the DM-38, the H-shaped enclosure houses key electronics in four separate enclosures, with the output stages in the vertical legs, and the switching and power supply elements in the horizontal crossbars.

The DM38 provides for both balanced and single-ended modes, as well as a so-called current-mode RCA input, set which is said to offer benefits in terms of noise rejection. Industrial-grade binding posts

provide a high-quality speaker cable connection.

The design expresses Candy's almost obsessive fight against distortion, which is claimed to be virtually immeasurable. Just how this is achieved falls outside the limited scope of this review, but the design principles of the amp are well documented.

The matching DM10 pre-amp looks a bit like a scaled-down version of the DM38, with similar 'legs' ►

Cover Feature

on either side of two horizontal casings. Like the power amp, there is significant emphasis on reducing distortion to extremely low levels.

As one would expect, the input choices include balanced and single-ended, with the latter again catering for both voltage and current-biased connections.

The inputs are numbered, but can be assigned to display the input name, or even the name of the source connected.

For vinyl fans, the good news is that the DM10 includes an excellent, configurable phono stage.

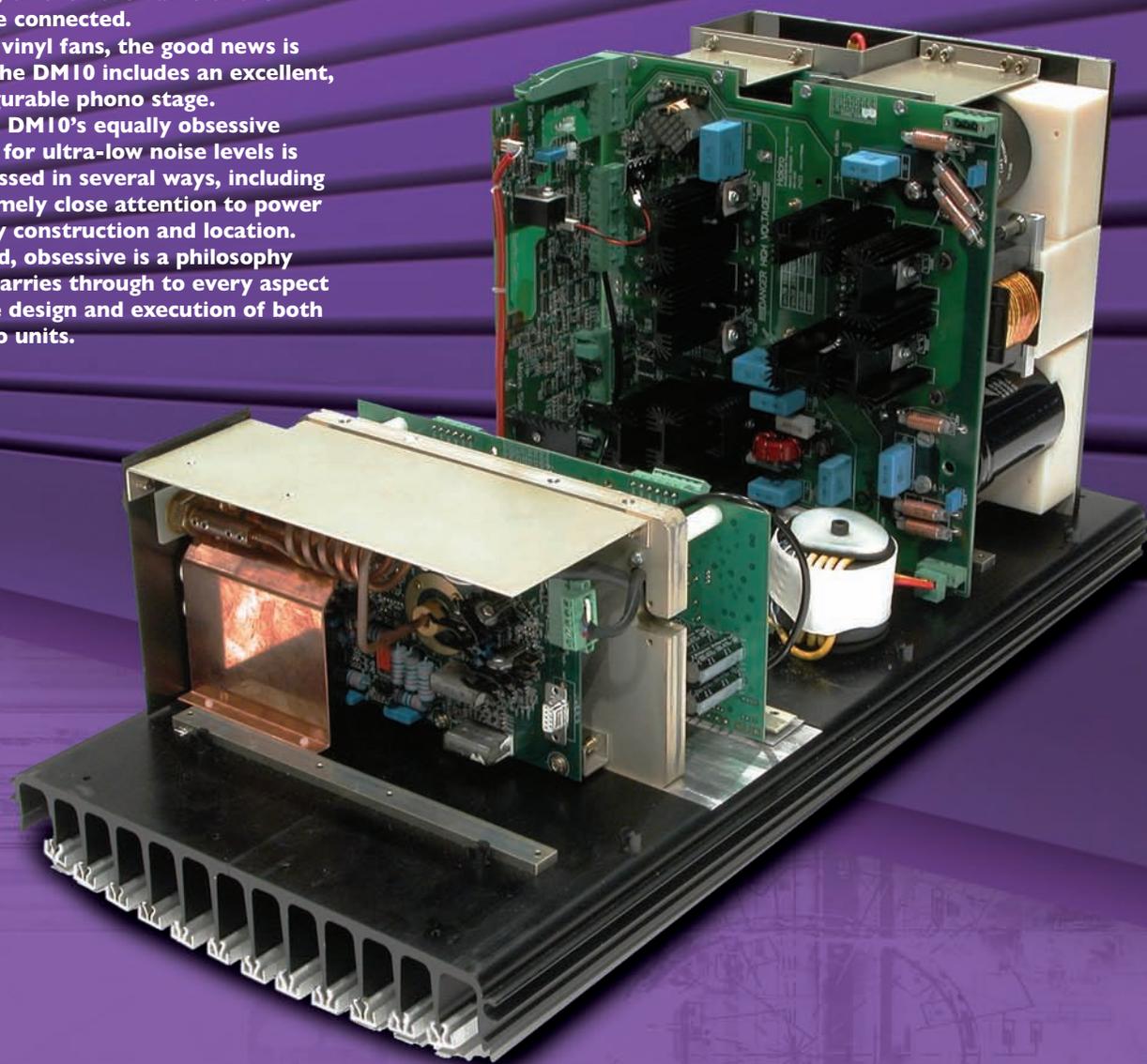
The DM10's equally obsessive quest for ultra-low noise levels is expressed in several ways, including extremely close attention to power supply construction and location. Indeed, obsessive is a philosophy that carries through to every aspect of the design and execution of both Halcro units.

As a quick aside, Halcro is the (rather unusual) middle name of company founder and chief designer Candy, which perhaps expresses his close relationship with these components.

The exact technical execution of the Halcros is well documented, and

perhaps thus falls outside the scope of this review. Instead, let's focus on their sonic capabilities, which became increasingly beguiling during their time in my system.

The units provided for review were well used, and required no break-in time. They were accompanied by



my usual reference components, consisting of Vivid Audio VI.5 speakers, an Esoteric Audio UX-3SE universal deck, a Linn LP12/Ittok/Ortofon Kontrapunkt B record deck, and a mix of XLO and Nordost cabling.

The performance of the Halcros initially appears lacklustre and ordinary. Given their physical presence and weight, the expectation is of a similar sonic signature: larger than life, impressive, perhaps even a little overbearing.

Instead, the music is delivered with an understated, deceptive ease that only becomes truly apparent once you've spent a bit of quality time in the listening chair. And perhaps music is the key word here: its ebbs and flows, its emotional content, and the ambient context of the recording are all faithfully represented.

The level of fine detail extracted by the Halcros has to be one of the core reasons behind the growing sense of revelation as you listen to recordings you though you know well. Those nuances inflections add a musical truth and intention that often I had not noticed before.

A new, pristine vinyl copy of 'Jazz At The Pawnshop' on the Proprius label proved to be the perfect example. I've heard the recording hundreds, perhaps even thousands of times, in myriad systems. But here, the music had a liquidity, an unencumbered flow and a resulting accessibility that was quite astounding.

Of course, the inherent clarity and purpose of the Halcros has other sonic benefits. Transparency makes for an open and inviting soundstage that ensures a great degree of accessibility. The staging never sounds exaggerated, but appears to accurately reflect the scope and the scale of the original recording.

The intimacy of Carol Kidd's trio-backed jazz vocals were as astutely and honestly delivered

as the towering scale and majesty of the Gunter Wand-led NDR Symphony Orchestra delivering Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony in full cry.

Talking of which, dynamics and sheer pace were executed with verve and agility, but again, were determined by the musical performance, rather than any electronic interpretation by the components in the system.

And that, to me, is the critical difference between the Halcros and many other pre-amps and power amps: the Halcros are perfect, non-intrusive hosts to the musical original, simply facilitating the listening process, rather than contributing to, or detracting from it.

Of course, that definition defines the ultimate purpose of audio design, but in truth, most components I've reviewed reveal a sonic signature that impacts – sometimes subtly, sometimes significantly – on the overall sound of the music.

In those terms, the Halcros could be accused of some tonal detachment, although one could argue that the warmth and richness so often advocated by valve supporters are artefacts not present during the original performance.

The Halcro DM10 and DM38 prove that electronics can extract the essence and the musicality of a performance without contributing or detracting. Their sense of precision and musical élan is the result of allowing music and listener to engage in a dialogue that is uncannily direct and convincing.

From a reference perspective, those attributes place the Halcros at the highest level.

Word has it that Candy is working on a new flag ship product that will push the boundaries of audio even further. Improving on the lofty standards of the existing units is likely to be the sternest challenge of all.

Deon Schoeman

■ Vital Stats ■

HALCRO DM10

Input impedance 10 kOhm
Output impedance
 170 ohm(voltage mode)
 30 kOhm (current mode).
DistortionUnmeasurable below noise floor
InputsVoltage mode:
 3x RCA, 3x XLR.
 Current mode: 1x RCA.
 RIAA phono: 1x RCA, 1x XLR
OutputsVoltage mode:
 2x RCA sets, 2x XLR sets,
 both bridgeable.
 Current mode:
 2x RCA sets, one bridgeable.
Dimensions (WxDxH)
448x400x240 mm
Weight23 kg

HALCRO DM38

Power output:180 watts
 (8 ohm, resistive).
 350 watts (4 ohm, resistive)
 THD<-110 dB (<3000 parts/billion)
 up to 20 kHz (100 kHz B.W.)
 at 350 watts into 4 ohm.
Slew rate-100V/μs
Single-ended inputsVoltage mode
 RCAs, 10 kOhm.
 Current mode RCAs, 60 ohm
Balanced inputs.....Voltage mode
 XLRs, 10 kOhm
OutputsSpeaker binding posts
Dimensions (HxWxD)
790x400x400 mm
Weight55 kg
PRICE
 DM10R170 000
 DM38R220 000

VERDICT

Ultra-quiet, ultra-refined and yet incisive and supremely poised, authoritative delivery from this amplification duo. A singular lack of signature or 'electronic' presence allows unencumbered flow of musicality. Utter transparency makes choice of ancillaries critical.

SUPPLIED BY

Vivid Audio
 0861 4VIVID

WEBSITE

www.halcro.com