



Little wonder

Don't be fooled by its petite exterior, this new integrated may be small in stature but it's certainly not in sound, says **David Price**

How times change! I can vividly remember the launch of the Exposure X, way back in the late eighties. It was something of a big deal back in those days among those of us that followed British hi-fi closely. Exposure, lest we forget, had made something of a name for itself during that decade for extremely large, powerful and punchy solid-state pre and power amplification. Many people bought them to drive Linn Isobariks, for example, which were not exactly an easy load. Yet then came along the company's first ever integrated, selling for around £400 in 1988. How we all marvelled at the prospect of owning something with

the infamous brand name on it, that was so small and room friendly. All of which goes to highlight just how much the hi-fi world has moved on a generation or so later. The XM5 you see here is half the size of the classic X, and yet it is considerably more versatile. Interestingly however – unlike manufacturers such as Cyrus – the company hasn't gone down the Class D route to get the amplifier to deliver decent amounts of power from its diminutive dimensions. Indeed, this integrated is 'old-school' Class AB, putting out a claimed 60W RMS per channel into 8ohm. When you listen to it, that doesn't seem a wildly unrealistic claim, either. The XM5 doesn't even use MOSFET power

DETAILS
PRODUCT
 Exposure XM5
ORIGIN
 UK
TYPE
 Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
 5kg
DIMENSIONS
 (WxHxD)
 218 x 89 x 363mm
FEATURES
 • Quoted power output: 2x 60W RMS (8ohm)
 • Analogue inputs: RCA line; AV bypass; MM phono
 • Digital inputs: USB-B; 2x Toslink; 2x BNC coaxial
 • Preamp output
DISTRIBUTOR
 Exposure Electronics Ltd.
TELEPHONE
 01273 423877
WEBSITE
 exposurehifi.com

modules, relying instead on good old-fashioned bipolar output transistors – in this case from Toshiba, a brand which is synonymous with reliability and consistency. Exposure says that Class AB via discrete transistors is its speciality, so why change? As the company's full-size separates have already demonstrated, excellent sound quality can be achieved this way. I am a big fan of the 2010S2 integrated (*HFC* 401), and the XM5 shares much of its DNA. To wit, it has an 'as large as the case will permit' 200VA custom-made toroidal power transformer delivering the juice, with cascode circuitry for improved power supply immunity. The transformer is bolted to the aluminium casework, alongside the main circuit board with its high-quality resistors and capacitors. The preamplifier section has its own rear panel output via a pair of RCA sockets, and there's a direct fixed level AV input. Alongside this, there's a moving-magnet phono section (quoted sensitivity is 2.5mV), and another line input. There's also a Wolfson DAC fitted under the hood, with two BNC inputs, two Toslink optical and one Class 2 USB input. The latter allows PCM up to 24/192 and DSD64 while the remaining digital inputs run PCM-only up to 32/192. In use, the Exposure is easy enough to fathom. Because there's only the

space on the extruded aluminium front panel, there's no room for a rotary input control, so instead input selection is done with left/right push buttons with LEDs to denote the source. In these days of OLED displays, it all feels a bit nineties when it comes to operation, although it works perfectly well. The volume control and switchgear have a fairly smooth and slick action, although they're not in the Marantz league when it comes to silkiness. The supplied remote control wins no prizes for ergonomics, and feels rather plasticky, but it does the job. The BNC sockets fitted to the rear panel in lieu of standard RCA digital coaxials are chosen – says Exposure – for sound quality reasons, but many buyers will find themselves needing to buy an adapter.

Sound quality
 For someone that has spent time with the full-size Exposure 2010S2, the XM5 is – as George W Bush liked to say – “*deja vu* all over again”. There's something eerily familiar about its character, just as you'd expect considering that the XM5 is basically a 2010S2 that has shrunk in the wash. Sonically it's only a little less large and fractionally less juicy. It has a rich, powerful and musical sound that really does the business in terms of rhythm. Every type of music that you

put through this amplifier sounds bouncy, like its got springs in its soles. Having just played with a very good integrated at twice the price, I am surprised to discover that the XM5 sounds better in many ways. It's not perfect, of course, but it searches out the musicality of any recording like a heat-seeking missile. Take The Orb's *Little Fluffy Clouds*, for example. This is a classic piece of early ambient house and is basically sampled lyrics set over a sparse beat, with various synthesiser doodlings accompanying it. The XM5 locks onto the interplay between the bass line, snares and hi-hat (all electronic, of course) instantly and frames the whole song around this. It's amazing just how flat this track can be through most integrations at this price, but the Exposure absolutely transforms things. Indeed it is good dynamically – especially with those small accents that really make the mix come alive. In terms of overall power and absolute dynamics it is obviously limited and it runs out of puff at high volume levels in a large room – but very few will be using it in this way. For most listening, most of the time, it's more than punchy enough and the sheer brio with which it makes music creates the illusion of it being far more powerful than it really is.

One of the key aspects of this is the bass. The XM5 is well endowed low down – all the more so considering its small size. It feels like a miniature 'muscle amp', rather than an asset-stripped larger one. The Orb's thumping baselines are wonderfully gutsy, the Exposure giving a barrel-chested sort of presentation that belies its diddy dimensions. True, it's just a tad loose compared with some other full-size integrations, but not much, and the apparent ease with which it can summon the pump to make things really hit home is most satisfying. This is no less apparent

when I switch to some fulsome, sumptuous sounding jazz funk courtesy of James Taylor Quartet's *Keep The Dream Alive*. It's a great mid-noughties Acid Jazz recording and very warm sounding. The XM5 carries it with great skill, really throwing the listener right into the music in a immersive and engrossing way. Bass is powerful, fluid and tuneful, and again my ear is drawn to the stick work of the drummer, as the snare punches the song along. The cymbals sound beautiful for an amplifier of this price, very silky and

Sonically it's only a little less large and fractionally less juicy than the 2010S2

sweet – shimmering nicely in the warm glow of this exquisite recording. This track does, however, bring one particular characteristic of the XM5's performance to my attention. This isn't meant as a criticism bearing in mind its affordable price tag – more of an observation. While the amp sets up a nice, wide soundstage and pushes instruments confidently out of the loudspeakers, it doesn't do particularly well when it comes to depth perspective. There's quite a two-dimensional sound, the XM5 not really serving up the cave-like recorded acoustic that some more expensive designs manage to muster. In this, it's quite like the 2010S2 – and simply proof that it's mortal like the rest of us. The XM5 sound is very much about power, punch, rhythm and tonal richness – but it doesn't really major on recreating huge recorded acoustics. *The Rhythm Divine* by The Associates is next on; this is a classic piece of late eighties synthesised pop that has a big sound that the XM5

The downside of those reduced dimensions is there's no room for a display

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

David Denyer
Exposure Hi-Fi PR



DP: What type of buyer would you say the XM5 is aimed at?

DD: This new compact Exposure amplifier has been designed for buyers who want a unit that can do most things, without taking up the same amount of room as conventional hi-fi separates. These days, many modern hi-fi users do not want a living room or office full of boxes. It's half-width because a full-width unit is too big for some and a small unit is more flexible for positioning. Still, the smaller dimensions of the unit do not compromise performance.

What is the design philosophy behind the XM5?

The circuitry is based partly on the popular Exposure 2010S2 integrated amplifier – which is the staple of our separates range – but it necessarily has a lower power output due to the space constraints of the case. We have chosen a conventional Class AB design, and use discrete power output transistors instead of MOSFETs. We believe this to sound better – indeed all our amplifiers except for the original 2010 have been bipolar from day one, and it works very well for us.

The digital section is based on the 2010S2's DSD DAC; it uses the respected Wolfson WM8742 chip, which has a fine reputation for sound quality across a wide range of source material in both PCM and DSD. The power supply uses a high-quality toroidal transformer; we get good performance from these and therefore see no real reason to change things.

Are there more XMs coming out?

Later this year will see the new XM9 mono power amplifier, and matching XM7 preamplifier launched. Alongside the existing XM5 integrated amplifier, that will make a total of four components in the range as there is a partnering XM3 phono stage already available offering high quality sound from both moving-coil and moving-magnet cartridges.



The XM5 is half the size of Exposure's classic X amp

appears to enjoy recreating. It pushes far out stage left and right, and that strong, grumbling bass underwrites the proceedings beautifully. Here you can really appreciate its fine tonality; although a little on the warm side, it's not syrupy enough to lose the strikingly distinctive sound of singer Billy Mackenzie's voice. Many amplifiers at this price can descend into hardness with this, but not the Exposure – which carries it with a pleasing purity of tone. This amp reveals itself to be good at detail too,

Although it is lacking in absolute clarity and doesn't have the spatial accuracy of some of its rivals, it never fails to turn in a rich, warm, pleasing sound that gets right into the musical groove and never lets go.

Conclusion

This is very much an audiophile integrated amplifier that just happens to be small, rather than a 'lifestyle' product masquerading as separates hi-fi. Sonically it owes very much to the full-size Exposure amplifiers, which means that it has a great start in life. It's surprisingly versatile too, and nicely presented.

My only gripe is that it's not quite as ergonomically pure or as pretty as some other half-width designs currently available, such as the Cyrus ONE (HFC 417). Although not in any way ugly, it's no looker. If this isn't an issue for you, then you will be charmed by the new Exposure XM5 – it's a joy to set ears on ●



Costing £700, the Cyrus ONE (HFC 417) is a good deal cheaper than the Exposure XM5 and wouldn't normally be considered a rival. Yet it sounds excellent at its price, and is a feature-packed half-width integrated amplifier from a brand that's been around nearly as long as Exposure. It shows up the XM5 for its relatively poor ergonomics; the Exposure isn't bad but the Cyrus is superb. Also, it sports a Bluetooth input – hardly the last word in sound, but very handy. Sonically, it's a fair way behind as you'd expect, but still turns in a big, punchy and enjoyable sound. It's not the equal of the XM5, but then few small amps are.

The XM5 sound is all about power, punch, rhythm and tonal richness

throwing out a very fair sprinkling, which makes the song seem all the more alive. Interestingly, on lesser integrateds, this track can turn into something of a dirge, plodding along in a somewhat frumpy way rhythmically. Needless to say, this isn't the case here as the XM5 offers up a really engrossing and truly arresting rendition.

In absolute terms, the Exposure isn't the best integrated that money can buy of course, but the great thing is that it covers its tracks so well. You can put pretty much any type of music on – across all of its sources – and it sounds really good. Both the DAC and moving-magnet inputs are not there just to make up the numbers, and this makes the overall package even better value for money.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Wonderfully musical sound for its size and price

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Not really an ergonomic or aesthetic triumph

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Excellent, fully featured compact integrated amplifier

FEATURES



OVERALL

