



PS Audio BHK Signature 250

Bascom H. King is a hi-fi legend. If you haven't heard of him, you may have come across some of the amplifiers he's designed for brands that include Constellation Audio, Marantz, Infinity and Conrad Johnson.

His latest creation was commissioned by Boulder, Colorado-based PS Audio, a company with roots in innovative audio stretching back to the early 1970s. The new amplifier (two, actually, if you count in the monoblock version) is notable for several reasons.

Firstly, it's the first amplifier deemed good enough by King to bear his initials (BHK). Secondly, it's a hybrid design that links a valve-based input stage to a MOSFET output stage, at a time when much of the focus in amplifier development is focussed on variations on the Class D, switched-mode power supply genre.

It's also the first power amplifier from the PS Audio since the now defunct HCA-2 (an ahead-of-its time Class D switch-mode amp) and the pure solid-state Classic 250, both dating back to the early 2000s, as well as the GCA Series amps, which incidentally were also hybrids, linking a Class A solid state input stage to a Class D power output stage.

It's interesting then that the amplifier now being touted by PS Audio as almost without peer features a tube-based input stage, combined with a solid-state output stage. Does it tell you something about Class D switch-mode designs? I think it does ...

What is indisputable is that Bascom H. King has seen it all and done it all in a career spanning half a century. And if King believes that the BHK Signature 250 stereo power amplifier represents every-

thing he's been aspiring too, then the chances are it's going to be something special.

Having been spoilt by a succession of new-generation, lightweight switch-mode amplifiers from the likes of Wadia, Classé and McIntosh Labs, manhandling the PS Audio into our listening room and onto a spike-coupled plinth felt like a blast from the past. At close on 37 kg it's a hefty beast that can make grown men cry, and chiropractors clap their hands in glee.

The casework reflects PS Audio's current design language, which is attractive in a form-follows-function kind of way. At least the heatsinking is internal and the corners are rounded, so you don't end up with post-installation bleeding knuckles ...

The all-metal enclosure is crowned by a glossy acrylic top, while substantial, isolating feet locate it sturdily on what



had better be a strong, solid surface.

Those familiar with PS Audio components will recognise the blue square logo on the otherwise plain faceplate that acts both as a power-on switch and indicator light.

Things get a little busier at the rear: a choice of RCA single-ended or XLR balanced inputs, an IEC power socket, and two sets of binding posts for each channel, which will please those with dual runs of fat speaker cables for bi-wiring purposes.

The overall impression is smart and upper class, with a definite emphasis on the kind of solid, reassuring engineering that speaks of care and quality. There aren't any frills, because there's no need for them.

According to PS Audio, the BHK Signature's valve input stage features matched pairs of Russian-made Genelax Gold Lion 6922 triodes that are self-biased with constant current and high voltage. Without the need for introducing negative feedback, timing and phase distortion are no longer an issue, while the valves remain electrically isolated from the power output stage.

However, tubes can't offer the power, speed and authority of solid state designs – which is why the BHK signature adopts a hybrid approach, benefiting from the purity, delicacy and richness of the valve input stage, while delivering it with the punch, gusto and impetus of a MOSFET-based solid-state output stage.

PS Audio claims MOSFETs sound better than bipolar transistors, and sound more like tubes than transistors, making for an easier sonic transition from tube to solid state. The BHK Signature employs low-distortion N-type MOSFETs only in the interests of lucidity and consistency.

While it is a hybrid power amplifier, the BHK Signature treats the input stage and output stage as two independent entities, each with its own power supply and power regulation. Particular attention was paid to signal path purity, with passive circuit components hand-selected for performance and sonic integrity, and then hand-soldered onto the circuit boards – there are no surface-mounted parts.

The result is an amplifier featuring a level of bespoke attention to detail

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unusual even at much higher price points, and with a focus on absolute fidelity that suggests exceptional musicality. The best way to find out? Take a listen!

The BHK Signature reviewed here arrived brand new – even the official importer had not laid eyes on it – and I proceeded to run the amplifier in, with sporadic listening sessions confirming that progress was indeed being made. However, let me warn any prospective buyers up front: this amp needs time to settle in.

In my opinion, 200 hours should be the absolute minimum before you can expect the BHK Signature to approach anything close to its full potential, even though the PS Audio team recommend 100 hours. By the time I finally had to send the power amp back, it had amassed around 320 hours, and I felt that it was still improving.

Thus, the comments in this review should be read in that context, with most of the listening notes compiled at about 250 hours or so. They were balmy hours,

VITAL STATS

Power output per channel250 watts (8 ohms), 500 watts (4 ohms)
Frequency response10 Hz - 20 kHz ($\pm 0,1$ dB)
Signal-to-noise ratio <-85 dBV (100 Hz - 20 kHz)
Inputs1x stereo XLR, 1x stereo RCA
Outputs2x gold-plated binding post sets per channel
Power consumption75 watts (standby), 175 watts (idle)
Dimensions (WxHxD)434 x 221 x 356 mm
Weight37,6 kg

PriceR113 000

Verdict

Effortless control and authority allow a fleet-footed, engaging delivery without imposing a specific sonic signature. Purity meets power to deliver unfettered musicality.

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OUR RATING: 92 / 100





too: the big amp runs fairly warm, and I was glad that it had been installed in a free-standing position, with plenty of air around the chassis.

Its extended tenure in the *AV Magazine* listening room also meant that the BHK Signature was partnered with a variety of components during that time. Notably, I was able to hook it up to several different loudspeakers, ranging from the magnificent GoldenEar Technology Triton Ones and our regular, engaging KEF R500s to the lush Sonus Faber Chameleon T floorstanders.

In some ways, the BHK Signature sounds like it looks: big and muscular, with loads of authority and control, but with an unexpected penchant for grace, delicacy and detail. It's the sonic equivalent of an iron fist in a velvet glove: loads of pace and momentum, but without wanting to ram the music down your throat!

Indeed, here is a gentle giant of an amplifier that pays close, deferent attention to fine details and nuances without relinquishing any control or focus. It's also very, very quick, showing a turn of pace that allowed it to easily reflect the rhythm and sparkle of the music.



The power amp displayed a generous tonal approach that convincingly reflected the full spectrum, with a believable sense of tonal equilibrium that derived from the amp's smooth, consistently linear progression.

There was no specific bias towards a richer midband, sleeker trebles or a more pronounced sub-bass: the BHK Signature simply sounded authentic and inviting,

and it never sounded as if it had to try too hard. Instead, the sound was easy, approachable and, eventually, beguiling.

In fact, the BHK Signature is deceptive in its ability to extract and express the essence and the soul of the music: it's performance wasn't impressive in the hi-fi club, test-record sense of the word. Instead, it preferred to facilitate a close and increasingly captivating rapport between the listener and the music.

Keith Richards sounds every inch the irreverent, timeless rocker that he is on his solo effort, *Crossseyed Heart* (FLAC 96/24). On 'Nothing On Me', his gravelly vocals commanded centre stage, with their gravelly intensity easily, believably captured.

The fuzz-edged guitar on the left was real and immediate, while the slam and punch of the drum kit could be felt as much as heard. And yet, the intimacy of the ensemble, the closeness of the sonic space, and the easy flow of the music was recreated with such verve and believability that I ended up listening not to just a few passages, or the track, but the entire album. That's what the BHK Signature does to you.

Effortless is a good word to describe this power amp, because it has an ability to serve up its sonic wares with such relaxed grace that it's easy to underestimate the control and authority at work here. It

Associated Equipment

Primare PRE32 pre-amp with MM30 media board
13-inch MacBook Pro/1,7 GHz Core i7/8 GB RAM/OSX Mavericks
Ayre QB-9 USB DAC
PS Audio DirectStream DAC
Esoteric Audio UX-03SE universal deck
Oppo BDP-95EU universal deck
KEF R500 loudspeakers
GoldenEar Technologies Triton One
Sonus faber Chameleon T

Software

Keith Richards - *Crossseyed Heart* (EMI FLAC 96/24)
Bruch - *Violin Concerto No.1* - Jascha Heifetz/Malcolm Sargent
New Symphony Orchestra of London (RCA Living Stereo
FLAC 176,4/24)
Ryan Adams - *Ryan Adams* (Blue Note FLAC 96/24)
Leonard Cohen - *Can't Forget* - (Columbia FLAC 44,1/16)



never has to push or shove to project the music, never gets in the way of the music's natural pace and flow, yet always provides the vital momentum to capture the full energy and presence of the performance.

The majestic, sonically panoramic recording of Jascha Heifetz performing Max Bruch's *Violin Concerto No. 1* (RCA Living Stereo FLAC 176,4/24) presented a sterner challenge, but the BHK didn't even raise a sweat, allowing the passion and power of the solo violin to shine with a bright, evocative intensity.

The tonal balance here was rich, accurately reflecting the recording's warmer bias, but never at the expense of insight, pace or dynamics. And while the amp's delivery was laced with a sense of precision, of layers laid bare and details revealed, there was nothing clinical about the process — quite simply, the BHK Signature was able to grasp the essence of the performance, and present the result with conviction.

In the process, it effortlessly (there's that word again) transported the listener into the concert hall. That ability to immerse the listener into the core and essence of the music, to evoke a level of

emotional reaction usually only achieved when experiencing music live, was a stand-out feature of this amplifier.

Scale and dimension, so key to the believability of an audio system, were as effortlessly rendered as the tonal breadth, the dynamics and the precision of the delivery. But again, there was no sense of hyperbole, of creating something larger than life. The sound picture sounded just as big or as intimate as it needed to be.

I'd suggest that a big part of the PS Audio amp's appeal is vested in a sound that isn't solid state or tube-biased in the conventional sense, and in fact isn't electronic at all. Its treatment of tone and timbre, of pace and momentum is so natural, so sonically intuitive, that the act of listening to hi-fi is inexorably replaced by the joy of listening to music.

It's a trait that's hard to explain, because if you're expecting the BHK Signature to blow you away with arresting dynamics and three-dimensional soundstaging, with blistering intensity and ultra-fast transients, you may be disappointed.

That's not because it doesn't achieve

all of the above, and more, but because this power amp contextualises all that is hi-fi within a musically truthful framework. The result is an emotional connection rare in a genre where detail and impact are often deemed more important than the bigger picture.

It's that inherent musicality, that ability to seek out, explore and present the essence of a performance, that also allows the BHK Signature to translate anything from rock to rococo baroque, from jazz to jive, with equal believability and aplomb.

Yes, it's all things that you'd expect of a top-flight amplifier: powerful and precise, fast and dynamic, generous in its staging and close in its focus. But its ability to translate those elements into a musically coherent and consistently compelling performance is what sets the PS Audio BHK Signature apart from any other power amp I've listened to. I sense a classic in the making.

Deon Schoeman