

A BOLD THESIS

What happens when Heed Audio's latest electronics meet PMC's newest loudspeaker?
Ed Selley has fun finding out



As locations go, Budapest and Bedfordshire don't have a lot in common. Aside from both being a nice spot for a weekend away, it's easier to cite the differences between the twin cities on the Danube and the quiet corner of the Home Counties. While they may not share much in the way of culture, what you see here is the result of a shared expertise and appreciation of great hi-fi.

Heed Audio's output has been deeply influenced by the designs and expertise of the late and much-missed Richard Hay whose Ion Audio Obelisk was the basis for Heed's original product and who continued to consult and represent the brand until his untimely death in 2012. Heed hasn't sat around feeling sorry for itself, though. The Thesis range is the latest to bear the Heed name and represents a move into uncharted territory.

The Thesis range comprises Alpha preamplifier with Pi external power supply and a pair of Omega monoblock power amplifiers – a phono stage is also available. Heed has never been a company to divide the responsibilities of components up in the 'normal' way and the Thesis models haven't seen a sudden nod to tradition. To this end, the Alpha

COMPONENTS

HEED ALPHA PREAMP £2,850

The Alpha combines digital and analogue inputs in a single chassis and can be used with and without an external power supply, which can provide a separate power source for the analogue section.

HEED PI POWER SUPPLY £1,600

The Pi is designed to provide a clean source of power for the Alpha and the Phi phono stage at the same time.

HEED OMEGA MONOBLOCK POWER AMP £1,750

The Omega monoblock takes Heed's trademark AC-coupled design principle to new levels and claims up to 160W of output with impedance handling down to an impressive 1.6ohms.

PMC TWENTY.26 £5,750

The largest member of the twenty series, the 26 keeps the tweeter and 6.5in midbass from the twenty.24, but increases the size of the cabinet and adds a 50mm soft dome midrange.



is fitted with analogue inputs as you might expect, but also has a quartet of digital inputs including the all-important 24/192kHz-capable asynchronous USB connection. This allows the Alpha to front a computer audio system with no conventional source beyond a Mac or PC.

The Pi power supply uses a heady combination of over specified components from the major brands in the business like Mundorf and Airlink to deliver an entirely stable and massively over specified supply of electricity to the Alpha and the Phi phono stage. Adding the Pi and Phi not only adds to your Greek alphabet, but also gives your system the coolest upgrade it can possibly have – sleek little boxes with no discernible function to the uninitiated.

Take the strain

The Omega power amps almost add to the 'mystery box' count, but the cutouts and visible heat sinks are fairly obvious clues that these are amplifiers and furthermore amplifiers that takes Heed into new areas and power delivery levels, although they retain the AC-coupled design that Heed is famous for. Each Omega claims up to 160Ws and is stable to 1.6ohms, which should allow the Thesis equipment to be used in a

variety of setups without any obvious signs of strain.

The Bedfordshire connection arrives in the form of PMC's twenty.26, the largest member of the 20 Series. As well as gaining a few inches on its smaller stablemates, the single biggest change to the 26 is the fitment of the 50mm dome midrange – a driver that I associate almost wholly with PMC. This is a difficult driver to produce and integrating it requires an

The PMC has an innate grasp of deep, fast and completely believable bass

intimate rather than passing understanding of crossover construction. The 26 also benefits from PMC's work in the National Physics Laboratory, which involved both serious science and for the rest of us the unbridled joy at the idea of firing lasers at loudspeakers.

As a partnership, the Bedfordshire/Budapest axis begins to make sense even before it plays a note. In both cases, the equipment used is undoubtedly the product of their respective concerns, but there is an additional layer of civility that makes

Above left: Unmistakably a Heed product, the Thesis range manages to feel more grown up than some compact models

Above: Extensive and useful connectivity is divided up in a slightly unorthodox but effective fashion

Above far right: The twenty.26 plays almost perfectly to the strengths of the Thesis components

them happier objects to place in any room remotely concerned with aesthetics. The Thesis boxes are unmistakably Heed; they are the unique Heed size and the mix of digital and analogue connections on the preamp and use of external power supplies is completely in-keeping with the brand philosophy. At the same time, they feel weighty and very special to use and the new styling is really rather lovely. The twenty series has been around a little longer and we've grown more familiar with their appearance, but if you consider them with a fresh eye the way that PMC has ensured they are unmistakably its handiwork while at the same time producing a speaker with some of the best proportions and styling out there is really rather clever.

Crank it up

Mute appreciation will only get you so far, though. In the rather lovely surroundings of the main demo room at HiFi Lounge – strengthening the Bedfordshire connection – which kindly accommodated the system and me, the overwhelming urge is to sit back and listen, and with my laptop connected and the Heed USB driver installed, a quick blast of Richard Thompson's *Stoney Ground* reveals a system that is highly distinctive, but

harnesses the attributes of both speakers and electronics to produce something that is deeply impressive.

The most tangible way that this manifests itself is the way that an impressive scale and effortlessness is combined with enough drive and attack to make music sound right. Thompson's backing musicians have a tremendous presence because, like him, they're unambiguously full sized and arranged in an endlessly believable way behind him. Indeed 'presence' features time and time again in my notes with this system and the reason for this is the manner of how the electronics and speakers work with one another.

Liquid refreshment

I shall avoid the cliché of saying that the Heeds sound 'valve like' because they don't. What they have is an almost liquid quality to their presentation that can take any piece of music and add a veneer of civility that aids listening without affecting the overall drive and attack let alone robbing the piece of any detail. The decision to place the DAC inside the Alpha preamp is significant in that you stop listening for the digital and listen to the Heed as a complete stack – almost like a little neurosis is knocked out of the equation.



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When you send this to the PMC – a speaker that has an almost innate grasp of deep, fast and completely believable bass as well as the sort of soundstage that creates spaces of whatever size you need utterly unconstrained by the actual size of the room they are in, the effect is nigh on perfect. The combination is endlessly appealing and able to handle almost anything you could possibly want to listen to with a

Thesis takes Heed Audio into new areas and power delivery levels

presentation that is incredibly easy to enjoy, but immensely rewarding at the same time.

This means that over the course of a listening session where everything from the delicacy of Abi Tapia to the sheer brutality of The Prodigy finds its way onto the playlist, the Heed/PMC is utterly unfazed by any of it. This is a system that has tremendous reserves of headroom, but deploys it so subtly that it is only when you realise that you are largely communicating with other people in the room using sign language that

there is a considerable amount of horsepower on tap. The moment you need it to put the bludgeon away and give you subtlety, it can do so instantly and with almost unsettling ease.

United we stand

The result of all this is a system that achieves the single most important benchmark that any collection of electronics can, in that it sounds better as a system than it does when the undoubtedly talented collection of electronics that go into it are listened to on their own. The Thesis range is a step up for Heed, but by evolving its design practices rather than feeling the urge to do anything radically different, they perform with an assurance that should see them in good stead. Above all, the way that the digital and analogue sides of the Thesis are combined in a single entity means that you listen to and appreciate the Thesis as a single unit rather than different components. When combined with a speaker as effortlessly capable as the PMC you have a system that will deliver truly outstanding musical enjoyment. The Bedfordshire/Budapest axis is not currently one of the 'power couples' of modern hi-fi, but a few more setups like this and it soon will be ●