

Hegel H150

integrated amplifier

Alan Sircom

While Hegel makes a fine and broad line in audio electronics, it's reputation today is built upon delivering damn good, affordable integrated amplifiers. The most recent of which is the H150, the development

codename of which was one of the worst-kept secrets in audio today; the Hegel H150 was known as 'The Prodigy'.

Normally, calling your amplifier 'The Prodigy' might elicit some ridicule. I mean... it's an amplifier, not Mozart. But this is quite the beast of an amplifier. If you look to its spec sheet and performance, and compare it to what we had just a few short years ago at the price, maybe 'The Prodigy' is more richly deserved. Hegel has been busy drawing inspiration from products like the more upscale H400 integrated amplifier and even The Viking CD player from the brand. It's also a very 'now' amplifier; with enough digital, line-level and even turntable inputs for those with traditional audio inputs, and a slew of streaming options for those who just want to a one-box, just-add-speakers solution.

The Prodigy has another trick up its sleeve. Although the older H120 is still listed on Hegel's website, it are effectively discontinued and the range is being streamlined to reflect a changing market. As such, the H150 is one of the first steps into the world of Hegel's deceptively sophisticated amplifier range.

Why 'deceptively'?

Hegel has long done a very clever thing with its amplifiers. The complexity is on the inside. As the motoring world is fast discovering to its detriment, making an overcomplicated user interface – no matter how sci-fi it might look – confounds users. OK, so trying to switch from streamer to record player in your living room isn't as potentially catastrophic as taking your eye off the road at 70mph while fumbling around a touchscreen trying to change the air-conditioning settings. But, while Occam's Razor could shave away few unnecessary interfaces, Hegel keeps things simple; two knobs, a simple display, a headphone socket and a power button on the underside. The remote handset (and the Hegel Control app) adds a little more functionality, helps set-up and even navigates internet radio. If you can work a tablet or smartphone, the H150 just becomes a no-fuss replay device. If you are of the school of thought that thinks an amplifier should be about as easy to use as a toaster, and with minimal explanation anyone should be able to use it, then the H150 has got your name all over it.

Thinking of the H150 as a black (or sometimes, white) box stops you getting bogged down in Tech-Spec Hell. Audio is one of the few technologies where the specs are still a big part of the discussion, and knowing the H150 is a 2x 75W amplifier that uses a toroidal transformer in its linear power supply are key considerations in the buying decision. But, do they really need to be? »





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» As someone with pages to fill, of course the answer is 'yes', but in reality, aside from some basic compatibility issues with sources (MM phono stage, so no using moving coil cartridges unless you have a step-up transformer), you're good to go.

This is why I like Hegel's ability to give every subsystem a descriptive name. SoundEngine 2, for example, is an easy way of describing a relatively complex feed-forward sampling signal correction system. The net result of SoundEngine 2 is lower distortion, more dynamic Class AB biasing, and improved damping factor. Which, in turn makes the amplifier sound less 'hashy' and 'electronic', and with a powerful grip on the loudspeakers.

This is perhaps why Hegel will not be drawn into discussions about the choice of DAC chip, aside from saying 'it's the same one that goes in The Viking.' And once again, it's the pragmatic rather than the spec-driven response to digital audio. The optical S/PDIF connection tops out at PCM at 24-bit, 96kHz precision, while the coaxial input and outputs, the USB connections and RJ45 Ethernet port all support PCM to 24-bit, 192kHz. No 32-bit processing, not 786kHz sampling, no DSD or MQA. Just the formats people in the market for an amplifier at this level will, you know... actually use.

Keep it simple

We're not done with H150s ease of operation and user-chumminess. There's input-sensing, so it will automatically wake and turn to the correct source. At the other end of the evening, there's auto-standby so it will power off when you stop using it. It knows all the popular TV remote codes, so control is easy, and its interaction and integration with systems like Apple Home or Google Home means you can configure voice commands without too much Internet Ninjutsu. In fact, the only real-world omissions are probably Bluetooth and HDMI ARC or eARC.

This hasn't been a conventional listing of inputs and outputs because I don't think The Prodigy should be thought of as a conventional amplifier. Does it bristle with digital or analogue inputs and outputs? No. Does it have the absolute state-of-the-art connections or formats of tomorrow? Absolutely not. But does it have all the things real people want from their real amplifiers at this very real price point? Oh yes. Very yes indeed. That means all the Connects (Spotify, Tidal, Qobuz), Apple AirPlay, Google Cast, all at the touch of an Ethernet. For what it's worth, The Prodigy is Roon Ready... but I suspect Roon might be a step too far for H150 owners. Nice to have, sure. But not a deal-breaker.

The best part

We're sort of saving the best part until the end; the sound. This is an extremely fun sound, full of powerful, controlled yet 'meaty' bass sounds. Hegel's bass performance isn't the most immediately deep, but first impressions can be deceptive and many mistake uncontrolled 'flubby' bass for depth. In fact, there's a lot going on in the Hegel bottom end, and a lot of it is informative and tight. By about a minute or so into listening, don't be surprised if you start reaching for the electronica or dub albums and tracks in your collection or on your playlist.

So, out came Augustus Pablo's mighty 'King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown.' This is a track I've heard off and on since my teenage years, and heard it on everything from a clock radio to the bowel-loosening Four Aces sound system in Dalston in the 1980s. As you can't recreate that visceral sound system experience (and nor should you; by the end of an evening, not only have you done irrevocable hearing damage, but you've rearranged your internal organs so successfully, that you're wearing your pancreas as a hat), you should choose a system that tells you what's going on with those pioneers of dub, reggae, electronica and more. The Hegel H150 defines those bass lines perfectly.



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

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» Moving up the registers, the same fun sound applies. The midrange is open, articulate and lithe. Detail levels and overall sonic coherence are good to excellent. Treble is well-balanced; forward enough to be energetic and detailed, but not so forward to sound bright or edgy. It presents a good soundstage, especially in width, but with some depth and height. The dynamic range bops along nicely, and so does the amp in keeping a beat. While Hegel has never had great emphasis on pace, the Hegel sound is no sluggard. With the H150, however, the rhythmic properties of the amp are more pronounced, more energetic. It will probably never win over the dyed-in-the-wool rhythm-obsessed, but its temporal performance sounds a little more 'beaty' here. Sure, reaching for 'Wholly Humble Heart' (Martin Stephenson & The Daintees, *Gladsome, Humour and Blue* [Kitchenware]) doesn't have quite so regimented a beat. However, the H150 remains one of the most rhythmically expressive Hegels to date.

An exceptional exception

I've long been a fan of Hegel's amplifiers and this is no exception. That's wrong... it is an exception. It's an exceptional amplifier that more than lives up to 'The Prodigy' epithet the brand has given it. Audio reviewers get blasé about equipment, and come up with calling an amplifier that costs as much as a Bentley 'a bargain'. But, given this £2,750 integrated amplifier has more than just a flavour of Hegel's popular range toppers, it's hard not to think of this amp as outstanding value for money. It's not simply 'good at the money', though... it's just damn good! +

Technical specifications

Power output: 2x75W into 8 Ohms @ 1kHz 1% THD, 100/120/230V AC

Minimum load: 2 ohms

Analog inputs: 1x Balanced (XLR), 1x Unbalanced (RCA)

Phono input: 1x Unbalanced (RCA) for Moving Magnet (MM)

Digital outputs: 1x Coaxial S/PDIF - 24/192

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Line level outputs: 1x Unbalanced variable (RCA)

Streaming: Spotify Connect (Lossless), Tidal Connect, Qobuz Connect, Apple AirPlay, Google Cast, airable Internet Radio and Podcast, UPnP, Roon Ready

Streaming formats: MP3, WAV, FLAC, ALAC, AIFF, AAC, PCM, Ogg

Frequency response: 5Hz-100kHz

Signal-to-noise ratio: More than 100dB

Crosstalk: Less than -100dB

Distortion: Less than 0.01% @ 50W 8 Ohms 1kHz

Intermodulation: Less than 0.01% (19kHz + 20kHz)

Damping factor: More than 2000 (main power output stage)

Dimensions (WxDxH): 43 x 35 x 10cm

Weight: 9.7kg

Price: £2,750, €2,995, \$3,600

Manufacturer Hegel Music Systems

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