



HEGEL H30 REFERENCE POWER AMPLIFIER (TAS 223)

Equipment report

by [Robert Harley](#) | May 22nd, 2012

Categories: [Solid-state power amplifiers](#)



I'm fortunate to be able to choose from the roughly 700 high-end products introduced annually approximately ten or twelve components to review myself. These are the components I'm going to live with for many months, not just for critical listening but for daily musical enjoyment. So, how do I choose the roughly one product in 70 that makes it to my listening room?

The Hegel H30 power amplifier reviewed here is a case-in-point. The Norwegian company's integrated amplifiers sounded good at shows and received highly positive reviews from our own Kirk Midtskog (in Issues 206 and 211), with the H200 earning a Product of the Year Award in 2011. Hegel also has an interesting technical story with its patented "SoundEngine" circuit and meticulous transistor-matching. Hegel's founder and designer, Bent Holter, seemed technically astute and musically sensitive based on a conversation I had with him at a show. And then I began hearing from seasoned industry veterans that the H30 was outstanding, even in the context of six-figure loudspeakers and the world's finest sources. I was intrigued by the possibility that a world-class power amplifier that could be had for \$15,000. Although not inexpensive, the H30 would represent quite a value if it lived up to its quietly growing reputation. I asked for a pair of Hegel H30s for review.

The H30 is a 350Wpc stereo amplifier that can be bridged for mono operation. In this bridged configuration the amplifier delivers a whopping 1100W into 8 ohms. Hegel markets the H30 primarily as a reference monoblock amplifier, but unless you need massive power, a single stereo unit will drive most loudspeakers more than adequately. Not only is 350Wpc a hefty output power, the H30 meets the challenge of driving current-hungry loudspeakers by nearly doubling its 8-ohm-rated output power when driving 4 ohms (675Wpc into 4 ohms). This ability to nearly double the output power when the impedance is halved is indicative of a robust power supply, a generous number of output transistors, and substantial heatsinks.

The H30 is a model of Scandinavian minimalism. The nearly square black chassis is adorned with only a gentle bulge in the front-panel's mid-section, a large round power button, and the engraved Hegel logo. The heatsinks are contained within the chassis. The rear panel sports balanced and singled-ended inputs, separate inputs for monoblock use, a stereo/mono switch, and large binding posts. Although attractive and well built, the H30 is about as far from "audio jewelry" as you can get.

This somewhat self-effacing outward appearance gives no hint at the special technology inside. The H30 is the ultimate expression of Hegel's patented SoundEngine output-stage topology described in the technical sidebar. This new implementation of SoundEngine is coupled with a transistor-matching protocol that is unprecedented in my experience. The H30's designer, Bent Holter, is a semiconductor physicist who has applied his insight to develop audio circuits that take into account transistors' internal workings.

Listening

I'll start by describing the H30 as a 350Wpc stereo amplifier and later comment on a pair of H30s bridged for mono operation.

The first thing that struck me about the H30 after dropping it into the system was its ultra-clean, even pristine, rendering of timbre. Instrumental textures were totally devoid of grain, hardness, and glare. In fact, certain instruments on familiar recordings were reproduced with startling clarity along with a delicious combination of liquidity and fine resolution. Take Roy Hargrove's trumpet on the wonderful Jimmy Cobb Quartet SACD Jazz in the Key of Blue. Through the H30 the instrument had a gorgeous bell-like purity that immediately vaulted the H30 in my mind into the upper echelons of power amplifiers in timbral reproduction. What made the H30's rendering of timbre special was that it had a warm, lush, and involving quality without a hint of overly romantic coloration, thickness, or grain. Even more remarkable, the H30 was totally lacking in that sense you get from most solid-state amplifiers of timbres being overlaid with an electronic texture. The overall impression these qualities fostered was one of a sound that was organic, effortless, and natural. Music just seemed to flow in a way that didn't call attention to the playback system.

These are characteristics of mega-priced amplifiers; much of what you're paying for in the ultra-expensive units is precisely this combination of textural liquidity and clarity. Many amplifiers deliver the liquidity, but with a diminution of resolution and presence. Others err in the opposite direction, sounding pristine but also a little dry and sterile. The H30's core achievement, and one that defines the listening experience through it, is this pairing of vivid clarity and resolution on one hand, and liquidity and freedom from electronic artifacts on the other. Until the H30, these often mutually exclusive qualities commanded a significant price premium.

There's more to say about the H30's reproduction of timbre. Although the amplifier had a startling transparency and clarity, tone colors were dense, rich, and saturated. Instruments with complex harmonic structures—Art Pepper's sax on Art Pepper Meets the Rhythm Section (Analogue Productions LP), for example—were reproduced with warmth and richness. The H30 exhibited no trace of that thin, pinched, dry, clinical sound often associated with solid-state amplification. Timbres were so free from electronic artifacts that they took on a startling palpability and presence. In this regard, the H30 was reminiscent of a pure Class A design.

The H30's treble rendering was very much like that of its midrange—clean and detailed, yet smooth and rich. A characteristic of a great amplifier is the sense that the treble doesn't exist independently of the rest of the music, but rather is seamlessly integrated with it. This was the case with the H30; the treble was a natural extension of the upper midrange. The H30's treble integration resulted from a lack of hardness in the upper registers, freedom from glare, and absence of electronic artifacts that call attention to the playback system rather than to the music. Jimmy Cobb's delicate brush work on the previously mentioned Jazz in the Key of Blue illustrates the H30's wonderful ability to convey lots of information, but in a completely relaxed and unforced way with no etching of transients. I could hear the brushes moving against the snare-drum head in remarkable detail, but with a naturalness that fostered a sense of realism and music-making rather than "hi-fi" resolution.

At the other end of the frequency spectrum, the H30 had a taut, solid, and dynamic bottom-end that emphasized rhythmic drive and power. This was coupled with a slightly lean midbass that favored precise pitch definition and dynamic agility over weight and body. Kick drum cut through with sudden impact, emphasizing the instrument's rhythmic contribution. Immediately after switching to the H30 from the BAlabo BP-1 Mk-II I was struck by how the different power amplifiers changed the musical perception. For example, the H30's leaner midbass and tauter low bass brought out the kick drum and its musical contribution. The BAlabo tended to emphasize the weight, richness, and body of electric and acoustic basses. The Hegel had a slightly greater expression of rhythmic drive in rock; the BAlabo was more adept at conveying the swing in jazz, the warmth and richness of tone of acoustic bass, the power range of the orchestra, and the palpable textures of bass-rich instruments.

The H30's lean yet muscular bass, coupled with the amplifier's wide bottom-end dynamics and sense of sudden impact, gave the impression of great dynamic agility. The amplifier responded quickly to transient signals, starting and stopping on a dime. I also had the feeling that the H30 had virtually unlimited power reserves, which isn't surprising considering that I was driving the 94dB-sensitive, four-ohm Focal Stella Utopia EM with 675Wpc.

These qualities were all presented within a soundstage of crystalline-like transparency. Not only was there no sense of a fine veil between me and the music, but the palpability of timbres and images toward the back of the soundstage was phenomenal. Amplifiers that are less-than-transparent inhibit musical communication by diminishing the contribution of quieter instruments toward the back of the soundstage. The H30's ability to maintain the palpability of images by virtue of its transparency was remarkable, and an important ingredient of the amplifier's overall musicality.

Resolution of low-level detail was excellent, though not equal to the similarly priced (\$20,000) Spectral DMA-360, for example. The Spectral amplifier digs a little deeper into the finest layers of musical and spatial information.

Throwing the H30's rear-panel stereo/mono switch converts the stereo amplifier into a monoblock by bridging the left and right channels into a single amplifier (the speaker load is the "bridge" that connects the two amplifiers channels). In this configuration, two H30s are required for stereo, but the pair delivers 1100W each into 8 ohms. This power increase is accompanied by a doubling of the output impedance and a halving of the damping factor. But considering that the H30 in stereo starts out with a damping factor of a whopping 1000, this isn't an issue.

Comparing a stereo H30 to a pair of mono H30s, I thought that a single H30 offered greater treble delicacy, more bloom and space around image outlines, and an increased sense of ease. The monoblocks still had the wonderfully clean treble and pristine quality I so enjoyed in the stereo amplifier, but not quite to the same degree. Switching to the monoblock mode, the soundstage wasn't as infused with air between images, or with the sense of bloom around those images. Image outlines were less tightly focused, which also tended to blur the distinction between an instrumental image and the space surrounding it. The presentation took a step down from the magical ease I so enjoyed with a single stereo H30. With 350Wpc into 8 ohms, and 675Wpc into 4 ohms, a single H30 should drive just about any loudspeaker with ease.

Conclusion

The Hegel H30 is not just a great-sounding amplifier, it's also a tremendous bargain. I know I'll get letters complaining that a \$15k power amplifier by definition can't be a bargain. But what else can you call a \$15,000 amplifier with massive output power, unflappable stability, and a gorgeous musical presentation that vaults it into a select league of world-class power amplifiers? Or one that is fully at home in the context of my reference system that includes the \$54,000 Basis Inspiration turntable and \$94,000 Focal Stella Utopia EM loudspeakers?

As adept the H30 is at all aspects of portraying the music, it's the H30's rendering of midrange and treble textures that makes this amplifier a standout. The Hegel coupled a warmth and lushness of timbre with tremendous clarity and resolution, a combination that is rare in an amplifier of any price. The sense of timbral realism and palpability was world-class by any measure. Moreover, it's difficult to overstate just how greatly these qualities induced a sense of ease and deep musical involvement.

If your amplifier budget is anywhere near \$15k, the Hegel H30 should be on your short list of products to audition. You may find, as I did, that this unassuming and understated black box contains a Scandinavian surprise.

SPECS & PRICING

Output power: 350Wpc into 8 ohms (stereo), 675Wpc into 4 ohms (stereo), 1100W into 8 ohms (mono)
Inputs: Balanced on XLR jacks, unbalanced on RCA jacks
Signal-to-noise ratio: >100dB
Distortion: <0.003% at 100W into 8 ohms
Damping factor: >1000
Power consumption: 120W (power on, at idle)
Dimensions: 16.9" x 8.25" x 21.6"
Weight: 121 lbs each
Price: \$15,000

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Associated Components

- BAlabo BC-1 Mk-II preamplifier and BP-1 Mk-II amplifier, Hegel P30 preamplifier, Lamm ML2.2 SET power amplifier
- Focal Stella Utopia EM loudspeakers
- Meridian 808.3 and Meridian Sooloos system (Ethernet connected), dCS Puccini/U-Clock, and Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Series 2
- iMac server with Berkeley Alpha USB interface
- Basis Inspiration turntable with Basis Vector 4 tonearm, Air Tight PC-1 Supreme cartridge
- Aesthetix Rhea Signature phonostage
- Shunyata V-Ray V2 and Audience aR6tS power conditioners
- Shunyata CX-series AC cords, Audience Au24 AC cords
- Transparent XL Reference, AudioQuest WEL Signature, and Shunyata Anaconda interconnects
- Transparent XL Reference and Shunyata Anaconda loudspeaker cables
- Billy Bags equipment racks, ASC 16** Full-Round Tube Traps
- Shunyata Dark Field cable elevators
- Mobile Fidelity record brush, stylus cleaner, and LP wash. VPI 16.5 record-cleaning machine

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