



## Hegel H80 amplifier

by Alan Sircom

**T**he role of amplifier has changed recently. The nexus role of 'curating' sources and feeding them to a pair of loudspeakers remains, but increasingly 'sources' have become a single computer source. That means increasing onus on the amp maker to become an amp+DAC maker, and few companies have taken that new role to heart as much as Hegel.

The H80 is the company's new hub. Yes, it's an 75W per channel integrated amplifier, but the overall design quickly shows it's very much an integrated amp with today in mind. As a line-level amplifier, it's relatively limited, with just two line-level phono inputs (one of which can be configured as a home theatre direct input) and one XLR input on tap. On the other hand (and on the other side of the rear panel) it has two coaxial digital, two toslink

optical and one asynchronous USB inputs. Moreover, it's indicative of a bold move on Hegel's part, in that the same degree of importance toward digital audio is echoed throughout the range. There's a fairly obvious and logical reason for this; the need for line-level inputs is beginning to fade in modern audio (often it now comes down to the output of a phono stage and a tuner) while the need for digital audio connections – potentially for both audio and audio-video devices – is on the rise. It's possible today that someone might use an amplifier with no line-level sources whatsoever, perhaps connecting the optical link from a satellite decoder and a games console and the USB input from a computer. Line level is not exactly 'legacy' and will likely never be consigned to the dump-bin, but it's interesting just how many sources can be covered with fairly minimal analogue pathway demands now. And Hegel seems to get that change in user demands to a very deep degree.

The analogue stage is not an afterthought though, especially as essentially the DAC sits on top of the analogue preamp section. This has ►



► been pulled from the company's P20 line preamp or top H300 integrated, borrowing heavily from those upmarket devices. Similarly, the power amplifier stage of the H80 also borrows from the Reference class products, using Hegel's own SoundEngine local error cancellation circuit design, which is claimed to deliver Class A linearity in a Class AB design, increasing damping factor in the process. It also uses hand-matched transistors in the input stage and the DAC, of course, bears a lot in common with Hegel's 32-bit filtering, AKM4399-based 24-bit, 192kHz precision off board converters like the HD11. OK, so putting DAC, pre and power in the one chassis is never going to be quite as good as having them in separate chassis with separate power supplies dedicated to the task in hand, and the small chassis means there's no room for the kart wheel sized toroidal transformer and power reserves found in Hegel's 200W and beyond amplifiers, but this appears an exercise in specification reduction rather than sonic sacrifice.

Hegel's products stress the minimalist approach. All black, one knob for source, one for volume, a power off switch on the underside of the amp below the source knob and a big blue LED readout. There's a credit-card remote that accompanies the amp, and can control the computer's playlists. It can turn off or even dim the large and bright display, too if you press it for three seconds.

But with no preamp output, there's no upgrade path for someone wanting to add a bigger power amp. More importantly, there's also no monitor, digital output or headphone socket, so if you want to listen through headphones, not only is it impossible through the H80, but it's impossible to even take a feed from the H80 to drive headphones, which may be a deal-breaker for some.

Anders Ertzeid of Hegel confided in me that the code name for the H80 within the company was PIGLET (as in the cute one from Winnie the Pooh). But while that's true from the outside, 'PIGLET' bares no resemblance to the sound it produces. It's more 'The Little Engine That Could'. It is deceptively powerful; yes, it's a 75W amp, but it has the kind of grip over loudspeakers that makes it sound more like it's double that. And it does so in an intrinsically right way. I tried it with a number of speakers (some of which are tested in this issue), but settled on the Raidho D1s as the perfect

partners, with Crystal Cable providing the linkage everywhere except USB (one day, I'll have mugged enough old people to afford Crystal's Absolute Dream USB, but until then Nordost makes a good stand-in). The front end was mostly Apple-based, but my old Lyngdorf CD-1 was also pressed into service for its S/PDIF connections.

Like the H300 we tested in issue 98, the amp takes a fair while to spring to life. It's a vapid, listless first few days with the H80, and that's nothing like the amplifier it grows up to be. Hegel makes a sound that doesn't draw attention to itself, but that's what a good amp should do. And the DAC matches the amplifier perfectly. This is not an ostentatious, fireworks sound – it's in it for the long game, with excellent precision (both in detail and in soundstage width and depth terms), super dynamics and most of all a sense of great poise and integration across the range.

You get the distinct 'you are there' feeling with the H80, as if the electronics are out of the way. You put on Schiff or Brendel, and you are in the audience. You put on ZZ Top and you are either in the studio or in the bar. You put on Kraftwerk and you are inside the oscillator. This is not an uncommon impression in the high-end, but it usually comes when components are more divided up than this. ►



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Integrated amplifier

**Digital inputs:** 2 coax, 2 optical and 1 USB

**Analog inputs:** 2 RCA unbalanced (1 configurable) and 1 XLR Balanced input

**Output Power:** 75+75W in 8 ohms

**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 1000

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 8 x 43 x 34.5cm

**Weight:** 12kg

**Price:** £1,300

**Manufactured by:** Hegel Music Systems

**URL:** [www.hegel.com](http://www.hegel.com)

**Distributed by:** Aventure

**URL:** [www.aventure-europe.com](http://www.aventure-europe.com)

**Tel:** +44 (0) 1347 440101

I'm not wholly convinced this is a Class A sound from a Class AB amplifier, but it gets closer than most. Where the H80 wins though it the bass; if it has some of the ease of listening of Class A in the mids and treble, the bass is powerful, deep and satisfyingly 'chewy'. It grips hold of the drivers to ensure they give good account of their actions, but does so in the kind of way where you just start reaching out for old reggae recordings for the fun of it. There probably won't be that many Hegel/Raidho combinations that punt out Burning Spear's *Garvey's Ghost* dub remix of the *Marcus Garvey* album, but it worked. OK, 'it worked' is subject to this not being the kind of club rig that can play bass so deep it dislocates knee joints at 30 paces, but 'surprisingly deep and loud' for domestic use does it for me.

I play a little game with myself during reviews. Where possible, I try to avoid discovering the price of a product until the end of the review, and I see if I can guess correctly. Usually, I'm in the right ball-park. With the H80, I got this spectacularly wrong. I put this at about the £5,000+ mark, in among some serious top-end integrated amp peers. It's why I happily drove this amp through a pair of Raidho D1, completely unconscious of just how much of a 'mullet' system I had created in the process. The thing is though, the H80 is so 'right' sounding, with such good bass control and so much in its favour with such a partnership, it seemed the most natural thing to put this little amp with a pair of speakers that cost more than 10x as much. I can't think of a higher recommendation than that.

Hegel is one of those brands that deserve to be better known. Products like the H80 make all the right noises and tick all the right boxes for a 'now' product. It's a well-built, deceptively powerful amplifier with an excellent digital audio stage. 'It fights above its weight' is a cliché of the highest order, but it really applies here. Excellent! +