

If you love music, you have to listen to Classé

By Adrien Rouah

For the generation in their fifties, **Classé Audio** is one of the Canadian brands associated with high fidelity. It is a brand that has added a brick to the building of our listening pleasure. Like **Bryston**, **Simaudio/Moon** or **Sonic Frontiers** which have their own remarkable signatures, each being another brick, **Bryston** with its legendary reliability, **Simaudio-Moon** with the absence of feedback loops in its dual mono designs or **Sonic Frontier** with its use of tubes...For **Classé Audio** the starting point was the design of Class A amplifiers and it got its name from pronouncing Class A in English “**Class-é**” but written in French. If some technologies have enabled these different companies to leave an imprint in the history of high fidelity, they had to evolve through time and this is what **Classé** has done with its use of Class D amplifiers and a new generation of preamplifiers. This is what we will discover now with the Sigma SSP preamp/processor and the Sigma AMP2 amplifier.

Nobody really knows how a new trend gets adopted in the audio world. Class D was not born yesterday. Back in the fifties it could be found in some car radios, in the amplification modules in TV's or very high power P.A. systems, etc...in the seventies it was already widespread. So what has happened to see this amplifier technology resurfacing again today? It could be because of the actual eco trend that says, -rightly so- that we should consume less, that we should get more efficiency with less loss. Yes, it could be it, consume more intelligently. The letter D, just like A, B, C and E are used to categorize amplifier's classes according to how they work. These classes define the shape of the signal at the input and the shape at the output and also the duration of the use of an active component. In order to simplify, I will just express the percentage aspect in order to understand the ratio between input and output: what is supplied and what we will get at the output. Therefore, in class A, the totality of the input signal will be used, so 100% at the output; in class B only half, 50%; in class A/B a little bit more than half, 50 to 70%; class C, less than half. For our topic, talking about intelligent power consumption, class D is, of course, a winner because of the low loss created by this topology: we get maximum efficiency with very little heat production, maximum power with minimum volume and weight.

The Classé Sigma SSP preamplifier

The Sigma SSP has been optimized for stereo, but it includes HDMI switching, a multichannel processor and a dedicated subwoofer output. It makes it a very serious contender to watch movies. In addition to the classic linear inputs (unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR), the Sigma

SSP has enough features to satisfy any generation of music lovers, it can accept any source of music: *USB audio* up to 24 bits/192 kHz, Ethernet with DLNA support (**D**igital **L**iving **N**etwork **A**lliance), *AirPlay*, connections for *iPhone*, *iPod*, *iPad*, the whole new digital world is there!

If the source connection possibilities are numerous, the possibilities of the Sigma SSP itself are seemingly limitless! You can judge for yourself what an owner of this Classé component will be able to achieve: using the touchscreen he will be able, from the menu, to access any secondary function and personalize any of the 18 different inputs, or reduce the number of sources to simplify, give them a name and configure settings to tune them to his speakers, adjust the volume settings, tone controls and parametric equalization. This is the simple part. He will also be able to choose which source will be processed through DSP and how. The Sigma SSP can also detect and analyze input signals and automatically switch inputs...you have to admit this is almost scary at first glance! What you have to remember for the time being is the vast array of possibilities offered to match what is and what will be available and to fine tune everything in accordance to the needs and desires of the owner. It seems the company did not want to offer what most people think they want but instead offer everything that modern technology has and let the customer become more refined over time and let him discover what will be the best settings for his system and listening tastes. Classé proposes a perfectly tailored component for present and future uses.

The amplifier

AMP2, this two channel version of a Sigma amplifier is the brotherly complement of the Sigma SSP. The AMP2 uses a SMPS technology for its power supply (Switch Mode Power Supply). It delivers 200 W per channel at 8 Ω and 400 W at 4 Ω . In this case **Classé** implements very well high power output and low power consumption in a small and compact package. Balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA inputs are available and a double pair of binding posts enable bi-wiring if desired.

Packaging and presentation

We can only congratulate **Classé** for their boxes containing the beautiful Sigmas. They are very professional, very safe and...classy, -if I can say so-. In fact, and this is unusual, we really want to keep these boxes, not discard them; they are like a part of the original package. Inside the box you will find another box with a drawer containing the remote control, a manual and a USB key with the complete instruction manual.

The visual appearance of the Sigma SSP and AMP2 is the same for both and they look pretty good. On each front panel you will note a touch of good taste with the slanted portion in the middle. On the SSP the slanted portion houses the clear and easy to use display. On the AMP2 this portion is simply a mimic to make both components look alike. Both components, anodized

in black, are well finished with a slightly shiny touch. The proportions for both are identical, harmonious and well balanced. The SSP has a carefully recessed volume control knob mounted flush with the front panel. A full blown installation, with every possible rack mount component was also kept in mind. By simply inverting the side panels, the required flanges for rack mount appear, very clever! The appearance and quality, both external and internal, the magnificent layout of the circuit boards, everything is exemplary and admirable. My only caveat would be for the remote control that I liked much for its shape and small size but disliked because of its sharp edges. A slight buffering of the angles would make handling more pleasant. **Classé** is still designed in Lachine, in Québec and assembled in China. This enables offering top notch products for a reasonable price. Sigma is a brand new entry level line at **Classé**.

Preparation

Ouch! I will not be able to listen to this system on **B&W** speakers, this is not what I use at home! And because I know that **Classé** and **B&W** are now the same company...What? **Classé** will work anyways? Are you sure? Allright then, I feel better already because I heard about some brands liking to use a specific cable or speaker...Good, I will now plug my usual speakers, both pairs, (not at the same time!). One pair with a sensitivity of 89dB / 1W / 1m and the second being 95dB /1W /1m. These speakers were chosen to offer twice the power, subjectively speaking, something explained by the 6dB difference between both pairs. I will also use my own cables, CD player, TV and laptop computer and will simply live with this system for a while in order to describe accurately what this system does, just like an owner would do...

Now, the choice of music and movies: this is easy, I have eclectic tastes and it makes my work easy and fun. In fact this is why I can pretend to be you so easily and tell you what I really think regardless of the price of a component.

It is up to you now to read my thoughts and if you can afford it to indulge yourself with these components. Dear reader of TED Magazine only you will be the final judge but in order to help you I made a diversified choice using classical, jazz, world music and even sometimes weird and out of tune music (but still enjoyable), stuff we don't hear often, like spoken words instead of songs. The list is published at the end.

Listening

How about if, contrary to my habits, I would begin with live performances for this **Classé** set up? Let's say **Angélique Ionatos** and **Katerina Fotinaki**. From the very beginning, from the rumour in the hall, you are already there, in the show. You see both women arrive on stage and as soon as **Angelique Ionatos** attacks the first chords, I immediately realize what the **Classé** combo offers: an extraordinary presence and a sense of depth which is physically detectable. This first impression immediately pleases the filmed live performances enthusiast that I am. The

recording is remarkable, like the emphasis of some guitar licks and tapping on the body of the second guitar for percussion, really well reproduced: we are at the show!

For a change, while remaining in the live concert category, **Renaud Garcia Fons** was a must. I have to say that the CD comes with its complement DVD, thus giving the choice to see the performance at the same time. I have to say it feels good to see and hear the performers at the same time. With the SSP and AMP2 the performance is alive and both the sound and the picture provide the audience masses of accurate details. This is enough to delight any music lover. During the introduction of *Gitane*, it is possible to feel the gracious playing of the fingers rubbing the strings and the texture of the wood on **Mr. Fons** 5 strings bass. Any audiophile will be overwhelmed by the poignant musical performance of the **Classé**.

From a formal and structured music form I am now going to something a bit more devilish with **Taraf de Haïdouk** in order to convince myself of the flexibility of the **Classé** system. Devilish and up tempo does not mean disorganized and confused; this is a trap for a system that could lack speed and definition but with the **Sigmas** the performance remains easy to follow without any difficulties letting us follow the phenomenal speed of the cymbalum or the violin player without losing a single note.

Of course, it was also important to hear the behavior of a complete orchestral mass and choir reproduced by this **Classé** system. **Jean Gilles** is not well known and deserves a larger audience: let's do him justice! Immediately, the overall presentation delights. At the introduction of the choir, I am convinced by the layout of the choir and its natural height. The men and women repartition is splendid: another magnificent performance reproduced by the melodious **Classé** tandem from this CD that has no video attached to it.

Conclusion

This is what **Classé** says: *"For many years we were aware of the huge potential and advantages offered by digital technologies and consequently we have increased the number of specialized engineers in the **Classé research team**. Some of these engineers are world class specialists in digital technologies and switch mode power supplies. When we created our class D amplifier, we did not recycle and repackage an existing solution by putting it in our casing using our logo. Instead we started with a clean sheet and designed everything from the ground up using our team of highly qualified engineers who have a combined experience of over fifty years in these highly specialized fields. We have developed exclusive solutions and technologies, custom made components and algorithms specially designed in-house for our DSP. Our team has developed methods and intelligent compromises in order to offer a genuine **Classé** performance in our entry level range at a reasonable cost."* This is what defines the approach and philosophy of the company and its goals. I am convinced that in light of the results obtained subjectively and

with all the possibilities offered by these components, **Classé** is in a pursuit of excellence, fundamentally oriented towards the future of sound and video. This *Sigma* system is a huge achievement that everyone must absolutely discover.

Nota:

My advice to you would be to go through the instruction manuals of the SSP and AMP2 in order to discover the many possibilities offered by this top notch system.