

Creek craft



Martin Pipe's verdict on Creek's modestly-priced 50A amplifier/tuner? It's a crafted cracker...

My first exposure to Creek audio products came in the form of the CAS3040 tuner. An original design intended to partner the CAS4040 integrated amplifier, mine still works perfectly – and even now it sounds better than some contemporary tuners that sold for considerably more. Not bad for a product that's 30 years old. And that's one of the great things about Creek gear. It's engineered to last.

Creek's latest amplifier, the solid-state Evolution 50A, looks certain to continue this trend. In its standard form, the 50A is an elegant and compact 50 Watt per channel integrated amplifier that weighs in at a substantial 7.5kg. But there's more to it than that. Your choice of the Sequel phono stage – versions are available for low-output MC carts, low-output MM/high-output MC carts and high-output MM carts – can be fitted internally. Our review sample was fitted with the Sequel 40, the high-output MM variant. They're the same modules sold for other recent Creek amplifiers, such as the Evolution 2 and the 50A's bigger brother (the 100A).

Not enough? An optional RDS-capable FM/AM tuner (the 'Ambit') or a forthcoming DAC (the 'Ruby') module can also be (retro) fitted. Luke Creek told me that the Ruby will also include an FM-only tuner with a performance equivalent to the Ambit's. Our particular unit was equipped with an Ambit, which seamlessly integrates with the 50A's operating software. So, our 50A can be seen as the 21st-century equivalent of those 'receivers' that beat at the heart of many a 1970s hi-fi system.

Needless to say, 21st-century tech is very much in evidence. The crackle-prone pots and switch-banks of old are gone, replaced by microprocessors and electronic switching. I'm impressed with the highly-intuitive control system, which relays information to the user via a bright and readable organic-LED panel centrally-located on the machined-aluminum front panel. On either side of this are the control knobs (which operate reliable digital shaft-encoders, rather than wear-prone pots and switches) and quartets of tactile backlit buttons for source selection, tuning, balance, configuration and so on. Creek have

thought all this out very well.

A comparatively nondescript-looking handset allows you to carry out all functions from the comfort of your listening chair. Indeed, some (like switching the tuner from stereo to mono to eliminate 'hiss' from weaker FM broadcasts) are remote-only operations. It will also operate recent Creek CD players. A nice attention to detail is that the front-panel remote sensor can be bypassed with an external 'trailing' one that plugs into the rear panel – an adjacent output socket sends remote data to other compatible gear. This can be useful if your amplifier is to be hidden in a cabinet. Personally, I think the 50A is so good-looking you'd want to keep it on show...

Also on the rear panel are the inputs. There are three standard phono types, one of which is augmented by balanced XLRs, a welcome touch considering the modest pricing. This particular input's phono and XLRs sockets should not be connected simultaneously. If you don't have the phono stage installed, the relevant input will be a line-level input instead. Yet another phono input is available if you don't have a tuner or DAC installed.

Then there's the 'AV Direct' input, which can be configured to bypass the preamp thereby feeding the power amp directly. This can be useful for multi-channel applications, or for driving the amplifier directly from a suitable source component.

Creek has also made available a pre-amp output. Although intended for subwoofers or beefier power amplification, it does have limited application for recording. If a tape deck is connected to one of the 50A's inputs and you accidentally select it whilst recording then a positive feedback-loop will be created! Be careful, in other words. What a pity that the 50A lacks a dedicated 'loop' with a tape-monitor button. Sign of the times, I guess.

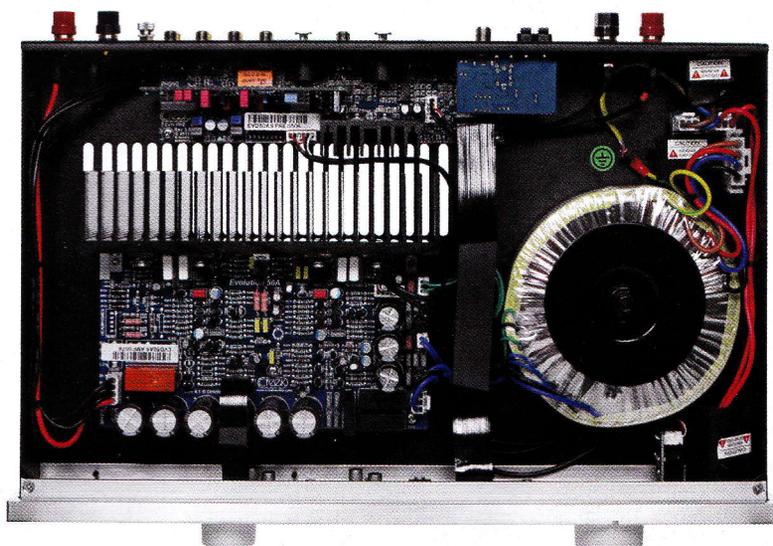
Minimalists, cover your eyes. Creek has made the heretical decision to implement bass/treble tone controls on the 50A. I don't personally think that's a bad idea, as you can to some degree correct over-bright or bass-shy recordings. Sensibly, though, you're given a choice. Holding down the 50A's 'tone' button disengages the tone controls completely. As they're taken out of circuit, internal relays can be heard to click; imposing (tone) defeat in this way gives you the best of both worlds. Equally welcome is the front-panel headphone socket, which happily drove a range of 'cans' including Onkyo ES-HF300s reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

The £125 Ambit tuner is of the 'software-defined' variety, rather than a bought-in screened module as fitted to many AV receivers. Basically, the radio signals are converted into digital form and processed in that domain before being transformed into analogue audio signals. We last saw this in the Sansui DR-201 a few months back. Creek's implementation is, however, far better. Tuning combines digital stability with analogue practicality; audio isn't muted while spinning the knob thereby ensuring that no stations are missed as you travel along the band. Numerous presets, and an indication of both signal strength and quality (the latter factors in nasties like multipath distortion) grace the spec too.

Moving to the juice behind the 50A, we have an enormous 200VA toroidal transformer with separate windings for the various stages and digital control circuitry, which work with well-smoothed power supplies. The power amplifier is a

complementary Class A-B design based around pairs of muscular Darlington output transistors bought in from Sanken, and connects to your speakers courtesy of robust binding-posts that will also accept standard 'banana' plugs. Internal construction is of a very high standard, employing glass-fibre printed circuit boards – many decent-quality components are evident.

of Goldfrapp's Supernature. Alison's seductive vocal has such presence here it seems as if she's in the room (if only...). The synth bassline that drives the song along was deep and well-controlled, compared to the Nait 3 I was using previously. I then switched to the second part of Jean Michel-Jarre's 1978 classic Equinoxe, its effects and scattershot rhythms panning around channels and creating an effective sonic envelope.



A busy interior with big toroidal mains transformer at right, heatsinks over base vents to keep the Sanken output transistors cool, and low level relay source switching.

SOUND QUALITY

The Naim Nait 3 that normally resides at the centre of my hi-fi system was replaced with the 50A; naturally, some connections needed to be remade as there are no DIN sockets here! I used my faithful Acoustic Energy AE109 speakers, while sources included a Valhalla Linn LPI 2/Basik Plus/Ortofon 540 MkII on a Russ Andrews Torlyte platform and a Cyrus Xa streamer – which was also used as a DAC with a Sony CD transport. The Cyrus, also reviewed in this month's Hi-Fi World, sells for almost twice as much as the 'base' 50A but is a very revealing component.

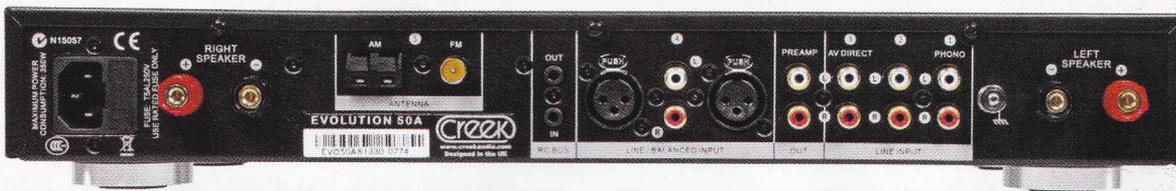
And so to the listening. This new Creek is a highly-revealing amplifier – it shows up poor recordings and any worn LPs in your collection. With decent material, though, it's thoroughly enjoyable to listen to yet tonally-neutral. It's fast, thereby doing justice to percussively-driven music, and is texturally-rich too. If you want 'warmth', though, you're probably advised to go elsewhere. Budget tubes, maybe?

Starting with CDs, we started off with the 21st-century glam synthpop of Ooh La La – the opening track

Moving to French music of a previous era, specifically the atmospheric fifth movement of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* (Ansermet/L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, Decca). This may have been an analogue-sourced recording from the late sixties, but is dynamic nevertheless – and the 50A rose to its challenge admirably, thanks in part to Creek's attention to power-supply matters. There's a sense of space coupled with strong detailing; the timbres of the prominent clarinets and tubular bells, for instance, are preserved.

It may be an integrated phono stage, but the optional Sequel turned in a sterling performance. The relatively-straight-forward pop recording of Luka, from Susanne Vega's *Solitude Standing*, retained its sad beauty and conveyed the emotion of the song's dark subject matter. Next came Music For Chameleons, from





Balanced XLR inputs are provided for connection to high quality / distant sources. There are AM and FM aerial inputs too.

Gary Numan's I, Assassin LP. Here, Pino Palladino's prominent bassline is rendered in all its sinewy glory. I then spun David Bowie's Scary Monsters. The elegant art-rock of Fashion proved to be an engaging listen, thanks in no small part to the 50A's rhythmic ability.

Also worthy of bouquets is the Ambit tuner, which – out of interest – can be configured to reach all the way down to 76MHz (maybe Creek sees a ready export market in Japan,

which uses this slice of VHF spectrum for FM radio). It managed to get across the building excitement of the Last Night of the Proms carried by Radio 3, and nothing was shown to be lacking in the sound staging department when the BBC Symphony Orchestra played its (mostly) familiar repertoire. It's detailed without tending towards brightness, while a subsequently-broadcast Elgar organ sonata revealed the bottom-end to be deep yet controlled. Nice to see

that Creek still takes FM seriously.

CONCLUSION

There's little not to like here. I found a flexible, friendly and robust design with sonics that are marked by transparency and dynamism – and all for a very attractive price. If you're seeking integrated amplification – or a receiver – at the sub-£1000 end of the market, then take a trip down to your Creek dealer and arrange to audition the Evolution 50A.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Power output of the Evolution 50A measured 66 Watts into 8 Ohms and 110 Watts into 4 Ohms. Since most loudspeakers are 4 Ohms this is the power available in practice, and it is plenty enough for very high volume.

The distortion characteristic was unusually stable, harmonic structure changing not one little bit, from below one Watt of output, all the way up to full output, at 10kHz into a 4 Ohm load – a demanding test. The Creek will sound clean and easy in its sound as a result.

Sensitivity of the line inputs was low, 550mV being need for full power output. The balanced XLR inputs needed a high 1.1V so are purposed for an external source delivering 4V through XLR. A 2V XLR will still work, but volume will have to be high.

Frequency response was wide and did not change with volume control position. This was the case with the phono input too, due to accurate equalisation. However, the phono stage has a warp filter that lifts low frequencies slightly in the audio band but rolls output down below 20Hz, response being -5dB at 5Hz were warps most commonly occur. This will lessen cone flap but also add some fullness and warmth to low frequencies via the phono stage. Sensitivity, noise and overload values were all fine for MM cartridges.

The VHF tuner was accurately equalised and gave a similarly smooth responses right up to 13kHz, before a pilot tone filter rolled off output into a deep notch at 19kHz. The tuner will sound

smooth and evenly balanced tonally and possess natural treble. Full quieting (minimum hiss) occurred at a very low 430µV (p.d.) from the aerial. Above this level hiss measured a low -69dB, lower than that from most modern VHF tuners. The high sensitivity responsible for this also resulted in a very high stereo sensitivity value of just 4µV. The VHF tuner works very well with weak signals, keeping hiss better suppressed than that from most quality external tuners.

The signal strength meter was calibrated to show useful signal strength values. The first sector (of 6) illuminated at 4µV where signal was just strong enough for reasonably low hiss (-50dB) on stereo, whilst the top sector only illuminated when full quieting was attained (430µV). The VHF tuner measured very well, being a high quality unit rather than a budget add-on.

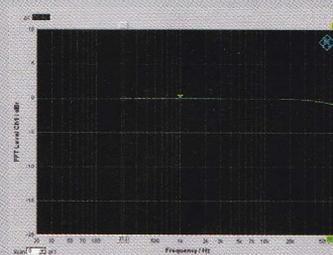
The Evolution 50A measured well in all respects. The VHF/FM tuner in particular offers better facilities and results than most available today. NK

Power	66watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	6Hz-70kHz
Separation	92dB
Noise	-105dB
Distortion	0.02%
Sensitivity	550mV
Damping factor	28
PHONO	
Frequency response	10Hz-20kHz
Separation	68dB

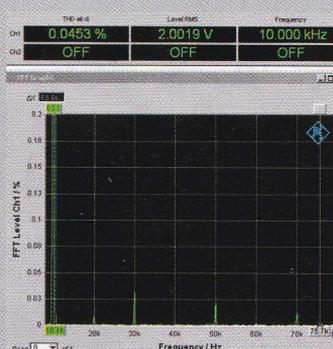
Noise	-81dB
Distortion	0.01%
Sensitivity	5mV
Overload	53mV

VHF/FM	
Frequency response	35Hz-13kHz
Stereo separation	47dB
Distortion (50% mod.)	0.05%
Hiss (CCIR)	-69dB
Signal for minimum hiss	0.43mV
Sensitivity (stereo, -50dB hiss)	4µV
signal strength meter:	
(µV)	4, 10, 30, 67, 170, 430

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



CREEK EVOLUTION 50A £750



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

A very strong performer with numerous features, the Evolution 50A sets new value-for-money standards

FOR

- beautifully designed and built
- dynamic and detailed sound with articulate bass
- superb phono-stage and tuner options

AGAINST

- warmth sacrificed for transparency
- remote handset
- no dedicated provision for analogue recorders

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