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AMPLIFIER REVIEW STREAMING & DIGITAL REVIEW

PULSE IV ALL-IN-ONE FROM LEEMA

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A solid, hefty all-in-one system complete with an amplifier, digital section and Bluetooth to boot, Paul Rigby reviews the Pulse IV

Since the Pulse III crumbled into the dust of history, returning its Welsh-derived DNA to the cheery spirits of its valley-based forefathers, Leema has been busy. It has released the Pulse IV adding a “high-quality phono stage” (from the Essentials range), aptX-based Bluetooth and a 32bit/384kHz DAC.



And it's this large nugget of information that leads me to shake a finger in the direction of Welshpool. If you nip over to the Leema website then you will see the Pulse IV listed under 'amplifiers' within the Stellar range but I venture to disagree. This integrated amplifier, which does push out 80W RMS, offers five unbalanced RCA inputs, two sets of Line Outs, a pair of Rec Outs and a set of speaker terminals but also arrives with plenty of digital fare: coaxial (three), optical (three) and USB ports while there's that Bluetooth aerial poking out of the rear. To me, this gamut of features is more akin to an all-in-one unit. I realise that, nowadays, the line separating an amplifier from an all-in-one unit is fine but, in this case, the only thing that's really missing is a CD player and, in this day and age, that's not even a prerequisite anymore.

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The front, incidentally, features a large input/power knob, volume/menu knob, 3.5mm headphone socket and output window but if you've just raised your eyes slightly, you knew that already.

The problem with all-in-ones is that they're susceptible to veiling electronic noise, infecting other areas of the chassis which can either dull detail, produce a slight stridency or both. Leema's more expensive and rather wonderful *Quasar* (priced at an extra £700) handled the potential pot-holes with ease and was well received by myself during its review almost exactly a year ago but the lower build budget of the Pulse IV, spanning 435 x 90 x 375mm and weighing 11kg, would prove a more challenging task. Nevertheless, I was eager to find out just how this all-in-one would perform.

SOUND QUALITY

I began by plugging in my external phono amplifier and playing Tubeway Army's *You Are in My Vision* from the fine 2008 Vinyl 180 reissue of the LP, *Replicas*.

What immediately struck me about the Pulse IV was the organisation of the soundstage. It had a definite viewpoint on how the instruments were to be placed. *Just so*, was the explanation. I've heard some amplifiers that almost paint the soundstage with sound with a sort of relaxed sonic brush. So you get drums moving across from left and right, bleeding around the edges and guitars sit somewhere behind with the vocals sort of in the middle. Not here. Gary Numan was fixed in the centre. One lead guitar sound hit the left channel then, on cue, bang, that guitar sound was doubled as the right channel joined in. The guitar sounds sat rigidly on the far channels as the drums backed dead centre, fixed off behind the lead vocal...and so on. Every instrument had a place. I'm sure, if you could have moved the instruments the amp would have taken a dim view, kept you back for detention and issued a 100 lines for good measure. There's a definite sense of discipline here. A sense that the Pulse IV is taking control and there's no messing around.



There's nothing cuddly about the Pulse IV. You listen to another Numan track off the same album, *It Must Have Been Years* and there was a sense of seriousness here, a furrowed brow. Bass, was deep, guttural, even raunchy. Drum strikes were crisp, hitting the ear like bullets. Even treble-based cymbals offered a measured reverb from every tap.

The word is efficiency. The Pulse IV wants to give you value for money and it works damn hard to do so. It sounds like it's just come back off the gym and it's pumped before it's decided to play you music.



While I was about it, I briefly tried the built-in phono amplifier which was good – not amazing or devastating – but very nice indeed for an internal jobbie. Definitely an option if your budget cannot immediately run to an external phono amplifier.

So much for dynamic music. What about the thoughtful stuff? Bit of jazz? I turned to CD and listened to Nina Simone's *Who Am I* from the RCA LP *...and Piano!* An album of voice and piano. Yes, there was evidence of a touch of noise from this subtle and intricate recording which uses silence as much as music to present its emotive power and I wonder if that might be down to the presence of a DAC and Bluetooth module in the same chassis as the amplifier? The effects were relatively minor, though and tended only to show during crescendos.



In general, while the amplifier didn't have the gentle flow and delicacy exhibited by a valve amplifier, the Pulse IV did grab the potentially chaotic piano by the scruff of the neck. This meant that the amplifier gives you a great deal of information and detail because it produces a focused and precise sonic signal.

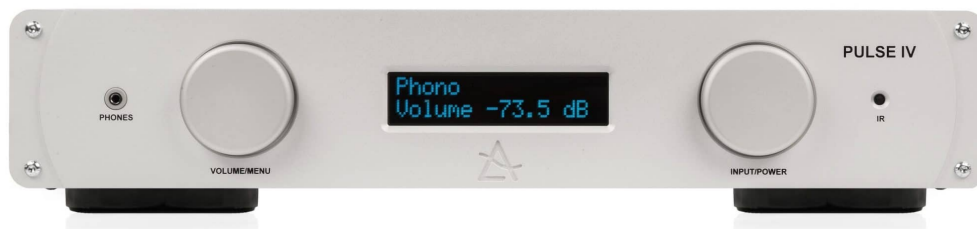
The amplifier also tracked the Simone vocal well too. Again, the subtle nuances of the song were not a priority here but the Pulse IV never allowed even the slightest intonation to escape from its clutches. Every item of detail was ticked off. Again, there's a real sense that the amplifier is conscious of giving you your money's worth so its tried hard to do a good job.



I then turned to the Bluetooth module which paired very easily with my iPhone 8. I streamed Kylie Minogue's All the Lovers.

Yes the AAC file sounded compressed, thin, lacking in emotion, offered bright and hard edges which was just the nature of this particular beast but...given the source, I was still impressed, at least in relative terms, by how the Pulse IV handled the stream which produced a full and broad soundstage with enough instrumental separation to produce a relatively richly populated track. Enough space was inserted into the soundstage to give the secondary percussion a full place in the mix while the strummed guitar was surprisingly delicate.

I then plugged my Astell&Kern AK120 into the rear optical port and played Bob Marley's Jamming at 24bit/96kHz. Again, at the dynamic extremes a little bit of noise hovered around the upper mids but nothing destructive. What was more obvious was the excellent instrumental separation and sense of space across the soundstage with a superb insight in terms of detail. In fact, in raw detail terms, the Pulse IV produced a top quality performance.



I also plugged a pair of Sennheiser HD650s into the built-in headphone socket and, although there was a slight upper midrange roll off at the very extremities of the frequency, the performance was good. The detail extraction persisted while the bass frequencies provided a solid grounding, adding to the rhythmic bounce of the music. That is, there was plenty of opportunities for toe tapping.

CONCLUSION

The ever so slight stridency heard during upper mid crescendos during sound tests didn't get in the way of the output from the Pulse IV which, considering the array of features, performed very well with an impressive overall performance. Packed full of energy and verve, the Pulse IV produced a typically solid state performance and fans of the latter need to give the Pulse IV an immediate demo. Its tight, efficient sonic response to the varied sources thrown at it screamed order and method. A highly effective all-in-one system.

LEEMA PULSE IV

Price: £2,295

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