

Gato Audio DIA-250S NPM

THE MODEL DESIGNATION OF THIS INTEGRATED AMP IS ALMOST AS EXTENSIVE AS ITS SPECIFICATION – HOWEVER, THE PRICE HAS UNDERGONE CONSIDERABLE SHRINKAGE OF LATE, MAKING IT EVEN MORE OF A BARGAIN

Times are changing in the hi-fi market, as in most of retailing: anyone who's walked down many British high streets will note the gaps in the selection of shops, and the growing number of premises now occupied by charity outlets and the like. Indeed, the trend has become so prevalent in all but the best-heeled shopping areas that it's sometimes hard to remember what used to be in particular locations: several high streets I knew when young, which used to be anchored by the likes of Marks & Spencer, Woolworths and large local department stores, are now all but unrecognisable.

It's a major turnaround from the peak of 'bricks and mortar' retailing, when many hi-fi shops found they could no longer afford to be on the main drag, and were forced to move to secondary locations just around the corner or in other slightly less fashionable locations. Now they're facing an even bigger threat, as the seemingly unstoppable rise of online retailing is causing manufacturers and distributors to reassess how their products are sold.

For a long time it was thought that hi-fi, and in particular high-end hi-fi, would be immune to this trend: it was always argued that consumers would want to listen to products before deciding whether to buy. Now, however, some brands have found a way round this: they sell direct to the consumer, offer a trial period, and promise to refund if the customer returns the product at the end of the trial

Factory direct

It's not exactly new in the world of mail order, but it's a sea-change for what one might consider 'serious hi-fi', and it seems the trend, and its effects, may be growing. Take, for example, the Gato Audio amplifier we have here: this time last year you would have paid some £4900 for it, but then the manufacturer decided it was going to start selling

direct to consumers worldwide from its factory in Denmark, and pegged the price at €2995.

That would have severely impacted the existing UK distributor, so a deal was struck, bringing the price here down to £2995, and creating an agreement where Gato wouldn't sell direct into the UK. Now one can quibble about exchange rates, taxes and so on, but the fact remains this is still a pretty good deal: the price has fallen by almost 40%, and we still get conventional dealers through which to buy, and local distributor support.

And the DIA-250S NPM is more than just a pretty good amplifier: quite apart from its sculptural style and the quality of its build, it's also very well equipped and sounds very good indeed. For while the amplifier is relatively compact and looks simple enough with nothing more than its single central control, flanked by two dot-matrix displays and buttons for standby and input, this is actually a remarkably flexible.

Network add-on made easy

The clue is in that NPM suffix, denoting the Network Playback Module the Gato engineers have added to their acclaimed mid-market amplifier. The 'basic' DIA-250S (£2495) already has analogue inputs and an internal DAC, with Bluetooth, optical/coaxial digital inputs and an asynchronous USB Type B port to connect to a computer; adding 20% to its price, the NPM brings to the party Ethernet and Wi-Fi networking, the latter using a USB dongle plugged into the socket provided to the rear of the amp.

If/when Wi-Fi isn't required, it can be taken away completely, removing a source of interference, and indeed Gato says that 'To avoid network conflicts you should not install the USB Wi-Fi dongle into the NPM while connecting with an Ethernet cable.'

Via the network connection, the amplifier offers DLNA/UPnP streaming from network storage, plus Deezer, Qobuz and Tidal – and is also Roon Ready. Existing owners of the DIA-250S can have their amplifier NPM'd by paying just a little more than the difference in price. The same applies to the more powerful DIA-400S amplifier: at £3995, the NPM version is £500 more than the standard one.

The basic amplifier is built around Class D amplifier technology with switch mode power supplies, sourced from International Rectifier/



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Infineon and using FETs to ensure accuracy and low losses in the PWM modulator stage, with output filters to low pass the analogue component to the speakers. This allows the amplifier to develop plenty of power – it's rated at 250Wpc into 8ohms, and 500Wpc into 4ohms – while at the same time only running barely warm even when working hard.

In fact the amp is a development of the original DIA-250: as well as gaining its 'S', badge, it underwent a range of improvements, including an optimised mains filter and power supply upgrades, new input stage and reworking of the output section. New analogue stages were added for the DAC – which is a balanced output Burr-Brown PCM1794, into which all digital inputs are upsampled to 192kHz/24bit – and changes were also made to the digital signal routing and firmware and connectors.

In addition to its digital inputs, the Gato has one set of balanced XLR analogue inputs and two sets of RCA unbalanced ins, and offers pre-outs on both XLR and RCA sockets alongside the speaker terminals. A 'direct' function is available to allow an input to bypass the preamp stage, making it possible to combine this amp with the front channel left/right preouts of an AV amplifier or surround processor, in which mode the DIA-250S NPM operates purely as a power amp. To do this, select input 1 until the display changes to HT, and you're done.

Completing the appeal of the amplifier is the sculpted look, the way the bright white on black displays scroll when changing, and the solid feel resulting from the fact the amp is hand-assembled in Gato Audio's facility in Copenhagen. The casework is smaller than the normal 42-44cm hi-fi width, but perhaps bigger than it looks in pictures, the oversize display giving false visual hints – in fact it's 32.5cm wide and 10.5cm tall, while the depth is much more conventional at 42cm.

Enough streaming for most

While the DIA-250S NPM doesn't offer the extended streaming capabilities found in some amplifiers and network players, its 192kHz/24bit upper limit should be more than sufficient for most users. Streaming control is via ConversDigital's freely available Mconnect Control app, or of course the amp can be run using the Roon Control app if it's being used with a Roon Core.

This was my first acquaintance with this model, and within a relatively short period of listening, I was beginning to regret not having encountered it sooner. For an amplifier with so wide a range of input flexibility, the DIA-250S NPM manages to deliver a constant level of sound

quality whether the source is analogue or digital, physical or virtual. This isn't one of those amplifiers where preference is given to particular signal paths, and it's a tribute to how well Gato has designed and implemented its Network Player Module that the DIA-250S NPM delivers so high a standard of performance across the board..

Rhythms are crisply defined, making the interplay of a jazz recording's bass and drums really propel the music along, low frequencies having both shape and texture, from the impact and decay of a bass drum to the resonance of bass strings. And this combination of weight and speed, coupled to a fresh yet sweet treble via an expressive midband, means the amp is as satisfying with a full orchestra, as evidenced by the recent Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra/Gatti recording of Mahler's first symphony.

Gato's claim is that its amplifier offers a more organic sound than usual and that's obvious in the flow of the music, and the sense of a live event. The presentation here is tight and precise, rather than having that tailored lushness some crave in an amplifier; but unless you have a specific problem elsewhere in your system you're seeking to correct, its fast, agile sound will serve well a wide range of listening.

The RCO recording has all the warmth and weight one could want, and this shines through via the Gato used a pair of the unusual Neat Iota Xplorer speakers, which offer a similar sonic balance to match their seemingly magical 'above the enclosures' imaging. And even with a dense recording such as the crashing version of 'Don't You Forget About Me' from the Simple Minds' *Live in the City of Angels* set, the speed and dynamic ability of the DIA-250S NPM is deployed to good effect, as is its seemingly limitless power.

The grip and drive of this amplifier is as impressive as its delicacy of touch, and that couples with its ease of use to create something that's not only a compelling listen but also excellent value – especially at its newly 'realigned' price.


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Specifications

Gato DIA-250S NPM Integrated amplifier/DAC/ network player	
Output power	250W into 8ohms, 500W into 4ohms
Analogue inputs Two unbalanced line-ins on RCAs, one balanced on XLRs	
Digital inputs	Optical/coaxial, asynchronous USB Type B, Bluetooth with aptX HD
Networking	Wi-Fi via USB dongle supplied, Ethernet
Analogue outputs One pair of speakers, RCA/XLR (6.5V max level unbalanced, 13V balanced)	
Other connections	12V trigger
Dimensions (WxHxD) 32.5x10.5x42cm	
Price	£2995 (UK); €2995 (rest of world, factory direct)

www.gato-audio.com
www.eliteaudiouk.com (UK
distributor)