SPECIAL EDITION PACKED WITH HI-FI & AV REVIEWS FROM SOUND+IMAGE

AUSTRALIAN

Best Buys

AUDIO & AV

Your path to the perfect

HI-FI & HOME CINEMA

INSIDE: AUDIO-TECHNICA + BOWERS & WILKINS + DENON
EPSON + KALEIDESCAPE + LEICA + MOFI + MUSICAL FIDELITY
RICHTER + SENNHEISER + TCL + TRIANGLE + VAF + WATTSON

FUTURE

9 780725 523374 01

2026 #1 A$12.95 NZ$13.90 (inc. GST)

WATTSON AUDIO MADISON LOUNGE EDITION

STREAMER/DAC

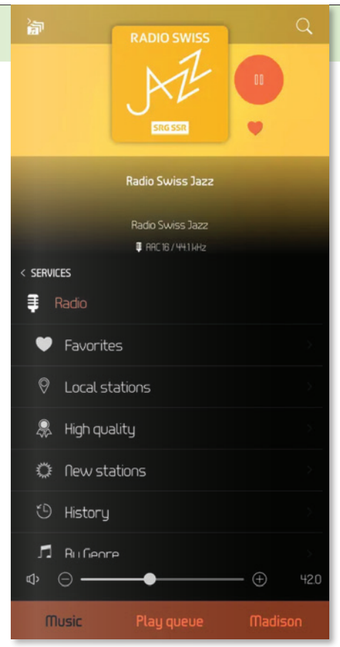
Welcome to the wonderful world of Wattson's unusual hi-fi component designs. Strange as this streamer may look, the sound emerging from it was simply first-class.

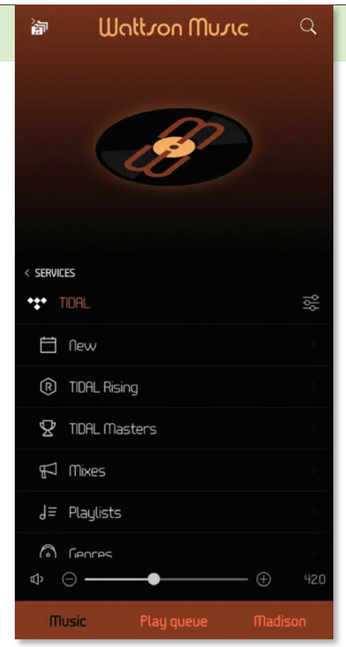
Despite being entirely a Swiss concern, Wattson Audio is named in honour of Scottish engineer James Watt, after whom the SI electrical unit the "watt" was named. Wattson's history is a little convoluted, so bear with us: it had its roots in another Swiss company ABC PCB, established for the purpose of "developing and commercialising electronic equipment for the measurement instruments, audio and computer sectors." ABC ended up being owned by one Florian Cossy, and then passed to Alexandre Lavanchy, under whom it transitioned into a new company called 'Engineered SA'. Lavanchy then founded the separate Wattson Audio in 2020 with co-founders Guy Cheval (Rhapsody Hi-Fi) and Philippe Day (both had previously worked for ABC PCB and Engineered SA) — and the circle was then completed when Florian Cossy's company CH Precision acquired the Wattson Audio brand in April 2024. According to Lavanchy: "It's great to be working even more closely with Florian and his team once again. Modern products are incredibly hardware and software intensive: combining the resources of CH Precision and Wattson Audio gives both companies unparalleled access to design bandwidth and capability."

But enough about the people; let's get to the unusual-looking kit. We have two of the company's products to examine — the next review looks at one of their amplifiers, while here we are playing with a streamer/DAC. The full model name of this product, the **Wattson Audio Madison Lounge Edition Streamer DAC**, is so long that you'll find it abbreviated not only in the references to it on the internet, but also on Wattson Audio's own website and in official Wattson Audio literature. It's such a long name that Wattson couldn't even squeeze it onto the front panel! Instead, they've just settled for 'Madison Lounge Edition'.

It's not only because of the length of the model name that it couldn't be squeezed onto the front panel — it's also because the front panel itself is small. The Madison LE DAC (see, now even we're abbreviating it!) is only 174mm wide, 185mm deep and 52mm high, so it's barely wider than the palms of your hands.

Although you may have noticed the similarity in shape between Wattson Audio's Madison LE DAC and the company's Madison Amplifier (see next review), the dimensions of the two products are completely different in all three dimensions: width, depth and height. It appears that if you want a matching Wattson Audio amplifier, you'll need to investigate the company's Power S amplifier, which is not only the same width, but will also provide the necessary DC voltage required to power the LE DAC, failing which you will instead need to use the LE DAC's own external 5V DC power supply that's made in Switzerland from lightweight alloy and measures 120mm deep, 75mm wide and 45mm high.





Streaming details

The product name might be lengthy, but it does very accurately describe what the device does, which is to convert music delivered to it in a digital format into an analogue audio signal that can be passed on to be amplified to a loudspeaker system. However, because it has a standard 6.35mm stereo headphone jack on the front panel, you could always just plug in a pair of headphones and use these to listen to your music... so no need for any other components at all.

As for delivering the digital signal to the LE Streamer DAC, this can be done from your network, via a standard 100Mbit/s Ethernet jack on the rear panel, in which case the digital signal can be PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz or DSD up to 256× (11.2896MHz). If you choose to use the coaxial (via a gold-plated RCA socket) or optical (via a standard Toslink socket) digital inputs, you are restricted to PCM data up to 24-bit 192kHz — limitations which are baked into the S/PDIF protocol, rather than from any decision by Wattson. Besides, this is hardly a 'restriction', as the primary use for either of these inputs would likely be to connect the digital output from a CD player or CD transport, for which you need only a 16-bit/44.1kHz capability.

Controlling the Madison LE is accomplished via Wattson Audio's own Wattson Remote app for Android, or Wattson Music Controller for iOS. The Madison LE is also Roon Ready, so you can optimise performance that way.

Otherwise there's integrated support for Qobuz, Tidal, HRA *et al*, plus Wattson Audio promises "seamless compatibility" with Audirvāna, so you can play high-resolution music from your computer (Mac or Windows). And, of course, there's always UPnP should you prefer to roll this way (or in the event you're using a Linux platform).

The Wattson Remote app is not loaded with features, which can be considered an advantage in that it's very quick and easy to learn where everything is, and to navigate effectively. For everyday listening purposes, all you need to be able to do is find a track stored on your server and play it; the app was all we needed. If you need more features, use your preferred UPnP software.

Set-up and processing

Setting up the LE Streamer was simplicity itself. Once you have connected whatever inputs you intend to use and then the external power supply, you just press and release the main control knob, upon which all the LEDs on the front panel will flash three times. The LED over the active input will then remain on, as will one of the volume LEDs. (Note that when using the network input, the NET LED will blink until the LE has obtained an IP address.)

In the event that the default active input is not the one you wish to use, simply press the main control knob, which will instantly mute the output, then rotate the knob (in either direction) to select your desired input. Rotation is made very easy because of what look like rubber rings around the knob (they might be made of some other material) that provided a truly non-slip grip.

One input that is not available on the Madison LE is USB, with neither a USB-A slot into which you might plug a USB stick and/or external hard drive to play files directly, nor a USB-B socket which would allow a computer a more direct connection than networked UPnP. But we were more than happy to mostly audition the performance of the Madison LE via the coaxial input, though of course in the interests of completeness and comprehensiveness we did also connect the Madison LE to our network, more about which later in this review.

For outputs the Madison LE provides both unbalanced (via gold-plated RCA sockets) and balanced (via gold-plated XLR) options. We used the balanced outputs and would suggest that you do the same if you have suitable partnering equipment — obviously the Madison amplifier in the next review would be suitable in this regard.

The control knob on the front panel allows you to adjust the volume (as well as input switching and standby power

functions), but the manner and means by which it controls volume is not so obvious, being in the digital domain, via 'lossless' LEEDH processing.

LEEDH processing was developed (and patented) by French designer Gilles Millot of Acoustical Beauty. Unlike most digital volume controls, which can 'lose' essential information at the truncation stage, LEEDH processing is an algorithm that enables digital volume without any information loss. The technical description of what it actually does, how it works and why it's superior to other methods is the subject of a white paper presented at the 2020 AES by Heeb Thierry and Leidi Tiziano of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (which we've linked via *tinyurl.com/BB-LEEDH*), but proof of its efficacy can be gauged by its popularity with other companies that are using it, which include not only Wattson Audio but also Lumin, Metronome, Vermeer Audio, 3D Lab, Soulution and others. (LEEDH is an acronym for *Laboratoire d'Études et de Dévelopements Holophoniques*, which in English translates to Holophonic Laboratory of Research and Development.)

Listening sessions

While we did most listening using the coaxial SPDIF input and standard 44.1kHz/16-bit data, we also put in quite a few hours with higher-res sources and using the Madison LE's other input options — and we were impressed by the Madison LE's performance in every respect. It delivers truly state-of-the-art performance across the board.

Bass was crisp, tight and extended down beyond the lower limits of human hearing, so far lower than necessary for accurately replaying any type of music, irrespective of resolution. Sound quality across the midrange was such that the tonal fidelity of all the instruments heard in our sessions was exactly as you'd expect to hear them in real life. The same was true of human voice, whether singing or to speech. Voice intelligibility was always at the very highest level, even against the most confused of sonic backgrounds.

High-frequency sounds were delivered with amazing fidelity, no matter whether high-pitched acoustic instruments or synthesised high-frequency sounds. There were no signs of high-frequency harshness, blurring or ringing... just pure, clean treble.

One of the first albums we played was Jeff Buckley's 'Grace', which hadn't been out of the rack for a while. Our Editor is excited about the forthcoming Atmos remix of this album, but our return to the original came after reading that, thanks to TikTok, one of the album's tracks (*Lover, You Should Have Come Over*) had finally charted (albeit at No. 97) 29 years after his unfortunate death.

We were re-entranced by the beautifully delicate intro to the album's opener *Mojo Pin*, and by how well the Madison LE reproduced the 'twang' of the guitar, the sound of the drum kit and, of course, the sound of Buckley's gorgeous tenor voice which, for readers who might not have heard it, spanned four octaves, not including his exceptional falsetto.

The album's title track highlighted the Madison LE's ability to fuse multiple melodic lines while simultaneously keeping them separated, so the music is presented on a higher plane. As for the lovely *Lilac Tree* track, a song much recorded but perhaps most famously by Elkie Brooks in 1978, well, that simply showcased the LE's total lack of circuit noise... this is certainly one super-quiet DAC. You can also hear this on Buckley's cover of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*, arguably the very best version of this famous song. Interestingly, Buckley based his version on John Cale's cover rather than reinterpreting Cohen's original. Also interesting is that although Cale's version is the one used in the movie *Shrek*, the version on the movie's soundtrack album was sung by Rufus Wainwright. (And for completeness, k.d. lang delivers a superb version on her classic album 'Hymns of the 49th Parallel'.)

When playing high-res music, we played only tracks for which we had the provenance, and actually recorded using a high-resolution recorder. Listening to *Ballad for Chris Green*, recorded live at 96kHz/24-bit, Cindy Boste's voice was a sonic mirror of what it sounds like in real life — and likewise the sound of her guitar, plus an absolutely silent background (if you don't count that we could hear the distant sound of birds chirping in the trees).

The same was true of Micah Shelef's wonderful track *Turn It Around*: his voice was exactly as it is in real life, the electric guitar sound was true and the piano sound was everything it should have been.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can only rephrase some of the above, and say that Wattson Audio's Madison Lounge Edition DAC/Streamer delivers truly state-of-the-art performance across the board.

WATTSON AUDIO
MADISON LE STREAMER

- Superb sound
- State-of-the-art performance
- Headphone output
- No USB input
- Unusual size and shape

Price: $8200

Input resolution: PCM to 24-bit/192kHz
Network streaming resolution: PCM to 32-bit/384kHz, DSD to 256x (11.2896MHz)
S/N Ratio: >120dB A-weighted
THD+N: <0.001%
Inputs: optical digital, coaxial digital, Ethernet network streaming
Headphone output: 6.35mm phone
Dimensions (WDH): 174 x 185 x 52mm
Weight: 1.075kg
Contact: Absolute Hi End
Telephone: 0488 777 999
Web: www.absolutehiend.com

WATTSON AUDIO MADISON POWER AMPLIFIER

STEREO POWER AMPLIFIER

If you liked the look of the preceding streamer, you'll be primed to consider matching it (kinda) with this high-end amplifier from the same Swiss company.

Our second Wattson Audio product, the Madison Power Amplifier, is again unique in its design, as you can see from the photographs here. So while you could use it with other brands, the design really makes most sense when partnered with a similar Wattson Audio's preamplifier and/or streamer. Although if you do, you'll discover that while the designs match, the sizes don't (21.6cm wide here, versus the streamer's 17.4cm), so that some elements, such as the three grooves etched in the top surface, do not align. Yet they look neat enough from the front (see overleaf). For the purpose of this second review, however, we are looking at the Madison amp as a standalone component.

Before we can start the review at all, however, there's some housekeeping to get out of the way, because if you peruse the internet, you'll find references to two seemingly different versions of Wattson Audio's 'Madison' power amplifier. One is named 'Madison' and the other named the 'Madison Lounge Edition' (which, even more confusingly, is sometimes referred to as a 'Madison LE' which, as with the streamer, will be interpreted by many as a Limited rather than a Lounge Edition; indeed we suspect this may have been a joke by the company).

According to Alexandre Lavanchy (see the streamer review for his background), the 'Lounge Edition' of the amp, although reviewed, was not a production model but rather a prototype, with a completely different power supply to the 'Madison' reviewed here, which is a production model. Says Lavanchy, *"The initial prototype we presented in 2024 had a traditional linear power supply, with two toroidal transformers. We were not happy with the 'grip' of the amplifier on low impedance speakers. For this reason we changed entirely the power supply concept and went for an external AC-to-DC unit. Inside the amplifier enclosure, we have two main DC/DC isolated voltage converters producing the rails for the amplifier. These converters work at a frequency close to 300kHz, far from the audible bandwidth. We went quite a long engineering path to make this work properly (one entire year actually) but are convinced it was worth it."*

Interestingly, this decision about the power supply makes the Wattson Audio Madison the first power amplifier we can recall reviewing that has an outboard power supply made not by itself, but by a third party, because the outboard AC-to-DC converter that delivers 36 volts of direct current to the Madison is a GST360A36-C6P switch-mode supply that is designed and manufactured by Meanwell Enterprises in Taiwan (despite being labelled also as being 'Made in China', rather than in the 'ROC').

Features & build

As for the Madison amplifier itself, that is 'Designed, Engineered and Built in Switzerland' according to the circular sticker placed on its rear panel.

The provision of an external supply makes it more difficult for any mains hum to creep into the audio circuitry, but it also means that the Madison does not have a mains power switch — the press-button at the top of the front panel only switches between On and Standby… though it does also allow you to select which input you'd like to use (balanced or unbalanced), and to turn the speakers on and off. The lack of a power switch means that, as the manual says: "The power socket must remain accessible because it is the only means of disconnecting from the electrical network."

The rear panel of the Madison sports three toggle-style micro-switches aligned in a row. The first of these is a three-way type with positions for 8-, 4- and 2-ohms; the second is also a three-way type, with positions for 'Stereo', 'Mono' and 'Biamp'; the third is a two-way type with positions marked 26dB and 20dB.

As you'd imagine, the 26dB/20dB switch adjusts the overall gain of the Madison, with the 26dB setting providing additional gain necessary for the amplifier to deliver its rated output power in the event that the source voltage is too low to enable this with the 20dB setting.

Also as you'd imagine, the three-way switch with 8-ohm, 4-ohm and 2-ohm settings is intended to optimise the output circuitry of the Madison to best suit the nominal impedance of your loudspeakers. You might expect to see such a switch on a valve amplifier, but it is exceedingly unusual to find one on a solid-state amplifier, which the Madison most definitely is. According to Lavanchy, this switch "modifies the power supply rail voltages. When set for low impedance, it puts less stress on the output stage which allows the amplifier to handle high currents more easily."

But what if you don't know the impedance of your loudspeakers, or you simply set it incorrectly, we wondered. Apparently, this is not a problem.

"There is no risk at using the amplifier in any setting with any load, it's just a matter of slight optimisation," says Lavanchy.

As for that third micro-switch, 'Stereo' mode allows the obvious: stereo operation! When the switch is set to the middle ('Biamp') position, any signal at the left-channel input will be sent to both the left and right channels.

"This mode is ideal for vertically bi-amping loudspeakers with two pairs of independent binding posts," says Madison's Owner's Manual. "Use two Madison amplifiers to create a stereo setup."

As for the monophonic mode, it wasn't at all what we expected. In monophonic mode, the entire power supply is devoted to just the left channel of the Madison amp, so the right channel is rendered inoperative. The Owner's Manual explains it thus: "This mode is ideal for complex loads and high amplifier demands."

This is quite curious, as all other amplifiers we can recall that offer a 'monophonic' mode use it to enable the left and right channels to be bridged, which effectively doubles the amplifier's power output so that although you sacrifice a channel (and therefore require a second amplifier for the other channel) you get twice the power output. Whereas with the Madison, you don't get any additional power at all, just a cooler chassis, because the single amplifier is producing less heat.

And speaking of heat, you have probably noticed that the chassis of the Madison is completely enclosed, without any ventilation holes or slots, and there is no external heat-sinking, so the chassis can indeed become rather more than just warm, such that the Owner's Manual advises: "Do not operate under high ambient temperatures (>35°C) or with extremely high humidity (>85%)."

While we suspect this is just a McDonalds-style warning (as in words printed on McDonalds coffee cups advising that "Caution, Coffee may be hot!"), Wattson Audio says that actually the amplifier will sort out any over-temperature issues by automatically switching itself off. The protection circuitry that does this monitors not only the internal temperature of the amplifier itself, but also temperature variations of the power transistors and the (internal) power supply. It also monitors output current to guard against short-circuits. If an error event is detected, the amplifier automatically switches off and all the LEDs on the front panel will flash on and off in yellow to indicate that the protection system has been activated. We did not have any days during testing which pushed into Sydney's occasional 40s, so cannot report as to whether such ambient temperatures really preclude its use.

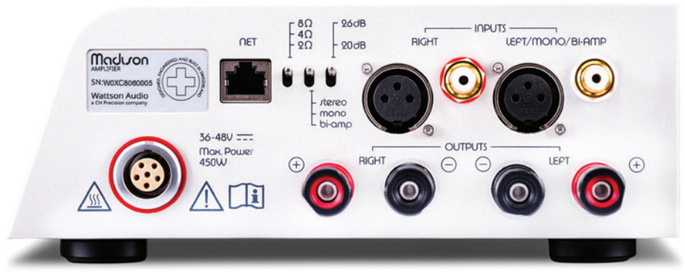
As you should be able to see from the photograph of the Madison's rear panel, XLR sockets are provided for balanced input connection, RCA sockets for unbalanced input connection, and multi-way terminal posts for loudspeaker connection. The Ethernet connection (NET) is simply to facilitate firmware updates; it has no other application.

The Madison power amplifier measures (at its widest points, since the amplifier is not rectangular) 216 × 300 × 87mm (WDH) where that stated depth does not account for the speaker terminal protrusions. The amplifier weighs 6.0kg.

The outboard power supply for the amplifier is 220mm deep, 95mm wide and 50mm high, and the umbilical cord that connects its low-voltage output to the Madison (via a multi-pin LEMO connector) is one metre long, so you can easily hide it out of sight (which would be a good aesthetic choice, because of its large, coffin-like jet-black appearance).

Listening sessions

If we were asked for the single most notable characteristic of Wattson Audio's Madison, you'd need to wait quite a while for an answer, because we'd be torn between its lack of noise, which not only renders silences truly silent but also makes it possible to hear even the tiniest musical details, and its superbly extended frequency response, such that low frequencies extend



down into the subterranean and the high frequencies out far enough to make bats envious. Oh, and thirdly the incredible precision of the stereo imaging and the depth of the soundstage. The short version of the foregoing is that the Wattson Audio Madison is a lovely-sounding amplifier.

This is evidenced by the delightful (and very catchy) album 'Tunnel Vision', from Beach Bunny. Founder, vocalist, rhythm guitarist and lyricist extraordinaire Lill Trifilio is supremely talented. The sound quality of this album is exceptionally good, too, particularly the drums, which are expertly played by Jon Alvarado. He's a very clean, very precise musician, as you'll hear for yourself. We seem to be at odds with the majority of Beach Bunny fans because our favourite track is not *Vertigo* but *Clueless*, even though we don't particularly like the treatment of Trifilio's voice on this track (listen to her vocal on *Big Pink Bubble* by way of comparison). That said, it's likely you won't hear these differences unless you're listening via amplification with the superior sonic qualities that are exhibited by this Wattson Audio offering.

The purity of the sound of the Madison certainly helped us get a grip on Miley Cyrus's most recent offering, 'Something Beautiful', which is so sonically complex as to almost beggar belief, perhaps partially to take your mind away from the lyrical content, which is not strong. Though this album was Cyrus's concept, it's actually a team effort with collaborators Maxx Morando, Cole Haden, Shawn Everett, Jonathan Rado and Michael Pollack, plus more than enough additional musicians to put an orchestral cohort to shame. Drop us a line if you can think of an instrument or a sound effect that isn't on this album...

Cyrus even roped in supermodel Naomi Campbell to help her out on the track *Every Girl You've Ever Loved*. Campbell gave up her musical career after her only album, 'Baby Woman', bombed in the UK, though one track from it — *Love & Tears* — charted at number 40 when released as a single. Although it bombed in the UK, maybe partly due to *NME*'s Emma Forrest's review of it ['*Naomi Campbell's debut singing effort is stubbornly not as bad as it should be. Her voice is an inoffensive, ineffectual whining alto*'], Campbell still managed to sell a million or so copies — mostly in Japan.

> If we were asked for the single most notable characteristic of Wattson Audio's Madison, you'd need to wait quite a while for an answer, because we'd be torn...

While they share a similar design aesthetic, the Madison LE Streamer (top, see previous review) is relatively dinky in comparison to the still-small Wattson Audio Madison amplifier (bottom).

Talking of Japan, you should take the time to use the Madison to audition the most recent album from Japanese Breakfast, because they've finally had the sense to make a professional studio recording, rather than mucking around in a home studio. Don't pay any attention to the album's curious name 'Melancholy Brunettes (& Sad Women)' which was apparently inspired by a book of short stories called 'The World of Apples' by John Cheever. Michelle Zauner's lyrics are as obtuse and elusive as ever, but if you take the time (and you should) to read her memoir, 'Crying in H Mart', which spent 60 weeks on *The New York Times*' non-fiction bestseller list, you'll get a better grip on where she's coming from. Listen out for Adam Schatz's sax and see if you can pick who's playing drums on *Mega Circuit* (don't peek at the liner notes!).

At one point during our listening sessions, we took a dinner break and returned to find the amplifier wasn't working, which turned out to be because it had switched itself to Standby while we were away. It turned out that we'd missed the bit in the Owner's Manual that clearly states "To comply with power consumption standards, the amplifier will automatically switch off if there is no music signal for about 40 minutes." But that's in Europe; we have no such restrictions here. Doh!

Conclusion

Although at first blush the Madison might seem fairly pricey for a relatively low-powered and less-than-full-sized power amplifier, once you consider the boutique nature of the company, the uniqueness of the exterior design, the Swiss-made build quality — and then hear the purity of the sound — you may become convinced that this is the amplifier for you.

WATTSON AUDIO
MADISON POWER AMPLIFIER

- Sonic purity
- Super-quiet background
- Excellent stereo imaging
- Mono mode doesn't bridge
- No power switch
- Unusual shape

Price: $10,300

Inputs: RCA stereo in, balanced XLR in, power in, Ethernet (updates only)
Input impedance: 100kohm
Output power: 2 x 50W into 8 ohms; 2 x 75W into 4 ohms; 2 x 120W into 2 ohms (THD+N < 0.05%)
Bandwidth: 1Hz to 400kHz (-3dB)
Signal-to-noise, weighted (SNR-A): > 120dB
Dimensions (WDH): 216 x 300 x 87mm (without binding posts)
Weight: 6.0kg
Power supply: 36V DC 350W external

Contact: Absolute Hi End
Telephone: 0488 777 999
Website: www.absolutehiend.com