

Trust Your Ears



Wilma Cozart Fine, lead producer of the Mercury Living Presence catalog during the 1950s and 1960s, conducted her professional career in the recording industry according to this simple philosophy: "Trust your ears." Wilma's ability to remember the sound she heard at a recording venue was legendary. She became remarkably proficient at judging a recording's verisimilitude to the live musicians. Her first goal was always to preserve the sound of a performance's "Living Presence"—capturing the event as she heard it in the concert hall.

She worked closely with her husband, recording industry pioneer C. Robert (Bob) Fine. He provided his music-driven engineering expertise and offered a constant stream of innovations in equipment and techniques. Together, they set out to tape a series of classical recordings that were as closely faithful to the original sound as the technology allowed. Wilma produced over 200 classical records, many of which are still considered references for lifelike music reproduction.

When it came time to remaster the Mercury Living Presence catalog for CD, she brought the same exacting standards to this new media as she demanded when producing the analog originals. As Wilma considered the equipment she'd use to convert the analog master tapes to digital, she eschewed products used by most engineers and producers of the time and searched for a better solution. After evaluating several alternatives, she ultimately chose the then-new dCS 900 for its high resolution, musicality, flexibility, and unique ability to produce 24-bit files—technology dCS pioneered.

Now, as part of the 70th Anniversary of the Mercury Living Presence label's inception, Decca Records has released the entire digital catalog to the major streaming services, allowing more music lovers than ever to access and enjoy Wilma Cozart Fine's legacy of vibrant, timeless classical music, lovingly recorded.



Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the first Mercury Living Presence Recording.
Entire Digital Catalog on all major streaming platforms soon.
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Number 109

Our 16th Anniversary!

Cover Story: Three from Audia Flight

FL Three S FLS 9 and FLS 10

\$3,950, \$7,500, and \$11,000

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One of the most common questions when faced with multiple choices in audio is “where does the point of diminishing returns lie?” In the case of the three integrated amplifiers we have from Audia Flight, it’s a linear progression. Where some manufacturers add a little bit more power, and a few extra buttons, each one of these three integrated amplifiers is an excellent choice at its relative price point.

With more and more great integrated amplifiers on the market, not having complete separate components is no longer a black mark on your audiophile soul. Unless you are a hifi whisperer, considering you don’t have to match amp and pre, or get the right pair of high-performance cables with an integrated amplifier, I submit it’s easier to hit one out of the ballpark going this route. This way you know your components will go together perfectly.

From what our readers have been telling us, a great integrated paired with speakers of your choice and maybe a turntable makes for an outstanding music system that offers high performance with a minimal footprint. As we head towards 2022, not as many people want a massive rack of audio gear in their environment as in years past.



We've got three for you here, and we will be listing these models in their base configurations, because you can configure the smallest Flight Three S (\$3,950) with or without a phono stage. The larger FLS9 (\$7,500) and FLS10 (\$11,000) offer two expansion slots, which can be filled with DAC (\$1,600) MM/MC phono (\$1,000), or additional analog inputs (\$500), giving you a range of configuration exactly to your taste. One of the most common complaints we always hear is "but I don't care about vinyl, why do I need to pay for a phonostage," or similar comments from vinylistas that don't think they need a DAC.

This modularity is awesome for three reasons. Customization is always a good thing – because you never know what your tastes are going to morph into. Second, keeping it all on board makes for a compact, yet high performance system. Third, price of entry is lower. Nothing wrong with that, eh?

The Flight Three arrives with built-in USB DAC, and the phono slot is vacant, so we can't make that comparison. The other two amplifiers each have phono cards installed, and the FLS10 has both DAC and phono, making this a \$13k integrated as delivered. Again, just buying three sets of interconnects and power cords for four separate components could set you back five figures. See why we like premium integrations so much?

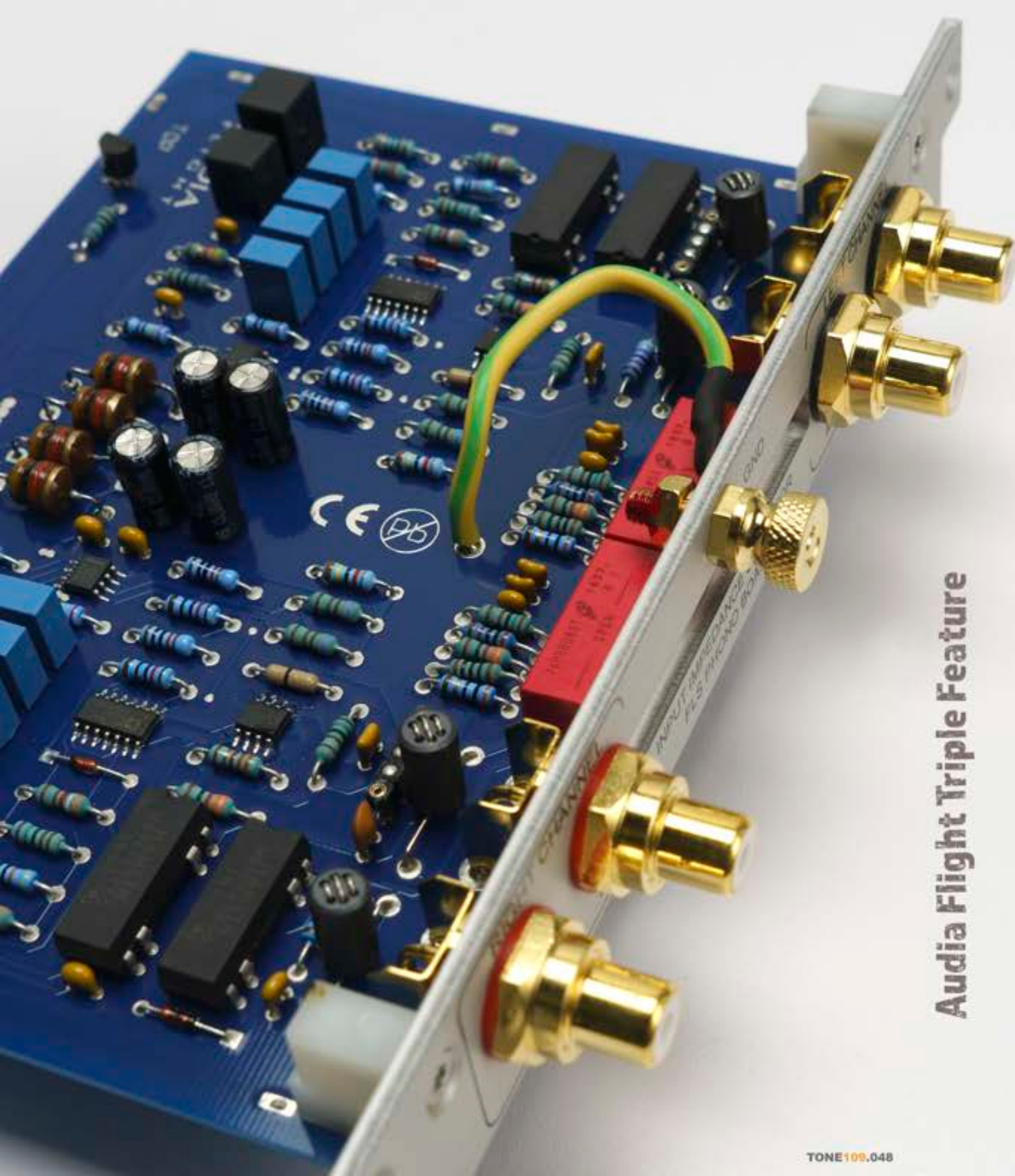
Look and feel

All of the Audia Flight components share a similar design language, featuring their trademark swoop on the front panel with a large, thin volume control and blue LEDs keeping you posted on input choice and volume. In case you haven't already guessed, this is an Italian product. Whether you choose silver or black, the Audia Flight amplifiers look gorgeous in any setting. Simply beautiful to behold.

The casework is finely machined and finished, with each box a standard form factor of about 18" wide and 17" deep. The Flight Three is about 5" tall (with feet), the FLS9 about 6.5" tall and the FLS10 almost 8" tall. Flight three is a very manageable 36 pounds, the FLS9, 56 pounds, and the FLS10 weighs 97 pounds.

Fit, finish, and implementation are world class here, but what makes these components even more special is the human engineering. The ergonomics are flawless, with all controls laid out with ease of use in mind. These are amplifiers you will enjoy walking up to, and interacting with, even though the remote is excellent. I suspect that if you buy an Audia Flight amplifier, you'll want to engage with it.





Audia Flight Triple Feature

All three amplifiers have tape and preamplifier outputs. Very nice, in case you wanted to add an additional amplifier or connect a tape deck. Now that the cool kids are picking cassette decks again, a good idea. To this end, I actually used the FLS10 to make a few mix tapes on my Nakamichi 1000 to great effect. The Flight Three and FLS9 feature single binding posts for speaker outputs, while the FLS10 provides dual speaker outputs, for those that bi-wire. Aside from optional phono and DAC inputs, all have five line level inputs. The Flight Three offers four RCA inputs and a balanced input, while the other two provide three RCA inputs and two XLR inputs. And, they all feature headphone jacks on the front panel.

Overall sonics

Listening begins with a pair of vintage Acoustat 2+2s and the FLS10. You might think this a bit crazy, but these are tough speakers to drive. Amplifiers lacking in current drive and control roll off quickly. They are almost like connecting a giant capacitor across the speaker binding posts. Don't laugh, more than one "big name" amplifier has shut down quickly, trying to drive the 8-foot-tall relics.

Queuing up Aimee Mann's *Lost in Space* draws me in immediately. Audia Flight spends a lot of time on their website discussing their approach to amplifier technology, and how they were on a quest for an amplifier with better load control, and quicker signal responses. This led them to a current feedback approach, rather than a traditional voltage feedback design. These 40-year-old speakers never performed better, and almost sound like I've added a supertweeter, with all the additional air and detail up on top.

ESLs are never known for major bass extension or detail, but the 2+2s were seriously good.

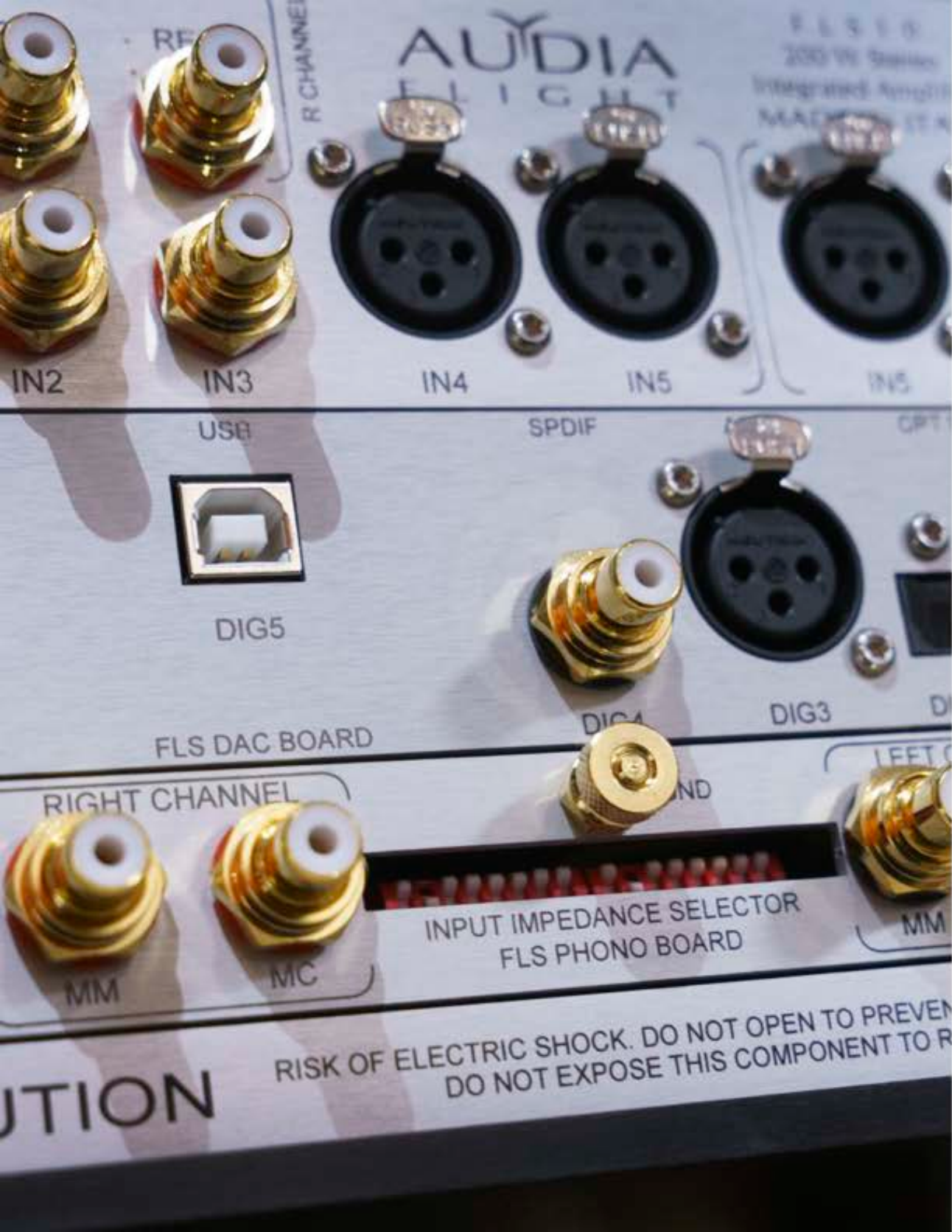
Switching the program to Kruder and Dorfmeister's "Bug Powder Dust," is tons of fun. This record also offers up a lot of atmospheric effects – playing to the strengths of the current feedback topology. The FLS10 makes the monoliths dig deep, which leads to more bass heavy tracks. Thanks to the ultra-low distortion, the familiar rap of ESL panels pushed a little too far comes up to remind me to turn it down. This is really good stuff indeed.

We've listened to a few current based phonostages and they have been equally enthralling – with a signature clarity that few others have matched. The same thing is going on here with the Audia Flight amplifiers. There is a delicacy and airiness that you might normally associate with the finest tube designs – yet they have the bass extension and control that only great solid-state amplifiers can deliver.

All three of these amplifiers produce some of the most balanced sound we've heard, with nothing sacrificed anywhere. Where some amplifiers rely on a certain voice, or emphasis (i.e. killer bass but diffuse soundstaging, or congested highs, etc.) these amplifiers have as little coloration as can be imagined. They are always resolving enough to let the character of the speakers in use come right through without bias. If I were to describe Audia Flight's "sound" in one word, it would be clear. This is a clarity that you usually have to spend a lot more money to get, with tube or solid-state electronics.

Vinyl thoughts

The FLS Phono board is exciting because you get a two-input phonostage, with MM and MC inputs. The DIP switches at the rear allow you to adjust loading between 20 and 1500 ohms, with a lot of adjustment on the lower end of the spectrum. Most listening was done with a Denon 103R, and a recently rebuilt Lyra Helikon SL cartridges. MM duties were handled by the Ortofon 2M Black.



An internal board saves major expense, in terms of more casework, an additional power supply and so on, allowing that \$1,000 phono board to perform much better than you'd get, buying a stand-alone box for the same price. You'd have to pay at least twice as much to get this level of performance, and there's still the issue of another power cord and pair of interconnects. Owners of mega analog front ends will either already have a phonostage they love, or investigate Audia Flight's Classic FL Phono.

Used with the Technics SL-1200/Denon combo, an Avid Ingenium (with alum. Platter upgrade, SME 309 tonearm and the Lyra) and a Rega P10/Apheta, the on-board phono delivers stellar results. The sonic and resolution differences between very different cartridges are easily discerned, and the match with Rega's Apheta MC is excellent. This cartridge gives its best performance when loaded between 25 and 50 ohms. Even some premium phonostages aren't up to this challenge, that the Audia Flight amps pass with ease.

As I have the first Ingenium, with dual tonearm capability, the convenience of two phono inputs is lovely. Sporting the Lyra/SME309 at one end, and a vintage SME 3009 and Shure V15III mounted on the other, the FLS9 and FLS10 is a versatile combination.

Sonically, the phono stage is voiced like the rest of the amplifier – quiet, dynamic, and resolving. It is easy to hear the different personalities of the three cartridges used, never feeling inadequate. The only complaint is the slight difficulty in adjusting loading. Turntable enthusiasts indulging in a wide range of cartridges for their ever changing moods, will tire of moving the amplifier out of its shelf to adjust. Especially the 100-pound FLS10.

DAC in the box

Again, Audia Flight goes the extra mile with their onboard DAC. With Toslink, RCA SPDIF, balanced AES/EBU and a galvanically isolated USB, you will have no problem accessing whatever you use to play your digital library. Only a streamer is missing. Maybe this will be a future expansion board? Hint, hint. That and MQA – which is off our radar.

Once in the menus, five filters are available to custom tailor the sound to your preference, and there are a few settings for DSD as well. Not having much of a DSD collection, this is the only aspect of the Audia Flight amplifiers we did not explore, but good as the PCM side is, I'm guessing DSD will pose no issues.

There is a lot of digital performance here for \$1,600, and for all the same reasons as the phono. As with my reference dCS player, I preferred filter no.1 the Slow Roll Off. Filter 0, the Sharp Roll Off filter may be what more of you without the ability to change filter settings are used to, so start there. It's nice that at this price this is an available adjustment.

Listening to most files via USB and a MacBook Pro, via Roon, everything works as it should. The DAC section has a natural reproduction that feels much better than most DACs you'll find on the market for this price. Much like the Boulder 866, the upcharge for the DAC section is minimal, and the performance gain tremendous.

This is a very "un-digital" sounding DAC indeed.



Getting personal

Along with everything else, all three amplifiers offer a ¼" front panel headphone jack. Head fanatics with a plethora of four-figure phones will still opt for a standalone headphone amplifier, but for those using headphones occasionally, the onboard stage is just fine.

Using some vintage Grados, a pair of Audeze LCD-1s, and our standby Sennheiser 650s (with Cardas wiring) was engaging enough to keep me planted in the Eames Lounge for some fairly long copy editing sessions. Trying a few other phones from HiFi Man and Dan Clark were equally satisfying. This amplifier provides a great platform to explore headphone listening if you aren't already doing so.

Final questions

Every aspect of the Audia Flight amplifiers is sheer enjoyment. Quick, lively dynamics, free of tonal coloration, and their ability to paint a large sonic landscape in all three dimensions is the rule of the day. Even the entry level Flight Three drives difficult ESLs with ease. In the course of trying everything from Harbeth, Dynaudio, Eggleston, Piega, and Sonus faber speakers was a breeze.

The only speaker proving slightly difficult for the Flight Three was a pair of Magnepans, which are notoriously power hungry. The sonic result was good, but the two larger models delivered a more realistic presentation with these speakers.

Going up the range from the Flight Three to the FLS10, each amplifier offering increased resolution and ease in equal proportion. The FLS9 reveals more musical detail and a larger dynamic envelope than the Three, and the FLS10 the most of all. Similar to turning up the ISO dial on a DSLR, from 100 to 3200. The lower number produces images with more nuance in the highlights and shadows, while the higher number produces grainier images.

These amplifiers all exhibit a similar sonic core: delivering a fine line between being highly resolving, but never harsh. Even with the Acora SRC-1, which is one of the most resolving speakers we've experienced, the Audia Flight amplifiers merely allow you to hear further into the mix.

Deciding between the Flight Three and the FLS9 will ultimately decide on how much performance you require from the on board phono and digital sections (should you go in that direction) and if your speakers have enough resolution to warrant the larger amplifier section.

I felt the tougher choice was between a fully configured FLS10 or one with no onboard analog and/or digital section. Using this amp in the center of my reference system with the Sonus faber Stradiveris, Nagra Classic Phono, (with Thrax table and ASL cart) and the dCS Vivaldi DAC is a delight. This is an amplifier that will feel perfect, should you decide to use it with a premium DAC and phonostage. With 200 Watts per channel on tap and a huge power supply, the FLS10 is able to play music much louder than required. This amplifier can easily be the anchor of a \$100k system.

All three amplifiers are executed to near perfection. You will have to be the judge of which one will work best for your room, system, and budget. A great time to visit an Audia Flight dealer and give them all a listen. This trio goes from great to fantastic, and provide a very linear progression of features and performance going up the range.

Great sound, great build, and one of the best feature sets going. What's not to love?

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