

# Soulnote A1

## integrated amplifier

Jason Kennedy

**T**here has long been a belief that the smaller an audio company is, the more its engineers focus on sound quality rather than commercial potential. This is because they typically follow their passions rather than aim to develop a product within a certain price range with specific business objectives. When this industry was larger, it was more evident, and only a few engineers working for mass-market brands appeared as passionate about sound as their customers, often because commercial pressures hinder the pursuit of perfect sound.

Soulnote was founded by former Marantz engineers—experts who know how to produce electronics at a sensible price and who found themselves in a position to go the extra mile and craft products that bring them joy. As a result, this base model in the Soulnote amplifier range costs slightly more than similar products from larger brands, yet it includes many of the technologies that have recently established this Japanese brand's reputation.

Soulnote's shtick, I doubt that is the Japanese phrase, is the liveliness of sound; they are after "the soul that lives in the sound source." This is an admirable approach and

one that few others mention, even though many probably share the same desire. If you look at the second-hand market for Soulnote, you will see several relatively old models at what appear to be reasonable prices. These, however, were built before the current chief engineer, Kato, took over operations and implemented the live sound philosophy, meaning that models produced since 2016 are likely to differ.

### Vibe drain

The A1 integrated amplifier is a well-constructed piece of equipment. The distinctive horizontal slots on the thick front panel make it stand out, and I appreciate the contrast created by the aluminium control knobs and the chrome badge. At the bottom of the case are three feet, with one at the rear positioned directly underneath the centre of the power transformer. The idea is to dissipate mechanical vibration through the optional spike that can be fitted to all three feet. These feet come with flat metal tips as standard, and that's how I used the amp. However, there is some reasoning in using a spike for the intended purpose, if the supporting shelf can absorb the energy rather than reflect it back into the amp via the other feet.





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» Operationally, the A1 avoids a potentiometer for volume control and uses relay attenuation. These features make it quite clicky during operation, but they are recognised as providing higher sound quality and are commonly found in many high-end amps and preamps. The entire chassis has been designed to control resonance by maximising rigidity. The main body of the case is made of conventional steel, but there are ridges on the underside that increase the rigidity of the base.

The amplification circuit is a discrete setup that avoids negative feedback, instead focusing on direct coupling by omitting connectors, star earthing, and tuning for optimal drive current. While negative feedback is common in most transistor amplifiers and is not usually considered negative, in the realm of glass audio, it is avoided, and some believe that its advantages are limited. Soulnote appears to be part of this latter group. Output transistors are paired for maximum accuracy, or, as we might say, hand-selected, with two pairs per channel, delivering 80 watts each.

### Hook ups

Connections include three sets of RCA sockets and one pair of XLRs; all four are line inputs, so there is no phono input for turntables or digital inputs for streamers, etc. This is an all-analogue amplifier and makes no bones about it. The speaker terminals are of good quality and will accept bananas, spades, or bare wire. Does anyone still use bare wire? The front panel display is very old-school, featuring red LED numerals for volume and input. There is also a mirror effect when viewing the display from above; here, the numbers are inverted, which can be confusing for the uninitiated. The remote handset is a system type with easy access volume and input rockers, the former encouraging the aforementioned clicky relays.

With a pair of Elipson 402 Tribute speakers connected to the Soulnote, the liveliness Kato mentions is immediately clear; this is a vibrant and energetic-sounding amplifier. The sound is so enthusiastic that it resembles a springer spaniel—never happy to sit back and relax, always on the move. This speaker is quite neutral and responds to the signal and amplifier with notable transparency. However, if you only listened with the A1, you might think it's a speed freak. But this wasn't the case with other amplifiers. Here, the relaxed flute, sax, bass, and drums of Phi-Psonics sounded excellent, maintaining their chilled vibe but feeling somewhat more optimistic in this setting.

This amplifier is powerful in its immediacy, which makes it sound very lively. If you hear an electric guitar played in a building, you know it's authentic because of the quick impulse response, even if the volume isn't high. The same is true of more powerful acoustic instruments, like the piano; the dynamics and immediacy show that it's real, and that's what Soulnote has managed to reproduce quite well. It probably requires a bit more power to fully achieve this effect, along with equally fast loudspeakers, but it comes closer than most in the crucial area of attack.

### Snap of snare

The Moses Yoofee Trio (MYT) is primarily a piano trio, but the rapid-fire drums in particular set them apart. The track 'Till Tomorrow' stands out, and this amplifier's combination of power and textures makes it especially captivating—the amplifier providing plenty of detail and capturing the snare's snap with enthusiasm. Switching to PMC twenty5.26i floorstanders does nothing to diminish this impression; these speakers deliver a notably open, fast, and lively sound that, although it might be a little lean, compensates with a sense of live music being played. »



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» This speaker would prefer a bit more power than what is available, but there's no denying the expansive sound it creates with the A1.

I love how this Soulnote seems to bring all kinds of music to life. The bass might not be bone-crunching in terms of weight, but it is always rich in texture. So, when the performance is as sophisticated as that of Arild Andersen, the effect is beneficial. The amp is, of course, transparent to the less refined elements in recordings, as well as those intentionally included, but it doesn't allow them to interfere with the music.

The last speaker I chose to partner with the A1, proved, perhaps inevitably, to be the best suited for the job. The Vivid S12 is the smallest model that the company makes, but it is a superb two-way stand-mount, unlike anything else heard often. It manages to be transparent yet relaxed, which suits the Soulnote perfectly. Keith Jarrett and company's *The Cure* comes across in particularly vibrant form, the live nature of the recording being as clear as the brilliance of the improvisation. Someone recommended an old Orbital tune called 'Dwr Budr,' and despite it not being the simplest of electronica, the Soulnote/Vivid pairing made it accessible and enjoyable. It also projected an unusually three-dimensional image right into the room.

### Vivid by nature

With the Vivids, the tonal balance was perfect, and this, combined with the superb energy and speed of the Soulnote, created some top-tier entertainment. The timing was spot-on, and the bandwidth appeared to be far too wide for such a compact loudspeaker, but size is no measure of quality, as we know.

Let's face it, this works out cheaper than a Rega Aethos these days. If the A1 is what Soulnote can achieve with its most affordable amplifier, then I am very eager to hear what its larger models are capable of. It captures the life force of

the music, creating a highly engaging listening experience. As with the speaker pairing, I would prefer more relaxed-sounding options to balance its enthusiasm. However, many will want the extra excitement that a fast-forward speaker can deliver. Either way, the Soulnote A1 is an amplifier for those seeking to be moved by their music, and ultimately, that's what it's all about. +

### Technical specifications

**Type:** Solid-state, two-channel integrated amplifier.

**Analogue inputs:** Three single-ended line-level inputs (via RCA jacks), one balanced input (via XLR connectors).

**Digital inputs:** none.

**Analogue outputs:** Speaker terminal.

**Input impedance:**

- Balanced 16 kOhms
- Single-ended 8 kOhms

**Output impedance (preamp):** N/A

**Headphone Loads:** N/A

**Power Output:** 80W/8Ω per channel, 120W/4Ω per channel

**Bandwidth:** Not specified

**Distortion:** THD 0.08% (30W 8 Ohms).

**Signal to Noise Ratio:** 110dB (IHF A network)

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 109 x 456 x 418mm

**Weight:** 11kg

**Price:** £3,300, €3,680, \$4,000

**Manufacturer** Soulnote

🌐 [www.soulnote.co.jp](http://www.soulnote.co.jp)

**UK distributor** Kog Audio Ltd

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