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MUSIC IN **BY KALMAN RUBINSON** THE ROUND

THIS ISSUE: Cleaned-up power, a networked multichannel DAC, and a multichannel class-D amplifier.

Merging Technologies ahead

THETA DIGITAL DREADNAUGHT D MULTICHANNEL AMPLIFIER

For years now, class-D amplifiers have been encroaching on the mainstream of high-end audio. The first onslaught were based on the TriPath technology--it was pretty good, but burdened with a dim, opaque treble. That was largely erased by the second wave of class-D amplification, based on Bang & Olufsen's ICEpower technology, but still the gap between those amps and the very best analog power amps was audible to most of us. Theta Digital showed the two-channel Dreadnaught D class-D amplifier (\$6149.95) at the 2015 Consumer Electronics Show, but I wasn't greatly interested in it--until I experienced a revelatory demonstration of Bruno Putzey's Mola Mola

power amp, based on his Hypex NCore technology. Shortly thereafter, I enjoyed reading Larry Greenhill's glowing review of Theta's Prometheus monoblock (\$12,000/pair), which uses the NCore module, as well as John Atkinson's bench tests of it.⁵ I also noted the appearance of a number of other amps based on class-D, such as NAD's Masters Series M22, reviewed elsewhere in this issue. I guess this is the third wave.

The Dreadnaught's *D* designation no doubt indicates class-D, but it's also the fourth model of the Dreadnaught series. Like its predecessors, it's a configurable design with a fixed power supply and one or more individual amplifier modules. In fact, the Dreadnaught D has *two* independent power supplies, each requiring its own power cord, and each supporting two of its four amp-module slots. Each supply consists of a 1180kVA toroidal transformer, 40,000µF of power-supply reservoir capacitance per slot, and two 30A rectifiers per slot.⁶ Any of three module options can be chosen, each based on the same NC1200 Hypex boards used in the Prometheus: mono 225W, stereo 225Wpc, or mono (bridged) 500W operation. Up to eight channels of 225W each are possible. After I had extended discussions with Theta, they recommended a 225Wx3 configuration for me, but sent what was available for review purposes: a 225Wx5 unit (\$8699.95).

My first impression of the Dreadnaught D was of a traditionally big and heavy power amp: It measures 17.5" wide by 7.9" high by 19.6" deep, and weighs 98.6 lbs "fully loaded." Hey, wasn't class-D supposed to give us more efficient designs that were *smaller* and *lighter*? But Theta's philosophy is that switched-mode power supplies, even Hypex's, are incompatible with efficiency or instantaneous power. To quote Jeff Hipps of ATI (Theta's parent company):



Dreadnaught class: inside Theta Digital's multichannel amp.

"Switch mode supplies are typically fully regulated which limits headroom, are less reliable (more parts), must be filtered to remove the switching noise and have issues we call 'power over time'—where the power supply cannot supply full current if it is demanded for more than a few seconds."

On the rear panel, the butt end of each amp module sports selectable balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) inputs, and a pair of substantial multi-way speaker terminals. On the impressively massive front panel is an LED to indicate protection mode (it never lit up), and a three-color LED to indicate status (Standby/Warming Up/On). I used the XLR inputs, and connected my three front Bowers & Wilkins 800 Diamond speakers to three of the five amp modules. I then plugged each of the two power supplies into the wall, turned on each one using its separate switch on the rear, then pressed the front-panel power button. After a few seconds of warmup, this button gleamed blue and the sound bloomed.

Y'know, some folks in this hobby believe that all amps, when used ap-

propriately, sound the same. I find that impossible to accept. Every amplifier I have on hand is a really good amp that, on its own, is more than capable of providing more-than-satisfying sound. Yet, in direct comparisons, each reveals a character that subtly distinguishes it from the others. When I listen to music, is one of these amps right and all the others wrong? If I didn't make the recording and/or wasn't present at the performance, how can I know?

What I can say is that Theta Digital's Dreadnaught D not only sounded good, it sounded *right*. I could—and in my next column, I will—pick away at the things that distinguish it from other amps. But from the moment I turned it on, I've been smiling. The Dreadnaught D is really quiet and very dynamic, and sounds consistent at any output level. And there's nothing about its sound that says "digital"—even though all my sources are.

I'll have more to say about the Dreadnaught D after we've lived together for a couple more months. But for now, "Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." ■

Kalman Rubinson (STLetters@sorc.com) gets the best from his multichannel music in both his Manhattan apartment and his weekend retreat in New England.

⁵ See the March 2015 issue: www.stereophile.com/content/theta-digital-prometheus-monoblock-power-amplifier.

⁶ These specifications aren't too different from those of the Prometheus's potent power supply: 1440kVA toroid, 20,000µF capacitance, and two 30A rectifiers.



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