



Classé Sigma 2200i

The latest addition to high-end audio marque Classé Audio's Sigma Series is also perhaps the most intriguing – and one could argue the most versatile. Indeed the Sigma 2200i stereo integrated amplifier is a veritable jack of all trades.

Fortunately, it doesn't fall into the trap of being a master of none: indeed, its extensive facilities are matched to an overall proficiency that makes it an impressive all-rounder.

At face value, the 2200i looks very similar to the Sigma SSP pre-amp processor I reviewed in April 2015: smart, all-black, all-metal casework, dominated

by a large, clear touchscreen display. And indeed, the resemblance is more than skin deep.

The 2200i effectively combines the control/pre-amp circuitry of the SSP to the switch-mode power amp internals of the Sigma Amp2 – on a single chassis. The pre-amp and power amp sections are digitally linked, which means all signal switching and processing is achieved in the digital domain.

The signals from the 2200i's XLR and RCA analogue inputs are converted to a 96 Hz/24-bit digital data stream, while the only digital-to-analogue conversion is applied to feed the subwoofer output.

The 2200i's close relationship with the Sigma SSP means it retains the latter's HDMI inputs and outputs – despite being a stereo-only device. In other words, it can operate as a pre/processor in a 2.1 AV set-up – an unusual configuration in home theatre terms, but one not without its merits as far as simplicity and sonic integrity are concerned.

As far as signal manipulation is concerned, the 2200i offers comprehensive parametric equalisation options which can be individually set up for each source to address room-specific acoustic anomalies.

These may be of little interest to purists, but underline the exceptional





versatility of the Classé – although settings should be based on real and accurate measurements of a room's acoustic properties. There are six equalisation filters for each channel, each adjustable for centre frequency, gain and Q.

For those seeking broader tonal attenuation, the Classé offers a customisable tone control system that can either offer conventional treble and bass adjustment, or set up as a so-called tilt control, which offers subtler but more specific changes, based on fixed frequency inflection points and by how much treble and bass are boosted around those points.

As already mentioned, the 2200i has a subwoofer output, and Classé has gone to some lengths to offer effective subwoofer integration in a 2.1 speaker configuration. Users can set up the amp for stereo full range, stereo full range plus subwoofer, or a 2.1 system, with bass management features that include high-pass and low-pass adjustment in 10 Hz increments between 40 Hz and 140 Hz.

Indeed, the scope for personalisation and customisation is extensive, extending to renaming the inputs, adjusting input off-set levels, determining mute levels, and setting display brightness and delays.

The process of setting up and customising the Sigma 2200i is surprisingly simple, thanks to that large touch screen display and a menu system that's completely intuitive.

The fascia offers an unusual but effective

VITAL STATS

Power output	2x 200 watts (8 ohms) 2x 400 watts (4 ohms)
Frequency response	10 Hz – 20 kHz (-1 dB, 4 ohms)
Signal-to-noise ratio	97 dB (full-scale, unweighted)
Analogue inputs	1x stereo balanced XLR, 2x stereo single-ended RCA
Digital inputs	2x RCA coaxial, 2x Toslink optical, USB Type A, USB Type B, 4x HDMI 2.0
Connectivity	Ethernet, Apple AirPlay
Outputs	Five-way speaker binding posts, 6,35 mm headphone jack, RCA and XLR subwoofer out, 1x HDMI 2.0
Supported audio formats	FLAC, WAV, ALAC, Ogg Vorbis, WMA, AAC, MP3
Dimensions (WxHxD)	432 x 140 x 370 mm
Weight	12,11 kg
Price	R96 990

Verdict

Articulate and athletic, this integrated amplifier never seems to run out of steam. Links plenty of pace to a lucid, honest view of the music – especially when employing in-built digital inputs.

Supplied by

HFX Systems
011-907-9092

e-Mail

sales@hfxsystems.co.za

Website

www.hfxsystems.co.za

OUR RATING: 87 / 100





disc-like rotary controller for volume, buttons for power on/standby and mute, a 6.35 mm stereo headphone jack, and a USB Type A socket for iDevices or flash drives. A slim, mesh-grilled air intake spans the lower edge of the fascia to provide cooling.

The rear panel underlines the versatility of the Classé, offering both analogue and a full complement of digital inputs, as well as an asynchronous USB Type B socket and a quartet of HDMI 2.0 inputs.

Connectivity is via Ethernet to allow for AirPlay and access to DLNA devices, as well as controlling the Classé using its excellent iOS app. A single set of binding posts completes the picture, together with a set of IR in/out sockets. Power is via an IEC kettle-style power socket.

The 2200i partnered a variety of loudspeakers, including the imposing Sonus faber II Cremonese floorstanders that feature on our cover this month. But I also used the amp in conjunction with a set of JBL Model 4429 Studio Monitor speakers, and with the Vivid Audio B1 Ds – both reviews pending.

Set-up was pretty much plug 'n play. I used the built-in MM30 media board of our Primare PRE32 pre-amp to feed one of the Sigma 2200i's coaxial digital inputs, while the Olive One's digital input was routed to the Bryston BDA-3, which was in turn linked to the amp via its XLR input set. AirPlay and UPnP interfaces were also tried.

While the EQ settings may be of only passing interest to purists, they can play a vital role in addressing acoustic peaks and dips in a specific room, thereby maximising system performance. It's a unique feature.

I left the EQ settings and tone controls deactivated, preferring to run the Classé as *au naturel* as possible. By the way, the 2200i will cope with most of the well-known music file formats at up to 192 kHz/24-bit resolution (except Toslink, which is limited to 96/24), but doesn't cater for DSD playback.

Sonically, the Classé performed very much like the Sigma SSP/AMP2 combination I reviewed in 2015. The sound was forthright, honest and direct, with little in the way of tonal emphasis and a preference for neutrality and linearity.



Software

Beethoven – Piano Concerto No. 5 – Serkin, Ozawa, Boston Symphony Orchestra (Telarc 44/16 WAV)
Collective Soul – Collective Soul (Warner 44/16 WAV)
Seal – Best 1991-2004 (Warner 96/24 FLAC)

Associated Equipment

Bryston BDA-3 D/A converter
Primare PRE32/MM30 pre-amp
Olive One network player
Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite SACD player
Oppo BDP-95EU universal deck
Synology 216se NAS
Sonus faber II Cremonese loudspeakers
Vivid Audi B1D loudspeakers
JBL Model 4429 Studio Monitor loudspeakers
XLO Reference and Kimber KCAG interlinks
StraightWire Virtuoso speaker cables

By that, I certainly don't mean to intimate that the 2200i sounded lean or clinical, but rather that it didn't impose its own, specific signature on the music. Instead, it's an amp that affords the music the best possible opportunity to show off its best.

Staging was generous and airy, allowing for accurate and believable imaging, while the amp always showed off more than enough pace to keep up with the music.

The tonal range was broad, with a real talent for deep, foundation-setting bass delivered with controlled intent, partnered by a smooth and benign midrange with plenty of scope for detail and texture. The trebles were bright and revealing, with plenty of easy sparkle.

Rudolf Serkin's insightful, articulate reading of Beethoven's 'Emperor' Piano Concerto No. 5 accompanied by the Boston Symphony Orchestra (Telarc 44/16 WAV) sounded lively and airy, with the piano dominating centre stage, while perfectly framed by the orchestra's accompaniment.

The amp delivered its sonic wares with believable scale and grandeur, while making the most of an extensive harvest of detail: Serkin's touch on the keys was almost tactile and the instrument's registers were spread wide across that generous soundstage.

A strong sense of timbre and tonal intensity made for beguiling listening: the tonal depth and athletic urge of the cellos and double basses was expressed with an almost eager alacrity, while the midrange displayed a smooth accessibility and a succinct presence.

Despite the density of the recording, the 2200i sounded light-footed and almost delicate in its treatment of fine detail, but it was never too polite to get stuck into the core of the music with boisterous enthusiasm.

The 2200i's tonal neutrality allowed the essence of the original recording to shine through unhindered, while also reflecting the Telarc recording's slight tendency towards brightness with lucid honesty. The result was an exciting, vital sound that portrayed the energy and the dynamics of the orchestra with ease.

For something completely different, I

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switched to Collective Soul's eponymous debut (Atlantic, 44/16 WAV), but the Sigma 2200i didn't miss a beat, easily translating the band's muscular, visceral sound with a confidence that oozed authority and pace.

On 'Simple', the amp was not at all intimidated by the power guitars, the thundering percussion and the sheer grunt of the bass guitar. It portrayed the music with the kind of impact and urgency that gets feet tapping.

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The Classé was more than happy to be cranked up, giving the JBL Model 4429s a real work-out, yet retaining its lithe and lustrous sound. The trebles were afforded a flawless sheen without reverting to aggression, while the bass had plenty of weight and impact, but was never allowed to become boomy.

If anything, the sound displayed a pervasive sense of insight that invited full access to the music's majesty.

That clarity of purpose was even more compellingly demonstrated when listening to the marvellous acoustic version of Seal's 'Crazy' from the two-disc *Best 1991-2004* set. The amp brought all the clout, and all the delicacy, of the performance to the fore, expressing the full scope of the recording's expansive ambience.

Here, Seal's expressive vocals soar above a majestic piano, with the instrument's lower registers so powerfully presented that they were as much felt as heard. The acoustic guitar served as a delicate, glowing counterpoint, while the percussion was rendered with finely honed precision.

The way the music was presented on an inviting, alluring soundstage demanded close attention. But despite the sheer energy and shimmer of the music, the Classé was also able to expose the emotive quotient of the performance's musical formula.

With both the JBL Model 4429s and even the big, demanding Sonus faber II Cremonese floorstanders, the listening experience was almost magical in its honesty and intensity.

I've purposely steered clear of discussing the 2200i's switch-mode amplification, because it seems largely irrelevant. The implementation of what is still widely described as Class D amplification is entirely proprietary here, as it is with the Sigma AMP2 and the Delta D200.

As I've remarked before, any fear that the glare and harshness often associated with so-called digital or Class D amps will manifest itself here is unfounded: yes the sound is clean and honest, but it lacks nothing as far as heft, tonal breadth, soul or authenticity are concerned.

Downsides? I would have preferred more analogue inputs, but then, this is very much a product of the digital age, and its focus on keeping the signal path in the digital domain makes a lot of sonic sense.

That aside, the Classé Sigma 2200i offers exceptional functionality and versatility, power output to spare, satisfying sonic poise and downright musicality. As high-end integrated amps go, what more does anyone really need?

Deon Schoeman