



Audio Alchemy

DDP-1, DPA-1, & DPA-1M

Audio Alchemy used to be an innovative audio brand best known for its unusually compact, very affordable and surprisingly competent hi-fi components, including the still legendary Digital Decoding Engine, an early, trend-setting D/A converter. That was back in the 1990s.

Fast forward two decades, and Audio Alchemy is back. The man behind the marque's return is Peter Madnick, who founded the original Audio Alchemy, and has built up quite a reputation as an audio engineer, most recently with high-end producers Constellation and Elac.

The new Audio Alchemy's ever-expanding product range is by no means cheap. But the prices do reflect good value when considered in the context of the high-end arena the components compete in.

The Audio Alchemy line-up consists of

the DDP-1 pre-amp/DAC, the DPA-1 stereo power amp and DPA-1M monoblock, and most recently, the PPA-1 MM/MC phono stage and DMP-1 music server. All of these components share the same compact but robust, all-metal casework, with slightly curved sides.

Also available is an even more compact external power supply, dubbed the PS-5, which can simultaneously feed two Audio Alchemy components. It's shaped to fit snugly against the DDP-1's rounded fascia so that the combination looks like a single, more elongated component.

The PS-5 is also a must-have upgrade, elevating the DDP-1's sonic talents significantly by offering improved regulation and filtering.

The DDP-1 is arguably the core component of the Audio Alchemy line-up, operating as it does not only as a pre-amp, but also as a

D/A converter, and a headphone amp. It's also the only Audio Alchemy device with a clear, white-backed LCD display, framed by large rotary controllers for volume and source selection.

Smaller soft-touch buttons look after secondary functions, including acting as navigation buttons for the menu-based user interface, as well as performing mute and output selection functions.

The display is too small to be realistically useful from a distance, but it does show volume level as a big numeric value, in addition to several status messages – digital filter selection, digital signal status, input selected, etc. A headphone jack confirms that the DDP-1 also offers headphone amp functions.

The menu-driven interface is simple to understand and easy to operate, and there is a certain tactile appeal to the



VITAL STATS

way the buttons and controls feel and operate. It definitely creates the impression of a quality, crafted product.

The rear panel is a fairly crowded place, since the DDP-1 caters for both analogue and digital ancillaries. The analogue offering comprises two stereo RCA input sets and a single balanced XLR pair, while there's also a choice of RCA or XLR outputs.

The digital agenda is served by two coaxial RCA inputs, two Toslink optical inputs, an I²S input, an AES/EBU input and a USB Type B input for computer connections. That's seven digital inputs in total! A small power socket receives the 9V feed from the wall wart-type power supply. Alternatively, the PS-5 provides the power via a dedicated, DIN-style port.

Under the skin, the DDP-1 employs a pair of high-end AKM 216 kHz/32-bit DACs, combined with XMOS digital signal processing and field-programmable gate arrays (FPGAs) for digital-to-analogue conversion and filtering.

It offers a choice of four digital filters, as well as resolution enhancement, which can be set up for each digital input individually. The FPGAs also suggest that the DDP-1 will be upgradeable going forward. The filters are a matter of personal taste, introducing subtle differences, while resolution enhancement introduces a stronger sense of depth that benefits most material I tried.

The DPA-1 stereo power amp and its DPA-1M monoblock sibling are somewhat simpler to describe. The amps have the same, curved alloy casework as the DDP-1, but sans the display and some of the switchgear.

The fascia has a centrally located power switch, and buttons for gain selection and mute, as well as RCA/XLR input selection. Clip indicators are provided for each channel, too. The rear panel gets sturdy binding posts and a choice of stereo XLR or stereo RCA input sets.

As a hybrid design, the DPA-1 and DPA-1M link a Class A input stage with discrete components to a Class D output

DDP-1 PRE-AMP/DAC

Frequency response	10 Hz – 80 kHz (±0.1 dB)
Signal-to-noise ratio	103 dB unweighted (1 kHz)
Digital conversion	Up to 216 Hz/32-bit PCM, DSD64 (USB only)
Optional	PS-5 balanced power supply
Analogue inputs	1x stereo XLR, 2x stereo RCA
Digital inputs	AES/EBU, 2x RCA coaxial, 2x Toslink optical, I ² S
Outputs	1x stereo XLR, 1x stereo RCA, 3,5 mm headphone jack
Dimensions (WxHxD)	267 x 76 x 295 mm
Weight	3,6 kg

DPA-1 STEREO POWER AMP

Power output	2x 125 watts (8 ohms)
.....	2x 200 watts (4 ohms)
Frequency response	20 Hz – 20 kHz (±0,25 dB)
Signal-to-noise ratio	100 dB, unweighted
Inputs	1x stereo XLR, 1x stereo RCA, 3,5 mm trigger
Outputs	Five-way speaker binding posts
Dimensions (WxHxD)	267 x 76 x 295 mm
Weight	7,3 kg

DPA-1M MONO POWER AMP

Power output	325 watts (8 ohms)
.....	400 watts (4 ohms)
Frequency response	20 Hz – 20 kHz ±0,25 dB)
Signal-to-noise ratio	100 dB, unweighted
Inputs	1x XLR, 1x RCA, 3,5 mm trigger
Outputs	Five-way speaker binding posts
Dimensions (WxHxD)	267 x 76 x 295 mm
Weight	7,3 kg

Price

DDP-1	R45 000
DPA-1	R45 000
DPA-1M	R45 000
PS-5	R17 000

Verdict

A high-quality, modular product line focussed on function and high-end audio performance. The PS-5 is a must for optimum results.

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OUR RATING: 87 / 100





stage utilising a pair of Hypex UcD modules, one for each channel. In the case of the DPA-1M monoblock, the two modules are bridged.

Rated power output is generous, with up to 200 watts per channel into 4 ohms on offer from the stereo amp, and 400 watts into 4 ohms from the monoblock. The amps are also compatible with the PS-5 power supply.

I initially ran the Audio Alchemy DDP-1/DPA-1/PS-5 combo in conjunction with a pair of KEF R500 floorstanders, while the source signal was provided by an Olive One network player sourcing its music files from both an internal hard drive, and a Synology DS216se NAS.

Later, I also tried the Audio Alchemy set-up hooked up to my 13-inch MacBook Pro running Audirvana 1.12.5, and playing files from a Synology NAS on my home network, with a trusty Esoteric UX-3 SE universal deck offering an alternative source, playing back CDs and SACDs.

Across both applications, and regardless of whether the source was analogue or digital, the overriding sonic characteristics of the system combined loads of power and presence with a real talent for pace and rhythm.

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Despite the compact dimensions of the components, there was nothing small or reticent about the sound: instead, the delivery was bold and incisive, with a broad tonal range and plenty of headroom.

The bass was muscular, extracting plenty of bottom-end from the speakers, and always retaining succinct, defined control, yet still allowing the enthusiasm and impetus of the music to remain unbridled.

The mids are best described as neutral and lucid, with an open, revealing nature that ensured full access to the music. It encouraged close examination of the music without resorting to clinical precision or exaggerated brightness, but also didn't smooth things over: sonic honesty prevailed throughout.

Those characteristics were carried over into the trebles, which were crisp and detailed, but not bright or aggressive. The Audio Alchemy combo extracted and delivered generous dollops of detail with sparkle and vivacity, but again, the result was always musical and engaging, rather than clinical or confrontational.

Staging was open and layered, believably positioning instruments and voices wide and deep across a sound image that always allowed intuitive access, but never sounded

overblown or exaggerated. There was an intrinsic authenticity to the presentation that was as effective at recreating the intimacy of a jazz trio as it was reproducing the scale and impact of a symphony orchestra in full cry.

While the DDP-1 shone brightly when wrangling analogue signals, it really came into its own in the digital domain. Clearly, the on-board DAC is something special, infusing further levels of energy, and extracting fine subtleties and nuances, to create an absorbing musical experience. It finds just the right balance between finely drawn detail and an underlying, almost organic essence, so that the music is presented with an intensity that is as much emotive as it is sonically spectacular.

Those traits held true regardless of the resolution and depth of the original musical files: from 44,1/16 WAV files to DSD, the DDP-1 found a magic and a precision that rivals the best DACs out there.

The amps deserve praise too — mainly because they display an authority and urge that makes them sound, well, big and muscular. They deliver their musical wares

Software

Beethoven — Symphony No. 4 and 8 Bernard Haitink/LSO (LSO Live 96/24 FLAC)
Paul Simon — Stranger To Stranger (Concord 44/16 FLAC rip)
Kaleo — A/B (Atlantic 44/16 FLAC rip)
Melody Gardot — Currency Of Man (Verve 44/16 FLAC rip)
Calexico — Algiers (Anti- 88/24 FLAC download)

Associated Equipment

Esoteric UX-3 SE universal deck
PS Audio DirectStream D/A converter
Vivid Audio V1.5 loudspeakers
Synology DS213+ NAS
2011 MacBook Pro Core i7/8 GB RAM/OSX El Capitan
Avid Diva II SP/SME 309/Van Den Hul The Frog record deck
Sutherland 20/20 phono stage
Olive One network player
Synology DS216se NAS
Primare PRE32/MM30 pre-amp
Parasound Halo A21 power amp
KEF R500 loudspeakers





with a heft and a substance that is both lithe and purposeful.

Clearly, the combination of the Class A input stage and the highly regarded Hypex modules is a match made in musical heaven, because there is none of the exaggerated neutrality or clinical definition that can still haunt switch-mode amplification: the DPA-1 had plenty of oomph, but also the texture and the musical integrity to go with it.

That was as true of the DPA-1 stereo power amp as it was of the pair of DPA-1Ms. You'd expect the monoblocks to offer more headroom and more momentum, and that might be true in instances where the loudspeakers present a challenging load – but neither the KEFs nor the Vivids could be considered difficult, and the stereo amp never got even close to clipping.

Bernard Haitink and the London Symphony Orchestra's performance of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 4* (FLAC download from the LSO Live Series) is powerfully, viscerally presented, with huge dynamic swings and a fullness of tone that demands scale and range in abundance.

The Audio Alchemy system revelled in the challenge, translating the crescendos with almost gleeful enthusiasm and giving the music free rein, but also affording the listener real insight into and engagement with the music.

The kettle drums on this performance can be almost overpowering, but here, they were delivered with controlled purpose and intent, while the strings and woodwinds in the final 'Allegro ma non troppo' soared and shimmered with an almost magical exuberance. The Audio Alchemy combo lent scale and space to the music, too, adding to the compelling, entertaining nature of the listening experience.

On Paul Simon's 'In The Garden of Edie' (from *Stranger To Stranger*) the acoustic guitar was perfectly, almost intimately presented, with the instrument's timbre and resonance examined in minute detail, and Simon's subtle vocals only just audible in the background. The simplicity of the track can be deceiving, but the system got the delicacy, the transients and the decay of the guitar and the ambience of the

recording just right.

Kaleo's 'All The Pretty Girls' (from the Icelandic rockers' bluesy LA/B7) links falsetto vocals and liquid guitars to splashy percussion and simple percussion, and the Audio Alchemy system endowed the performance with a vibrant realism and an energy that made the music come powerfully alive. While every nuance, every detail was carefully examined, it was the way these elements were drawn into a fulfilling, riveting whole that made the listening experience special.

And that's really the bottom line here: the Audio Alchemy components have a way of making the most of the material on offer. Their sonic approach is accurate, authoritative and energetic, but with all the detail and all the drama of the real thing.

In the South African context, these Audio Alchemy components can't be considered cheap. But in high-end audio terms, they offer an exceptional price/performance ratio that translates into equally impressive value.

Deon Schoeman