

# Ciao, Bella!



## Dominic Todd enjoys meeting Monrio's pretty little MC 207 integrated amplifier.

**T**owards the end of the nineties, a small Italian company launched a series of amplifiers and CD players that, whilst not exactly rocking the establishment, earned a good deal of respect. Distributed in the UK by UKD, Monrio's Asty proved a sweet little thing with few sonic nasties. The MC207 looks set to continue the theme, but just a little more upmarket at £1,100.

Indeed, as soon as you pull this amp out of its box, it's not hard to tell that there's some serious componentry under the hood. The 130x80x310mm pressed steel casing is very solid, with a chunky 10mm anodised aluminium front panel, but this doesn't completely explain its considerable mass. Removing the lid shows exactly where the MC 207 gets its weight – it is a dual mono design with two 200VA power supply transformers, rather than just one feeding two mono circuits.

The NOR-SE toroidal transformer units look hefty enough to power the whole amp solo, so two of them should create quite some fireworks! Four 10,000uF capacitors are used for each channel – that's right, not four in total, but four per side!

Unsurprisingly, there's little room for the preamp amongst all this big-hitting electronic componentry, so its main board is mounted inside the

unit's front panel, with the ALPS Black volume control sandwiched between the two channels on the power board. Just for good measure, the pre-amp also has its own toroidal PSU about the size of one found in your average budget integrated amplifier!

The Monrio is definitely of the minimalist school when it comes to features, however. There's a standby function to keep the servo circuits warm, and four inputs plus a tape loop and an enigmatic 'direct' connection – this isn't actually a 'source direct' type input, but a direct input for using the MC 207 as a slave amplifier for multichannel applications.

### SOUND QUALITY

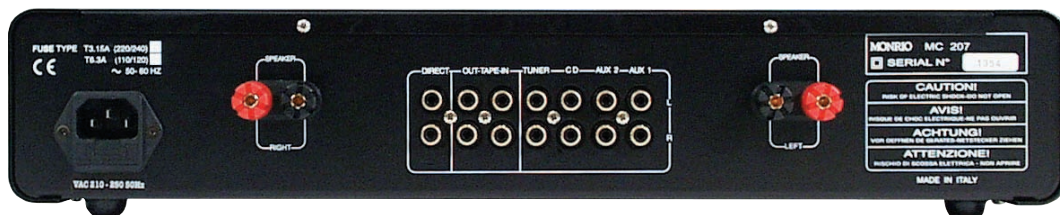
With its thousand pound plus price tag, the MC 207 faces stiff opposition from the likes of Arcam's A85 (£800), Cyrus's 8/PSX-R (£1,150 all in), Roksan's Caspian (£895) and Sugden's A21a (£1,050). How then, does it sound? With the Monrio hooked up to my reference system, I kicked off my listening session with The Crash Test Dummies' 'In the Days of the Caveman'. The MC207 immediately lived up to expectations by offering a beautifully broad and deep soundstage, produced with the effortless ease associated with a decent dual mono designs. Also typical of the best of the breed was an iron-fisted grip on the music, that

should keep even the 'loosest' of `speakers in check.

Yet this bold 'wall of sound' didn't come at the expense of refinement, which is precisely the area in which a number of transistor power houses fall down. Whilst not exactly portraying a liquid, smooth valve-like quality in the treble, it was at least well integrated and free from glare. Cymbals, for example, didn't splash and fizz as they can do on inferior transistor amplifiers. The MC 207 offered a very engaging and energetic performance indeed.

Although different in design, construction and price, the huge soundstage and decent refinement couldn't help remind me of my old favourite, the NAD C370, but on a larger scale. The separation amongst the mix was good, although it couldn't quite offer the holographic insight of some of its rivals – the Cyrus 8/PSX-R, for example, defines each instrument just that little bit more precisely. Then again, even it couldn't approach the gutsy dynamic prowess of the Monrio.

Such a powerful sound is all well and good with certain types of music, but with something more sedate it can begin to grate. To see if this was the case here, I turned to Norah Jones' 'Don't Know Why'. Unsurprisingly, she fairly leapt from the `speakers with great alacrity. It did, however, reveal the much-lauded artist as being a little too closely



microphoned for my personal tastes – it's as though the recording engineers were determined to squeeze every last dB out of the signal until the sound teetered on distortion. Still, this is hardly the fault of the Monrio, which simply revealed the recording warts and all! As such, the resulting sound can be just a little too forward if you already have a bright pair of loudspeakers. With my current-hungry Celestions, the results were just about spot on however – a powerful vocal presence combined with good texture and timing made for another highly enjoyable listen!

The MC 207 was similarly revealing of The White Stripes' 'In The Cold, Cold Night'. It stripped away the recording, showing plenty of hiss, and kicked out the bass guitar track with sharp relief. Rather than spoiling the song, however, it simply added to the atmosphere of this rather eccentric, quirky recording, making for a nicely expansive sound. The whole piece was well balanced – bass didn't swamp proceedings on any of the tracks, and remained pleasingly solid and in tune with the rest of the mix. As with The Crash Test Dummies track, the Monrio was generally in its element here, even though it didn't offer the last word in detail retrieval. For example, the guitar timbre was fine, but not exceptionally well defined.

If the MC 207 does have a weakness, then I found it apparent with classical music. Listening to Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet by The Berliner Philharmoniker, I found all the thunder and tension one could wish for in pieces such as 'The Montagues and Capulets'. Bass could have been a touch deeper, but this didn't distract from the impressive impact made. What was less pleasing was the slightly muddy string tone. I also found that when the pace died down, the Monrio became less engaging with average renditions of more delicate clarinet and horn solos. It seemed unable to get the best from the individual instrument, when it wasn't being played at full pelt. That having been said, the timing was good throughout and the brass sections generally showed no such

## EDITOR SAYS

**Here's an interesting one. For my money, the best amplifier at this price is Sugden's sublime A21a, but there's a problem. You see, this Class A delight simply doesn't have the motive force to work with any loudspeakers of average sensitivity or less - or even with sensitive speakers in loud rooms. The other obvious player at the price is Cyrus's 8/PSX-R, which has plenty of oomph, detail and clarity but lacks the Sugden's ultra-beguiling sound. This is where the Monrio comes in. Think of it as 'an Italian Meridian 551 - it's a great compromise between the two which offers real grunt and grip but a touch of finesse. Where the Meridian majors on style and connectivity options, the Monrio is more in the traditional mould of integrateds and thus less 'slick' to use, but ultimately has more vim and a broader tonal palette. A very capable new entrant to the mid-price amplifier fray, with its own distinctive Latin character.**

weaknesses. In short, whilst the MC 207 was never less than pleasant to listen to, there were times when its ability to transfix the listener ebbed away somewhat.

I would be very surprised if any purchasers of Monrio's MC207 would be disappointed. Build quality and finish are top notch and it has all the features that most people need – namely a volume control and a handful of inputs. It generally delights and engages the listener with an exceptional vigour rarely found at this price. What it also successfully manages – which is far more difficult around this price – is to combine great vigour with decent refinement. If you've ever heard a NAD C370 then you'll know what I mean. If you

think of this amplifier, but with a still more polished presentation, then you'll get the idea.

What it can't quite do is strip away layers of music in the style of the Cyrus 8/PSX-R, or offer the first rate timbral definition of the Sugden A21a – for those wanting the last degree of insight, this is probably not the best amplifier at the price.

Think of this amplifier as treading a clever path between these two aforementioned class leaders, and you've got its measure. Although it can't beat either at their own particular games, it gives has a good go. Where the Monrio is weak, its faults are forgivable, where it is strong, it is sublime. Heartily recommended.

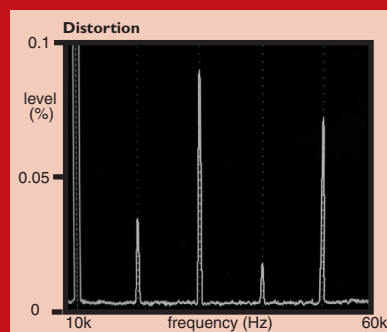
## MEASURED PERFORMANCE

**The Monrio MC207 has some clout, producing a hefty 84watts into 8ohms and 132watts into 4ohms. It will drive most loudspeakers well enough, getting good volume from them.**

**There was measurably more distortion at high frequencies than is common, with an extended harmonic structure and this may well colour treble slightly, possibly adding a little coarseness or edge. At 0.14% total harmonic distortion levels were low though – low enough to possibly pass unnoticed. I would guess Monrio choose to use as little feedback as possible.**

**With wide bandwidth and good channel separation the MC207 measures well enough in all areas.**  
NK

Power	84watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	4Hz-70kHz
Separation	80dB
Noise	-92dB
Distortion	0.014%
Sensitivity	420mV
dc offset	10/8mV



## VERDICT

Powerful, muscular sound allied to real finesse makes this an essential audition.

**MONRIO MC207** £1,100

UK Distribution

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www.ukd.co.uk