

# The Sugden A21SE Integrated Amplifier

by Jason Kennedy

On the face of it the Sugden A21 integrated amplifier looks like the longest running hi-fi amplifier in the world – ever. However, because it first appeared in the sixties, its low power output meant that the original design had a perfectly respectable ten-year life span before being replaced by the A28. The A21a that is currently being built started life in 1987 at a time when the hi-fi world began to realise that there was something desirable about low-powered amps and more efficient loudspeakers.

The company behind this classic design was originally formed by James Sugden in the mid-sixties and the A21 was its first product, its class A approach being even more radical at the time because the industry was just coming to grips with relatively high powered class AB transistor designs for the first time. But those early transistor designs left a lot to be desired especially in their high frequency performance and the A21 managed to establish itself well enough to outlast not only the models of that time but several of the major brands as well.

Sugden the company changed hands in 1981 and is now run by Tony and Patrick Miller who have steered a steady course and resisted the temptation to expand for the sake of short term sales. Either that of they didn't want to risk the roller coaster ride of mass production and the compromises it often entails. Contrary to contemporary practice Sugden keeps a large amount of its manufacturing in-house, and that

includes the casework and much of the circuit production. Its philosophy is detailed on the company website and contains the following rather illuminating line: "in hand, in house and under control!" One doesn't get the impression that these men of Heckmondwike are of a frivolous inclination.



The A21a as it's now called was beefed up to a 25watt circuit shortly after the change of ownership, the design incorporating a pure class A output stage with current feedback and a single voltage rail, an approach that underlines many of Sugden's original designs.

The new A21SE is more than just a luxury version of that model. It may only deliver 5 more watts, but its power supply is 50 per cent larger than that in an A21a and its output impedance significantly lower, which means that load tolerance is far greater. The line-stage is supplied by its own current shunt power supplies driven by a separate transformer winding. This new power supply is combined with minimal input signal paths, relay switched input facilities and new line-stage circuitry which Sugden claim

allow them to "fully exploit the benefits of the Pure Class A power output stages".

This is one of the most attractive integrated amps I have come across. It has a very masculine style which I don't imagine swaying too many B&O customers, but if you like metal boxes the attention to detail here is very impressive and the overall form extremely clean and well balanced. The omission, for example, of input names makes the front look unusually neat, while the identical styling of on/off switch, indicator lamp and remote receiving eye is particularly nice.

The Sugden does not go big on features, and while the inclusion of remote control is quite a luxury, the degree of its functionality does not extend beyond altering the volume level. On its black finished rear panel the amp has five relay operated line inputs alongside pre- and tape-outputs, all on RCA phonos with speaker terminals provided by glitzy WBT style binding posts with locking mechanisms to grip a banana/4mm speaker cable plug. Unlike the A21a there is no option for a phono-stage on the SE but a matching standalone stage is in the pipeline. There is also a matching CD player already in production.

As this baby pumps out 30watts of class A power it gets distinctly hot when left on for any amount of time, so much so that I reached for the oven gloves when moving it shortly after turn off! This is mostly because the heat sinking runs along the sides ▶

► of the amp where one's hands need to be, but to be honest I don't think there was anywhere I could have lifted it comfortably. But just as you wouldn't touch a valve on an amp that used them, you just have to avoid leaving anything on top of the A21SE, unless you want to grill it!

In another magazine I once reviewed a system that had been recommended by Definitive Audio of Nottingham and which consisted

with a lot of music. Gillian Welch's voice for instance is beautiful and rich when she sings one of the many laments that she does so well, this amp and speaker combo smoothing out the slightly gritty aspect that harder hitting pairings can accentuate. It also goes loud more comfortably than these speakers do with amps such as the Euphonic Research reviewed this issue, so I could play John Surman's *Amazing Adventures of Simon Simon* at a higher level and enjoy the rich sonority of his bass oboe to full effect. It's hard to imagine a more rich,

good with the SE, it reveals nuances and even notes that other similarly priced designs fail to unearth, which means that everything you play through it retains plenty of character and differentiation from everything else. Midrange seems to be what class A is all about. That's what all the gorgeous low power tube amps give, albeit with a little more openness, and that's what you hear with the SE, and that of course is where the heart of the music lies. Frequency extremes are for hi-fi nuts and heavy metal fans (both categories that I inhabit on an occasional basis). Those who are only in it for the music get everything they need from the middle octaves.

That's not to say that this is a narrowband amplifier. You will hear plenty of weight and depth in the bass if it's on the record, but it won't have the bone crunching edge that class A/B designs deliver. Is this due to the inherent crossover distortion of that approach, I guess that's what Sugden and other class A stalwarts would say. If all we had on

our records were purist recordings of acoustic instruments that might well be the way we'd all perceive it too. But the existence of electricity within the music and record making process means that much of the edge we hear with class A/B is derived from the source and only very slightly added to by the domestic amplification.

So to get back to what you can hear without crossover distortion let's look at tone colour and the glorious sound of Dewey Redman's saxophone on Keith Jarrett's *Eyes of the Heart*. With many amps this can sound overly rasping and aggressive, which a sax can do if its player so wants, but as ►



of a Helios CD player, Living Voice Auditorium speakers and the Sugden A21a. I don't know if Definitive still stocks Sugden but if they do the chances are they might well recommend its use with their Living Voice OBX-R speakers, the same speakers that I often use for assessing amplifiers, as they offer a relatively easy load that's well suited to lower powered amps such as the SE. You can't get Helios CD players anymore but Definitive is a big fan of the Resolution Audio Opus 21 that I use as a reference, so in a way this amplifier forms the heart of a natural upgrade from that simple but effective A21a based system.

In some respects the OBX-R is slightly too smooth a speaker for the SE. Both components are relaxed in the treble and the overall effect is distinctly on the warm side. It's not unappealing though. In fact it's downright gorgeous

woody sound than this instrument produces with this system, albeit from vinyl via a van den Hul Condor rather than the aforementioned disc spinner.

Not everything sounds like this however. Earl and Carl Grubbs' *The Visitors* maintained its emphasis on slightly splashy cymbals while giving up a nice sense of depth in the studio, which proves that this amplifier while smooth is also transparent.

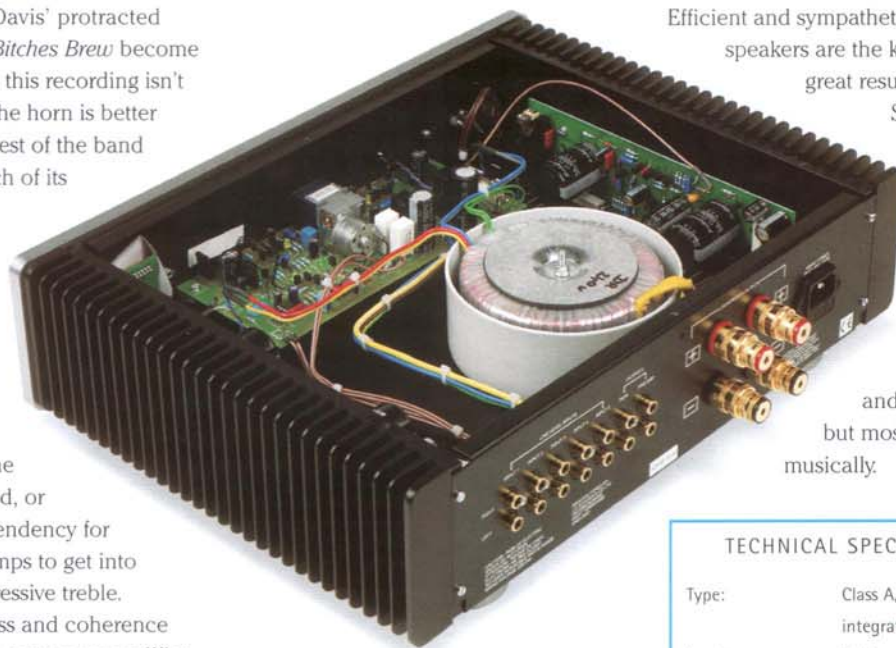
Despite the lack of high frequency edge, temporal resolution is good with rhythmically strong tunes showing good cohesion and tightness. Bob Dylan's fabulous 'If You've Got To Go, Go Now...' revealing much of its musicality and pretty much all of its detail. Midrange resolution is extremely

► far as appreciating the soul of the music goes this slightly smoother approach has a lot to offer – not least listenability. If you have been tempted by the goose strangling style of free jazz but have trouble coming to terms with its abrasive tone this could be the perfect amp for the job. It's impressive coherence and the ability to deliver detail in a natural and engaging manner makes difficult music as accessible as it's going to get. Even Miles Davis' protracted indulgences on *Bitches Brew* become more intelligible, this recording isn't the greatest but the horn is better served than the rest of the band and delivers much of its tonal character without the distortion that usually accompanies it. A distortion that may be ones ears struggling with the hard edged sound, or possibly it's the tendency for more exposed amps to get into trouble with aggressive treble.

Its smoothness and coherence also makes this a very easy amplifier to listen to whether you're paying attention or not, which does suggest an absence of a particular type of distortion. I often find it difficult to listen to music when I'm working, but with this amp there's no distraction even with the level above quiet. I spent a whole day listening to the internet station Groove Salad (128k bitstream) and found it an enjoyable experience. Indeed one that suggests that accessing music this way has a future even for those concerned about sound quality.

In an auspicious turn of events a pair of Coincident Super Eclipse III speakers turned up while I was reviewing the SE, with their high sensitivity and unusually easy impedance, on paper at least, they looked like the perfect partner for

lower powered amps. Rather conveniently they also managed to balance out the SE's tendency to smoothness with a more upfront balance than the OBX-Rs and a more expansive bottom end, thanks to twin eight-inch woofers. These speakers allowed the SE to reveal its more energetic side, delivering plenty of grunt from Missy Misdemeanor and Redman rapping over Timbaland's heavyweight beats.



The same track revealed more definition and power when amplified by a 200 watt Gamut D200 power amp and Border Patrol Control Unit, a combination that managed to elicit significantly more high frequency resolve and a rather more obviously transparent sound. On the other hand this dearer pairing was no more dynamic and, treble aside, doesn't reveal significantly more detail. Imaging for instance is just as strong with the Sugden when it comes to voices, which stand out in no uncertain manner. In fact voices as diverse as Joni Mitchell and David Thomas are reproduced in a genuine reach out and touch it style, while

acoustic reverb stretches way behind the speakers.

The Sugden A21SE is, like its maker, an idiosyncratic amplifier. It makes a very good case for class A by providing a detailed, dynamic and engaging sound. It has a smoother, warmer balance than most amps but it doesn't take long to accommodate that and start to hear the colour, detail and quality of imaging that it can provide with a decent pair of speakers.

Efficient and sympathetically balanced speakers are the key to getting great results from the SE. With a revealing example of that breed this an extremely gratifying amplifier, both sonically and aesthetically, but most importantly musically. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Class A, solid-state integrated amplifier
Inputs:	5x line-level
Input Sensitivity:	110mV @ zero attenuation for full output
Outputs:	1x pre-out (variable), 1x tape out, 1pr of stereo multi-way binding posts
Power Output:	30 Watts into 8 Ohms, 40 Watts into 4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430mmx115mmx360mm
Weight:	14kg
Finishes:	Titanium (illustrated) or graphite
Price:	£1,995

#### Manufacturer:

J E Sugden & Co Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0)1924 404088/404089  
Net. [www.sugdenaudio.com](http://www.sugdenaudio.com)