



Italian renaissance

If this integrated amplifier is anything to go by, **Chris Ward** reckons we can expect to hear a lot more from Norma Audio

Crema in Northern Italy has an illustrious musical pedigree. Home to Monteverdi and Pochielli, it is perhaps most famous for the manufacture of the world's greatest stringed instruments by the likes of Stradivari, Rugeri and Amati. So, Norma Audio is hoping to emulate engineers that have fostered some of the greatest sounds ever made.

Founded in 1987 the current audio business is part of Opal Electronics, which designs and builds advanced electronics measurement instruments,

so it should be well placed to expertly calibrate its products.

The Revo IPA-70B is Norma's entry-level integrated amplifier claiming 2x 70W into 8ohm power output. This modest headline figure is overshadowed by other rather more remarkable specifications. Norma says the Revo IPA-70B is able to deliver more than 1MHz of bandwidth, up to 100A of current and 1,000W peak power handling capability. This suggests not only some serious over engineering, but also a very dynamic performance indeed.

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Norma Audio Revo IPA-70B
- ORIGIN**
Italy
- TYPE**
Integrated amplifier
- WEIGHT**
15kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
430 x 75 x 350mm
- FEATURES**
 - Quoted power output: 2x 70W (8ohm)
 - 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC
 - Inputs: 4x stereo RCAs; 1x stereo RCA (AV); 1x USB port
 - Optional MM/MC phono stage
- DISTRIBUTOR**
HiFidelity Ltd.
- TELEPHONE**
07787 056723
- WEBSITE**
hifidelityuk.co.uk

Unboxing the Revo IPA-70B reveals a rather polite and unremarkable looking amplifier. Notably slim and sporting a gently tapering top plate that hides integrated cooling fins on the right-hand side, it is the very definition of understated. Available in silver or anodised black, the build quality feels bombproof. Connectivity includes four line-level RCA inputs, one AV RCA in and an optional DAC module with a single USB input, although coaxial and optical inputs are notably absent. Alternatively, a modular phono stage can be specified.

A single button is used to cycle through inputs and the central volume knob can be turned manually or remotely controlled with course or fine adjustment via the comprehensive yet chic all-metal handset.

Sound quality

I connect up a Shanling CD-T100 HDCD player and Cadence Area speaker using Chord Company's Epic Analogue interconnect and Black Rhodium's Foxtrot loudspeaker cable (HFC 412), and warm everything through ahead of critical listening.

Playing *Flash* by Cigarettes After Sex on CD is insightful. The dark acoustic

is vast and deep with rimshots reverberating off into infinity as a sonorous keyboard glows warmly against the inky blackness. The depth of the soundstage is notable, seeming to confirm very sensitive signal handling that can preserve the most subtle of musical nuances. Treble is extended and sweet, somehow feeling entirely grainless yet never sounding like it might be smoothing over detail. Already the amplifier confirms it's a class act as every musical detail is laid out with effortless authority. Bass is

full and wholesome while preserving a languid liquidity. Some might prefer their bass tighter and faster with more punch, but this performance sounds like a real instrument played by a real person complete with extra intonation and deeper expression than I'm used to. Greg Gonzalez's vocals appear centre stage, dripping with emotive detail. Sensitive inflections in his voice are communicated superbly. The amp has an amazing ability to resolve tiny textural detail in three dimensions without sounding fatiguing.

Swapping to an HDCD rendition of *Rain Rain Rain* by Roxy Music, the opening keyboards are big, fulsome and brassy, perfectly capturing the early eighties synthesised sounds. Allan Schwartzberg's drumming is almost holographic as every beat and stroke bristles with lilting, syncopated detail that places his kit perfectly in the mix. Yet again the Revo IPA-70B seems to excel at painting a more spacious and human rendition than I'm used to. There is a naturalness and flow that feels addictive, balancing explicit detail with silky smoothness while delivering the essential drive and momentum of the track. The wonderfully burbling bassline is supple, weaving in and out with total agility, yet pressing into my listening room with real presence. Ferry's voice is sublime; gravelly and textured yet

Detail is sweet and effortless, ensuring the big picture is never compromised

sultry and warm. His vocal commands it's own space in the soundscape, creating a real sense of a performance, more than simply high-fidelity playback of a recording. This amp clearly has a talent for vocals and other complex acoustic instruments. There is a kind of projection to performers where you can perceive more realistic air around them. It's akin to when distant church bells sound more distinct and resonant on a damp day when the moisture in the air conveys more clarity and atmosphere. Tracks feel more spatial, human and ultimately musical as the amp digs a little deeper into the expressive qualities of the music. All the detail and accuracy is there, but it's sweet, fluid and feels almost alive.

I connect my Macbook Pro and swap to the DAC input via a Chord Company C-USB interconnect (HFC 427).

CONNECTIONS



- 1 4x stereo RCA analogue inputs
- 2 Phono stage input (optional)
- 3 USB port
- 4 Loudspeaker binding posts
- 5 Grounding post for turntable

Q&A

Enrico Rossi

Founder, Norma Audio



CW: The design pays a lot of attention to power supplies, current delivery and extended bandwidth. Why is this important?

ER: Music, like all life, is energy and information. With limited energy, only limited results are achieved. Current, power, bandwidth, capacity and power are different points of view of a single larger concept.

Tell us more about your approach to circuit design, components and relay switching?

Everything that is in the signal path is crucial. The beauty and emotion we want to reproduce is so subtle (but clearly perceptible) that nothing should be allowed to contaminate it. The quality we seek is very 'shy', and it must be looked after with love.

Sometimes highly musical amps measure poorly and amps that measure well can sound weaker. What are your thoughts?

Measurements (at least the most common ones) are not related to what our brain decodes as a sensation of listening. There is the danger that self-referential technicians will only be guided by numbers. However, I've never heard products with terrible technical measurements sound natural – both musical and the technical are essential. The first guides us where we want to go and the second is how we get there.

Tell us more about the importance of reproducing the human voice in your designs?

Just listen to a live opera singer. In their voice there is everything: speed, bandwidth, refinement, power and emotion. Imagine one big orchestra playing *forte*, you can easily recognise the voice but you cannot recognise each instrument. Our auditory system is very sensitive to the vocals. We recognise a known voice among dozens at the same time. I have never heard a system, with correct voice reproduction sound bad with other types of music. If you reproduce the voice well, everything else will be automatically reproduced well, too.



Exceptional build quality and the very definition of Italian style

Playing *Beim Schlafengehen* from *Four Last Songs* by Richard Strauss sung by Jessye Norman accompanied by the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, the opening strings growl and grow with wonderfully dark menace, full of vibrant texture and melancholic yearning. Norman's soprano voice gently rises up gaining strength and shape until fully formed high above the lush orchestra. Again, the Revo IPA-70B seems to perform the impossible trick of communicating precise vocal phrasing and rich detail around dense and complex instrumentation, yet also giving the performers space and room to flow and breathe. As with the Roxy Music track, there's plenty of detail, ensuring that the big picture and emotional expression is never compromised. Norman's voice has immense power on certain phrases and this is precisely where I can tell that provision of extremely generous current delivery and potent peak power ensures the three-dimensional picture doesn't flatten or harden up.

Spinning *The Wheel* by SOHN on CD is really telling. Given the Norma's clear prowess with acoustic material and vocals I had wondered if some electronica might trip it up. The track starts simple enough with the Revo IPA-70B portraying the sumptuous blend of pure voices beautifully. In comes the deep bass and it hardly breaks a sweat. The more I listen, the more I enjoy its bass handling. The deepest registers have lots of suppleness. Die-hard drum and bass fans may look for greater control, but I personally relish the extra life and expression that this amplifier brings to the essential deep underpinnings of music. Fast, pulsing beats, razor-edged samples and crisp

keyboards add layer upon layer of intricate digital complexity until the track is bristling with crystalline textures. Not only can the Norma handle electronica, it positively gives it more light, shade, shape and expression. The track sounds spry and impressive through most amps, but here it gains some extra soul.

Conclusion

The Revo IPA-70B is a class act. It represents an understanding of musical refinement over dry hi-fi specifications. Where some higher end amps can tend towards harsh resolution and raw power, it instead focuses on greater insight and stronger expression. There is a shade more contrast, a hint more sweet detail and a tad more colour, all adding up to a great deal more presence and enjoyment from one's music. The longer I spend with this Norma amplifier the more I appreciate just how multi-talented and easy to live with it is. I was not aware of the company before I started this review, but I will certainly be paying far closer attention to it from now on ●



The Revo IPA-70B reminds me of the all-analogue and excellent £2,200 Belles Aria (HFC 412). It shares high build quality and provides a generous sound from a circuit design that also celebrates powerful delivery. Leema's Tucana II Anniversary Edition at £5,000 and Hegel's H390 £4,900 must be essential auditions too, both marrying power with resolution and finesse. The Hegel majors on connectivity, and speaker grip with the tightest bass, whereas the Leema walks a more neutral line between the extra expression of the Norma and the control of the Hegel. You'll be satisfied with any of these and will know your preference when you hear it.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Highly communicative sound with sweet treble; design and build

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Understated styling; USB-only DAC

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: An effortlessly musical and truly engaging integrated

FEATURES



OVERALL

