



The new Norma?

CHRIS KELLY HAS BEEN SHIELDING OF LATE, BUT HE'S HAD COMPANY – AND GOOD MUSIC – COURTESY OF A STYLISH INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER AND CD PLAYER/DAC FROM ITALIAN COMPANY NORMA AUDIO

Writing this at the start of the second quarter of 2020, I find myself under house arrest for my own protection, or “shielding” as I believe is the official term. I am very fortunate that I can continue to explore my deep interest in all matters relating to audio equipment and the replay of recorded music and that the various courier services can continue to deliver equipment to my home for me to hear, enjoy and to write about. And that prompts me to ask this next question: why will the Norma Audio name be a new one to most of us here in the UK?

For the past few weeks my equipment rack has played host to two pieces from this well-established Italian brand. Designed by Enrico Rossi, as has been every piece of Norma equipment since his first foray into audio in 1987, the Revo IPA-140 represents a genuine taste of what a purchaser can expect from a high-end integrated amplifier, while the DS-1 combines the functions of CD player and DAC.

To run briefly through the technical specifications, the Revo IPA-140 is a genuine dual mono design, powered by a pair of toroidal transformers rated at 400VA each. The specified power output is 140W RMS into 8 ohms and 280W RMS into 4 ohms, using six MOSFETs per channel on the outputs. Due to the dual mono design, the RCA inputs on the rear are not arrayed in pairs but split left and right with the IEC power input and the on/off switch mounted centrally. The very high-quality binding posts are mounted one pair per side, below the input sockets. There's a pair of balanced XLR inputs available, but I stuck to the RCA options.

The front of the unit is uncluttered and functional. A blue LED to the left of the large rotary volume control glows to confirm power is on, and to the right of the volume control is the input selector button. There is an array of five small blue LEDs to indicate which input is in use.

The quality of the case work is exemplary, and the sides are pleasingly but subtly curved towards the rear. The volume control does not have any illumination to show where it is set, but there is a deep indentation which marks the position and which is actually visible from across the room, assuming you are not listening in the dark of course!

The review sample lent to me by the UK distributor Hi-Fidelity Ltd came fitted with the optional MM/MC phono stage. More of that later.

I connected my trusted Harbeth P3ESR loudspeakers using Tellurium Q Ultra Black cable, plus the Norma Revo DS-1 CD player/DAC and the Chord Huei phono stage using Audioquest Wind and Fire RCA interconnects. For the mains lead I used a Shunyata Venom NR. I had been told that the CD player (reviewed separately in this issue) was a brand new unit but that the amplifier had been used extensively so other than a brief warm up should be ready to go. So I inserted a disc into the CD player, made sure that I had selected the correct input on the amp, pressed play and went off to another room to let all the bits get to know each other, as it were.

When I came back into the room it was in time to hear the last five minutes of *Echoes* from Pink Floyd's 1972 album *Meddle*. My goodness, this was impressive! I restarted the CD and listened intently



from start to finish. That actually ought to be my summary, because whatever I played through the IPA-140, it always totally commanded my attention. This is an amplifier that demands that you listen, because whatever I played from those two sources was absolutely compelling. My little Harbeths are not in any way bass-monsters - they are quoted as delivering down to 75Hz - yet with the Norma driving them they sounded so big, so spacious and so quick that it simply did not matter.

Switching to the external phono stage (another "guest" in my system), I played the same album but on the 2016 remastered pressing. The CD had been impressive but through my Linn Sondek LP12 with its Tangerine Audio upgrades and a Gold Note Machiavelli MC cartridge fitted to the Ittok arm, the album took flight. I was hearing deep into the recording and the impact was immense.

Emotional connection

From then on, I listened to vinyl for about two thirds of the listening time. Whether playing hard rock, classic rock, jazz, blues, chamber music, choral or symphonic music or any other genre, the Norma did not do anything but delight. When subtlety was required it was feather-light in its touch, but when the music called for real power it was there instantaneously. Playing the 45rpm pressing of Dire Straits' *Love Over Gold* on the recent Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs release, the rendition of *Telegraph Road* was revelatory. Classical music too, was conveyed with power and delicacy as required, and with real emotional connection. That old chestnut, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, cut direct to disc by Mike Valentine for his Chasing The Dragon label, brought Interpreti Veneziani into the room, and tears into my eyes.

At the request of Anthony Mills of Hi-Fidelity Ltd I then took the Chord Huei out of the system and connected the LP12 to the phono stage built into the Norma. Many integrated amplifiers are equipped with a built-in phono stage these days, as the marketing department cajoles the designer to do so to acknowledge the resurgence of interest in vinyl replay. In most cases the device is there to handle moving magnet cartridges only. However, the IPA-140 has MM and MC options, the latter being configurable by removing the top plate and adjusting the values using dipswitches.

I'm not an engineer and I'd be terrified of doing damage to the internals of the machine, although I know many of you reading this will be perfectly capable of doing so safely, so my advice to a purchaser would be to get your dealer to configure the thing for you. Luckily for me though, the review IPA-140 had previously been set up for an MC cartridge with similar characteristics to my Gold Note Machiavelli.

I wasn't expecting great things, but I was very quickly forced to rethink. The first record I played was one of my all-time favourites, JJ Cale's first album, *Naturally*: Track 1, Side 1 is *Call Me The Breeze*. Hold the phone! This was not an afterthought playing - this was as good as the sound from any sub £1000 stage that I have had here in the past few years. If you're a vinyl user, I urge you to audition the Norma before you splash the cash on an external box. It really is that good. I played a lot more records after that and found no reason to change that initial opinion. Clearly if you have a very high-end cartridge you will doubtless want to select your own stage, but I think the Norma will do justice to any sub £1000 cartridge.

Was there anything to criticise in the IPA-140? Sonically, absolutely nothing at all. This is an extremely well-executed design, and will I think give any purchaser many years of musical pleasure. It is powerful enough to work with the vast majority of domestic loudspeakers and musical enough to satisfy the most demanding listener. The weighty metal remote control's buttons are small and a tad fiddly for my stubby digits, but once I had mastered the layout it was perfectly functional.

I've thoroughly enjoyed my time with the Norma. At just over £6000 with the optional (but excellent) phono stage it is by no means inexpensive, but I have heard plenty of high-end amplifiers over the years and the Norma Revo IPA-140 would not be embarrassed by any of them. In that context, you might consider this to be champagne audio at prosecco prices.

A master of digital, too

The DS-1, meanwhile, shows that designer Rossi is as much a master of 21st century digital replay as he is of analogue amplification. Physically the CD player and amplifier share the same design ethic, being both handsome yet functional, without unnecessary embellishment. The silver casework curves elegantly towards the back while the front sports a power standby switch, a screen and an array of 5 buttons allowing control of CD play directly on the machine. On the back we find the IEC mains power input, the main on/off switch, RCA and balanced analogue outputs and 5 digital inputs. These support USB, 2 x SPDIF RCA, SPDIF optical and AES-EBU. In other words, you can plug in the vast majority of digital sources. For the review I plugged in my TV sound using the SPDIF optical and a second CD player here for review via one of the SPDIF RCA connections.

First of all, I wanted to hear how the DS-1 performed as a CD player, and connected it via the RCA outputs to the Revo IPA-140. I recently bought a box set from Esoteric Recordings of the 1967-1968 recordings on the MGM label of Eric Burdon and the



Animals. I bought all these albums on vinyl when I was still at school, so was intrigued to hear these new remasters. Good heavens! The familiar music came pouring from my little Harbeth P3ESRs but sounding as if it was recorded last year, with fast tuneful bass and loads of rhythm and timing.

Vivid musicality

I tried several other discs during that first session including the CD layer of some hybrid SACDs and the DS-1 just went about its business, not caring whether it was playing rock, jazz or classical. Everything poured out of the loudspeakers with vivid musicality. Gary Karr on double bass, accompanied by Harmon Lewis on church organ? No problem. The Dunedin Consort singing *Messiah*? No problem. Cream at full throttle on the live *Wheels of Fire*? No problem. Did the CD replay have quite the depth of vinyl? No. *Meddle* on the Discovery Edition CD vs the same album on the 2016 remastered vinyl pressing was interesting. That wonderful bass riff on *One Of These Days* just had more oomph through vinyl, but it was not by any means that other audiophile cliché that “it sounded broken” on CD: au contraire, it was a pretty close-run thing.

Switching to the DAC and again playing *Meddle* through the other CD transport via the SPDIF RCA input was interesting. It was still very good, but I thought that the Norma’s own transport gave a slightly more involving listening experience. However, this was a subjective reaction and I am not sure any differences would have been detected even if I could have measured. This is a fine implementation of Burr Brown DAC technology.

I then took out the second CD player and connected my Naim UnitiServe via the BNC to RCA cable which I keep handy for such things. That worked a treat. The Naim WAV rips came through with that pace, rhythm and timing so beloved of the Naim user, and I found it very musically engaging indeed.

Switching to the optical input to listen to the AV source in my room was very rewarding. Film soundtracks were delivered with great dynamics

and detail, with dialogue very easy to follow. Spoken word television sounded as if the performer was in the room – indeed, a couple of times my wife got up to answer the telephone only to discover it was a sound effect, not real life.

As I found with the Norma Revo IPA-140 amplifier, the user interface via the remote control does take some practice. I did not find it intuitive but in the end I was able to navigate around the remote control fairly well, although the density of the buttons and the rather sharp edges to them never really won me round. However, the display is a model of legibility and each digital interface when selected displays the frequency of the incoming signal – 44 for the external CD player and 48 for TV.

My reservation about the ergonomics is the only minor criticism I can find to level at this extremely competent digital hub. If you want a really well-built CD player through which you can also play your streamer, your laptop or anything else, and which felt like it is engineered to last a lifetime, the Norma would be an excellent candidate for your short list. Couple it with the matching Revo IPA-140 amplifier as I did for this review, and you have the heart of an extremely compelling system.

So, I end with this question again, why is Norma not better known here in the UK? It really should be on every prospective amplifier buyer’s shortlist. Obviously this is an inappropriate time to suggest that you seek out one of the UK dealers and ask for an audition, but if you are in the market for a new amplifier or CD player I urge you to wait until it is feasible and then find a Norma dealer and go and listen. You may have to travel a distance, but I think that you will be very pleased that you made the effort.

It is worth mentioning also that every piece of Norma equipment now comes with a five-year warranty, showing their confidence in their own quality. Also distributor Hi-Fidelity Ltd is pledging to donate £100 to the NHS Royal Free Charity, to support their sterling work in these trying times, for every Norma unit sold in the UK.

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RECOMMENDED

Specifications

Norma Revo IPA-140

Type	Integrated amplifier
Price	£5695
Inputs	4 line RCA, 1 Line XLR, mm/mc phono stage £389 option DAC £459 option
Outputs	1pr speakers, preout, tape, subwoofer
Power	140W into 8ohms, 280W into 4ohms
Inputs	Optical/coaxial digital
Dimensions (WxHxD)	43x11x36.5cm

Norma Revo DS-1

Type	CD player/DAC
Price	£4195
Digital inputs	USB, 2 coax, optical, AES/EBU
Dimensions (WxHxD)	43x7.5x35cm

normaudio.com
hifidelityuk.co.uk