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Equipment Report



Exposure 3010S2D Integrated Amplifier

Outer Purity, Inner Beauty

Neil Gader

A life lesson that we all learn: Looks can be deceiving. It's also an axiom that applies to the high end—it's what's inside that counts. An amp like the Exposure 3010S2D is a case in point. Visually its nondescript design conveys classic component minimalism and purpose. British reserve, if you will. Only a purist volume control, input selector knob, and power switch occupy the forthright aluminum front panel, which eschews the dozens of flashy pushbuttons and infotainment-style LED displays common to many designs. Operationally it cuts to the chase by getting right down to the critical business at hand—high-performance amplification in the form of a clean, direct circuit design, a robust power supply with plenty of headroom, and rigid construction to thwart EMI as well as acoustic and airborne resonances.

These qualities weren't born overnight. Exposure was founded in 1974 by John Farlowe, whose early passion for recorded music led to building guitar and PA amps and later working in recording studios rubbing elbows with the likes of David Bowie and Pink Floyd. Since the company's inception, expert engineering combined with a philosophy geared to "real hi-fi at real-world prices" has been its stock-in-trade. All current Exposure products are designed by Brighton-based chief designer Tony Brady (see his Back Page interview, Issue 265), and final assembly still takes place in the United Kingdom.

The 3010S2D represents the fourth generation of Exposure's top-tier integrated. It outputs 110Wpc of solid-state power. Like its predecessor it comes equipped with six line-level inputs, but now also includes an AV input for integration with a multi-channel system. A preamp output permits the addition of a separate power amp for system bi-amping. There are dual sets of speaker terminals (banana only). A remote control is included as well.

Internally, Exposure uses high-quality capacitors in the signal path, and has carefully mapped its circuit topology to keep signal and power-supply paths short. Cascode circuitry is used for improved power-supply immunity. The 3010S2D pre-amp stage now sports a new circuit board with all discrete components (rather than op-amps), while the power amp boasts a fast bipolar transistor output stage (four bipolar devices per rail) and the new power supply adds extra stages of regulation. The volume control is a fine Alps potentiometer.

Owners can also select from a pair of options: an mm or mc phono stage, or a plug-in DAC board. My review unit came equipped with the latter. The board is capable of up to 192/24-bit PCM and DSD64, and comes with two inputs: USB and BNC, with auto-switching between them. For my Apple TV I ran a SPDIF into the BNC via a superbly crafted Cardas Audio adapter. Using my MacBook via Pure Music/iTunes, I linked to the 3010S2D with the excellent Audience USB interconnect. Setup was a snap and performance was even snappier with very good transparency, smooth quick transients, and solid dynamics. A world-class DAC on the order of a Berkeley or a dCS? Well, maybe that's a

stretch, but considering the price segment that this package competes in, adding the \$595 DAC option is a virtual no-brainer.

Generally my sonic impressions begin to gel when listening to solo instruments—vocals, piano, cello, guitar—and then I move on to smaller ensembles and ultimately the "big guns." This protocol permits me to isolate certain criteria first: the ambient silence in and around the instrument, image integrity, decay patterns, harmonic sustain, and so forth, without the soundfield being clouded by the complexities of added instrumentation. However, like many of you, my *other* impulse is to grab all the symphonic heavy-hitters in my record collection and throw the whole sonic kitchen sink at the product. It was difficult to hold back with the Exposure—right out of the box, its clarity, tonal authority, and timbral authenticity immediately captured my attention.

The sonic lynchpin of the 3010S2D's performance was the stability and musical foundation it reproduced. From the opening salvos of Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" to the angelic vocal of Alison Krauss' "You're Just a Country Boy," the amp established a stable soundspace in which each image was positioned with sure-footed specificity. There was a superb combination of poise, densely textured midband detail, and dynamically authoritative overall energy. Plus the Exposure's very low noise floor led to an appreciation of the ambient riches that reside between musical passages. Images,

Equipment Report Exposure 3010S2D Integrated Amplifier

such as Russ Kunkel's signature tom-tom fill during Carole King's "Home Again" from *Tapestry*, stood out as they suggested genuine weight and dimensionality rather than appearing as flat cardboard cutouts.

As for a distinctive sonic signature, neutrality prevailed for the most part, though at times the 3010S2D's character conveyed warmer, darker shadings, reminiscent of a walnut wood grain. Female and male vocals had realistic body in a distinct sense of place—with both feet on the ground, so to speak. On his *Mule Variations* Tom Waits' voice had the requisite chest resonances and throatiness I've come to expect; Leonard Cohen's vocals from *Old Ideas*, closely miked and darkened with age, seemed to emerge from a subterranean underworld. During violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter's performance of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto, her violin's top end was nicely extended, but not overly detailed or etched.

Could the sound have used a bit more top-end air? I think so, but importantly, there was a sweetness to the 3010S2D that was especially pleasing on full-bodied, resonant, acoustic instruments such as cello and bass viol. Bass response was equally musical and balanced with hints of tube-like warmth but all the while maintaining the tautness, pitch stability, and

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control that are the essence of a modern solid-state performer.

In my review of the B&W 805 D3 compact (in this issue) I point out the chameleon-like character of its brilliant diamond tweeter, a transducer so finely polished in its resolution that it doesn't let any texture, distortion, or harmonic slip by. It also doesn't suffer poor amplification lightly and will reveal grit and grain or any hint of treble artifacts. It was love at first sight for the B&W and the Exposure, and as I listened to Respighi's *Brazilian Impressions* [BiS] the 3010S2 handled the delicate percussion cues with sensitivity and finely honed resolution.

While the Exposure is suitable to power most compacts and smaller floorstanders I always recommend auditioning an amp while listening at typical volume levels to the loudspeakers you'll pair

with it. (Considering your room size is also important.) For example, my own ATC SCM20 compacts and their very naughty 83dB sensitivity elicited a bit of compression, and caused this 110Wpc amp's bass grip to loosen slightly; an acoustic bass or a kick-drum lost a bit of the sheer, ball-fisted dynamic energy that a larger amp imparts with that power-hungry speaker.

In sonic colorations, the Exposure kept its nose clean. It didn't hype treble frequencies, etch transients, or evince any pernicious tonal peaks or bumps. Its minor sins were subtractive at best. It could drive a speaker like the Vandersteen Treo CT beautifully across most of the frequency spectrum, and only when really pushed *hard* did the Exposure's sound tend to relax and soften in the lower midbass; the potency of deep percussion dynamics was slightly reduced, and sustains were less discernable. Substituting the likes of a Pass Labs or an MBL Corona C51 restored a soundstage dimensionality and harmonic authority which the Exposure had backed off slightly. On the other hand, substituting either of these well-regarded amps could also send a carefully crafted audio budget swirling down the drain.

Don't let the simple façade of the Exposure 3010S2D integrated amp fool you. It may not have outer glitz and glamour but it's a real standout when it comes to inner beauty. The Exposure 3010S2D is an honest and classy piece of work that honors the finest traditions of the high end. **tas**



Specs & Pricing

Power output: 110Wpc at 1kHz into 8 ohms

Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz ± 0.5dB

Dimensions: 17" x 4" x 11.8"

Weight: 25 lbs.

Price: \$2795 (Options: mm or mc phonostage, \$495; DAC, \$595)

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