

Roksan Caspian IA Integrated Amplifier

Mike Driscoll & Steve Berg



IN THE TWO WEEKS following the tragedy that befell our country on Sept. 11, I found myself glued to my TV screen, as, I suspect, were most Americans, audiophiles included. I would hazard a guess that there was a great deal less music listened to, at least in this country, during those two weeks than at any time since, probably, the assassination of J.F.K.

After those initial couple of weeks, however, it seems that a lot of folks became tired of hearing the same news over and over, and began to turn on their stereos again, some probably for the first time in weeks, months or even years. Since that time, I have had many people, including many casual acquaintances, tell me that they might be interested in getting a "better" stereo, since they have found themselves listening more and viewing less. And I, as an "authority" on the subject, because I write for this "wonderful" magazine, am the logical source for advice. [Editor's Grump: Hey, you, Mike, watch those quote marks!]

Music has a soothing effect on human beings, as well as, according to scientists, on the so-called "lesser animals." Music was, some say, our first means of communicating with our fellow Neanderthals; our ancestors are said to be banging mammoth bones on hollow logs, long before the development of language. Music is wired into our brains at birth, as anyone who has ever seen a crying infant soothed into slumber by the sound of its mother singing a lullaby can attest. It seems that some folks, seeking respite from the mostly terrible events happening in the world, are turning to music. I, for one, have done my best to steer these people away from the mass-market crap most people think is hi-fi, and into the world of high quality audio. To several people, I have recommended the Jolida JD202a integrated amp I reviewed a few issues back, along with the Dynaudio Audience 42 loudspeakers. (Ditto!) But tubes aren't for everybody, particularly non-audiophiles.

Enter the Roksan Caspian solid-state integrated amplifier, which, as luck would have it, showed up on my doorstep at the end of September. The Caspian is a 70-watt-per-channel unit from Roksan of Great Britain;

it's distributed in the North and South America by May Audio. The look or industrial design of the unit is advanced or sharp, with curved sides on the chassis and a silver clipped-corner front panel symmetrically sporting two large knobs and two small buttons. It also comes in black. In the center of the front panel is a long horizontal window featuring the Roksan logo, and several mode and source indicator lights. The functions are duplicated on the remote control, which is light and palm-sized.

The mode function requires a little explanation. When the mode button is pushed for an instant, on either the front panel or the remote, the Roksan mutes by 20 dB. However, when the button is pushed for a longer period, the amplifier sort of "goes to sleep" in its standby mode. There is no way to shut the unit off from the remote or the front panel, as the unit is meant to be powered up all the time, and simply put into this "sleep mode" when not in use. On the rear of the chassis, there is a large rocker switch, which does kill power to the amplifier. I know that a lot of audiophiles leave their equipment on all the time, so as to keep the caps charged up for best sound, though I have never seen any percentages about this come out of any surveys. I know I don't do this, but I really think that this is a decision best left up to the user. I have had many pieces of audio equipment in my system with hard-to-access power switches, put where they were by the manufacturer perhaps in an effort to coerce the user into leaving the gear powered up all the time. I have found it to be a pain in the gluteus maximus every time. I personally have no problem with waiting for a half-hour or so for the equipment to warm up. I feel much better about this than I would about wasting even the small amount of electricity needed to keep it powered up at all times. I can, however, easily understand others think differently.

No More Soapbox

OK, I'll get off my soapbox now, except for saying that the speaker binding posts on the Caspian were way too large for the spades on my speaker cables (or any

other cables I tried.) I wish high-end manufacturers would agree on one type, or at least one size, of binding post and spade lug? This is only a real hassle for reviewers, of course, as most folks will connect their cables once and are done with it, at least until they move.

So how does this amplifier sound? Pretty good, actually, in fact better than that, it sounds really good! I have been using either the Jolida integrated or the combination of my venerable, but still more than serviceable B+K Pro 10 MC Sonata preamp and an O.D.L. HT-2 amplifier. This is an early version of the Odyssey Audio Stratos, an American-made amplifier based on the Symphonic Line RG11, which is built in Germany. (I

hope you were paying attention, there will be a written test later, composition form, 300 words minimum.) Compared with either of those set-ups, the Roksan sounded just a shade more forward. Front and center vocalists, ones that I am used to hearing appear on a plane that includes the back of my loudspeakers (Mirage M3si's or the Dynaudios), appear with the Roksan in a more forward position, at the front plane of the speakers or slightly forward of that.

Tonal balance seems to me to be quite good, with excellent bass extension, and an extended, but not shrill or hard, high end as well. It is in the midrange that the Roksan surprised me the most. If an amplifier disappoints me here, it's only use for me is as a boat anchor. The Caspian Integrated does not disappoint. It displays a smooth, accurate-sounding midrange that does not tend to add "chestiness" or bloat to vocalists.

Diana Krall's voice on *All For You*, her album dedicated to the Nat King Cole Trio, was full bodied and surrounded by an envelope of air. As she sat at her piano, her band appeared behind her, and each member of had his own "space" within the overall acoustic. On the Chesky CD of Mozart's flute quartets (CD128DDD), each musician likewise had sufficient "air" around him to give a convincing 3-D presentation. The violin sounded like a violin, and was easily distinguished from the viola, both in tonal qualities and in its location in space. These two qualities made it very easy to pick individual musicians out from a group, and follow their musical "line." Gram Parsons *Return of The Grievous Angel*, which is one of the few, if not the only CD in my collection which actually sounds better than its LP counterpart, features Emmylou Harris in a wonderful duet on "Love Hurts." The two vocalists start out separated by the entire width of the soundstage. In my system and room, they appear forward of the loudspeakers, to the left and right of the listener. Gradually, as the song progresses, Gram and Emmylou move closer to each other until, at the song's climax, they appear together at front center. The Roksan reproduced this effect as well as any amp I have ever had in my system.

Never harsh, the top end is nonetheless extended, as I have already mentioned. My favorite test for this is Karl Shiflett and The Big Country Show's *In Full Color*, a bluegrass album that can indeed sound harsh on systems with this tendency. The Roksan passed "the Shiflett test" with flying colors, reproducing the harmonic structure of the banjo superbly, without introducing any harshness.

At the other end of the spectrum, the bass on Holst's "The Planets" came through just as deep and as well controlled as with my more powerful O.D.L. amp. The Roksan also was able to show up the differences between different editions of the same recordings, including ones in different formats. I listened to Miles Davis' *Kind Of Blue*, in several different incarnations, from OJC vinyl to CD to Classic reissue, and the differences in sound quality were always apparent. On *The*

Traveling Wilburys, Vol. 1, there is a huge difference between the quality of sound on the LP compared with the CD. I use this recording as a demo whenever people try to tell me I'm crazy because I "still" listen

to LPs, the difference is so profound, anyone can hear it, as long as the equipment is revealing enough. On the CD, there is a harsh edge to the vocals, particularly Bob Dylan's on "Dirty World." The LP shows none of this harshness, as well as providing a deeper and wider soundstage and a generally "lusher" sound. As an aside here, the news came out yesterday that "Nelson" Wilbury, aka George Harrison, passed away of cancer. The musical world, as well as the world in general, will be poorer for his absence. Sadly, all things must, indeed, pass away.

To sum up, the Roksan Caspian integrated amplifier is an extremely competent performer, and deserves an audition by anyone looking for an integrated amplifier in this moderate price range. It provides a large and detailed sound space, good tonal balance, is extended on top without being harsh, gives deep, tight bass (dependent, of course, upon speaker capability), and is revealing of differences both in the recordings fed through it, and the other equipment in the chain. Its 70-watt-per-channel power rating should drive most "real world" loudspeakers well.

After listening to (and enjoying,) the Caspian for the review period, I gave the Roksan to my friend, "wrong way" Steve, for his opinions, which also appear here. (I also lent him my Dynaudios for his judgment on that combo.) I have not seen what he has written, but my experience with this amp tells me that his review could be nothing but positive.

The Other Guy's Opinion

Late fall in New England means two things for me: Raking leaves, and starting back up with more hours available to listen to audio. The Roksan Caspian integrated amp arrived at the perfect time, the leaves were done and hours for listening were now at hand. First impressions tend to be lasting impressions, and my first impression was very favorable. This is coming from a listener who has had a number of tube amps (both integrated, and separates) in his system over the past few years.

After getting by a couple of quirky features, the Roksan was pure sonic enjoyment. The first of the quirky features are the speaker connectors. This being my first experience with a British-made amp, I was surprised that the speaker connectors were not standard dual banana jacks. I've grown accustomed to the convenience of using such banana plugs in order to be able to switch between a number of speakers and different

**Roksan's IA integrated
is a fine-sounding amp;
at \$1500, it's a steal!**

amps. [Editor's Other Grump: This deal with connectors appears to me to be a solution in search of a problem, a difficulty forced on the manufacturers by a confused European regulatory body, one where some over-wrought bureaucrat didn't understand how these items are physically used. I have had Ray Kimber of Kimber Kable and associates of Ray's from WBT, the maker of premium connectors, tell me in great detail about their dust-ups with the regulators, who seem to me to be dumb by intent. Oh, well, someone has to hire those who can't walk and chew gun, too.]

The other quirk was how difficult it would be to remove the cover. The cover was held on with several Allen screws and Phillips screws. I was interested in taking a look at the build quality, but didn't have a proper set of Allen wrenches handy so I couldn't remove the cover. However, I will say this baby is heavy, especially for its size. From a design standpoint, it is well designed, with the microprocessor board and logic board toward the front, away from the amp section.

The amp's electronic design is loaded with features: Two preamp outputs, power amp input, tape monitor function, and short-circuit protection. The supplied remote worked extremely well, even off axis, as I was able to control the

amp from quite a distance and do it at a 45-degree angle from the amp. The Roksan is the ultimate in simplicity, with just two rotary controls and two buttons. As with most amps these days, there are no tone controls or balance control. There are five inputs (something I miss on my tube stuff), although no phono section. I do not believe it is an available option; too bad.

How did this baby sound to me? Pretty darn good, in fact downright wonderful. I put the Roksan through its paces with a variety of music, from both CDs and vinyl, and two different sets of speakers. In every situation, I was completely amazed at how "musical" this amp sounded. Never once, did I miss the tube amps (except for that wonderful glow). This amp is rated at 70 watts per channel, and there was plenty of power for both sets of speakers tested with the amp. At one point I really let the amp loose, and it performed flawlessly at near deafening levels with no sign of boomy bass, clipping or distortion.

Where this amp really came through was in the midrange. My love for tubes is tied to how musical they are in the mids, and if an amp is going to send me into musical ecstasy, particularly a solid-state unit, it must produce nice mids. Well, the Roksan did just fine in this area, and I was quite surprised to

say the least. I spent a night spinning some of my blues LPs, and selected some discs by Mississippi Fred McDowell, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Muddy Waters.

This amp did anything but give me the blues. Fred's slide guitar sounded very natural, with great attack and decay. Sonny Boy's harp was right there complete with his wonderful vocals and enunciation. Listening to Muddy took me back to the days of hearing him live, it was that good. There was great separation between Muddy's vocals, James Cotton's harmonica, and Otis Spann's piano. All instruments were very natural sounding.

Having just seen Dylan twice in the previous week, I thought it appropriate to see how Bob would sound. I didn't have his most recent project *Love and Theft* on vinyl (only CD), but do have *Time out of Mind* on the large-sized record. Again, as with the blues selections, the music sounded wonderful. Dylan's voice, with all of its nuances, sounded as it should. The soundstage was wide and deep, with great separation between instruments.

During my review period, George Harrison passed away. As my personal tribute, I pulled out one of his "great humanitarian projects," *Concert for Bangla Desh*. While all the songs with George were simply wonderful and very musical, what really got me was the side with Ravi Shankar. The sitar sounded exquisite with great tonality, and the presentation was wide and deep. There was great separation between the sitar, the sarod, and the tabla.

Could I live with this amp in my system? You bet. Roksan has a winner with the Caspian KA-1 integrated. I just may have to re-bias my bias for tubes after listening to this fine little solid-state amp.

NOTES

Roksan Caspian IA Integrated Amplifier, \$1,500.00. North and South American Distributor: May Audio Marketing, 2150 Liberty Dr., #7, Niagara Falls, NY 14304; U.S. phone 716/283-4434, U.S. fax 716/283-6264, Canadian phone 905/780-0079, Canadian fax 905/780-0443; website www.mayaudio.com.

Associated Equipment, Steve

Dynaudio Audience 42 speakers, Marantz CC-65SE (transport), California Audio Labs Sigma II DAC, AR ES turntable with Sumiko arm and Sumiko Pearl cartridge, Dynaco PAS-4 Preamp (phono preamp), Definitive Technology BP-10 speakers, Kimber, Audiortruth, and Monster cables and interconnects.

Associated Equipment, Mike

Mirage M3si speakers, Dynaudio Audience 42 speakers, Philips CDR 760 (transport), MSB Link DAC, Apex AD 500b DVD player, B+K Pro 10mc Sonata preamp (solid state, used as a phono preamp, or in passive mode), ODL HT-2 amplifier (solid state), Jolida JD202 integrated amplifier (tube), VPI HW19jr turntable with Aq PT6 arm and Sumiko Blue Point Special cartridge, Discovery 1,2,3 speaker cable (bi-wire), Jps and Kimber interconnects, McCormick digital interconnect, and assorted tweaks, footings, and acoustic "fixes."

Reprinted by permission of The Audiophile Voice © 2002 Guts & Elbow Grease Publishing Ltd. 215 Glenridge Ave, Lower Level, Montclair, NJ 07042.

Subscriptions are \$30.00 for one year or \$55.00 for two years within the U.S. Canadian subscriptions are \$39.00 (U.S. dollars) for one year and \$65.00 for two years. Overseas subscriptions are \$66.00 for one year.

Please pay by check or money order in U.S. funds. We do not use credit cards so as to help keep our overhead low. Send payment to: **The Audiophile Voice**, PO Box 43537, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043