

BEST BUY

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Poundstretcher

Advance Acoustic slashes the cost of two-box amplification

PRODUCT Advance Acoustic MPP 206 and MAA 406

TYPE Preamplifier and power amplifier

PRICE (MPP 206) £350; (MAA 406) £550

KEY FEATURES (MPP 206) Size (WxHxD): 44x11x35cm

- Weight: 5kg ● Inputs: 4x RCA phono
- 1x MM/MC phono ● Outputs: 2x balanced XLR, 3x RCA phono ● Active filter output
- (MAA 406) Size (WxHxD): 44x15x43cm
- Weight: 19kg ● Power: 150 watts per channel (8 ohms), 220 watts (4 ohms) ● VU meters
- Inputs: 2x RCA phono, 2x balanced XLR

Thirty years ago Japan rocked the economy of the UK's hi-fi industry and now it's the turn of the Chinese. With products like this latest pre/power pairing from Advance Acoustic being offered for under a grand, times are extremely tough for domestic manufacturers of audio electronics.

Against that background and given the value of the Euro these days this latest offering from Franco-Chinese company Advance is nothing short of staggering. The MPP 206 preamplifier has four line inputs and a phono input that caters for both MM and MC cartridges, it has balanced and single-ended outputs and can be fully operated by remote control.

It boasts a solid case and is professionally put together. To get this sort of build and feature complement elsewhere would cost you literally twice as much (the £750 Cambridge 840E preamp for example). And although Cyrus and Russ Andrews have lower-featured designs that are less expensive they still don't dip below the £600 mark. On paper, at least, this preamp appears to be a serious bargain.

There is, of course, Advance Acoustic's own MPP 505 (£600), which appears to be the same preamplifier with the addition of digital inputs and DA conversion. The MAA 406 power amplifier is clearly also a great-looking deal. This is specified as delivering 150 watts into eight ohms with the aid of an 800VA transformer and weighs a convincing 19 kilos. It too has balanced and single-ended connections and sports the biggest pair of VU meters we've seen since the last far eastern audio invasion – an era when Technics (remember them?) had a penchant for such devices. Such things went out of fashion because they serve no purpose aside from making what are otherwise rather featureless boxes look more appealing.

A thorough search does turn up a couple of potential competitors for the power amp, notably NAD's 150-watt C272 at £475 and Rotel's RB-1070 which gives you 130 watts for the same asking price as the MAA 406. Neither sport UV meters, however, but sonically this could be to their advantage.

The MPP206 has a couple of unusual outputs next to the traditional types, one is called 'sub out' presumably for connection to a subwoofer, while the other is called 'hi-pass out'. According to the manual, if our French is correct (we didn't get the English version), you use both in conjunction when running a sat/sub system. There is also a button that switches between 75Hz and 150Hz crossover

component) allow a manufacturer to offer higher quality components. To establish whether Advance Acoustic's two-box approach was a sensible one, we initially brought out a favourite integrated in this price area, the Cambridge Audio 840A (£750). It doesn't offer quite as much power (130 watts) but is very well featured and a useful benchmark. Nevertheless, it is one that the AA pairing manages to surpass with surprising ease, delivering a smoother result with fuller bass and significantly improved timing. There is also clearly more power on tap than the 30-watt increase would suggest because the bass has greater weight and yet remains timely, allowing you to follow bass lines without

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points for these RCA phono outputs. This is an unusual feature that could be of use if you want to add a subwoofer to regular loudspeakers and don't have the option of running the sub from the power amp's speaker terminals.

Build quality is good for the money, the steel casework of the preamp sounds undamped under the knuckle test, but we'd be shocked if this were otherwise. The power amplifier runs quite hot and thus is not all that green, although it does have a standby mode so there's no need for constant power unless you want best results straight away.

SOUND QUALITY

At this price point, £900 all in, we would normally recommend an integrated amplifier because the saving made in casework costs (usually the most expensive part of any hi-fi

having to try too hard.

Imaging is pretty good for the money, too with reasonably precise placement and, more importantly, a high fun factor with great pieces of music such as that produced by Israeli jazz band, Avanim, where the AA's smooth character and good grasp of tempo allows you to enjoy the trumpet driven grooves to full effect. There is a slight sense of thickness to the sound however, which makes these amplifiers better suited to open and lively speakers such as those from PMC and Focal. We tried PMC's new OB1i floorstanders and were very happy with the balance; the MAA 406's generous power reserves helping the combination to deliver a big soundstage with the aid of Fink's *Biscuits for Breakfast* album. We like the way that the sound has good edge definition without glare and can produce reverb in such a spacious fashion.

The slight warmth in the AA's balance has one advantage in that it allows you to play loud without the sound getting hard. After all, why would you want an amplifier of this girth if not to play loud?

To see how the MPP 206 preamp fares in the grand scheme of things a Russ Andrews HP-1 was brought out to take a turn driving the AA power amplifier. This little preamp has only two inputs and no remote operation, yet costs £499. It's rather more open sounding than the MPP 206 and delivers more low-level detail; basically it's more transparent. Substituting a Russ Andrews PA-1 power amplifier (£699) for the MAA 406 results in more openness and greater realism, but a curtailing of bass weight as a result of the drop in power to 60 watts. We were surprised however that the dearer RA pairing did not offer a significant increase in timing quality, which supports the impression that this is a strongpoint of the Advance Acoustic pairing.

In fact, with the less-than-easy to drive B&W loudspeakers in use, the combination of RA HP-1 and AA MAA 406 worked the best, which is a credit to the big power amp as such beasts are rarely very nimble.

Using the slightly easier load presented by the OB1i gives the little Russ Andrews power amp the edge it needs to reveal its greater grasp of dynamics and speed, combined with a significantly increased sense of clarity to the result. But it costs you another £150 and doesn't come with big meters (or big anything for that matter).

This AA pre/power pairing proves that you can get a decent two-box amplifier for under a grand without having to compromise on features or power. Some care has to be paid to speaker matching, but this is often the case. And then there are those VU meters; they may not be necessary, but we have to admit that they do look great. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Good feature set and build for the money, combined with powerful and timely sound quality that puts the pairing ahead of established integrated benchmarks.
FEATURES ★★★★★	CON The power amp is bulky and runs hot while the preamp's remote volume control is a little crude, but it's hard to complain at the price.
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION Advance Acoustic has managed to produce a physically heavyweight power amp with decent power reserves and a well featured preamp with good build and finish for a great price. It may lack sophistication, but has qualities that are hard to beat.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	