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INTEGRATED AMP REVIEWS

darTZeel CTH-8550 integrated amplifier

Wes Phillips | Aug 24, 2009

As the 2009 Consumer Electronics Show neared its end, I wandered into Blue Light Audio's room, which was dominated by the innards of darTZeel's new NHB-458 monoblocks—think of a 3D "exploded" diagram and you'll be on target. So impressive was that display of brute engineering that I almost didn't notice the amplifier that was actually making the music: the CTH-8550 integrated (\$20,300).



Yes, you read correctly: \$20,300 for an integrated amplifier. That's an order

of magnitude greater than the typical integrated. Granted, you get a moving-coil input, *and* it's built in Switzerland to Swiss standards, *and* it cranks out 200Wpc into 8 ohms or 330Wpc into 4 ohms, *and* it's endlessly user-configurable—but Criminy, that's a lot of simoleons.

DarTZeel can rightfully argue that each of its products is meticulously engineered by Hervé Delétraz, which means that its products employ unique technologies. And, far from benefiting from any economies of scale, darTZeel components are about one step short of bespoke—they're made by hand, and mighty close to order. But none of that will matter if you can't get past the sticker shock.

Men are only as good as their technical development allows them to be

If you *can* get over the shock, however, the CTH-8550 is packed with interesting technologies—such as its optical Pleasure Control (as Delétraz calls the loudness control), with a range of from Less to More.

Manufactured and customized for darTZeel by Elma, it's the most responsive knob I've ever fondled. Its tactile feedback was, well, *fun*—I'll confess to twirling it a few times just for fun as I murmured, "Come in, Rangoon."

Then there's the CTH-8550's display screen, which, along with its CPU, lets you set virtually any parameter to your preference—and includes both a clock and a function that automatically powers the amplifier on or off at a set time. My first thought regarding this "alarm," as darTZeel calls it, was to laugh—but then I imagined a scenario in which my CTH-8550 powered itself on every evening half an hour before I got home from work, and was ready to rock my world as soon as my butt hit the comfy chair. Of course, the problem with that fantasy is that first I'd need a day job—although if I did, perhaps I wouldn't find the price so daunting.

The CTH-8550 uses a large toroidal transformer for its output stage and a smaller one for low-level signals. (If you use it only as a preamplifier, you can turn off the big toroid via that nifty display.) Delétraz has designed an output stage based on paralleled transistors and short signal paths; he doesn't say much about it, except that it is supposed to run cool—oh yeah,

and that it sounds good.

The CTH-8550 has two sets of unbalanced RCA outputs, one following the volume control so that the amp can be used as a preamp, a "darT" output (50 ohm BNC), two "Zeel" inputs (ditto), four unbalanced RCA inputs, plus two more pairs marked MM and MC (MM is optional; an MC module, with user-adjustable gain, comes standard in the US), and a pair of balanced XLR inputs. The speaker terminals are substantial—and, even better, they open wide enough to accept thick spades. An IEC mains jack and two USB inputs complete the complement of connectors.

Two USB inputs—whatever for? The CTH-8550 comes with a USB flash drive, which arrives blank; you must register your CTH-8550 online to receive a compressed folder with a .dtz extension. Transfer the file to the USB stick and plug it into a USB slot on the CTH-8550, at which point you upload the latest upgrades to the unit's firmware, as well as your *activation code*. Skip that last step and your \$20,300 component will work for a mere 15 minutes every time you power it on, then shut itself off.



I can clearly see the benefits of uploading firmware changes to the CPU via flash drive, but the whole concept of having to "authorize" a component after forking out 20 grand for it strikes me as creepy and insulting. I can't conceive of how that benefits the customer.

As with other darTZeel products, the cosmetic package of the CTH-8550 is unique. My sample had darTZeel's usual livery of gold-anodized faceplate with burgundy chassis (an all-black model is also offered). While the CTH-8550's fit'n'finish and materials are impeccable, it looks less styled than engineered. In a channel milled into its thick faceplate are 11 LEDs (one per

source and one each for the left and right channels) and eight pressure-actuated switches (Menu, Time, Light, Name, Mute, Mono, Balance, Power). There are two massive handles, and another pair on the back, which is good—the li'l sucker weighs 62 lbs. Between the front handles are the optical control and the display. Most of the CTH-8550's bling is on the *inside*.

Four legs good, two legs bad

For all of the CTH-8550's customization options, I found it simple to use. Most of its settings are set-and-forget. Its heatsinks are mounted under its vented casing, so it can be placed just about anywhere that can support its mass and allows adequate ventilation. For all the pleasure I got spinning the Pleasure Control, in daily use I used the remote control almost exclusively. While the display is easy to use up close, much of its information is in a font too small to be seen from across the room, so I opted for its Auto Off feature.

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