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CONSTELLATION AUDIO INSPIRATION PREAMP 1.0 LINE PREAMP AND MONO 1.0 POWER AMPLIFIER

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The march of progress in high-end audio often seems to be centred on the price of the product. As things get better, so prices get ever higher. It rarely goes in the other direction. But Constellation Audio is one of the rare exceptions to the rule. Starting with its top end Reference range, then came the Performance series that saw the price of admission come down, and now Inspiration offers Constellation Audio performance at a new level. I hesitate to say ‘low’ level, because there is nothing about Constellation Audio’s brands that could be considered ‘low level’, unless you are talking about resolution or bass response.

Relatively speaking, then, Constellation Audio brings the brand to a new level. The company is never going to make amplifiers that would be considered ‘cheap’. But we are talking the difference between a First Class air ticket, flying in a private jet, and owning your own airline. When you think how close Inspiration gets to Performance and Reference in terms of sound and build quality, and how much more Performance and Reference cost in outright terms, it’s hard not to be a little impressed.

The big thing with Inspiration is it has many of the attributes of the bigger electronics, benefiting from the circuits pulled together from the company’s famed ‘dream team’ of designers. So the Preamp 1.0 could be thought of as pulling together key elements of the Altair II and Virgo III preamps from the brand, and the Stereo 1.0 and Mono 1.0 pull in concepts developed for the Hercules II and Centaur II power amps. That is easy to write and incredibly difficult to do in reality. For example, cramming in the dual-mono, three-transformer preamp that routinely takes up two huge boxes in a single chassis is no

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mean feat, all this while managing to make it look very similar to the Altair II preamp by using CNC-machined aluminium, but this time with a tongue-and-groove design in place of the 'machined from solid billet' nature of its bigger brothers. You'd never notice this tongue-and-groove finish from the feel of the amplifier, so solid is the construction. And, like its bigger brothers, audio circuits are isolated, although not using the same 'raft' design. It's an intrinsically balanced design, although it features three RCA single-ended inputs and two RCA outputs. If you can, XLR is the way forward.

The power amps are equally drawn from Constellation's master plans for the Hercules II and Centaur II. It retains the same Line Stage Gain Modules found in its bigger brothers, and relies on making balanced amps with only N-type output transistors, instead of mirrored N-type and P-type transistors. The difference is using N-types only allows the circuit to perfectly balance, which is otherwise impossible. The difference in output between banks of NPN and PNP transistors is minute in absolute terms, but it's this kind of trifle that makes perfection. Just ask Michaelangelo.

The principle difference between the Stereo 1.0 and Mono 1.0 and the Performance or Reference models is the input and gain stages are no longer mounted on individual circuit boards, but are fed separately. Placing these modules on one board means a considerably simpler power supply, meaning a smaller and less heavy chassis. The net result is the 200W per channel Stereo 1.0 and 400W Mono 1.0 we tested are not made up of smaller 125W modules (although the basic topology is very similar), and the amplifier only has 'sensational' dynamics instead of the 'revolutionary' dynamic range of the bigger brothers. This is not an idle claim; the NPN-only output design makes for greater dynamic range not unlike a single-ended triode amplifier, only with a lot more power behind it. This is what has made Constellation Audio so popular with today's top-end audiophiles. Inspiration follows in these footsteps.

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