



One for all

German high-ender AVM wants to make top all-in-one performers. **David Vivian** takes a listen to its all-singing integrated amp

You know, the best ideas don't die, they simply move with the times. Take the typically unlovely MDF and plastic music centre that graced many a teak dresser in the mid-to-late Seventies. Absurdly bulky, badly compromised and rubbish by the hi-fi standards of the day, the briefly fashionable turntable, cassette deck, tuner and amp all-in-one with add-on speakers (of highly dubious quality) was nevertheless an ace idea waiting for its time to come.

Not only has it come, it appears to be on course to conquer, the twin trends of convergence and convenience achieving maximum traction in this digital age. Whether we choose to embrace it or not, it's given us a viable reason not to access our musical jollies via a coalition of individual components laced together with hard-to-hide cables. But even in a burgeoning market for high-performance plug 'n' play minimalism, AVM's AS 2.3 is strikingly, almost inscrutably, sleek – a compact, screwless, flush-surfaced, feature-dense nugget of aesthetically neutral tech that looks great anywhere.

Compact all-in-ones have been German high-end brand AVM's

stock-in-trade since the Nineties.

Unlike some of its older models, the AS 2.3 doesn't have a slot-loading compact disc drive, its omission perhaps understandably tilting the user experience towards streaming, though hooking up a transport isn't a problem. Instead, AVM styles the AS 2.3 a: "modern integrated amplifier". "With benefits" is kind of a given. Most obviously, it points to the company's powerful X-Stream Engine and gives a conspicuous nod to the new RC X app that's used to control all aspects of its operation. Every millimetre of the necessarily rather limited space on the rear is given over to connections, which includes the increasingly common HDMI ARC TV slot. All stoked up by plenty of trickle-down tech from above? You bet, the much larger CS 8.3 all-in-one flagship providing the inspiration and selected goodies.

Core is the new AVM X-Stream Engine network platform developed in-house, which is entirely software based and updatable and does all the hi-res formats up to DSD256. As well as the HDMI ARC interface, latest Bluetooth codecs and all the usual digital inputs plus two analogue RCA sockets and a USB-A port for external

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
AVM Inspiration AS 2.3

ORIGIN
Germany

TYPE
All-in-one integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
7.1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 100 x 320mm

FEATURES

- Claimed power output: 2x 140W (8ohm)
- Inputs: HDMI ARC; 1x optical; 1x coaxial; USB-A
- Airplay 2; Roon ready; Bluetooth 4.2

DISTRIBUTOR
PMC Speakers

WEBSITE
avm.audio
pmc-speakers.com

storage, the digital outputs are all level adjustable. Another AVM product line is its Rotation range of up-market turntables, so naturally the company has paid appropriate attention to the quality of the AS 2.3's on board MM/MC phono stage, again with tech trickled down and re-engineered to fit in the AS 2.3's compact chassis.

Considerable effort has also been put in to making the control app as clear and intuitive as possible, and that certainly checks out. It's one of the best

The way ambience and timbre are rendered is very impressive indeed

I've used – just as well as there isn't the luxury of a supplied remote to back things up, though the crisp OLED display offers some touch functions such as playback and tone control adjustment. Along with Spotify Connect, it's good to see Tidal Connect, Qobuz and HiResAudio integrated into the app and it would be a big surprise if the AS 2.3 wasn't certified Roon Ready and AirPlay 2 compatible. No surprises.

The AS 2.3 certainly doesn't want for poke, claiming 140W per channel of Class D power, the amp stage taking key cues from that used in the CS 8.3 flagship but optimised for use in the smaller model. AVM claims the AS 2.3 fears no speaker, however exotic or power hungry and it may well have a point. DAC duties fall to the latest ESS 9038 chipset, though quite rightly AVM points out that the AS 2.3's

ultimate sound quality rests just as much with the company's decades of accumulated development nous.

That admirably contained aesthetic? It can be tweaked to taste, the supplied unit's restrained aluminium silver finish looking distinctly plain beside the special-order Cellini version with its chrome-plated and hand polished fascia. Black is the other standard option, and very smart, too. Build is ridiculously good, but then this is a pricey thing and all AVM products are meticulously hand assembled with components sourced from suppliers local to its Malsch factory. Quality control is claimed to be similarly exacting with repeated checks during all manufacturing steps and a break-in period of several days for each unit.

Sound quality

Beyond firing up the app, inserting an Ethernet cable (the network can also be accessed wirelessly), plugging in a pair of speakers and, possibly, a turntable, there's nothing much more to the set-up process. To give the Class D amp's impressive 140W output something to think about, I choose ATC's ever-capable SCM40 (HFC 389) floorstander – a big, fairly insensitive sealed box that requires a beefy amp with plenty of grip to come to life. Finally, my Rega Planar 6 (HFC 453) and Ania (HFC 452) moving-coil cartridge give the impedance adjustable phono stage a whirl.

The RC X app is a wonderful thing. The right half of the screen is devoted to playback, player functions and volume control, and the left takes care of menu options and library navigation. Usefully, there's a Home button to zip back to square one if needed. Simple.

First up on Tidal, the opening track from Van Morrison's *Moving On Skiffle*. Elizabeth Cotten's terrific *Freight Train* certainly has momentum thanks to the relaxed rhythmic chug-a-long conjured by organ and guitar with

HOW IT COMPARES

Expensive as the AVM is, you can see, hear and feel where the money has gone. Two more affordable alternatives spring to mind. Arguably just as stylish, Cambridge Audio's EVO 150 is, likewise, steps ahead of your typical streaming amp and a true object of desire with loads of flexibility and great sound. Equally hard to overlook, Naim's Uniti Star (HFC 433) also combines broad functionality with Naim's distinctively pacy and grippy sonic personality.



Van's inimitable vocal providing the necessary acerbic anchor through the first verse before the backing singers add gorgeous harmonic texture for a richer ride to the end.

Coming immediately after a setup incorporating a Line Magnetic tube amp, the tonal temperature is a little cooler, the presentation leaner and tauter. But there's no mistaking the uptick in precision, transparency and control of the ATC's large, heavy woofer. Particularly impressive is the way ambience and timbre are rendered with as much care as the AVM's spry way with pace and timing.

With an Audiolab 6000 CDT CD transport optically tethered to it, fast-fingered guitarist Brian Bromberg's immaculately produced version of the Hendrix classic *Fire* dials up the decibels and tempo, and is delivered with tremendous energy and verve, the big ATC speaker squaring its shoulders and responding enthusiastically to the cranked AS 2.3's bidding. Bromberg's fret gymnastics are cleanly delivered over blistering

drumming and superbly heavy and twangy bass guitar – a properly thrilling visceral presence in the room.

The AVM's built-in phono stage is no slouch, either, as eager to please as the production team behind Bruno Mars singing *Finesse* from *24-Carat Magic*, yet easily able to capture the direct, pared-back sonic mien of Fifties studio recording at its best with Sonny Rollins blowing up a storm on *Saxophone Colossus*. Unless you own a five-figure turntable and really want to push the boat out, there's no pressing need to buy a separate phono preamp.

Conclusion

No amount of all-in-one excellence – even as supplied by the exceptional AS 2.3 – will part dyed-in-the-wool audiophiles from their main system separates. If ultimate sound quality is the goal, it's still the only way to go. If however, for whatever reason, the separates must go, the fully evolved 21st-century music centre has a lot going for it, and the AVM Inspirational AS 2.3 more than most ●

Connectivity boxes are all ticked, thanks to optical, coaxial, HDMI ARC, RCA and phono stage inputs



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Design; compact size; build; app; transparent; super grippy sound

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No CD drive

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** There are cheaper all-in-ones, but we can't think of any that are as classy, well-made or sound as good as this one

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★