



MARCH 2010



# TSAKIRIDIS DEVICES ALEXANDER & ORPHEUS

**Reviewer:** Chris Redmond

**Financial Interests:** click [here](#)

**Source:** AMR CD771

**Preamp:** Music First silver TVC

**Amplifier:** E.A.R. 509 monos, Border Patrol WE300B

**Speakers:** Audio Note AN/E Silver Sig, Dynaudio Contour 1.3Mk2s

**Cables:** Kimber Select KS-1030 silver, Kimber Select KS-3035 silver/copper, Artisan Silver Dream, Kimber High Current, JPS Kaptovator

**Stands:** Single sand-filled column Atacama for Dynaudios, Finite Element Spider Rack for components, Townsend isolation platform for AMR CD77, Targer wall shelves for AN/E outboard crossovers

**Power delivery:** PS Audio P600 multi-wave, separate Kimber High Current mains spur

**Sundry accessories:** Acoustic System Resonators and sugar cubes

**Room size:** 70 cubic meters

**Review Component Retail:** Tsakiridis devices: £3,575/pr for the Orpheus mono blocks, £1,750 for Alexander Preamplifier



Despite Tsakiridis Devices having apparently over fifteen years experience in the home audio business, I'd never actually heard of this Greek company until receiving the review solicitation. I had absolutely no idea what to expect for quality or performance. This of course made the review proposition impossible to turn down.

Attempting a little research beforehand proved slightly frustrating. On the net there is very little information aside from the odd brief show report and passing forum comment. Visiting the Tsakiridis website to find the usual links to product details and reviews was a bit of a cul-de-sac. Apart from the introduction, the component descriptions are primarily in Greek and much of the website is still under construction. This only served to increase the intrigue however and from a list of nine amplifiers subsequently provided by UK importer Ikon Audio Consultants, the Orpheus monoblocks were recommended along with the matching Alexander line stage.



Rated at 25 watts, the class A zero feedback 845 Orpheus SET Orpheus runs three valves each, one 845 output valve, one 6SN7 and one 6SL7. The Tsakiridis product catalogue thankfully provided in English by Ikon Audio consultants lists further details such as gold-plated WBT i/o connectors, low-tolerance 1% metal film resistors, high-grade polypropylene signal capacitors, porcelain tube bases, United Chemicon power supply capacitors and hand-wired construction.

Of particular note are the hand-made highly linear output transformers with multi-layer construction. The quality of the transformers has a major influence on the sound of valve gear but good transformers certainly don't come cheap. Rolling your own is one way to ensure quality and keep prices down.

Ulysses—or Odysseus in Greek—says about the company that "it was established in 1987. It's a family business consisting of my father Panagiotis, my brother Costas and I. We spent a lot of time creating audio devices with and for our friends trying to ease the lust for precise musical audio reproduction equipment without resorting to the multi-thousand dollar gear that's always displayed at hi-end shows. So we decided to turn our passion into a business. My theoretical background of electronic engineering lecturer at the Athens Technical College, my brother's practical experience as telecommunications officer in the Greek Army and my father's multiple talents of electrician, carpenter, plumber, builder and foremost uplifter of spirits allowed us to start a company that

would make high-quality audio equipment available to everyone. Our main concern right from the start was the price/performance ratio and we try to stick to it."

This being the first time I'd have class A valves in my system which weren't single-ended 300Bs, I looked forward to hearing what the highly regarded 845s would bring to the table and how they'd compare with my own reference Border Patrol 300B SET and to a lesser extent the EAR 509s. The latter are class AB. While they lack the seductive come-hither midrange of SETs and even the class A transistor Sugden A21SE I'd been impressed with during a review, they are nonetheless superior to non class A transistors in my opinion when it comes to creating a richer more vibrant soundscape. It's all a matter of taste of course but solid-state class A/B just hasn't convinced me yet that I'm listening to anything other than a reproduction - albeit at times a very good reproduction.



For many years the 509s were my own reference amps - until I jumped straight into 300B SETs after reviewing a pair of Audio Note Quest Silvers. I was aware of course that other enthusiasts in search of the Holy Grail had found their soul mate in other output valves, the most popular probably being the KT88 and 845 which to their minds suffer none of the perceived 300B failings such as a single-figure wattage (usually true) and rose-tinted coloration (not in the better modern designs). Even before firing up the 25wpc Orpheus, I'd subconsciously and provisionally placed them in a theoretical midrange hierarchy somewhere between the 30wpc class A Sugden and the Border Patrol. Coincidentally this held true when comparing prices, with the integrated Sugden at

£2.400, the Orpheus at £3.575/pr and the Border Patrol at around £5.500. Both the Sugden and Border Patrol are my subjective champions at their respective prices and both are class A so the bar had been set quite high on performance and relative value when the Orpheus arrived.

As it turned out, the preconceived midrange hierarchy wasn't far off and the first thing that strikes one about **the Orpheus monos is their beautifully balanced smooth and grainless midrange.** Sometimes you hear a certain product and immediately know that whoever designed and conceived it must really love music and appreciate great sound - or at least agree with our take. While the mids were instantly recognizable as being virtually flawless and lacking harshness or grain, this was more because I tend to tune into this aspect. I think most of us do instinctively. We all know what a voice sounds like to become a default reference point. **The Orpheus' class A pedigree shone and romped through the vocal test like a thoroughbred yet no single sonic aspect jumped out and impressed in isolation.** When you are impressed by a certain characteristic, it's often because other aspects are somewhat lacking. Then the sound isn't as balanced as it should be. With its 'get up and boogie' factor, Naim is an obvious example in my opinion. Many devotees would argue that the Naim sound is more authentic than any other. It's the unmistakable though undoubtedly entertaining character of the Naim sound which turned me away from it many years ago.

Their sound favoured certain musical genres yet detracted from others. **The Orpheus amps now were proving immensely entertaining on whatever discs I threw at them. Transients were razor sharp, leading edges crisp and the whole experience extremely natural.** Without being able to compare playback to an actual recording session, 'natural' is of course impossible to determine with certainty but the Orpheus pulled off the trick to convince me that they were natural. That's the important thing.

Take Hugh Masekela's Hope CD on Analogue Productions. It's as good a recording as I've heard. The track "Stimela" is a demo par excellence when it comes to convincing non-believers of the benefits of a decent valve-based system over an iPod and dock. [As the \$995 all-in-one Peachtree iDecco shows, such throwaway comments don't always hold true – Ed.] Following an introduction involving various percussion instruments which seem to include random kitchen implements, Masekela begins telling the story of the coal train in his native South Africa which transported conscripted workers to the gold and mineral mines of Johannesburg and its surroundings where they worked "sixteen hours a day or more for almost no pay..."

Masekela's trumpet begins the main instrumental at 2.41 and appears out of a deep expansive acoustic, this being a major strength of other DSD recordings I've heard and a welcome benefit over regular CD mastering. The sense of space, soundstaging, purity of the trumpet, impact—and delicacy—of the percussion all combine to make this track totally immersive. The Border Patrol had ruled supreme here, squeezing the last drop of magic from Masekela's beguiling piece of social commentary. That's what 300B SET amplification does best I think.

As it turned out, apparently not just 300Bs. **The 845s of the Tsakiridis monos proved just as adept as the Western Electrics and no less magical.** Listening further revealed only the merest advantage for the Border Patrol in terms of finest resolution but this was nothing worth writing home about and certainly not noticeable unless one were a most critical anal-retentive listener struggling to find differences between two very similar amps.

The midrange had that unforced class A SET liquidity stamped on its core but there were also improved dynamics and drive to remind us that we were outside 8wpc territory of 300Bs paired with speakers of the highest efficiency.

To even approach the 25 watts of the Orpheus with 300Bs, you'd need a parallel configuration and even then there'd be a shortfall of typically around 7 watts while the added circuitry takes away from the minimalist simplicity of a single output triode and the theoretically more purist approach\*.

I should state from the onset that for the preliminary assessment, the Orpheus monos were paired with the Music First silver TVC to eliminate any influence the matching Alexander preamp would surely add. For the uninitiated, the Music First is as transparent as the best passive preamps—I'd say even more so—yet does not suffer impedance matching issues due to the use of silver-wound transformers with multiple taps in lieu of attenuating resistor networks. Sliding open the AMR CD-77 transport cover to insert Jennifer Warnes' The Hunter for track nine soon had the ceiling lights vibrate along with the subterranean tones of "Way Down Deep" which involves quite prolonged bass notes for a good test of an amp's current delivery. It's not exactly the torture that organ music can inflict on amps and speakers but a good test nonetheless.

Here again theory and practice can converge. The Wyetech Labs Sapphire and Trafomatic Audio Reference monos are just two SETs I'm familiar with which don't seem to suffer from paralleling their 300B output tubes - Ed.

When hooked up to the Dynaudio Contour 1.3Mk2s, these power leeches—which caused even the 30wpc Sugden A21SE to sound quite anemic—now generated still respectable SPL. Only the 180wpc AMR AM-77 had previously been able to grab the Contours by the gonads for unbridled dynamics. **While in a direct comparison the Orpheus were only slightly less resolving than the Border Patrol though endowed with an equally convincingly natural midrange, their more ballsy bottom end should increase appeal** for those who don't want to restrict themselves to the relatively narrow choices of speakers usually paired with 300B SETs.

A CD I've only recently acquired is the 2008 Grammy-nominated soundtrack to the film Once. The lead character played by musician Glen Hansard is an aspiring songwriter/singer who busks in his native Ireland. His songs revolve mainly around a former muse who broke his heart and the songs and their delivery have a raw edginess which sometimes reflect this bitterness. The track which won the 2008 Academy Award for Best Original Song is "Falling Slowly" sung in collaboration with his co-star and fellow musician Marketa Irglova. Hansard's guitar begins the intro shadowed by Irglova's delicate piano and the recording is thankfully of much higher quality than most other soundtracks that have more in common with compressed Dolby Digital film sound.

**The Orpheus captured Hansard's emotion and intensity perfectly and his harmony with Irglova was as tender as the performers were trying to convey. Yet when the guitar was strummed more forcefully and stronger emphasis was placed on certain words for effect, everything was communicated perfectly.** This is an album about pain, regret, anger and confusion. While any decent system will play the recording and make the song sound good, the best systems add that extra dimension which makes you cling to each word and care.

I'd expected at this stage to be suggesting that anyone taken with the sound of the Orpheus driving their 88dB speakers could confidently move to speakers designed specifically for lower-powered amps and perhaps audition 'proper' 300B amps. **Yet such was the quality of the Orpheus that I had to re-evaluate and concede that they could be the last amp even the most discerning listener would ever want or need.** Ever since the AMR AM-77 integrated amp had leaned hard on my Border Patrol last year, I've been on a mission to upgrade to an even better SET and redress my domestic imbalance of power. The Tsakiridis amps now hammered home this necessity even further.

My own AN-E Silver Signature speakers are perfect for my tastes and offer qualities I now couldn't live without. Their £20,000+ price new means I'll never be able to replace them. They'll have to last a lifetime – my lifetime at any rate. Along with the highly resolving components in the external crossovers and silver-wired individually matched drivers, they also are 95dB+ sensitive to benefit from single-ended single-tube 300B amplification and its subtle improvements in tonality. While being superbly musical devices, they are outstanding reviewing tools too. Besides cheer-leading my own choice of speaker, I'd suggest that the vast majority of transducers will find the differences between the Border Patrol and Orpheus more difficult to discern still. **Most listeners**

should in fact find the Orpheus amps to possess virtually all of the qualities they could possibly wish for in a 300B SET - without the one very real drawback of power.



On sound, the Orpheus thus gets my unreserved recommendation. If the rest of the Tsakiridis range sounds as good, I can see the company developing an enthusiastic fan base outside their native Greece. The price too is attractive when judging the Orpheus on performance. Though build quality is not of the highest standard, it is sturdy enough for something meant only to sit on a shelf looking pretty most of its life. One minor criticism is that the amps are identical rather than mirror imaged. Placed cheek to cheek on a rack, they don't look as neat and symmetrical as they could. The chrome chassis is a finger print magnet so once positioned, I'd be inclined to carefully wipe them clean with a suitable liquid to remove handling grease and prevent any possibility of tarnishing.

At a UK retail of £1.750, the Alexander is a pure class A line preamplifier with 6 inputs, a recording output, stabilized power supply and 2 x 12AT7 valves. Weighing in at 6kg and measuring 42 x 32 x 14cm, it certainly was nice being able to position a component in the rack without any grunting for a change. Ratings provided by Tsakiridis Devices state 0.1% THD @ 1kHz, maximum output voltage of 50 volts, frequency response of 5Hz to 100KHz, S/N ratio of 95dB, input impedance of 47ohm and output impedance of 100 ohms. The Alps volume control and input selection can be operated with the basic remote but if you wish to change inputs manually, you must operate two toggle switches, one to flick up through the inputs, the other to flick back down. Causing a moment's head scratching since the manual isn't very informative, this works fine in practice and is likely the best way to switch between the high-grade relays Tsakiridis employs.



A quick run through the rest of the specs lists four independent DC power supplies, two independent power transformers, optional balanced inputs & outputs, United Chemicon power supply capacitors, porcelain tube bases, double-sided circuit boards with separate signal and power paths, hand-made power transformer, high-grade polypropylene signal capacitors, 1%

tolerance metal film resistors, a low-feedback design, gold-plated Ultimex input connectors and Nickel-plated Ultimex output connectors. The black Perspex fascia is an aesthetic match for the Orpheus amps and the gold of the brass cap nuts makes for a quite attractive appearance. The two toggle switches and volume control are straightforward enough and the LCD window is easy to read from a typical seating position.

Around back, things do get more than a little confusing because there is no silk screening to identify inputs and outputs. The Tsakiridis brothers and their father apparently don't speak English which probably accounts for the problems I had with the website. The manual is a very rudimentary affair knocked up by Ikon. Preamps should be simple enough devices to work out for anyone with even minimal experience however and so the Alexander quickly replaced the Music First transformer volume control.

The LCD showed a warm-up cycle which lasted approximately 60 seconds before defaulting to the 'CD' input which I figured would most probably be the set of inputs set alongside the balanced inputs. That was the theory. In practice I got no sound. After half an hour's checking and plugging and unplugging, it was time to take out the screwdriver and remove the top panel. Now I discovered that the inputs I'd connected to were not connected to anything internally and never had been. This explained the lack of sound. I later learned that this particular set of sockets is reserved for the optional phono stage. Some indication somewhere sure would help.



Flicking the 'up' toggle once moved the selected input to 'DVD' and moving the Kimber Select KS 1030 interconnects to the next set of RCAs produced continuity. It was finally time to sit down and listen. The first impression was one of pleasant surprise. **The loss of resolution I'd expected vis-à-vis my passive was nowhere near as obvious, this due again to the even-handed supremely musical presentation the Tsakiridis family had instilled in their product.** Granted, there was a loss of the magical incisiveness and rawness which make the TVC so special but this had held true also for the outstanding Audio Note M3 preamp at twice the cost of the Alexander although the M3 was



undoubtedly a level above the Alexander's resolving power. On involvement and midrange fluidity, the M3 and Alexander were very similar however. I'd rate the Alexander a very good preamp for the price regardless of power amplification used though it is obviously an excellent match for the stable mate Orpheus both sonically and on cosmetics.

One caveat with my Audio Note speakers was a bit of static noise at the drivers. This wasn't intrusive at my listening position some seven or eight feet from the front baffles but users with higher-efficiency speakers should probably audition this preamp to be sure. The M3 is whisper quiet in operation so the Alexander did suffer by comparison. Yet most preamps would - this was the case even with the highly regarded Lamm LL2 I previously owned. Returning to the issue with the blank 'CD' input and general build quality, I must also mention that while the four balanced sockets require two bolts each to fix them to the chassis, each terminal only showed one bolt each to have arrived minus a bolt and a nut. While not a major issue, I was surprised that the distributor hadn't more closely inspected the unit prior to delivery to a reviewer. Hopefully a customer will be treated with more care. There's of course a generous 5-year. As is, I can't help but rate the Orpheus amps very highly for their fluid musicality and their ability to make all genres of music sound natural, unforced and involving.



A decent manual remains a vital to-do item especially since the Alexander lacks any type of rear-panel labelling to indicate what are inputs and outputs. Inserting the Alexander didn't detract from the qualities of the monos and of course it was designed and tuned to compliment these and other Tsakiridis amps. Unless one had considerably more cash for a preamp, I'd be inclined to seriously consider the Alexander for a tubed proposition. While at twice the price the Music First—and to a lesser extent the Audio Note M3—demonstrate that the Orpheus monos are capable of more yet, the Alexander/Orpheus combo remains a thoroughly engaging package that should enchant and delight many a music lover around the globe.

## Summary

**Quality of packing:** Personal pickup, hence not applicable.

**Reusability of packing:** Ditto.

**Ease of unpacking/repacking:** Ditto.

**Condition of component received:** Orpheus okay, Alexander was missing four screws and labeling on the back.

**Human interactions:** Professional and friendly.

**Warranty:** 5 years.

**Pricing:** For the sound quality on offer, very good. Aside from quality control issues with the loaners, this is affordable high end.

## UK importer's comments:

A propos the unwired phono inputs, these are deliberately unwired and available for a phono stage upgrade. It is also worth noting that a 'bespoke' service is available whereby a customer can elect to have/not have XLR inputs & outputs or 2 outputs for use with a subwoofer etc. As regards the other finishing issues, this has been flagged with the manufacturer who was very concerned that the product arrived in less than perfect condition. They suggested dislodging of the bolts in transit and will take steps to correct this to prevent a repeat. - Ion

The reviewed products are hand crafted in Greece by:

## Tsakiridis Devices



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