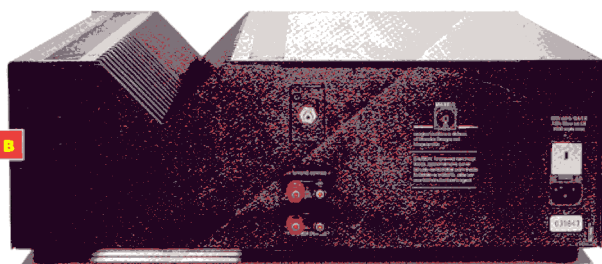


Aragon Palladium II Monoblock Power Amplifier

Work out first.

by Mike Wood

Our country has an obsession with weight. Using the images of ultrathin models as ideals, the weight-loss industry generates billions of dollars in revenue each year. But



A. To better enjoy the Aragons' sleek industrial design, Mike kept them in the middle of his living room.
B. Uncluttered is the word for the Palladium's bare-bones backside.

in high-end home theater, weight is considered desirable, even downright sexy. Many say that the heavier an amp is—generally from a larger power supply—the better the quality. Well, in that case, the Aragon Palladium II single-channel power amplifiers win, hands down.

Aragon is the high-end product line of Mondial Designs, who also make the popular Acurus line of electronics. At about 70 pounds each, the Palladium II is the heaviest amplifier, per channel, that I

have ever tried to lift. (I have seen, but not carried, worse.) A set of six Palladium II amplifiers for a complete home theater system weighs 400 pounds.

What advantages do monoblocks have over conventional multichannel amplifiers? For starters, they're flexible. You can buy as many single-channel amps as you need. You don't have to buy a stereo amplifier to power only your center speaker, for example. The second advantage is resale value. A friend of mine (an audio dealer), once pointed out that there is less of a market for an amplifier with three, four, or five channels than there is for stereo amps. Yes, home theater is expanding, but there will always be two-channel-only systems. With the proliferation of 5.1-channel home theater systems, though, there is a need for an odd number of amplifier channels, and with monoblocks, you can always add another amp to have a stereo pair. The third advantage is the potential for better sound quality. A monoblock amplifier uses its own power supply and is totally isolated from any of the other channels. On the negative side, monoblocks take up more space and typically cost more than a comparable multichannel amplifier. The Mondial amps are no exception. These amplifiers come with a hefty price of \$5,000 per pair. I heaved the amplifiers into my system to see if the sound quality was worth the weight and the price.

Regardless of the sound quality, these amplifiers are exquisitely designed. The sleek and solid silver faceplate angles forward briefly, then back and upward. A V-shaped heatsink groove carves through the top of the amp, from front to back. My enjoyment of modern industrial design (and the fact that I'm single) allowed me to leave the amplifiers in the middle of my living room during the evaluation. This also allowed the amplifiers room to breathe, which turned out to be important. Because of its Class A design, this amp runs hot. I mean *really* hot. Leave the amp on for a while and you won't be able to touch the side of it without serious discomfort. Keep small children away and do not consider putting these amps in a cabinet without at least some forced air circulation, if not a direct vent to an air conditioner.

We tested the Palladium II with unbalanced (RCA) inputs, though it's also available with balanced (XLR) inputs. This amplifier uses a fully discrete, dual-differential, Class A design to provide a rated 125 watts into an 8-ohm load. The amps are rated to deliver 600 watts into 4 ohms and up to a kilowatt into 2 ohms! (Four- and 2-ohm loads are driven in A/B mode, which is typical for Class A amplifiers.) Current is delivered by a massive, 2000 VA power supply. The back of the amplifier is as Spartan as the front, with only the detachable power cord, the line-level input, and two pairs of speaker binding posts. Biwiring would be easy with the additional binding



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posts. Overall, the design and build quality of the amplifier compares to or exceeds what you'd expect of an amplifier in this price range.

For listening comparisons, I used the Parasound HCA-2205A

reviewed in this issue and the Marantz MA700 amplifiers I reviewed last month. These are excellent-sounding amps for the price, and are a good marker for determining the Aragon's value. The Palladium II is rated at lower power into 8 ohms than the other amps, but even after matching levels, the Aragon's still seemed to have more power. On all of the music cuts and film soundtracks, the Palladium

amps effortlessly produced more punch to the signal. If you feel the need for power, these amps,

TESTING SYSTEM

Pioneer CLD-97 LD player, Lexicon DC-1 pre/pro, Marantz MA700 and Parasound HCA-2205A amps, B&W FCM-8 and SCM-8 speakers, Boston Acoustics 595x THX subwoofers

though rated at less power than the others, had plenty.

First, I listened to music. The song I started with was the Holly

Cole Trio's "I Can See Clearly Now" from the album *Don't Smoke in Bed*. Holly Cole's voice was crystal clear and stood out in front of all the other instruments. The pinpoint imaging placed her lyrics solidly in the middle of the left and right speakers. (No, the center speaker was not on.) In addition, the upright bass was incredibly deep and extremely articulate. The midrange, as demonstrated by the piano, was warm, open, and natural. Overall, the tonal balance of the Palladium II was flawless.

Another track I tried was "Tribute to Art" by Will Calhoun, of Bluisiana II. Found on the Boston Acoustics bass test disc, this track is an excellent drum solo with difficult transients. The Aragon amplifiers again played beautifully. Details were sharper, and the sound had better transients than with the other amps. The bass drum and bass guitar were distinct, separate sounds, yet each bass drum hit had plenty of power behind it. In addition, cymbals had a warm ringing tone with plenty of sparkle and impact. Also, the sound was so articulate that you could practically hear the stretch of the drum heads as they were being hit. The notes remained detailed even as the drummer's roll flurried. Again, the Aragon amplifiers performed effortlessly.

After prying myself away from my music collection, I tried a few movie soundtracks. In *The Rock*, the Aragon amplifiers handled the sound of the jet fighters and explosions in chapter 21 with plenty of impact and controlled power, yet were subtle enough for the dialogue to sound natural, not boomy.

I then switched to *Air Force One*. The amplifiers sounded so effortless with all of the various sound effects that I forgot the amps were present and sat back to watch the movie. In the end, this is what it's all about.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Rated 125 watts from a fully discrete, Class A amplifier (measures much higher)
- Available with unbalanced (RCA) or balanced (XLR) inputs
- Great tonal balance, endless power

The Aragon Palladium II monoblock amplifier is a well-designed piece of equipment. It reproduces vocals clearly and smoothly, lends a warm, open character to the midrange, and provides articulate yet powerful

Palladium II Monoblock Power Amplifier	\$5,000/pair
Mondial Designs www.mondialdesigns.com	

deep bass. Used in a home theater system, this amp gives soundtracks all the impact of a true theater system, and maybe even more so. In the end, the Parasound and Marantz amplifiers remain good values, and you may not feel the need to spend \$5,000 on a pair of amplifiers for your home theater. If you do, though, and you choose the Palladium II, you won't be disappointed. 