



Simply seductive

A nostalgic **Richard Stevenson** finds an old friend offering a brand-new take on multichannel AV amplification



For those of us whose birthday cakes have candles representing decades rather than years, Audiolab is a name one will remember with affection. Back in the hi-fi bonanza years of the 1980s, this UK brand all but dominated the mid-priced range. And rightly so; the original Audiolab 8000 series two-channel components were fabulous. The new 8000 series AV kit reviewed here not only re-kindles that nostalgic flame but throws in

a gallon of petrol to re-ignite a hitherto forgotten area of the multi-channel market; simplicity.

Without falling into a complete historical article, Audiolab was kickin' in the 1980s. The in the 1990s it got bought by a bunch of Germans with more money and good intentions than sense to become Tag McLaren. Those boys threw some epic F1-style parties, and some of the esoteric Tag McLaren kit was stunning too. Regular readers will know my reference

Return to brand values: Can the new Audiolab recapture past sonic glories?

processor until this year was the company's AV32R-DP. But market forces did not favour the bold, where multi-thousand pound price points were concerned, and the company fell on its face a few years later. Then in 2004, IAG picked up the wreckage and began recreating the brand's values at far more realistic prices.

Enter the first AV processor and multichannel power-amp from the 'new' Audiolab – the 8000AP and 8000X7.

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In a class of its own, Audiolab takes PCM audio processing to a new level



Now, don't even look at the spec sheet of the processor if you're hoping to find HD-audio processing, auto-setup, RoomEQ or video processing technology. You'll be disappointed. What, no full colour GUI? No Ethernet networking or iPod docking port? No 12V triggers, no IR extenders, no multiple remote controls, no DAB modules or lists of three-letter acronyms set to out trump the competition? Not even S-video or component inputs? No, absolutely not. Put off already? Don't be.

Consider what you actually 'need' for multichannel surround sound rather than what is nice to have, convenient or simply handy. Some basic HDMI AV-switching, multi-channel bass management, über-clean handling of Dolby, DTS and LPCM audio, and a copious supply of high-quality analogue power over seven channels. That'll do nicely. Wrap this in a couple of neat cases with huge power supplies, a simple interface and basic remote control, and you have the Audiolab 8000AP/X7 setup.

Fresh air

Having recently had a run of mega-complex amps and receivers on the test bench, the Audiolab duo is a breath of fresh air. It raises a rather contemptuous middle finger at the Japanese feature-laden AV amps and comes to the table with signal-to-noise and THD figures that the behemoths struggle to get close to. Consider this as the quintessentially British Lotus Elise or Aerial Atom, against the Nissan Skyline or Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution. Audiolab's whole philosophy is about a simple passion for the perfect experience, rather than driver aids, fixes and features.

There is little point in speaking about the Audiolab's feature list because it doesn't really have one. The lack of decoding for the new HD audio formats is likely to elicit most angst, but is it really necessary? Both Blu-ray and the now-defunct HD DVD have specifications that necessitate audio decoding within the player itself and transfer over HDMI in multichannel linear PCM. And Audiolab's logic is rather sound. If you are likely to spend £2,500 on an AV amp, then the chances are you

AV/CV

Product:
Bare-bones audiophile processor and multi-channel power amp

Positioning:
At the top of Audiolab's select product range

Peers:
Denon AVR-4808
NAD T163/T975

will have rushed some £1,000 or so for a top-end disc-spinner with first class HD-audio decoding on board anyway. Why duplicate the cost?

The setup is stoically manual and about as straightforward as it gets. The menus and operation have a basic, organic approach that makes you feel part of the system. There is nothing to trip up those who like to recycle manuals as firelighters before playing the first disc.

On the downside, the HDMI output doesn't carry the OSD GUI, so you need a separate analogue composite video link – or the front-panel display – to get control of the thing. Add to this the lack of component or S-video inputs, the limited connectivity and shunning of anything remotely resembling multi-room or networking features and you get a feel of just how basic, 'basic' can be.

The shadow of Tag McLaren remains in the form factor, as the case and layout of buttons are clearly from the same mould. Moreover, the architecture is dual-processor DSP design (thus the 'DP' suffix of the AV32R-DP) and the display is a remarkably similar blue dot-matrix >

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Pure audio: The 8000AP (top) is a unique product in that it has no truck with video processing

affair. Yet IAG's chief engineer Jan Ertner is keen to point out that this is a completely new design.

Pirates, ho!

I loved the Tag for its super-clean sound and a noise-floor that was lower than sub-basement. The good news is the 8000AP has exactly the same character.

I discovered this while spinning the complete *Pirates of the Caribbean...* series, which arrived on Blu-ray at the same time as the Audiolab kit. With the trilogy's uncompressed 5.1 soundtracks, the Audiolab produces a clean mix with silences of epic blackness and dynamic swells that capture the thrill of the best commercial cinemas. While there is no video processing, the switch through is completely transparent, giving you a pixel-for-pixel picture from HD sources. You will have to leave your TV/projector/DVD deck to do any upscaling from standard-def sources.

Captain Jack's voice is crisp and intelligible – all things considered, quite a trick – and the ship-to-ship battles lack nothing in sheer gusto. The sea-sound aural effects are realistically watery and all-encompassing. Within moments of the movie starting I found myself drawn in to the action and adventure. Overall, I found this two-piece delivered a more subtle and even-handed presentation than some similarly-priced receivers, and the accurate channel-steering and sheer space in the soundstage gets very close to Yamaha's £5,000 DSP-Z11.

That low noise-floor does wonders for the overall dynamic impact and requires careful use of the volume control. There is a tendency to nudge up the volume in

the quiet passages – only for a sudden explosion of action to pin you to the sofa like a small nuclear blast.

The 8000X7's copious current reserve belies its fairly modest claim of 100W per channel and it will go mighty loud before running out of puff. Our Tech Labs measured 120W in two-channel mode and 108W with all channels driven. Moreover, four of its channels can be bridged into two, with more power and headroom for your main stereo speakers in a 5.1 channel system.

Stereo music ability is a real ace up the Audiolab's sleek black sleeves. There is real hi-fi pedigree to the sound with CDs, mixing an enthralling openness and clarity with bass coming at you in tight, well-defined and quite sizeable chunks. The sound is right up there with the Pure Direct modes on some of the best AV amp exotica from the likes of Denon and Yamaha, making the 8000AP/X7 combo something of a bargain in pure performance terms.

A class of its own

This 8000AP/X7 partnership represents Audiolab right back on the top of its game, carving out a viable niche in the market for performance with simplicity. It is a complete tonic to the multifaceted complexity and GUI-polished nicety of the competition, and I can see it winning many fans, particularly among those who want a dual-role amp for both movies and hi-fidelity music.

Of course, die-hard home cinema aficionados will still crave the style, flexibility and features of the Japanese super-amps, but if you want that sort of high-end performance at half the price, the Audiolab 8000AP/X7 is in a class of its own ●

→ **Specifications**

- Dolby True HD: NO
- DTS-HD Master Audio: NO
- THX: NO
- Multi-channel audio: YES 7 x 100W amplifiers
- Multi-channel input: YES 5.1 analogue input
- Phono-stage: NO
- AV inputs: NO
- HDMI: YES 2-in 1-out
- Video upscaling: NO
- Component video: NO
- Dimensions (8000AP): 455(w) x 338(d) x 338(h)mm
- Weight: 6kg
- Dimensions (8000XP): 455(w) x 338(d) x 130(h)mm
- Weight: 19kg
- Also features: Bridgeable main L/R channels, RS232 control and... er, that's it
- Links: <http://www.techradar.com/263576>
<http://www.techradar.com/263683>

→ **Tech Labs**

Manufacturer's Output: 100W per channel

- 120W (2 channels driven, 8Ω, 0.5% THD) 1 2 3 4 5
- 190W (2 channels driven, 4Ω, 0.5% THD) 1 2 3 4 5
- 108W (5 channels driven, 8Ω, 0.5% THD) 1 2 3 4 5
- 160W (5 channels driven, 4Ω, 0.5% THD) 1 2 3 4 5
- Fidelity firewall: 115W (0.098% THD, 8Ω, 1kHz) 1 2 3 4 5
- THD @ 50W: 0.0019% THD (1kHz, 8Ω) 1 2 3 4 5
- Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz +/- 0.2dB 1 2 3 4 5

Top-class performance all round, with power output way over stated specifications in all modes, and excellent results for fidelity firewall and distortion



HCC VERDICT

Audiolab 8000AP/8000X7 £1,000/£1,500 approx

Highs: Intoxicatingly clean sound ; bags of depth and detail; hi-fi class two-channel sound
Lows: Lack of usual connections and features give it rather limited appeal; demands good speakers

- Performance: 1 2 3 4 5
- Design: 1 2 3 4 5
- Features: 1 2 3 4 5
- Overall: 1 2 3 4 5