



Hi-Fi Choice
RECOMMENDED

Everyone's a WiiMer

Too good to be true? The streaming WiiM Amp looks that way on paper. **David Vivian** wonders if WiiM has defied reason again

Drummer Carl Palmer, the 'P' in Seventies prog supergroup ELP and famed for his 2.5-ton stainless steel kit, was once rather cruelly compared with a performing seal that, in the middle of nailing its regular bag of tricks, decides to do the ironing as well. I've always liked ELP, and especially Palmer's work rate, but the critic had a point.

I can see a few parallels with the WiiM Amp. Like Linkplay's acclaimed WiiM Mini, Pro and Pro+ (HFC 511) network streamers before it, the Amp, which inherits the streaming smarts of the Pro+, is a bona fide all-action marvel the like of which the market hasn't seen before. Nope, the nearly thrice as pricey Sonos Amp (HFC 454) simply doesn't do as much and hi-fi's burgeoning dinky, high-value Class D brigade has no direct answer.

Like Palmer at full pelt smacking every skin on his humongous kit just because he can, the WiiM Amp leaves no streaming stone unturned, no connection possibility unplugged, no

firmware updating opportunity unactioned. And all from a sleek, svelte aluminium-skinned box aping a Mac Mini's size, rounded corners and innate cool.

Although the DAC chips are different – the WiiM Pro+'s excellent AKM 4493SEQ becomes the similarly lauded ESS Sabre ES9018 for the Amp – the extensive reach of the Pro+'s streaming chops is folded into the Amp – which means native support for Tidal Connect, Qobuz, Spotify Connect, Amazon Music, Deezer, Napster, TuneIn, Calm, VTuner, Soundcloud and Pandora. Also stir in 2-way Bluetooth, Google Chromecast, Apple AirPlay 2, AirPlay Casting, Roon Readiness, Alexa/Siri voice control and subwoofer bass management. Although my streaming is confined to Tidal and I could reasonably argue that offering so much choice is rather performative and largely superfluous, the asking price is so low I wouldn't feel bad about paying for stuff I think I'd never use. Then again, never say never.

The Class D amp is based around Texas Instruments' popular TI 3255 chip, which claims 60W into 8ohm and 120W into 4. With just one physical fascia knob (turn for volume, press for play/pause), a neatly arranged rear panel and well-designed home app for smartphone or tablet, setup is properly intuitive and almost laughably simple. The supplied remote is paired to the Amp via Bluetooth LE – no line-of-sight required – while the home app integrates Qobuz and Amazon Music HD as well as analogue, optical and HDMI ARC inputs on the rear panel. Fire up the WiiM amp and it automatically connects to the network via wi-fi or Ethernet cable and flags firmware updates, all accompanied by voice confirmations that play through the speakers. I'm good to go in under five minutes.

Front and centre are midband clarity and detail, with taut and tuneful bass

Savvy to the likelihood of the WiiM Amp being purchased with standmount speakers but some owners' desire for a fuller 'bottom end' and a louder performance in larger rooms, there's a subwoofer output, but it's no simple 'sub out'. Thanks to a DSP bass management layer it's possible to decide not only the sub's crossover point, but also to adjust gain and phase settings. The available high pass filtering is a further sophistication that should help tailor the ideal system balance, relieving a two-way standmount of low bass duties and, thus, the potential for compression of the mid/bass driver with bass heavy music, the upshot benefitting midrange clarity. Impressive, too, the 24-preset EQ settings, 10-band EQ individually adjustable for each source input and a 4-band parametric EQ for fine tuning via the WiiM app.

Sound quality

We already know how fine the Pro+ streamer can sound with its AKM DAC chip on board. Presumably the move to the ESS decoder has been done to give the Amp's otherwise identical streaming platform a further boost for the Class D Texas Instruments amp next door to exploit. It's a potent combo. Up to a point and for the money, the WiiM Amp's sonics are outstanding, if adhering to a very particular style of presentation that

screams 'hi-fi' – the kind of clean, well-lit and crisply drawn sound dismissive audiophiles might describe as having been designed by AI after assimilating one too many upbeat digital kit reviews. Straight out of the box and teamed sympathetically with speakers, however, the results can sound mighty impressive.

Starting off in my smaller listening room with a handful of standmounts and floorstanders to try (but no subwoofer), the Amp drives them all enthusiastically with headroom to spare, even shrugging off a deliberate mismatch with Falcon Acoustics' LS3/5a Gold Badge (HFC 470), which – while not quite at its dazzling best – sounds surprisingly sweet and insightful. Wharfedale's excellent £500 Diamond 12.4 floorstander is a more sensible match, two over achievers pulling in the same direction with the Diamond's extra bandwidth tightly controlled by the Amp to great effect.

In the end, though, I settle on Rega's extraordinary £400 Kyte (HFC 508) standmount, landing a barely believable £720 system total. The results are frankly amazing, albeit in a textbook 'how hi-fi should sound' kind of way. Front and centre are midband clarity and detail, on point separation and organisation, decent dynamic expression and taut and tuneful, if not terribly weighty, bass. But it works. Playing a Tidal stream of Marcus Miller's *Official Bootleg, The Ozell Tapes* live set, there's a welter of the low stuff delivered by Miller's Fodera fretless five-string bass guitar the Amp and Kytes handle with

HOW IT COMPARES

Nothing else gets as much done so well and so painlessly, which prompts the obvious question: "why pay more?". If you do feel like pushing the boat out, there is the equally stylish Bluesound Powernode 2i (HFC 448) at £800 to consider. If it doesn't have the WiiM's plethora of inputs for connecting up additional source components, it does possess a very decent streaming platform mated to an amplifier capable of good results when, like the WiiM, it isn't over extended by room size and overly ambitious speaker pairing.



The extensive connectivity includes RCA, optical and HDMI ARC ins

confidence. The unprocessed immediacy and impact of the recording – taken from the back of sound engineer Dennis Thompson's mixing desk to a Sharp 702 MiniDisc – is startling, the energy generated by Miller's incomparable technique and Pooie Bell's powerhouse drumming coming across fully intact. No, not to scale or loudness, but still thrilling nonetheless.

Hopes that my larger listening room and ATC's strapping SCM40 (HFC 389) might prove an equally suitable habitat for the Amp aren't quite realised, though. The WiiM is game and listenable at modest levels, but

sounds increasingly strained and sterile – as if subtleties and finesse are being jettisoned to keep the core together – as the challenge of denser, more complex material and turning up the wick are addressed. By all means, be reassured by the 120W/4ohm stat but, as supported by the Amp's power supply provision, it will only go so far.

Conclusion

My guess is that, in the WiiM way, there'll be a WiiM Amp+ before too long and, among other things, it will sport a beefier power supply to accommodate those with larger rooms and more demanding speakers. I hope so, anyway. Until then, the plain Amp is plain sensational, a dream-priced, all-bases-covered, one-box solution like never before that, within limits, performs brilliantly for hi-fi newcomers or anyone interested in having high-quality music in their lives ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Design; build; flexibility; connectivity; fine sound; price
DISLIKE: Struggles if playing loud in a large room with demanding speakers
WE SAY: Another WiiM smash hit in the right conditions, but don't expect miracles

OVERALL
★★★★★