



VAN MEDEVOORT MA260

No, we had never heard of this amplifier either. There are no prizes for guessing that it's from the Netherlands. It's one of a number of amplifiers from Audioart. All are actually of European manufacture, though you might not guess that from their prices.

At one time, any integrated amplifier you could find included a phono input. Some still do, and the renewed popularity of vinyl is making the phono preamp more and more of a "must-have" feature. The *really* modern amp, however, has a *digital* input. And preferably more than one.

So here's the Van Medevoort, with just two analog inputs but four *digital* inputs. That means, if you're still in doubt, that this quite affordable amplifier includes a full-fledged digital-to-analog converter. You don't even need any sort of cable to link the two, since they live happily side by side in the same compact chassis. We figure this could be the future...or at least it could be if it's any good. Our goal was to determine whether that was the case.

Leaving the DAC out of the equation, the MA260 already looks like some sort of deal. The raw spec: 50 watts per channel in class A. This is such a spectacular boast that we wondered why Audioart bothers inflating the spec sheet by claiming 70 watts/channel *music power*. That meaningless figure went out decades ago.

But let's not get sidetracked. Our MA260 was brand new, and we gave it a couple of weeks of break-in time on

the analog inputs, and about the same on the coaxial input. We then wanted to determine whether it's a competent amplifier with either digital or analog source. If it isn't, then the presence of the DAC is meaningless.

Accordingly, we began the test of the amplifier only, ignoring the DAC. We were using a digital source (a Mac computer, a Stello U3 USB interface and a Moon 300D DAC), connected to one of the MA260's analog inputs. We selected four pieces of music, one from a high-definition file, the other three from CD-resolution (16/44.1 kHz) music.

For this test we moved to the Alpha room, whose Living Voice Avatar OBX speakers might be a better match for this amplifier than the giant Reference 3a Suprema speakers in our Omega system. As usual, we began the session by listening to all the selections with the system's own electronics: a Copland CTA-305 tube preamplifier and a Moon W-5LE power amplifier.

The amplifier

We began with the Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* (Reference Recordings HR-96, also available in HDCD and LP). This is a powerhouse for large orchestra and piano, and therefore a challenge for the entire system. The high resolution of the HRx version (24 bits with a sampling rate of 176.4 kHz) gives it lots of potential.

It was a good beginning. True, there was some reduction in the visceral impact of the orchestral *tuttis*, and the sound stage was smaller and less envel-

oping, but the realistic stereo image was very good, the dynamics remained impressive, and the varied instrumental timbres were mostly fine. "There was flow and definition, and the music was well served," said Toby. Steve agreed, but commented that the comparison was a reminder of how good our reference is.

We continued with *Way Down Deep*, a Leonard Cohen song from Jennifer Warnes' album *The Hunter* (Private Music 01005-82089-2). The song is punctuated by a very large drum we couldn't identify. It sounded bigger than a bass drum, perhaps closer to a Japanese Kodo drum. Not every system could do it justice, and we weren't sure a small amplifier could begin to handle it.

But the MA260 did just fine, surprising us. That huge drum had satisfying impact, which indicates that the amplifier's power rating is by no means an empty boast. It wasn't quite the same, however, with the trailing part of the drumbeat shallower, as though the amplifier had given its all on the initial thump. Toby found that interesting but less musical and therefore less satisfying. Steve, on the other hand, found the drum less distracting, since he preferred to concentrate on fine details, including Jennifer's voice. Gerard noted a slight increase in sibilance and felt less at ease than with the reference, but he admired the energy in the song, largely undiminished.

We had another selection with lots of power at the bottom end, Norman Dello Joio's *Fantasies on a Theme by Haydn* (Klavier KS-11138). It opens with an astonishing outburst of percussion, and then moves into delightfully complex brass and woodwind. The impact of the tympany made us gasp, because you don't expect this sort of power from a small amplifier — though we should not have been surprised by now. Of course it couldn't quite maintain the great clarity we had heard with our reference amplification. Though the rhythm and the dynamic construction were very good, some of the woodwinds, notably the clarinet, were less natural in timbre, and certainly less smooth. When they all played together, there was a certain confusion that left Steve uncomfortable.



"I liked the silent background, though," said Toby.

We ended this initial listening session with a selection from Margie Gibson's wonderful *Say It With Music* album (Sheffield CD-36), the song *I Got Lost in My Arms*. It's so good it is nearly impossible to spoil, but when it's reproduced right it totally captivates you.

It remained very good, with impeccable rhythm and phrasing, though at times it sounded as though it was too loud. Was the amplifier running out of breath? Sibilance was more prominent, and there was an occasional touch of hardness. "It's the difference between enjoyment and fascination," said Steve. Added Toby, "With the reference it's luminous, whereas with this version it is merely very well lit."

A preliminary conclusion? As an "ordinary" integrated amplifier, the MA260 is *more* than ordinary. But there was more to come.

Going digital

In this first session we had been using one of the amplifier's two analog inputs. What makes the Van Medevoort unusual, however, is its plethora of *digital* inputs. You can see them in the photo above. The amplifier contains a full-fledged digital-to-analog converter. If that DAC was good enough to do justice to the amplifier itself, that would mean the MA260 was a bargain.

The presence of the built-in DAC required that we break in the amplifier not once, but twice. Or two and a half times, perhaps. We ran over 100 hours on the amplifier using the same input we would be using for the listening session. And then we ran it in again for the same amount of time using the coaxial digital input. After that, we did a brief run-in time using the USB input.

Why so little? Because, as we shall see, the USB seems to be an afterthought.

We used the same recordings as in the first session. This time, however,

our Stello USB interface was connected directly to the amplifier, without our Moon 300D DAC between the two. If the DAC was as good as the 300D — or at least a good enough match for the amplifier itself — we would hear no difference.

We began with the *Symphonic Dances*. The MA260's DAC can't handle the very high (176.4 kHz) sampling rate of this HRx digital file. Nor does it allow a setting of half that sampling rate, 88.2 kHz. We had then no choice but to select the DAC's maximum sampling rate of 96 kHz. This is not optimum, because 96 doesn't divide evenly into 176.4.

And, no doubt for that reason, the piece didn't sound as deliciously lifelike as it had. There was still plenty of impact from the full orchestra, and the handoff from the piano to the double basses was very good. Rachmaninov's music remained deliciously melodic. Certain instruments seemed to have moved forward, however, and they lacked the gossamer delicacy we had heard with full resolution playback. The depth had become noticeably shallower. "There just isn't the same dynamic tension," said Gerard, "but it still sounds reasonably good."

The three other recordings were all CD-resolution, and so we set the sampling rate on our Mac's audio and MIDI preference panel to 44.1 kHz.

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Van Medevoort
Price: C\$1,990 (launch price)
Size (WDH): 43.4 x 36.8 x 7.8 cm
Rated power: 50 watts/channel
Analog inputs: 2
Digital inputs: USB, coaxial, optical
Most liked: Excellent amplifier performance, very good DAC
Least liked: Poor USB circuit
Verdict: The integrated amp of tomorrow, but tomorrow is now

We now moved on to the Jennifer Warnes song. "The music is way down deep," quipped Steve, and indeed that huge drum remained impressively deep and powerful. He would have liked better definition on the drum, though, remembering how it had sounded with our reference electronics. He liked the ascending slide of the bass guitar, with the audible fingering.

Toby actually liked it better, finding the overall sound more coherent. "I wasn't as much at ease with this sound," said Gerard, "but the song doesn't really suffer. On the basis of what we've heard so far, I would say that the DAC is well suited to this amplifier."

There is plenty of low-end energy on the Norman Dello Joio wind band piece too, and the MA260's DAC handled it well. "It has impact in all the best ways," said Steve. If the dynamics were very slightly constricted, we had little difficulty picking out the different groups of instruments, notably the woodwinds. We were pleased with the lack of any hardness on the leading edge of the brass phrases. "A few transients were still too noticeable," said Gerard, "but I maintain my judgement — this DAC is well suited to the amplifier."

Could the amplifier, with its DAC, do justice to the Margie Gibson song? It could. Steve thought the accompanying cello had lost some of its distinctive timbre, but that in all other respects the song worked well. "The failings, such as they are, are minor," said Gerard. Toby agreed, commenting that the song hung together well, with emotional power and much of its magic.

Thus far, the Van Medevoort amplifier was proving to be wonderfully well balanced. But it needed to pass one more test.

Using USB

The acronym stands for *Universal Serial Bus*, and it largely replaced other once-common computer connections,

such as serial and parallel. In its earliest incarnation, USB was used to connect such peripherals as keyboards and mice, but in its later versions it became fast enough to handle hard drives, music players and tablets. USB is an advantageous interface for music DACs too, because it is bidirectional, allowing a computer and its peripheral to talk to each other. It can also supply a limited amount of electrical power, obviating the need for a separate power supply.

Audio designers were slow to catch on to USB, though more and more audiophiles were buying small and inexpensive computers to act as dedicated music servers, placed next to the music system. When they realized which way the wind was blowing, many designers bought off-the-shelf circuits that proved to be woefully inadequate.

That is what Van Medevoort appears to have done. Though the company

claims its USB circuit is *not* synchronous (based on one-way communication between computer and DAC), it is limited to 16 bits and a 48 kHz sampling rate. The chip used is a Burr-Brown PCM2704, which is supposed to operate *even on a Windows PC* without a driver. For what it's worth, even our Stello interface box sounds awful with Windows unless April Music's driver is used. In any case, resolution of 16/48 is a sign of an obsolete chip.


We plugged our BIS Audio USB cable directly from our MacBook Pro to the amplifier, without using our Stello U3 outboard USB interface box, and listened to Margie Gibson again.

The result was dreadful, with Margie's voice transformed, and not in a good way. The magic was gone. The decay of the notes was truncated, "the way it would be on a \$500 CD player," said Gerard.

"More like a \$200 player," suggested Toby.

It was as we had expected. A usable USB circuit would have been the cherry on the sundae. Even so, it's a terrific sundae. If you're using an MA260 with a dedicated computer, you'll probably prefer to use an optical connection, which, like the coaxial circuit, works very well.

Conclusions

The Van Medevoort MA260 is, in nearly every way, the very model of what a good, affordable integrated amplifier should be. It has plenty of clean power and doesn't run out of breath easily. It has a built-in DAC of suitable quality, capable of giving superb results with its coaxial and optical inputs. Last but hardly least, its attractive price reminds us that good engineering need not cost more than bad engineering. 

CROSSTALK

If you already have a good DAC, why would you want this double-bill integrated? Because you can't find an amp that sounds as good for the price, even without a DAC, that's why! If its sound was not in the same ballpark as the reference's, it was in the same league (which is pretty rare). On all the pieces, the music was well-served, with flow, definition, clarity and liveliness. The Rachmaninov had enough detail in the bass to tell the piano from the double basses, and there was impact and space. *Way Down Deep* kept its intensity.

If you don't have a DAC now, you can have confidence in this one if you use the coaxial input. With the amp alone, *Way Down Deep's* huge drum sounded less interesting than with the reference, having lost its prodigious heft at the very bottom. However, the sound seemed to gain some coherence when the onboard DAC was used, so I minded less. I enjoyed the brass in the *Haydn Variations* more through the DAC than through the analog inputs; the piece seemed to have better timing.

The USB input, with its synchronous protocol, was of negligible interest to someone who normally plays files ripped at 16/44.1 and up. Margie's accompanying cello

was spread all over the stage, the natural decay of notes was cut, sibilance was noticeable, the double bass went boom-thud. The amp section can do better than this!

However, if you are now listening to MP3s over the average computer speaker, that's not necessarily a bug. Send the MP3s via USB to the Van Medevoort now, and enjoy what it can do. Upgrade the connection later — after you've got your music collection re-ripped lossless.

—Toby Earp

At one time, buying an integrated amplifier meant compromising, not only on power but on musical values. If you picked the wrong one (and there were more wrong ones than right ones), the compromise would take away the temptation to spend an evening listening to music.

That era is long gone, fortunately. However, getting an integrated amp *in this price range* meant that you wouldn't be happy for long, and you would then be saving your money for something better. Can you imagine an amp plus a DAC, all for this price? How can it possibly be any good?

Well, surprise! It is *very* good. That's true for analog, and it's true for digital (provided

you stay away from you-know-which input). It's a terrific amplifier, and it's also a DAC that, overall, is more than just good "considering the price." This box makes music, and it does it with pretty much any source you have in mind.

—Gerard Rejskind

As I watched this amp being hefted from the floor to its platform, I asked what it weighed. Twenty-five pounds was the quick reply. That is a good thing, I thought. After all, its casing held not one but two crucial devices, the amp itself, and a DAC, and I have often connected the concept of heavy with good quality, at least where stereo equipment is concerned. Yes, I know, many of those older vintage amps were dead weight and dead-sounding too. Still, I had a hunch about the MA260.

All through the test it performed as though it was David and the reference was Goliath. The bass notes were full, and Margie Gibson's voice was gossamer smooth. No, this David did not vanquish that Goliath, but it gave him a heck of a good fight. That this sleek case contains a DAC and a headphone amplifier is a true bonus.

—Steve Bourke