

# Fell Audio Amp

## stereo integrated amplifier

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**F**rom a hi-fi reviewer's perspective writing for a hi-fi magazine, there's something very satisfying about a brand-new company emerging seemingly from nowhere. It not only signifies telling a new story but also suggests there's a good chance of quickly hearing every product in this new company's range.

This review of the Fell Audio Amp marks my halfway point in exploring the Fell Audio range. I reviewed the 'Disc' compact disc player in Issue 245, and there's a 'Stream' network streamer in the pipeline. I prefer this direct approach to naming over trying to guess what a 'GX4q' does.

### The price is right

Unlike most hi-fi manufacturers, whose recommended retail prices tend to be just suggestions, the fact that Fell Audio is sold exclusively through Peter Tyson in the UK means the price is firm — whether you buy in-store or online. It's worth noting, however, that purchasing this 'Amp' alongside a £499 'Disc' grants you a handy £100 discount on the total.

People who have a keen interest in hi-fi products will notice some knowing touches in the design of the Amp. When I first unpack my sample, I am immediately reminded of my much-loved (although quite worn) 1977 A&R Cambridge A60 amplifier. It has something to do with the overall proportions and the fact that the fascia is recessed on both sides and across the top, I think. Those who don't notice, though, will see a neatly designed, very well-made little amplifier with a look that combines 'understated' and 'purposeful' very effectively.

From left to right, the fascia includes a volume control (whose pleasing sensitivity is balanced by the rather frustrating fact that it defaults to 'mute' each time the Amp is switched on), seven touch-sensitive input selection patches, an IR sensor for the standard remote control handset, a 6.3mm headphone socket, and a large 'power on/off' control designed to resemble the volume dial. The green-on-black illumination is quite calming and, once again, somewhat reminiscent of some classic audio products from The Before Times.





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### Pleasantly chunky

Along the rear, again reading from left to right, there are pleasantly chunky binding posts for a single pair of speakers, a Bluetooth aerial, digital optical and digital coaxial inputs, three line-level stereo RCA inputs, a further pair of stereo RCAs leading to a moving magnet phono stage, and two pairs of RCAs functioning as pre-outs (one for use with a power amplifier, the other for a subwoofer). It's quite clear that Fell Audio wants you to explore its entire product range, as two of the three line-level inputs (and their corresponding fascia selection buttons) are labelled 'Disc' and 'Stream'. The other line-level input is 'Aux', and the phono input is, somewhat deliberately, marked 'Vinyl'. Is that a clue to a future product?

Inside, the Amp uses Class D amplification connected to a toroidal transformer power supply. Fell Audio lists two ways of describing the Amp's power output: "both channels at 8ohms (20Hz - 20Khz): 89 watts" and "single channel at 4ohms (1kHz): 79 watts". While the difference is both minor and entirely explicable (they both describe different measuring conventions), I wonder if it creates confusion for potential buyers.

The digital board has its own power supply and offers very competent digital-to-analogue conversion via an ESS Sabre ES9018K2M — the same chipset fitted to the 'Disc'.

If it doesn't feature in the upcoming 'Stream', I'll eat (one of) my hat(s). Bluetooth wireless connectivity uses version 5.0 and is compatible with SBC, AAC, and aptX HD codecs. Having thoroughly implemented the digital aspect of this amplifier, Fell Audio chose not to include an HDMI socket. ARC/eARC music-led connections over HDMI aren't as widely adopted among audiophiles, so I'm not sure whether this says more about HDMI than it does about Fell Audio.

### Well-defined

The Amp is a well-defined device capable of serving as the core of a quite extensive system. For this test, the moving magnet phono stage is powered by a Clearaudio Concept turntable with an Aurum Classics cartridge, and a Rega Apollo CD player is connected both via the line-level 'aux' input and the digital coaxial input. Music streaming is managed by a WiiM Pro (connected via analogue and digital optical inputs) and a FiiO M15S using aptX Bluetooth. The Amp is linked to a pair of Bowers & Wilkins 705 S3 Signature loudspeakers on FS-700 stands via lengths of QED XT40i cable. The speakers are, I will admit, overkill in the system's overall context, but they are a) revealing of all standards of amplification, and b) what is available during testing. >>



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

### Fell Audio Amp



» The era when Class D amplification was seen as cheap or inherently inferior is over. The Fell Audio Amp requires no justification – it's a good-sounding device within its price range, and that sums it up. The 'Class D' label on its specification doesn't really matter.

And except for its performance via Bluetooth, it's an admirably consistent-sounding amplifier as well. Consider Bluetooth connectivity as a courtesy rather than a necessity. Much of what makes the Amp such an engaging listen is lost through the wireless format. Since the coaxial and optical inputs do not suffer in the same way, the issue is clearly upstream of the ESS Sabre DAC. Fortunately, wired digital and analogue performance more than makes up for it!

During the test, I streamed DSD64 files of Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book* and *Innervisions* [Tamla], listened to CDs of Spiritualized's *Songs in A & E* [Sanctuary] and Pete Shelley's *Homosapien* [Genetic], and played vinyl copies of Misty In Roots' *Live at the Counter Eurovision 79* [People Unite] and Black Sabbath's *Paranoid* [Vertigo], among others. The amp remains confidently and recognisably itself. Its comfort zone is truly vast, and its upfront character makes every listen an occasion.

#### Enhanced vigour

While it might run counter to audiophile sensitivities, the Fell Amp is not entirely neutral... and that's a good thing. Low frequencies are slightly emphasised, which is probably quite sensible given the kind of system the amp is likely to be part of. It also has also a hint of warmth in the tonality that subtly enhances the overall vigour of its presentation. There's a genuine sense of engagement in the Fell Audio's sound, offering a spirited rendition of whatever you're listening to, which creates an absorbing audio experience.

In a similar vein, it is consciously not the most detailed or most spacious-sounding amplifier. Once again, given the loudspeaker systems that might partner the Fell Amp, the tight and unified nature of its presentation is more than compensation for soundstage. If you're after analysis, a forensic examination of the minutiae of your favourite recordings, you should probably spend your £599 elsewhere. However, if you want the potency and dynamism of those recordings to be entertainingly expressed, you'll find a great deal to enjoy here.

Besides, it's not as if the Fell Audio Amp lacks insight or overlooks the finer, more subtle details. It simply doesn't give them priority – instead, it focuses more on the vitality and the visceral aspects of music. When paired thoughtfully, this approach and emphasis will continue to be rewarding, even if the most fleeting moments in a recording escape it.

#### Light and shade

Take rhythmic expression, for example. There's a credible amount of light and shade in the low-frequency activity the Amp describes, along with enough variation to stop bass from sounding monotonous or one-note. However, where the Fell Audio truly excels is in rhythmic expression and momentum - its mastery of attack and decay at the bottom end is impressive. Thanks to this disciplined clarity, music flows effortlessly. Nothing ever sounds forced or rushed, but recordings are always (as James Brown insisted) on the good foot.

Two down, one remaining. The 'Stream' music streamer has much to live up to. +

#### Technical specifications

**Type:** Class D stereo integrated amplifier

**Analogue inputs:** moving magnet phono, 3 x line-level stereo RCA

**Digital inputs:** coaxial, optical, Bluetooth 5.0 with SBC, AAC and aptX HD compatibility

**Analogue outputs:** speaker terminals (one pair), stereo RCA pre-, stereo RCA subwoofer; 6.3mm headphone

**DAC:** ESS Sabre ES9018K2M

**Power Output:** 89 watts @ 8 ohms, 20 =Hz-20kHz, both channels driven

**Bandwidth:** (-1dB) 0.5Hz - 100kHz

**Distortion:** 0.07% THD

**Signal to Noise Ratio:** Not specified

**Damping factor:** Not specified

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 75 x 440 x 300mm

**Weight:** 6kg

**Price:** £599

**Manufacturer:** Fell Audio

[www.fellaudio.co.uk](http://www.fellaudio.co.uk)