

# HIFI SOUND MAGAZINE®

o. 15

**\$2.95**  
in US: \$3.50

## TESTS

Integrated amplifiers from Sima, Sugden, Onix, Audiolab, QED!

## THE TOP CD PLAYER

Does spending more give you better sound than the economy models? We look for the best and we find it!!!

## COMPACT DISC vs LP

We pit the top CD player with the best discs against our reference turntable. Then we invited ten neutral observers to play judge. Has digital sound come of age?

## CLASSICS FOR LESS

Do classical reissues offer better sound than today's digital recordings?



Published in February 1988  
ISSN 0821-4875  
2nd class mail registration No. 5783  
Bipad No. 70970

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**Cover story:** a portrait of three of the six amps tested in this issue. Two are British, one is Canadian. One uses an unusual phono preamplifier. One uses field-effect transistors. And one looks as puny as Clark Kent, but...  
**Below:** CD's and LP's: we dare to compare!



## FEATURES

### Reinventing the record

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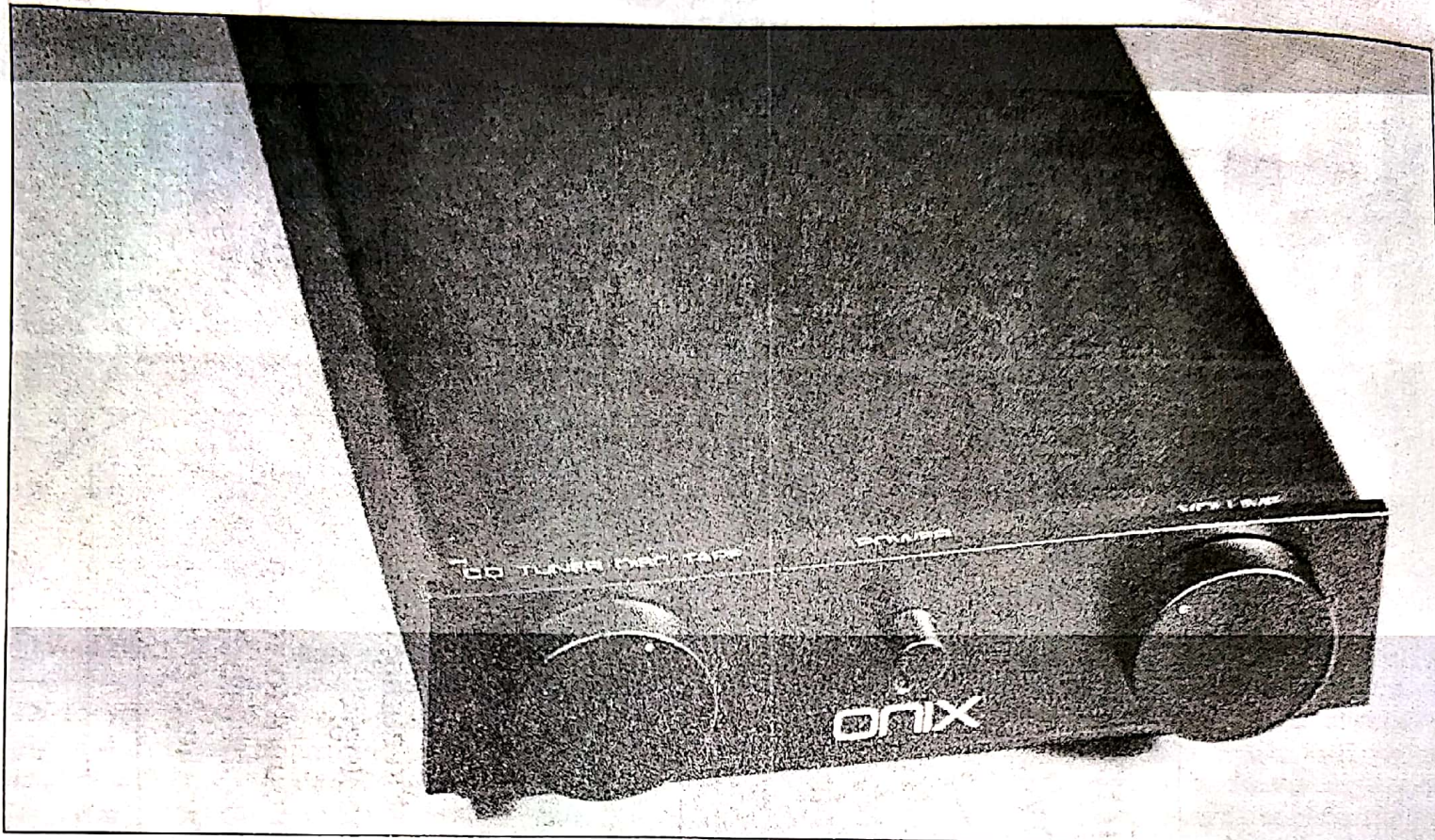
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*Maybe you've never heard of this amplifier. It's narrow, it's deep, it hardly has any controls, and it is about as boastful as the Sphinx. But just turn it on...*

**W**hat bothered us most about the *Onix* amplifier is its name. We know onyx and we've admired it in jewelry store showcases, but *Onix*? How could a company spell its own name wrong?

But you may already have concluded that if the name was what bothered us most, we must be reasonably impressed with the amplifier itself. And you're right. This is an impressive amp, with

quality reflecting its \$995 price, capable of taking its place in a very high quality system.

The amplifier is simplicity itself. There isn't even a model number on it (its official designation is OA-21; there is also a smaller OA-20). The front panel includes only the power switch and LED indicator, a source selector knob (phono plus three high level inputs), and the volume control. That's it. There's no

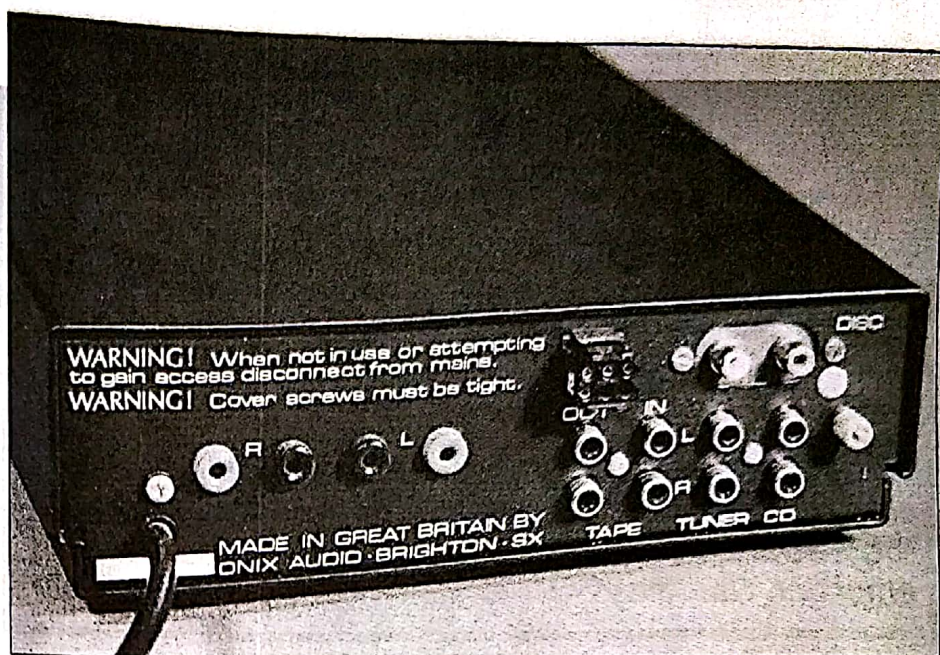
balance control. Fortunately the levels were well balanced as things stood, but if they hadn't been, there wouldn't have been much we could have done about it. There is also no tape/source switch. There are tape in and out jacks on the back, but of course you can't listen to what is coming off the tape as you record. As we've had occasion to say before, we think this is carrying minimalism a little too far.

# Onix: Simplicity Itself

The rear panel is fairly straightforward, except for the presence of a six-pin output plug, presumably an alternative to the banana jacks also provided. The plug doesn't look as though it will handle wires larger than 18-gauge, however, so be sure you pick up some banana plugs before you leave the store. Some users may be startled (and bothered) by the amplifier's considerable depth: it requires a whopping 45 cm of shelf depth, including clearance for good quality cables. On the other hand it is low and narrow. Cooling is done by radiation rather than convection, and so there are no ventilation slots to worry about. Still, it's a poor idea to stack other components on top of any power amplifier.

Note that there is no switch on the *Onix* for changing from a moving-magnet pickup to a moving-coil pickup. That's because you make the choice when you buy the amp: it comes with a plug-in card that accommodates one or the other. You aren't stuck with your choice forever, because whichever card you didn't buy can be obtained for another \$100. So upgrades are definitely a possibility, if you're willing to open the cover...or take the amp to the store for the change. Of course those who like to shuffle different pickups in and out of their tone arms won't be happy with this arrangement. A lot of other people will be, however, because the MC card (the one supplied with our sample) is a very good one. It's even fairly quiet. Background noise is evenly balanced between hiss and hum. The hum is fairly nasty 120 Hz stuff, but it is far too low to be bothersome even in a very quiet environment...such as our listening room. Phono equalization was accurate, except for a rolloff from 30 Hz down, a laudable measure to keep record warps and other subsonic gunge from hogging all the amplifier headroom.

*Onix Audio* is shy about more than its model name. Like Rolls-Royce, it also doesn't advertise output power. The



The *Onix* rear panel. The plug is for speakers if you're anti-banana.

Canadian importer says it is in the range of 45 to 50 watts per channel, and that turned out to be accurate: we measured 49.7 watts just below clipping. Though this is rather less than we're used to hearing from our reference amplifier, we found the *Onix* reasonably powerful. When we pushed it too hard (that's our job) it didn't show any signs of catastrophic distress, just a slight hardening to indicate that we were leaving the range in which it feels comfortable. It had little difficulty driving our large reference speakers, and for that reason we did most of our listening that way. The listening was quite extended, because the longer we listened to this amplifier, the more it grew on us.

The adjective we're tempted to use is "balanced." Everything is about the way it should be. The bottom end is solid but

**The illusion of three dimensions was about as good as you get in this class.**

not too prominent, not too loose. The top end is quite detailed, with very good articulation of voices and strings. With a large range of recordings, we found few signs of the typical flaws we might have expected: aggressive brightness, exaggerated sibilance, or graininess. On our usual Amanda McBroom recordings, we found it easy to concentrate on what she was singing, rather than on the sound the amplifier was making. The illusion of three dimensions on properly made stereo recordings was about as good as you get on this class of amplifier—which is to say, not nearly as good as we get with our reference amp and preamp (which cost together like four such amps)—but very good nonetheless. One looks hard for a distinctive flaw that would characterize it...and about all one comes up with is the spelling of the name.

So if you've got the money and the shelf depth for this little beauty, and if you're not a chronic cartridge juggler, and if you'll settle for the rather spartan control facilities, by all means put this amp on your list. Listen to it with good components. Our dictionary says onyx is a black gem. So is the *Onix*.