

Hifi Insights

Onix DNA-50 Amplifier review by Dominic Marsh

The brand Onix is a wholly owned British concern that has been around for a good few years now (approximately 35 years no less) and for reasons I still cannot fathom out, they have not really reached into mainstream hifi territory and become well known amongst audiophiles as other brands have become during the same period. Except of course they do have a small loyal band of followers and I shall touch upon this group of people in this review and the influence they have on the current product. Maybe ONIX don't bang their drum loud enough, or they want to maintain the key core values they are not prepared to sacrifice for the sake of vanity, fashion, or following the herd. This review then is about their latest model the DNA-50 integrated amplifier offering, so kindly read on.

CONSTRUCTION

If ever was a minimalist front panel layout then this is it. A mere 45mm in height, it is claimed to be the thinnest integrated amplifier on the market, so without scouring the entire world's supply of integrated amplifiers to check that assertion, it remains unchallenged by me. Two sizeable rotary controls dealing with volume control and source selection only, so beyond that there is nothing else to excite the knob twiddlers or switch pressers, then there a series of six multi coloured miniature LEDs arranged horizontally to denote which source has been selected, then zilch, nothing, nada, to play with or look at. Well not strictly true, because the ONIX logo has been milled into the bottom right hand corner of the faceplate. You can watch a video of the faceplate being manufactured on the ONIX DNA website.



No matter which way you rotate the source selector knob, it increments only from left to right sequentially.

Around the back it's equally as complex, with six pairs of RCA line level sockets, 2 output RCA sockets, a set of four BFA type speaker terminals, an earth tag, an IEC power inlet and an on/off power switch. The input sockets are labelled "O, G, W, R, Y, B" and I thought at first glance I thought I had a drop too much home brew the night before, until I realised that sequence corresponds with the different miniature coloured LEDs on the front panel and it doesn't need a genius to realise the letters are the first letters of the coloured LEDs of course (**B**lue, **G**reen, **Y**ellow, etc.), but to save confusion and befuddling nitwits like me, ONIX have labelled them inputs 1 to 6 below the sockets. The left hand OUTPUT socket can be used to feed a separate power amplifier and the right hand OUTPUT socket pair has another function which is to allow use of the amplifier with the last chosen input to remain active while in standby, enabling a selected source input fed into the amp having an output while it is in standby, to something like a multi-room installation while the main sound/entertainment system is not active.

If your speaker cables are fitted with spade connectors or they are bare wire ended, then you need a different set of speaker cables (or connectors) to fit the DNA-50 as these BFA terminals accept neither one of those. As a handy tip, "Z" banana plugs fit if you don't have BFA plugs available.



The amplifier's chassis is a good strong rigid affair made from aluminium and a nice touch is the recessed stainless steel screws which won't rust or distort the first time you need to take the lid off (not that you would). Talking of chassis and lids, note there are no ventilation holes or slots in same, as the

chassis itself also performs the role of heat sink for the electronics within. It works very well too, as after 3 hours of solid listening the lid isn't even warm to the touch.

Finally, you get a very well made metal remote control unit, again fashioned in minimalist style with only three buttons to play with. One is underlined with three dots for source selection which also doubles up as the standby button. A quick press on this button advances the source sequentially from left to right, or pressing and holding for four seconds sets the amplifier into standby mode, with a quick press to bring it out of standby with the last selected source stored. Below that button are two others for up/down volume selection setting.

Well, for a minimalist amplifier design that took some explaining I must say.

SPECIFICATION

Output	100W RMS 8Ω < 0.01% THD
Impedance	2Ω - 16Ω
Line Inputs	6 x RCA Direct line input 1 x Variable/Upgradable input for DAC, MM, MC or Bluetooth
Line Output	1 x Switched output. 1 x Permanent output (Standby)
Phono Stage	User changeable discrete phono stage MM/MC (MC-Moving Coil available April 2017)
Design	100% Bespoke & Discrete components
Type	A/B Push Pull split voltage rail
Power	Toroidal transformer 145mm x 40mm 350VA 220-250V
Dimensions	45mm x 435mm x 285mm
Weight	10KG (Shipped)
Construction	100% CNC Milled 6082 UK, AS7003 anodised aluminium
Remote	100% CNC Milled 6082 UK Hard anodised aluminium (virtually scratch proof)
Fixings	All fixings manufactured from non-magnet 316 stainless steel (rust proof) Motorised volume control for pure signal path sound. Selection by digital encoder
MISC	operating pure signal switching. Different coloured LED's denoting input selection further enforcing minimalist ideals.

Price at time of review: £1979.00

I am informed there will be a phono stage and a DAC in the pipeline as extra cost options. Contact ONIX DNA for more details.

SOUND QUALITY

BANG! Right from the off I was impressed with how clean and crisp this amplifier sounded and that was fresh out of the box. ONIX informed me it had been soak tested but not fully run in yet, so I carried on

listening regardless to that and if there was any improvement in sound quality, it was not noticeably manifested during the evaluation.



This is a good old fashioned Class AB amplifier with a lot of experience behind the design and for good measure, someone with a very good listening ear has honed it into a pure music making machine without any gimmicks. From the lowest bass to the highest treble everything is evenly balanced, so while you are listening no part of the sound spectrum dominates and that is a GOOD THING in my book. At the same time it's presentation is effortless so you can forget the specifications as almost irrelevant and it takes complex music into it's stride with absolute ease.

However, (he's softening us up for something I sense you thinking) there is one thing I ought to draw your attention to before I go any further. The motorised volume control has a very narrow usable range starting from 7 o'clock (fully off) to only 10 o'clock after which it is rather loud, so by the 11 o'clock position it is getting a bit raucous. ONIX explained this to me by saying a good number of their existing customers have legacy and vintage products which produce around 750mV outputs rather than the standardised 2 volt outputs we have become accustomed to these days, so that lower input voltage is reflected in the volume control having a wider operating window range when used with these units. Now that makes sense to me, but setting the volume I was happy with using the remote control was a series of up/down jerky steps until I found the exact level I wanted. I found it easier to walk across and manually set it with the volume knob but even that required a deftness of touch at times. If that is my one and only gripe with the ONIX DINA-50, then put this comment into context with the remainder of the review.

The DNA-50 performed faultlessly with my resident speakers and also a number of other speakers that come and go ranging from book shelf to floor standing, submitted for review purposes and it handled them all equally well. Bass in particular was very deep and very well controlled with not the slightest hint of bloom or overhang. Dynamics as fast, lithe and crisp as you could wish for and when the going got tough with some really complex music the DNA-50 was almost saying to you “Is that the best you can do to wrong foot me? Ha!” The DNA-50 amplifier has a real solidity and assuredness that you don’t even bother to seek out it’s purported strengths or weaknesses, you simply sit back, relax, spin your favourite tunes and be comprehensively drawn right in by the clarity, power and emotion of the music. In other words, you really are not listening to the ONIX DNA-50 at all *per se*.



At this point in the review I would generally try and relate those statements to some music I put through this amplifier during the evaluation, but on this occasion I am going to refrain from doing that, so instead I will summarise this amplifier’s traits for you.

Treble is crisp and sweet, free from sting, splashiness, or tizz. It picks up ambience and reverberation cues with complete unflinching accuracy. I was impressed by the way it made drum cymbals very real and tangible, so you were left in no doubt it was wood striking metal. And there was a moment or two of “not heard that before” from many very familiar recordings.

Midrange was also free from any colouration, haze or chestiness. Female vocals a delight especially.

Bass, strong, articulate and powerful, as well as communicative. Kick drum had the gut thumping power I adore. Bass guitar in particular had a real growl to it rather than just low bass notes and each pluck stood out as a separate entity. I'm sure some of you out there know exactly what I mean by that.

CONCLUSION

As you have probably gathered by now from reading this review is that the ONIX DNA-50 is all about the music, nothing more and nothing less. It has no embellishments, no bling, no gimmicks, no tricks up it's sleeves, it does not masquerade as something it isn't, it is simply well designed, well built and it's true forte is beguiling you entirely with the way it plays music. I'm going to add a rider to that, because I see so many components described as being "musical" which I interpret as a euphemism for something else; as a poor and entirely subjective way of not being able to categorise a component's characteristics and that is the last thing I could accuse the DNA-50 of and my use of the word "music" is what I say it is.

So I am asking, no pleading, that you to give this amplifier a serious audition. It might captivate you like it did me and I award it Gold Award accordingly.



Hifi Insights Gold Award

BUILD QUALITY: Simple design well executed.

SOUND QUALITY: I couldn't quibble at all about the musical abilities of this amplifier.

VALUE FOR MONEY: You could pay more than the asking price and it still be good value in sound terms.

PROS: Stunning sound quality sufficient enough to silence the one gripe I found.

CONS: Volume control is rather sensitive, more so with the remote control.

Dominic Marsh

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