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## Portal Audio Panache integrated amplifier

Despite its name, the Panache is not made in France, but here in the States, by Portal Audio, headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina. The company is owned and run by Joe Abrams, a longtime veteran of high-end hi-fi who was once closely associated with Threshold.

Threshold. Portal. Get it?

The Portal Audio Panache is an integrated amplifier rated to deliver the magic 100Wpc into 8 ohms and 200Wpc into 4 ohms. Portal sells directly to consumers, mainly by the Internet, and there are no North American dealers. The Panache costs \$1795 and the company offers an unusually generous 60-day home trial. You do, however, pay shipping both ways.

Joe didn't say who designed the amplifier, but at Threshold he was long associated with Nelson Pass. The Portal Panache looked and sounded like a Nelson Pass design to me.

Here's the deal: You get a robustly built integrated amplifier (of sorts) that weighs 32 lbs and measures 17" wide by 5" high by 11.5" deep. The Panache has a 425VA toroidal power transformer, after which the power supply is dual-mono. Each channel has 40,000µF of power-supply filtration and uses four pairs of bipolar output transistors per channel. That's more transistors than you need—but it's probably why the Panache doubles its power into 4 ohms. Most solid-state amplifiers can't quite manage that.

It's a misnomer to call the Panache an "integrated" amplifier. Rather, it's a power amp with a volume potentiometer (ALPS), a volume control, a balance control, and a selector switch. There are four line-level inputs, plus a pair of outputs for recording. Eliminating a gain stage can be a very good way to deliver excellent resolution for a reasonable price—as manufacturers such as Creek and LFD Mistral have shown.

The unit is Spartan, and that's the idea. There's no remote control. There's just one set of speaker outputs—with plastic nuts that are easily stripped if you over-torque them. You want luxuries? You want features? Heh-heh-heh. It was Nelson Pass, of course, who designed the legendary Zen



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solid-state amp, a build-it-yourself design that took "less is more" to a brilliant extreme.

Passive preamp *vs* active line stage. The controversy is grist for the old reviewer mill, like MOSFET *vs* bipolar. Joe Abrams says that most passive preamps "sound lifeless and lacking in dynamics" when connected to a solid-state amp. The problem is that the very high output impedance of the passive preamp has to drive the usually low input impedance of the power amp, often over a long length of reactive interconnect cable. *Drat!*

But the Portal Panache is designed with enough gain, and a high enough input impedance (22k ohm), to receive a line-level signal directly. No interconnect is needed.

Whoever designed this unit believes in passing the musical signal through as few parts as possible, just like Yves-Bernard André.

I switched the YBA Passion Intégré with the Panache, using the same Sony SCD-XA777ES SACD player and Sonus Faber Cremona speakers, and let the unit cook for a while. Like the YBA, the Portal Audio Panache ran cool. You can probably leave it on most of the time.

I didn't hear quite the same extraordinary resolution—oops, *restitution*—that I had with the much more expensive Passion Intégré, nor did I expect to. The YBA will set

you back more than twice the money.

But the Portal Panache came remarkably close, exhibiting very good clarity and harmonic purity. The amp was clear, quick, and clean, with nice body through the midrange and a smoothly extended treble. The Panache did not impart a transistory tinge.

In one respect, the Panache did outperform the Passion. I was able to play it louder into the Sonus Faber Cremonas without shutting down the amp or destroying the speakers. I also noted that the bass was somewhat more authoritative with the Panache—more extended, if perhaps not tighter. Piano notes, in particular, seemed to reach lower. I could go loud with less sense of strain—and without blowing a fuse.

Bear in mind, though, that 100Wpc is still 100Wpc. The Portal Panache did not deliver the weight and authority of a much larger amp, nor could I expect it to.

I especially liked the convenience of being able to connect headphones directly. (This mutes the speaker inputs.) Headphones are driven from the power-amp stage, naturally (since there is no active line stage). A simple device takes the signal straight from the speaker output jacks and converts that signal for headphone use. With my Sennheiser HD600 and Grado RS-1 phones, the sound was exceptional. When you think what some people have paid for outboard headphone amps...

Complaints?

Being lazy, I could have done with a remote control—at least a remote volume control. I wasn't crazy about the styling. The late Henry Kloss could have made this unit look Spartan and sexy at the same time. But there's nothing shoddy about the construction.

The Portal Audio Panache makes an excellent alternative to, let us say, itty-bitty British integrateds. With its generous power supply and four pairs of output transistors per channel, the Panache should have no problem at all with low-impedance loads, and is probably up to driving most speakers in all but the largest rooms.

An amp like this could give solid-state a good name. ☒

**Portal Audio**  
**Toll Free: 1-888-737-4434**  
[www.portalaudio.com/panache.html](http://www.portalaudio.com/panache.html)