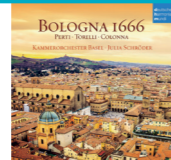


FEBRUARY TEST DISCS



A fine set of performances of pieces by Clara Schumann, delicately played by Mika Sasaki and with a detailed, vibrant recording from Yarlung Records



Captivating recordings by the Kammerorchester Basel, sounding crisp, clean and dynamic in 96kHz/24bit on Deutsche Harmonia Mundi

REVIEW PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

AVM Inspiration CS 2.2

It's a new name to the UK, and among its first products is this very appealing all-in-one network audio system

German manufacturer AVM has been in business for over 30 years, but has only just made it to the UK, courtesy of loudspeaker company PMC, which has just taken on distribution here. And as a result of that three-decade history AVM comes in with an extensive catalogue: there are 30 products, arranged in three ranges, and within those line-ups there seems to be quite a bit of duplication. AVM kicks off with the Inspiration range, moves up through Evolution and finally arrives at its flagship Ovation offering, but even looking at the simplest part of the range, the entry-level Inspiration from which the CS 2.2 we have here is taken, there seems to be a trio of very similar models.

Ask AVM chief Udo Besser what's going on here, and he'll explain that a lot of this is down to the way the company builds its products, all of which are hand-assembled in Germany. Modular construction is the key, allowing different models to be designed around the same building-blocks, each aimed at a slightly different target-market.

Thus the CS 2.2 is a compact all-in-one system combining a CD player, FM tuner, DAC and network player, partnered with an amplifier delivering a healthy 165W per channel, which should

be more than adequate for most needs. Take a step down to the C 2.2 and you get a similar specification but minus the network capability and the option for remote control using a phone/tablet app; move down further and you have the SD 2.2, which drops the CD player and power

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amplification to create a network streaming player/DAC/preamp. And if you think that's confusing, don't look further up the range: Evolution has six variations on the player/amplifier theme, and there are five in the Ovation line. Oh, and a high-end music server!

Anyway...what we have in the Inspiration CS 2.2 is a compact – just 34cm wide – unit, finished to the usual AVM standards in high-quality metalwork, and with a simple front-panel layout comprising a large, easily read display and a substantial sunken control straddling the slot-loading CD drive, plus a few buttons for more detailed operation and a 3.5mm headphone socket. 'Hard' buttons access source input,

AVM INSPIRATION CS 2.2

Type CD/streaming system
Sources CD, network audio, internet radio, streaming services including Qobuz and Tidal (subject to subscription), FM radio
Inputs MM/MC phono, three line, optical/coaxial digital, USB for memory devices
Outputs One pair of speakers, line out, preamp out, optical/coaxial digital, headphones
Formats handled MP3, WMA, AAC, OGG Vorbis, FLAC/WAV/AIFF (192kHz/32-bit via LAN), ALAC (96/24 via LAN)
Power output 165W per channel in to 4ohms, 110Wpc into 8 ohms
Accessories supplied RCS remote handset, Wi-Fi antenna. RC 9 remote control and app control optional
Dimensions (WxHxD) 34x8x35cm
avm-audio.com

SUGGESTED PARTNERS

The Inspiration CS 2.2 is an all-in-one – just add speakers and some storage

SYNOLOGY DS216

With its network capability, stream all your music from cost-effective storage solutions such as this Synology DS216



PMC'S TWENTY5.22 STANDMOUNTERS

Small speakers with a big sound: PMC's twenty5.22 standmounters will work well with the AVM



while multifunctional 'soft' buttons below the display have their operation modified by the menus. The standard finish is natural silver aluminium, but black with silver controls is available to order.

As well as all the flexibility within, which extends to access for streaming services including Tidal and Qobuz, along with network stored music and internet radio, the CS 2.2 has optical and coaxial digital inputs, a phono stage switchable for moving magnet and moving coil cartridges, and three line-ins. Fixed and variable analogue outputs are provided, as well as a single set of speaker connections and – should you need them – both optical and coaxial digital outputs. Network connectivity is via both wired Ethernet and Wi-Fi, for which a stubby antenna is provided, and content can also be played from USB drives using a socket clearly labelled as 'Stick/HDD'.

Alongside that modular design, AVM makes extensive use of parts either made for its products or customised to the company's requirements. The CD drive here, for example, isn't the usual DVD-ROM device found in many components these days for reasons of economy, but rather a dedicated CD-only device made to AVM specifications by Japanese manufacturer TEAC, and further damped with a felt coating to exclude vibrations.

Yes, such a drive is a more expensive option, but AVM feels the cost implications are worthwhile – and that modular approach means the same drive is used from this model all the way up to the flagship Ovation CS 8.2, meaning the company can buy the component in bulk, making the customisation a worthwhile project for a manufacturer the size of TEAC.

PERFORMANCE

There's something very precise and purposeful about the way the AVM does things: the controls have a smoothness and weight about them that inspires confidence, and the self-check routine the unit does when you first fire it up adds to the feeling of solid engineering.

What's more, that sense of sure-footedness extends to the sound of

the Inspiration CS 2.2: Udo Besser is admirably candid about the fact the presentation of his company's products is tailored for ease of musical enjoyment, and that he's no fan of the 'maximum detail' approach many listeners find irritating, and the way this system plays music is as euphonious as it is fulfilling. That substantial power output – into 4ohms, the 8ohm figure being 110Wpc – combines with a healthy damping factor to ensure there's more than enough in reserve to handle the dynamics of music while at the same time delivering tight rhythms. What's more, while the sound is definitely on the warm side of neutral, the balance is handled deftly to keep things rich and full rather than in any way overlush or slow.

What that means is this compact system is not only able to drive large speakers, but do so to impressive effect, delivering the scale of orchestral music while at the same time having admirable focus when handling smaller ensembles or solo instrumental recordings. Timbres are generous but persuasive, and the clarity is never in question, whether it's the shaping of individual notes or the audibility of what's being sung in vocal performances.

The warmth here undeniably makes the AVM an easy listen, with not a hint of that brashness some hear in high-end equipment, and yet the system delivers all the detail required to make it as fine a hi-fi experience as it is a musical one.

And it sounds just as impressive when playing live radio streams via internet radio as it does when playing CDs or hi-res content via network streaming: all content is upsampled to 192kHz/24bit resolution before being handled by the internal DACs.

'Driving' the system via the app is a delight – a conventional handset is standard, and a more sophisticated bi-directional radio-frequency remote also an option – and it's simple to get to grips with everything on offer here, despite the very comprehensive nature of the system.

Yes, even this 'entry-level' AVM model carries a substantial price-tag, putting it up against some impressive competition, but the quality of design, engineering and sound here is beyond question, and this is a highly attractive buy. 🎧