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ISSUE**

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COMPONENTS**

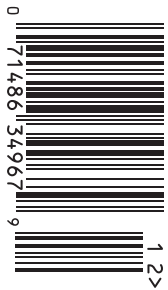
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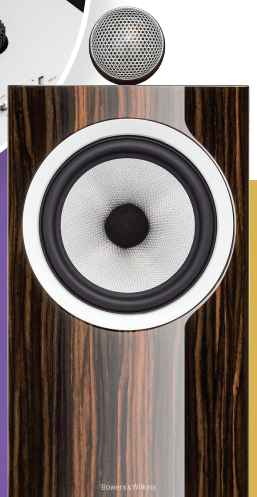


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JASON VICTOR SERINUS

# Gryphon Essence Mono

POWER AMPLIFIER



“Oh goody!” thought self, to self: “Another Gryphon component to review.” As eloquent and revelatory as that statement may be, there’s an even more illuminating backstory.

I had been aware of Denmark-based Gryphon Audio since the advent of the Gryphon Exorcist, a now-discontinued demagnetizer that cost far more than your average break-in CD, but I only began to encounter Gryphon electronics at audio shows a few years ago. While at first they seemed available for review only as a complete

package, Jim Austin was able to arrange for me to review the Gryphon Ethos CD player–D/A processor (\$39,000). I reported on that player in the January 2020 issue of *Stereophile*. To my surprise, I found the Ethos an “open, marvelously detailed, and fresh-sounding unit that makes listening an absolute joy.” I had not expected my experience to be so positive.

### Baggy for kitty

Why was I surprised? Because the sound I encountered

## SPECIFICATIONS

**Description** Solid-state, mono power amplifier. Input: 1 balanced (XLR). Output: 2 pair custom, gold-plated binding posts. Input impedance, balanced (20Hz–20kHz): 10k ohm. Output impedance: 0.0075 ohm. Gain: 31dB. Bandwidth: 0.3Hz to 350kHz, –3dB. Input sensitivity: 592mV. Dynamic range: 110dB. THD+N:

110dB. Output power (at 1% THD+N, class-A): 55W into 8 ohms, 110W into 4 ohms, 220W into 2 ohms (all 17.4dBW). Power supply capacity: 440,000µFpc. Power consumption, high bias: <0.5W idle, 350W standby, 1350W maximum.

**Dimensions** 18.5" (470mm) W × 9.45" (240mm) H × 18.11" (460mm) D. Weight:

99.2lb (45kg) each. Shipping weight: 126lb (57kg) each.

**Finish** Brushed black anodized aluminum and black polished acrylic.

**Serial numbers of review samples** 1612PPA+B. Designed and built in Denmark.

**Price** \$45,980/pair. Approximate number of US dealers: 13. Warranty: 2 years parts and labor.

**Manufacturer** Gryphon Audio Designs ApS, Industrivej 10B, DK 8600 Ry, Denmark. Tel: (+45) 86891200.

Web: gryphon-audio.com. US distributor: On a Higher Note P.O. Box 698 San Juan Capistrano, CA 92693

Tel: (949) 544-1990 Web: onahighernote.com.



from the Ethos in an all-Gryphon system at AXPOA 2019 was bright and lacked warmth—so much so that I fled the room without taking notes. It wasn't until quite recently—after I'd spent some time with the Gryphon Essence monoblock power amplifier (\$45,980/pair), the product under review—that Gryphon's director of sales, Rune Skov, confessed to me that the sound in that second-floor, air-walled convention-center room was so untamable—so far from what he wished to present—that he had lobbied for a static display. Static displays rarely cut it at audio shows, so Skov put his best foot forward and proceeded as though everything was fine. Which, without letting the cat out of the bag just yet, is how I felt once I heard the Essence monoblocks.

The brand-new, fully balanced Essence monoblocks are the lowest-powered monoblocks in the Gryphon line. They do not come cheap. The Essences are specified as putting out 55 watts into 8 ohms in pure class-A mode—that's \$836/W. If you have speakers with a 4 ohm nominal impedance, like my Wilson Audio Alexia 2s, the Essence's 100 class-A watts into 4 ohms make it a relative bargain, at \$418/W. Still, whatever your loudspeakers' nominal impedance, I don't think you'll find many folks who consider the Essence a bargain product. Which doesn't necessarily mean they don't represent a good value for the right customer.

Before I said "yes" to this review, I needed some assurance that the Essence monos could handle my loudspeaker, whose impedance dips well below 4 ohms in the bass. At first, Gryphon essentially brushed off my concern, but it was eventually addressed in detail during a joint Skype conversation with Skov and Gryphon's chief designer, Tom Møller.

"When we began to develop the Essence mono amplifier, we used it on our less-efficient speakers that are pretty difficult to drive so we could ensure that the amp could drive them and keep a supertight grip around multiple 8" drivers," Skov said. "Our goal was to control inefficient speakers, be extraordinarily fast, and have tons of resolution and lots of musicality."

"55W into 8 ohms is not a lot," Møller acknowledged.

"We wanted to make sure that the small amp could drive larger speakers with reasonable sound pressure."

Møller, a 20-year Gryphon veteran who is responsible for the topology and internal design of the company's amplifiers, preamplifiers, and CD players, explained that the Essence's power output is identical in class-A (high bias) and class-AB (low bias). "In AB, perhaps the first 7 watts are class-A; most of the time, however, the amp operates in class-AB." I asked if the monoblock had been optimized for high bias or low; I had already experienced the sonic differences between the Essence's two bias settings and had strongly held views of my own.

"It's optimized for high bias," Møller responded. "All our products are. If you put the Essence in low bias, the sound quality will almost certainly go down. It's not terrible—you can listen to background music and so on—but when you want to listen seriously and switch to high bias, it will reach the best temperature in a half-hour or so. If, on the other hand, you turn the monoblocks on from cold, you will have to wait an hour at least. If you start from cold and give them a couple of hours in high bias, they will perform great, and if you give them even more time, they can open up a little bit more."

That's precisely what I had already noticed, so I found Møller's confirmation reassuring.

To ensure that I always auditioned the amps at their best, I kept them on in low-bias mode between evaluation sessions, switching to high bias at least an hour before critical listening.

### The biasing light show

Beauty, like preference in music, is a matter of personal taste. To me, the Essence, with its polished black acrylic finish, is Scandinavian design at its most elegant. The monoblock's rear panel is simple: a 20-amp IEC connector, a single XLR input, and two large, proprietary gold-plated binding posts sensibly placed and a cinch to open and close. It's the front panel that is unique.

## MEASUREMENTS

I tested the Gryphon Essence with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see the January 2008 "As We See It"). I preconditioned the amplifier by operating it with class-AB output-stage bias at one-third the specified power into 8 ohms for an hour. At the end of that time, the top panel's temperature was 88.3°F (31.3°C) and that of the side-mounted heatsinks 90.4°F (32.4°C). Repeating the preconditioning with class-A bias after letting the amplifier cool down resulted in a slightly higher heatsink temperature, 92.1°F (33.4°C). The Essence monoblock easily has sufficient heatsink capacity for its output power.

The Gryphon's voltage gain into 8 ohms measured 30.7dB with both output-stage bias conditions, and the amplifier preserved absolute polarity

(ie, was noninverting), the XLR input jack being wired with its pin 2 positive. The input impedance was close to 10k ohms from 20Hz to 20kHz. Though this is half the specified 20k ohms, it is still sufficiently high not to cause compatibility problems with tube preamplifiers.

The Gryphon's output impedance in class-A was higher than the specified 0.015 ohms, at 0.26 ohm at 20Hz and 1kHz and 0.28 ohm at 20kHz. (These values include the series impedance of 6' of spaced-pair loudspeaker cable.) The output impedance was slightly higher in class-AB, at 0.29 ohms at 1kHz. Nevertheless, the modulation of the amplifier's frequency response, due to the Ohm's law interaction between this source impedance and the impedance of our standard simulated

loudspeaker,<sup>2</sup> was small, at ±0.2dB (fig.1, gray trace). The response into an

1 See [stereophile.com/asweseeit/108aws/index.html](http://stereophile.com/asweseeit/108aws/index.html).

2 See [stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2](http://stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2).

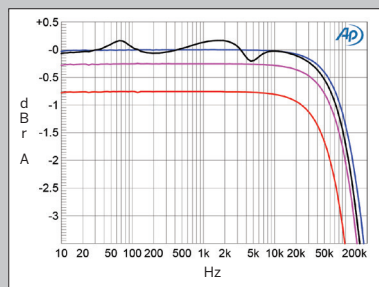


Fig.1 Gryphon Essence, frequency response at 2.83V into: simulated loudspeaker load (gray), 8 ohms (blue), 4 ohms (magenta), 2 ohms (red) (0.5dB/vertical div.).

Located on the amp's underside, close to the front edge, are three controls, easily accessible to anyone who can bend over without falling down. In the middle sits the main on/off toggle switch. It is flanked by two touch-activated buttons: "Mode" on the left and "Bias" on the right.

The Bias button, as you would expect, determines whether the amplifier operates in low or high bias.

The Mode button has nothing to do with how the Essence drives speakers; it's all about the front-panel light show.

When you flip the main power switch to the "on" position, the front panel's Gryphon logo lights up in an understated red and a small, touch-activated "Standby/On" sensor button just below it glows red. When you lightly touch the sensor, a long, horizontal touch bar turns blue, and both it and the logo blink for 25 seconds or so. After that, in Mode 1, the "on" button turns a faint green, and the bar remains blue. If you then change the amplifier's bias, the bar will blink for 10 seconds in the color corresponding to the new bias setting—red for high, green for low—before reverting to blue.

In Mode 2, the light doesn't revert to blue; it stays the color (red or green) corresponding to the chosen bias. In Mode 3—"stealth" mode—all the front-panel lights, except the green "On" symbol, remain dark until the bias is changed, at which point the touch bar blinks for 10 seconds in the appropriate color before going dark again. That's the most complex thing about this amplifier's functions.

Asked what else is special, Møller pointed to the Essence's new Sanken power transistors from Japan. "In the Diablo 300 integrated amplifier, we used four sets of power transistors in each stereo channel; here, we're using five sets to reduce the output impedance. In addition, in a monob-



**Part of that spell was cast by the Essence's almost mystical 3D depiction of air and space around voice and piano.**

lock, the two channels are coupled in parallel to further lower output impedance. This makes the power amp very powerful, so it can deliver a lot of current. This is the first step to making a very good power amplifier.

"The voltage amplifier stages are also very important. We use dual JFETs as a buffer in the input stage, going to a symmetrical, dual-differential voltage-amplifying stage with bipolar transistors. We also use surface-mounted resistors in the voltage-amplifying stages throughout the amp. Every stage is run in class-A. The power supply section, which uses a custom-made toroidal transformer with very low mechanical noise/hum, is not directly in the signal path, but it affects it indirectly. We also have a lot of capacitance—220,000 $\mu$ F each side—which, because it's in parallel in the monoblocks,

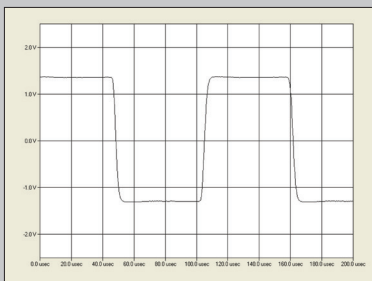
#### measurements, continued

8 ohm resistive load (fig.1, blue trace) was flat to 20kHz and down by 3dB at 170kHz, which correlates with the Essence's superb reproduction of a 10kHz squarewave (fig.2). Commendably, there was no overshoot or ringing with the squarewave response. Into 2 ohms

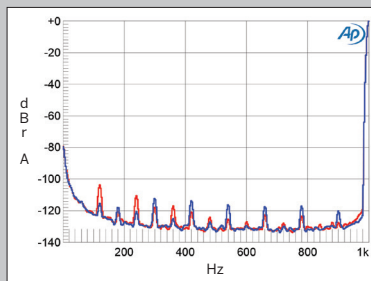
(fig.1, red trace), the response was  $-0.2$ dB at 20kHz and  $-3$ dB at 90kHz.

Measured with the input shorted to ground, the amplifier's unweighted, wideband signal/noise ratio was an excellent 86.5dB ref. 1W into 8 ohms, this ratio improving to 95.9dB when

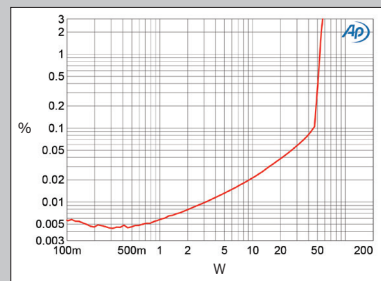
the measurement was restricted to the audioband, and to 100.8dB when A-weighted. This is a quiet amplifier. Spurious at the 60Hz power-supply frequency and its harmonics were very low in level but varied with the output-stage bias. The spurious at 60Hz



**Fig.2** Gryphon Essence, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.



**Fig.3** Gryphon Essence, spectrum of 1kHz sine wave, DC-1kHz, at 1W into 8 ohms with class-A bias (red) and class-AB (blue) (linear frequency scale).



**Fig.4** Gryphon Essence, class-A bias, THD+N (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

means 440,000 $\mu$ F for each channel.

“The power supply for the voltage-amplifying stages is fully regulated and very low noise to prevent smearing of small details and is decoupled with good-quality polypropylene capacitors. Many of our larger amplifiers use 10 pairs of output transistors coupled in parallel. Normally, if you do this, you’ll have a large capacitance in the base of the transistors, which is difficult to drive and can lower amplifier bandwidth. To avoid this, we use a lot of power to drive the output transistors. That is some of our secret.

“The circuit board is almost the most important component, because it contains all the signal and grounding tracks, which must be placed optimally to avoid introducing noise and smearing line and detail. Signal paths on the board are intentionally very short. We don’t use any internal connectors to conduct sound; all sound passes through high-quality cables that are soldered into the XLR sockets on the Essence’s rear plate and lead directly into the printed circuit board. The only wires we use lead to and from the pcb. A small, 15cm-or-so wire leads to the speaker connectors. It’s the same silver/copper wire as in the Diablo 300, our biggest and most successful integrated amplifier, and in our speakers. We don’t use more internal power supply or signal cabling than absolutely necessary because, during production, it can be difficult to wire components perfectly. In the worst case, if a signal wire is placed closer to a transformer than ideal, it can add audible induced hum. If you eliminate wires from the pcb, the layout will be consistent, which ensures that every Essence power amplifier sounds the same.”

Skov called the 350kHz bandwidth of Gryphon’s amplifiers both “enormous” and unusual for amplification with a lot of transistors in parallel. He also said, in passing: “We prefer low-capacitance speaker cables and don’t like coaxial speaker cables with or without active shielding. Those cables can be very good for digital amplifiers, reducing glitches and high-frequency noise, but for an analog amplifier with a huge bandwidth, their very high capacitance acts as a filter

that limits bandwidth.” Happy to say, my Nordost Odin 2 cabling is low capacitance.

### Feets, Don’t Fail Me Now

Truth be told, I’ve been accused of harboring a clinical-level foot fetish. No, I was not the guy who stalked the upper floors of Yale library, ca. 1968, taking stealth whiffs of coeds’ shoeless feet or stealing their shoes. I have, however, been known to experiment, to a degree some consider excessive, with aftermarket supports—footers—placed underneath the audio components I review.

Lest I have my head handed to me once this review is published, I discussed the Essence’s unusual footers with distributor Philip O’Hanlon (On a Higher Note) and then Skov before getting to work. The former told me that he removed the stock feet so that he could place the monoblocks on his Artesiana racks—which I thought gave me permission to try different footers. Then Skov told me that while the Essence was voiced with its proprietary, felt-padded, hollow Novodur P2H-AT792 ABS polymer feet, he unscrews them and attaches Essence’s BlackSpikes (\$350 for a set of four). Skov feels that BlackSpikes, which have a polymer body tipped with adjustable tempered steel, make the Essence sound “even more alive, especially in the lower midrange/top bass, where they seem to be quite effective.” The results, though, will depend on the shelves being used, he noted: “It is not always for the better.” Skov also told me that the spikes are packaged with two-sided adhesive rubber “wafers” that are meant to protect shelving.

Armed with that knowledge, I removed the Essence’s stock footers and listened, first, with the aftermarket footers I was using under my reference D’Agostino Progression monoblocks. After that, I spent 95% of my listening time with either the stock feet or the BlackSpikes and their wafers. My report only discusses these two company-approved scenarios.

The monoblocks were placed on Grand Prix Audio

### measurements, continued

and 180Hz were highest in level with class-A bias, at -104dB and -110dB ref. 1W into 8 ohms (fig.3, red trace), and were even lower in level with class-AB bias (blue trace).

The Essence’s manual specifies the amplifier’s maximum power as 55W into 8 ohms, 110W into 4 ohms, and 220W into 2 ohms, all equivalent to

17.4dBW.<sup>3</sup> Using our definition of clipping, which is when the output’s percentage of THD+noise reaches 1%, the Gryphon didn’t quite meet its specified powers, clipping with a 1kHz signal at 53W into 8 ohms (17.24dBW) with both class-A bias (fig.4) and class-AB bias (fig.5). In both bias conditions, the THD+N was very low at powers of

a few watts. Into 4 ohms, the Essence clipped at 101W (17.03dBW), but the THD+N was lower at low powers with class-A bias (fig.6) than with class-AB bias (fig.7). The Essence didn’t quite meet its specified power into 2 ohms, clipping at 182W (16.58dBW). However—

<sup>3</sup> The website, but not the manual, specifies slightly higher maximum output powers in class-AB.

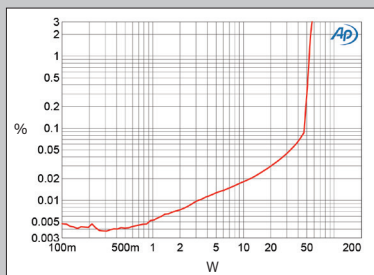


Fig.5 Gryphon Essence, class-AB bias, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

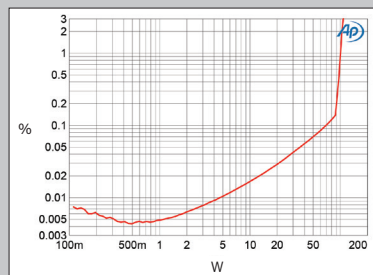


Fig.6 Gryphon Essence, class-A bias, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 4 ohms.

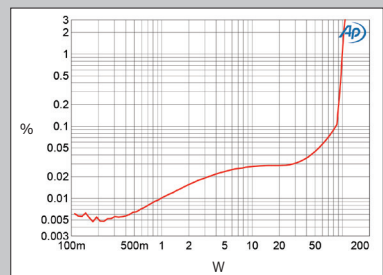


Fig.7 Gryphon Essence, class-AB bias, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 4 ohms.



Monza amp stands with bamboo shelves, fed by a source-component chain of NAS drive>Roon Nucleus+>dCS Rossini DAC/Clock. I declined O'Hanlon's offer to send Artesiana wafers to place under the spikes—I didn't want to risk adding anything that would alter the Essence's sound and skew my report—but then I figured out the motivation behind the offer: The sharp BlackSpikes pierced those thin adhesive wafers, leaving holes in the bamboo shelves. Worse, because I thought that the two-sided adhesive would stop the felt-tipped stock feet from sliding, I left the wafers on the shelves when I restored the polymer feet. When my husband and I were lifting one of the monoblocks, one foot stuck to an adhesive wafer, and before we could put the amp down, the shelf lifted up at a perilous angle and gashed my leg as it fell to the floor. Recoiling in pain, I toppled to the floor, managing to avoid knocking over an Alexia 2 or destroying the amp. Gryphon would do everyone a favor by replacing these little wafers with surface protectors with more substance.

I can hear you thinking "Serinus is about to let Gryphon have it!" Not so: Serinus is about to give the Gryphon a rave review.

### Cat and bag part II

Let's get the nonrave commentary out of the way first. You're not going to buy expensive monoblocks that were optimized for class-A with the intention of spending most of your time in class-AB.

With the stock feet, whether listening to the live recording of male vocal ensemble Chanticleer singing their "signature tune," Biebl's Ave Maria, on *A Chanticleer Christmas* (Qobuz 16/44.1 FLAC); Cher's fabulously spirited remake of ABBA's "Dancing Queen," from *Cher* (Tidal 24/44.1 MQA); Susan Graham singing Hahn's Bach-inspired "À Chloris" with Malcolm Martineau on *Un Frisson Français* (Qobuz 16/44.1 FLAC); Doug Tourtelot's superb recording of the Portland State Chamber Choir singing Eriks

Ešenvalds's "O salutaris hostia," from *Translations* (Naxos 8.574124, 24/96 WAV); Yello's bass-pounding, electronically hyped, smile-inducing "Electrified II" from *Tōy* (Tidal, 24/48 FLAC); or soprano Carolyn Sampson singing Mozart's heavenly "Et incarnatus est" from Masaaki Suzuki's recording of the Great Mass in C Minor with the Bach Collegium Japan (Qobuz, 24/96 FLAC), in class-AB, edges were bright and buzzy, images rather flat, and the midrange had a deficit of color and warmth. Soundstage depth and air were disappointing, making it hard to distinguish the all-important spatial relationships in the superbly recorded Ešenvalds. When Møller said that the Essence's class-AB was appropriate for noncritical background listening, he spoke the truth.

If you love music, you'll want to hear these amps in class-A.

I got on a "Dancing Queen" kick after San Francisco Audiophile Society member Ian Wotherspoon recommended an uncharacteristically mellow, guitar-accompanied version from Swedish duo Erato on *Erato Covers* (Qobuz 16/44.1 FLAC). When I mentioned the title to my husband, he immediately exclaimed "ABBA!!!" Shortly thereafter, we headed to the music room to hear their original version, on *ABBA Gold* (Tidal 16/44.1 FLAC), followed by Cher's version. With the Essence's stock feet, Cher's version sounded so juicy and full that we began dancing. The only thing missing was a bit of bass.

Then we turned to Chanticleer, who sounded ideally airy and beautiful, on Biebl's unforgettable late-20th century setting of the "Ave Maria." In class-A, Susan Graham sounded so characteristically warm, so optimally cushioned by piano, that even though we'd heard this performance 100 times, we were spellbound. Part of that spell was cast by the Essence's almost mystical 3D depiction of air and space around voice and piano.

On the Ešenvalds, the engineering wonder, the sound was all-enveloping. I managed to write "This is just magical—a kiss of grace" before the entry of the male voices, whose

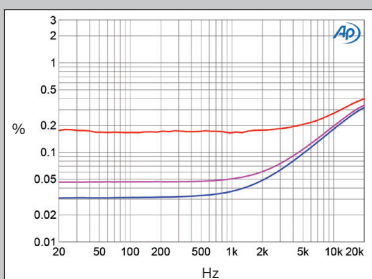
er, it is relevant to note that I don't hold the AC wall voltage constant when I test an amplifier's clipping power.

I measured how the THD+N percentage changed with frequency at 12.65V, which is equivalent to 20W into 8 ohms, 40W into 4 ohms, and 80W into 2 ohms, which are all ap-

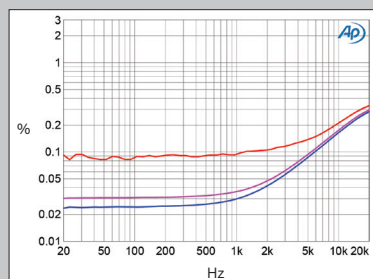
proximately 4dB below the clipping powers into these loads. The THD+N was very low in the midrange into 8 and 4 ohms with both class-A bias (fig.8, blue and red traces) and class-AB bias (fig.9, blue and red traces), but rose into 2 ohms (red traces). There is the usual increase in THD+N in the

top audio octaves, due to the circuit's limited open-loop bandwidth. (There is less gain margin available for negative feedback at high frequencies.)

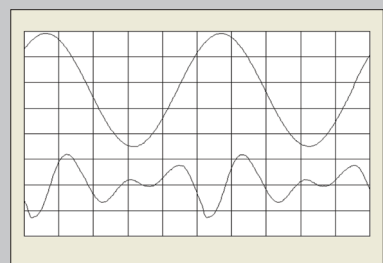
With class-A bias, the Gryphon Essence's distortion was predominantly an equal mix of the subjectively benign second and third harmonics (figs.10



**Fig.8** Gryphon Essence, class-A bias, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 12.65V into: 8 ohms (blue), 4 ohms (magenta), 2 ohms (red).



**Fig.9** Gryphon Essence, class-AB bias, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 12.65V into: 8 ohms (blue), 4 ohms (magenta), 2 ohms (red).



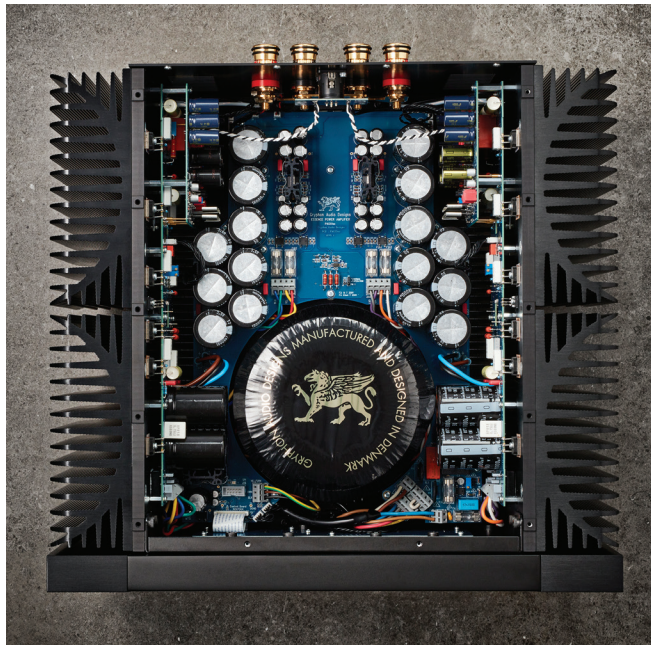
**Fig.10** Gryphon Essence, class-A bias, 1kHz waveform at 20W into 8 ohms, 0.0385% THD+N (top); distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).

perfectly placed foundation helped support the ethereal lift of the soprano voices that transported me to a place of wonder.

Next, I tried Gryphon's BlackSpikes. I found the sound somewhat fuller and more fleshed out in the lower midrange, with a concomitant boost in color saturation. With more there there, the perception of air and depth increased. Although the change was not huge, anyone who can afford these amps would benefit from shelling out an extra \$700 for the BlackSpikes.

My enrancement was momentarily shattered when I began to explore other kinds of music. Enter Chris Bell, who is working on a video that explores the journey of Art Dudley's former Altec Flamenco loudspeakers to their new home. Because Chris was passing through Port Townsend and was eager to take a listen—and because I always benefit from hearing music I don't usually play—I invited him to cue up some of his favorite tracks. Due to COVID-19, we sat masked at opposite ends of the couch, where neither of us could fully appreciate the Essence's superb depiction of spatial relationships.

After auditioning Rosemary Standley's cover of Leonard Cohen's "Bird on the Wire" from *Birds on the Wire* (Qobuz 24/44.1 FLAC), Billie Eilish's "Listen Before I Go" from *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* (Tidal 24/44.1 MQA), and other selections, Chris declared that he missed



his all-Naim system and ProAc K6 Signature loudspeakers' mightier bottom end. As I was celebrating the glorious sound of the flute in the Allegro Moderato from Abel's Flute Concerto No.1 in C, performed by Edward Beckett and the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields (16/44.1 FLAC), Chris was bemoaning the weak foundation.

Soon after, my bass-and-percussion-playing friend Gary Forbes visited for a height-of-COVID-19 solo listening session. Gary played bass-rich tracks from Gregory Porter, the Flaming Lips, Galactic/Macy Gray, and Troy "Trombone Shorty"

Andrews while I waited outside, resisting slipping into husband-pacing-incessantly-through-hospital-as-wife-gives-birth mode.

After Gary seconded Chris's assessment, I revisited any number of reference recordings that included deep, pounding bass. As I'd thought all along, while the bass was neither as strong nor as tightly focused as through my 1000 watts into 4 ohms reference D'Agostino Progressions, it certainly was there.

The time had come to measure the Alexia 2's bass response with both the Gryphon Essence and D'Agostino Progression monoblocks. After copying *Stereophile Test CD 1* to my NAS drive, I used John Atkinson's preferred SoundTools SPL app to measure a baseline tone at 1kHz and then

#### measurements, continued

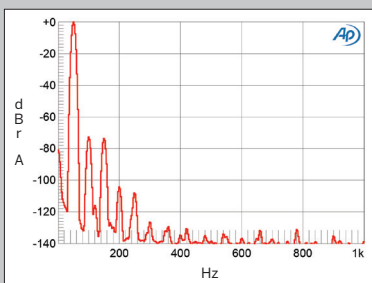
and 11), each lying at  $-73\text{dB}$  (0.025%) ref. 20W into 8 ohms. Higher harmonics are all much lower in level. With class-AB bias, the second harmonic was the highest in level, at the same  $-73\text{dB}$  (fig.12), but there were now

more higher-order harmonics present. When the Essence drove an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones with a peak level of 20W into 8 ohms (fig.13), the second-order difference product at 1kHz lay just above  $-80\text{dB}$  (0.01%) in

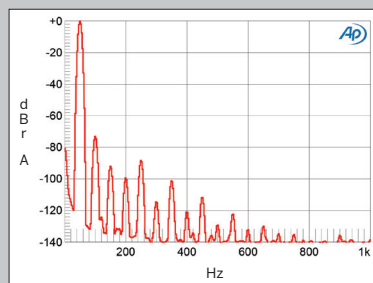
both bias conditions with higher-order intermodulation products a little higher in level, at  $-70\text{dB}$  (0.03%).

The Gryphon Essence performed very well on the test bench.

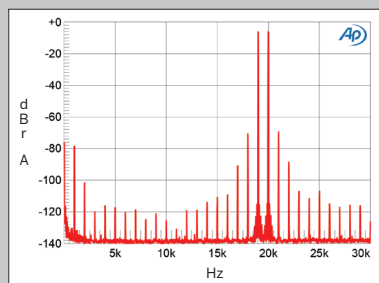
—John Atkinson



**Fig.11** Gryphon Essence, class-A bias, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 20W into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).



**Fig.12** Gryphon Essence, class-AB bias, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 20W into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).



**Fig.13** Gryphon Essence, class-A bias, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-30kHz, 19+20kHz at 20W peak into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

staggered tones descending from 200Hz to 20Hz. If you have ever tried this yourself, you've already surmised that the bass output from the Essence and Progression monoblocks was *identical*, within reasonable measuring error. And yet, through speakers known to challenge lower power amplification in the bass, the bass was neither as tight nor as sharply delineated as with similarly priced amps that output almost 10 times as much power. (Like duh, big surprise.)

Since I had no intention of staging a floor-pounding dance party during the pandemic, I confined subsequent auditions to music the Gryphon Essence monoblocks reproduced superbly.

### Magic

That the Gryphon Essence monoblocks with BlackSpike supports are capable of magic was confirmed on another rare evening when the spouse joined me in the listening room. He asked for Mahler by mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, with whose mother he had studied voice. I turned off the lights and streamed her live performance, with pianist Roger Vignoles, of "Ich Bin Der Welt Abhanden Gekommen" ("I am lost to the world") from the Five Rückert-Lieder, as captured on *Lorraine Hunt Lieberson: Mahler, Handel & Peter Lieberson* (Wigmore Hall Live, Tidal 16/44.1 FLAC).

"I am lost to the world with which I used to waste much time," sang Hunt Lieberson in that uniquely probing, plangent voice of hers. "It has for so long known nothing of me, it may well believe that I am dead. Nor am I at all concerned . . . For truly I am dead to the world. I am dead to the world's tumult, and rest in a quiet realm! I live alone in my heaven, in my love, in my song!"

Words cannot describe the alchemical transformation wrought by the Gryphon Essences on this remarkably air-filled recording. All sense of time fell away as the most intimate feelings of an artist who sang from the depths of her being filled my heart. As two souls became one, basking in the sorrowful stillness that can come with solitude and acceptance, I was transported.<sup>1</sup>

Next came the great Spanish soprano Montserrat Caballé singing Liù's disarmingly honest "Signore, ascolta" on the famed 1972 recording of Puccini's final opera, *Turandot*, conducted by Zubin Mehta (24/96 FLAC, Decca 00222094 / Qobuz). Again, the voice hovered magically as if floating on air. As many times as I've heard Caballé's mesmerizing pianissimos—may I be accompanied by sounds as heavenly as hers when I depart from this body—I'd never before experienced her voice quite like this. Not since I heard Beverly Sills live in *Roberto Devereaux* at New York City Opera in 1971, and Joan Sutherland sing Lucia's mad scene at her Metropolitan Opera debut nine years earlier, had the sound of a soprano produced such an experience.

This is not to deny that, a week later, when I returned to my reference amplification, Hunt Lieberson's voice was more fleshed out, with greater body, depth, and complexity to its viola-like midrange. Of particular import was the greater significance that the far more powerful Progressions granted to the carefully judged moment when Hunt Lieberson's voice swelled from a supremely inward *piano* to an emotionally potent *mezzo-forte*. The dynamic shift may have lasted only a few seconds, but it seemed monumental. Nonetheless, audible truth was *not* transformed into magic as it had been with the aptly named Essences.

## ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

**Digital sources** dCS Rossini SACD/CD transport, Rossini DAC, and Rossini Clock; EMM Labs DV2 Integrated DAC; Synology 5-bay NAS 1019+; Roon Nucleus+ music server with HDPLEX 200 linear power supply; Uptone Audio etherRegen, Small Green Computer Sonore opticalModule, TP-Link gigabit Ethernet media converters plus multimode duplex fiberoptic cable (2), Linksys routers (2); Small Green Computer linear power supply & Small Green Computer/HDPLEX four-component, 200W linear power supply (3); external hard drives, SSD USB sticks, iPad Pro; Apple 2017 Macbook Pro computer with 2.8 GHz Intel i7, SSD, 16GB RAM.

**Preamplifier** Dan D'Agostino Momentum HD.

**Power amplifiers** Dan D'Agostino Progression monoblocks.

**Loudspeakers** Wilson Audio Specialties Alexia 2.

**Cables** Digital: Nordost Odin 1 & Odin 2 & Valhalla 2 (USB) & Frey 2 (USB adapter), Wireworld Platinum Starlight Cat8 (Ethernet). Interconnect: Nordost Odin 2. Speaker: Nordost Odin 2. AC: Nordost Odin 2 & Valhalla, AudioQuest Dragon HC, Kimber Palladian.

**Accessories** Grand Prix Monza 8-shelf double rack & amp stands, 1.5" Formula platform, Apex footers; Nordost QBB, QX4 (2), QK1, and QV2 AC power accessories, QKore 1, 3, and 6 with QKore Wires, Titanium and Bronze Sort Kones, Sort Lifts; AudioQuest Niagara 5000 power conditioner & NRG Edison outlets & Jitterbugs; Tweek Geek Dark Matter Stealth power conditioner with High Fidelity and Furutech options; GreenWave AC filter; Ansuz Darkz T2S resonance support feet; Wilson Audio Pedestals; IsoAcoustics Orea footers; Stillpoints Aperture panels; Resolution Acoustics room treatment; Stein Music Super Naturals, Blue Suns/Diamonds, Quantum Organizer; Bybee Room Neutralizers; Absolare Stabilians; Symposium Ultra Platform; Marigo Aida CD mat.

**Room** 20' L × 16' W × 9' H.—Jason Victor Serinus

On very different music, René Jacobs and the B'Rock Orchestra's new rendition of *Schubert Symphonies 2 & 3* (Pentatone 5186759, DSD64), the Progressions delivered a fuller sound while bringing to the fore instruments that had previously been buried in the orchestral blend. But the sheer entrancement of listening to Schubert's joy-infused melodies through the Essence monoblocks was not repeated.

### How does one ...

... put into words that which is beyond words?

For this, we have poetry, music, and, if I may be so bold, electronics on the refined level of Gryphon Essence Mono power amplifiers. Although fully capable of conveying the entire frequency range, even through speakers that bring some modestly powered amplifiers to their knees, they cannot convey the huge dynamic swings and minute details that some more powerful beasts command. But on music that touches the heart, they can transport to a realm where few components know to go. Magic awaits those with the means to audition them at home, especially with their modest BlackSpike upgrade. "Highly recommended" is an understatement. ■

<sup>1</sup> How I wish that the late *Stereophile* writer Wes Phillips, who loved Hunt Lieberson's Handel, could have been alive to join me.