



Chord Anni

DESIGNED AS THE DESKTOP COMPANION FOR THE QUTEST DAC AND THE HUEI PHONO STAGE – THERE’S EVEN A MATCHING ALUMINIUM STAND TO ACCOMMODATE THEM – THE SMALLEST CHORD ELECTRONICS INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER IS IDEAL FOR PERSONAL AUDIO. BUT ANDREW EVERARD DISCOVERS THERE’S SO MUCH MORE TO IT THAN THAT

Maybe it’s a sign of the times through which we’ve all been living for the better part of two years, with the growth in working from home rather than the daily commute, but there’s been quite a boom of late in desktop audio: miniature components designed to give high standards of performance while taking up minimal table-top space. We’ve come a long way from sitting in front of a laptop screen with a pair of headphones plugged into the computer, or an iPhone at our side dispensing tunes: these days a USB connection to a DAC/headphone amp can serve us with ultra-high-resolution music, not to mention limitless streaming in ever-improving quality.

For me, this new era of listening has been a case of ‘welcome to my world’: on becoming a homeworking freelance writer more than eight years ago – how time flies, etc. – I moved from the necessity of wearing headphones in a busy office environment to the enjoyment of my own desktop system, comprising an elderly original Naim Uniti powering a pair of Neat Iota speakers, more recently fed from my Mac mini computer via a Gustard interface, with a little Intel NUC running Roon Core.

However, though my set-up has developed, it’s stood still while the desktop audio world has changed beyond all recognition. ‘Head-Fi’ has become a thing, with a horde of DAC/amplifiers support the huge growth in headphone listening, to the extent that hi-fi shows – remember them? – have gone from having a few tabletop booths

for headphone manufacturers to whole dedicated sections, or even entire spin-off shows purely for those for whom listening is a personal experience. And many companies have developed their own product lines to serve this market, from the tiny Audioquest DAC/amp-in-a-stick DragonFly models through to some very large headphone amplifier solutions pushing the acceptable limits of the ‘desktop’ definition.

Chord Electronics has been a leader in this arena, with its Hugo models and the arrival of its tiny pocketable Mojo, and of late has been developing these DAC/headphone amps with the addition of clip-on streaming solutions, enabling to user to play music on the move from microSD cards, or stream it anywhere a Wi-Fi connection is available. Now it has turned its attention to its little Qutest DAC, at £1250

“sounding big beyond its tiny form and modest on-paper output, entirely in control and above all a whole load of fun

its only model without a dedicated headphone output, and launched a partnering amplifier, the very compact Anni, selling for £1195.

Actually, it isn't just here to complement the Qutest, as Chord also has a very fine phono stage in miniature in the form of the £990 Huei, meaning one could combine Anni and Huei to create a complete desktop amplification system for vinyl playback – although of course one would then have to give up a solid chunk of workspace to accommodate a turntable, which might not be too happy sitting on the same surface as a computer keyboard. Well, not the way I type: blame it on having started my journalistic life with big old Imperial mechanical typewriters, which also probably explains my penchant for the clattery Das Keyboard on which I'm typing this review.

Anyway, I digress – when I say the Anni amplifier is compact, I'm not overstating things: it measures just 16cm wide, 4.25cm tall and a smidge under 10cm deep, matching the dimensions of the Huei and Quest, and weighs just 625g despite being cased in the aerospace-grade aluminium Chord uses for all its products. There's even a stand made from matching material, the £225 Qutest System Stand (or QSS), which can be used to stack two of these units to minimise the desktop real estate they occupy, while the Anni offers a DC power output to supply either the DAC or the phono amp, allowing the whole system to be connected to a single mains socket via the Anni's offboard 15V power unit, which feeds the amplifier via a four-pin socket. A grounding post is also provided.

Super-simple

As amplifiers go, the Anni couldn't be much simpler: it has just two line-level inputs, selected by pushing the central volume control, with the chosen input indicated by an LED ring around the control – blue for Input 1, red for 2. There's a single set of speaker outputs for each channel, plus 3.5mm and 6.35mm headphone sockets, muting the speaker outputs when the plug for a pair of 'phones is inserted. Two of Chord's familiar 'polychromatic control spheres' – balls to you and me – indicate how the amplifier is working: the power indicator glows cyan when playing into speakers, switching to green to indicate the speakers are muted for headphone listening, while other selects the output gain. It's blue for normal gain, switching to red when pushed to increase the gain to drive more demanding speakers, the amplifier automatically defaulting to the lower setting when headphones are used.

On the subject of the Anni's speaker-driving ability, those who adhere for the 'no substitute for cubic inches' school of amplifier selection should

probably look away now, for the little Chord delivers 'just' 10W into 8ohms. I'll return to that point in a moment, but anyone dismissing the Anni on a mere consideration of that figure might want to think of the desktop nature of this product, and wonder just how much amplifier power is actually required when listening to small speakers of (usually) reasonable sensitivity at a distance of not much more than a metre. Even my little Neats, not exactly super-sensitive, are quoted at 84dB/W/m, so – as I suspected – the little Chord proved more than capable of driving them cleanly to as 'realistic' a level as I'd ever want at my desk!

Trickle-down topology

Using a version of the company's Ultima amplifier topology, found in its heavyweight power amps: it's a dual feed-forward error-correction design, built to ensure clean drive of a wide range of speakers or headphones through constant monitoring and compensation of its output. And while it's more often found in Chord amps delivering the better part of a kilowatt, it clearly brings advantages in this much lower-powered design, too – the last thing the Anni sounds like is a small amplifier. In fact, the presentation here is big, rich, and ruthlessly controlled – in a good way –, ensuring this tiny box drives small monitors like the Neat Iotas with real grip and certainty, allowing them to deliver not just surprising bass, but also a degree of detail that's quite a revelation.

Playing Carole King & James Taylor's 2007 *Live at the Troubadour* set, the warmth and intimacy of the event is evoked beautifully by the Anni/Neat combination: OK, so it's not the most demanding of recordings, but the easygoing rapport between the two and the relaxed ambience comes through in a pleasing manner, and it's easy to be swept along in the atmosphere, kick back and enjoy the music-making. The tunes may be familiar, but the sense of occasion is palpable.

Similarly playing the sultry 'The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea' on *What Happens Next*, the latest set by blues guitarist Davy Knowles, the Chord amp delivers great scale in the bass and drums, and gives the guitar and voice plenty of space to do their stuff, bringing out the drama of the arrangement, while having plenty of power to allow the level to be cranked. Meanwhile the inherent control and finesse here is very apparent with Jonathan's Fournel's recording of the Brahms *Handel Variations* (on Alpha): each note is clearly defined and decays into the acoustic in an entirely credible manner, whether in the more delicate variations or when Fournel is playing his Yamaha grand forte, the percussive effect of each strike of the hammers on string truly exciting.

REVIEW

The Anni does detail and drive with equal flair, so it's perhaps no surprise that it's as adept with large-scale orchestral music or powerful rock, driving the little lotas with plenty of attack and control, while also proving a fine companion for high-quality headphones, as perhaps one might expect given the quality of the headphone amplification elsewhere in the Chord Electronics range. However, what it did next came as more of a shock...

Playing devil's advocate, I pulled the Anni out of my desktop set-up, and plugged it between the Naim ND555/2x555 PS network player and my Neat Iota Xplorer speakers in my 'main room' system. And yes, it looked faintly ridiculous sitting atop one of my equipment racks, dwarfed by the array of Naim boxes, not to mention being installed between £28,000-worth of front end and speakers with a tag in excess of £4000. But despite this unusual balance of system budget – although perhaps assisted by the higher 88dB/W/m sensitivity of the unusual Neat floorstanders – I was surprised to hear what the Anni could do in this set-up, and what was planned as a swift experiment turned into a longer listening session.

True, I wouldn't suggest this rig if most of my listening was to Wagner, or rock music at neighbour-rattling attempts at stadium levels, but there was no gainsaying the ability of the diminutive Chord amp to give a fine account of itself with more relaxed music at everyday listening settings. The Xplorers, with their upward-tilted midrange and AMT treble driver underpinned by the company's isobaric bass layout, are capable not only of a soundstage image appearing to float above the speakers, but also serious low-end impact when required, and playing the Fournel

piano recording through the Naim/Chord/Neat system showed all this to good effect, the size of the instrument and the superb playing both very much on offer, with both focus and a real sense of air in the acoustic, and a winning combination of speed and slam in the dynamics of the final 'Fuga'.

Both surprised and encouraged, I tried the beautifully-produced and unashamedly genre-hopping *The Lockdown Sessions*, the latest Elton John album, created from collaborations ranging from Gorillaz, Pnau, and Lil Nas X through to Eddie Vedder and Stevie Nicks. What could be an exercise in self-indulgence has instead turned out to be an absolute belter of an album, from the dramatic cover of the Pet Shop Boys' 'It's a Sin', opening with Olly Alexander's fragile vocal before Our Reg unleashes the big production and disco beats, to the 'rundown bar in Backofbeyond, Texas' ambience of 'Simple Things' and the gospel-tinged 'Finish Line', with no less than Stevie Wonder on vocals and harp. The Anni amp revels in the performances and the lavish production here, sounding big beyond its tiny form and modest on-paper output, entirely in control and above all a whole load of fun.

Rather as Elton's all-star set defies expectations, so too does this little Chord amplifier: after encountering what it can do in an unlikely set-up, it's clear that it's going to be well within its comfort zone in a desktop system or driving high-quality smaller speakers of reasonable sensitivity in modest-sized rooms, plus its almost toy-like dimensions and simple facilities bely a highly accomplished design. This is no novelty, but instead rather a fine amplifier over which the Chord team has run the magic shrinking-ray.

HIFICRITIC
HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Specifications

Chord Anni

Type	Integrated amplifier
Inputs	Two line
Other connections	12v DC power output, grounding terminal
Outputs	One pair of speakers; headphones on 3.5mm and 6.35mm sockets
Power output	10W per channel into 8ohms
Accessories supplied	15V Offboard power supply, Qutest power adapter
Dimensions (WxHxD)	16x4.25x9.66cm
Weight	625g

chordelectronics.co.uk

