

Townshend Allegri+ Preamplifier

Dominic Marsh

Hifi Pig

In this world exclusive review Dan Worth and Dominic Marsh take a listen to the new Allegri+ passive preamplifier using autoformers from Townshend Audio and costing £2400.

Unless you have been living on the far side of the moon that rarely sees the light of day, then Max Townshend will be a name that you associate with quality and extremely well thought out products, which perform excellently and are solidly engineered. Townshend's Allegri+ the successor to the popular Allegri has just been announced to be hitting the market and I've been lucky enough to get one of the very first units to leave the factory.



After the huge success of the Allegri Passive Autotransformer Preamplifier, the boffins at Townshend Audio Engineering, under the guidance of one of the industries true thinkers – Max Townshend, has created the latest and improved version of the Allegri Family. I'm sure many would agree with me that it was a real class act, offering a natural and dynamic presentation with infectious agility and speed. So what does the + version offer in terms of superior sound quality and build over its lower priced predecessor?

Fit and Finish

The Allegri+ comes in a very similar jacket to the Allegri, being only a centimetre or two larger all around and weighing in at a slightly heavier 2kgs against the previous units 1.5kgs, quite unnoticeable unless the two are side to side. The immediate visual difference being a 3.5mm stereo input on the front panel under the mute switch. Volume and input selector witches look the same along with the overall layout and dimensions. So not much going on visuals alone. The Autotransformers are wound using Townshend's very own Fractal wire and coated in ultra thin Mu foil to maintain transparency and dynamics. Being a transformer design – as I have explained previously – will in short (when designed correctly) ensure that the amplifier will be matched perfectly with the source component, leading to better dynamics, transparency and a practically silent noise floor.

I must admit, the Allegri+ doesn't leap out of the box and do a sexy dance for its new owner but it takes but a few mere moments for one to take a moment and appreciate the quality of the engineering.

The Allegri+ is far from ugly and Max should be offended if anyone was to call it industrial looking. Personally I like the styling, I love the footprint and admire the precision in its build.



Under the hood there are a few other tweaks, Max will only say that “inside are some critical upgrades to isolation, chassis and metallurgy, which in combination take the Allegri+ to a new level of musical performance.”

Installation

Installing the Allegri+ was an absolute breeze in comparison to many components due to its size and connectivity, usually I'm bending into all sorts of shapes tracking cables and running extra power leads etc, so being able to place the 1/3 sized component in between amps on my top shelf and easily connect the couple of Analogue cables without needing to empty shelves etc was a blessing, especially as it arrived one Friday morning while Dominic and I were having a little listening session before we went out for a bite and a beer.

The Sound

We soon had the Allegri+ plumbed in for a quick listen before we went out the door and both sat there happily listening to a range of different music for over an hour before we went out a little later than expected. We chatted about our initial thoughts in the car. I was very impressed with the bandwidth and dynamics but felt that midrange was a little forward and a touch hard during the early stages of its running in period and Dominic was pretty much in agreement, with us both being pretty stunned at how good the Allegri+ sounded fresh out of the box.

I'm running the Allegri+ from my DiDiT 212SE DAC which is fed files from the Melco N1/a2, into a Gamut d200 mk3 power amp, which is a great match for my modified Ayon Ceramics. The Gamut has been the best combination amp with the Ayons I have heard to date and the Audio Music R-T1 Preamplifier which added some real beauty to the powerhouse that is the Gamut. However installing the Allegri+ in place of the R-T1 did two things, firstly it increased the precision of the extension of the top-end and secondly sucked out the noise floor like a vacuum.

The R-T1 is a phenomenal piece of equipment and takes some serious beating, but where its beautiful valve line stage adds character/colouration to the signature of the system, the Townshend doesn't...at all. The honesty of the Allegri+ is humbling, even for the R-T1. The R-T1 does many magnificent things and side by side the R-T1 is hard to beat, but the characteristics of the Allegri+ give fond memories of why I loved the Allegri so much.

The Allegri+ is one of the most effortless and honest sounds you will ever hear, with a top end that is as crystal clear as fine cut diamonds and has a bandwidth that stretches on for days. Play any of your favourite music and try and work out where all the added bass comes from. The common statement “it's like having no preamp” is BS if you ask me, I prefer the term transparent.

A preamp has an awful lot of work to do in refining the input signal and in most cases manipulating it which colours it inevitably, while matching output impedances etc. In the case of the Allegri+ you are fully aware when it hits the shelf; things change, for the better, well, it depends what preamp you have now and how coloured you enjoy your music, but if like me all you want is the truest, purest rendition of the music in the most natural and effortless way possible then read on.

Temptations arise so quickly to start digging out albums you haven't listened to for so long once the Allegri+ is run in (over about three weeks). Gone is any forwardness allowing bandwidth extensions at both ends to gain more definition and inner details throughout the hugely wide and tall soundstage. I spent many a day listening intently to the Allegri+, I could say that I prefer the way some details are handled on the R-T1 and arguments could be made about its infectious midrange but the Allegri+ just has this, how can I say it... soul power.



It's like falling in love with the cute girl next door and telling Claudia Schiffer to get her toothbrush and assortment of fancy frillies and go away!

Because what has replaced her is a big hearted, kind souled human being that doesn't need all the bells and whistles to be special in my eyes, she's ambitious, honest and intelligent. Now that may sound a bit soppy but I don't care.

Emotionally the Allegri+ takes me to places where music makes sense.

I like to be surprised and to be honest I didn't really hold out too much hope for the Allegri+ being this much better than the standard version, which doesn't do the job quite as well as the + but also has a big heart.

Now that the forwardness of the midrange had disappeared through burn in, I found vocals to be earthly and almost eerie at times, standing proud and poised of the depth of soundstage that the Allegri+ added through its lack of background noise.

The height and breadth of the soundstage makes sense to me. The overall picture was as broad as the bandwidth and all notes, cues, decays, vocals and acoustics seemed to have been graciously given the correct space, making many other preamps at this price sound a little congested and restrained. The art of a great passive is simple to plan out, but extremely difficult to implement when it comes to employing the finer details of construction.

I've also heard many other passives that seem to fall short of what their technology stipulates is theoretically possible and only a handful in my time have been pretty good to great. That's why I have never really championed a passive in the past in my system. Of course I went over to the Audio Music R-T1 which is an active hybrid (TVC with active valve line stage) we could say and that is a dream to own but it's been the real first time that I have really fallen in love with a TVC.

What makes the new Townshend Allegri+ great is that it seems to clarify the signal, puts one arm on its shoulder and just says calm down, relax...now go! The speed in which drum rolls especially come rolling towards the listening position is almost startling. Transients swing up and down around and round. Play Rachelle Farrell's 'Can I Explain' and give it some volume and the dynamics of her vocals are mind blowing at times, but what a good preamp will offer is an almost as astonishing dynamic natural tone to the accompanying piano and yes you guessed it, the Townshend really excelled here. The special awareness of the performance was almost as strong as the R-T1 costing a fair bit more and bettering many pres I've heard in and around its price bracket.

The R-T1 and Allegri+ amps sound different and the Allegri+ does do some things which are maybe kind of, I think, possibly a little better at times...but its main attribute is it just makes you fall in love with the music and if it doesn't your listening too hard to the equipment and not the music, and if you're not wanting the music to emotionally connect with, you get a couple satellites and a subwoofer!

I wanted to take the Allegri+ over to my mate Richard's for a listen, I wanted to compare it with his Sowter transformer based passive and couple of valve preamps, however as usual Dick had two of the preamps on the bench making modifications and amendments to tailor them more specifically to his system and room. Fortunately the only pre that wasn't being cannibalised was the Sowter based TVC. Fed into a Parasound Halo A21 there hasn't been any hesitation in its abilities to drive the large Trolls Graveson design speakers which Dick has further modified.

His tastes in music are very broad and he really appreciates a lot of West African and Indian influences. Sometimes his tastes are a little too eclectic for me, but he does find some material which I really enjoy and during my visit with the Allegri+ he was kind enough to play some music which I really did enjoy.

Muslimgauze 'Mullah Said' was one of our first choices, with the Allegri+ replacing the Sowter TVC notes were far better defined and sound staging had far more air. The overall image was much cleaner and rhythms gained pace with far more expression of this massively expressive form of music which is constructed of many layered instruments and comes across as a real piece of art.

Amongst some of my more common listens we also spent a little time with Mari Boine a Norwegian Sami musician known for having added jazz and rock to the yolks of her native people. With a playful and sometimes sombre vocal Mari's accompanying musicians had as much attention to their contributions as she did in the front. There no denying the clean and open nature of the Allegri+ but what it has to rivals others in the same playground is the ability to stay absolutely natural regardless of volume.

Conclusion

Choosing the correct preamp for any system requires lengthy amounts of ongoing research. Generally it's easier, although not to be brushed off as simpler to implement a power amp that has all the basic requirements for driving the loudspeakers.

Valve, transistor, digital or passives such as TVC, AVC or simple attenuators have their pros and cons. A TVC is generally regarded as having an ease of installation between source and amplifier, due to its resulting impedance control, but in practice the topology isn't fool proof and although the design states that perfect matching between source and amp should be attained, practice has proven that often this is not the case.

What Townshend Audio Engineering have managed to do is create a set of transformers which will be compatible with the majority of amplifiers and to implement the topology in a way that sounds just sublime. Transparent to source and engagingly natural, the Allegri+ builds on the strengths of the previous Allegri.

Reducing the noise floor with tighter tolerance transformer windings using the companies Fractal wiring, with improvements in isolation and chassis damping, the new Allegri+ takes the natural and dynamic performance of the companies award winning preamp to the next level.

Giving the Allegri+ an Outstanding Product Award is so easy and I urge anybody who has been considering a passive preamplifier to put the Allegri+ from Townshend at the top of their list.

Dan Worth

Dan's nomination for the Townshend Allegri Plus pre-amplifier to be awarded an Outstanding Product gong has to be tested and verified by a second Hifi Pig reviewer, so we now hand over to Dominic Marsh for his verdict to vouch for the nomination.

I was at Dan's place when the courier delivered the Townshend Allegri+ pre-amplifier during one of our regular get-togethers and rarely have I seen him in such a state of eager anticipation while waiting for the courier to ring on the doorbell. We were actually due to go out for some lunch and my stomach was grumbling long before that doorbell rang and was very keen to go out and be fed, but Dan insisted we connect up the Allegri+ first before we went out. Whenever Dan uninstalls or installs anything in his rack there is Dan on his knees with an arm reaching around a lot doing plenty of fumbling around behind the rack and a sizeable portion of cussing for good measure while making the connections. Within a few minutes though, the Allegri was up and running with no accompanying profanities from Dan. That was a real shock, not about the amazing speed of installation, but the utter silence from the man. Note in diary was made.

I have a pre/power combo myself and to be honest I obsess a good deal less than Dan does over his system and I do like to stick to what I have, unless of course a component comes along that clearly and obviously is better than what I already have and I can warrant the outlay. Having said that, in nearly 3 years of knowing Dan and his evolving system which has gone from "nice" in those early days to almost "stunning" now (!), each one of his upgrades has been worthwhile with rarely any sideways and never any backwards steps. When the Audio Music R-T1 pre-amp was matched to the Gamut power amp and feeding his Ayon speakers there was nothing to fault with it according to my hearing. When the Townshend Allegri+ went in yet another perfect match was obtained and as Dan has said, the MUSIC took over the proceedings.

Dan and I have a long standing debate over the drummer's floor tom whacks in Fink's "Wheels Beneath My Feet" live album during the track 'Sort of Revolution'. I had yet to hear the power and energy of those drum strikes from Dan's system as I do from mine in my own listening room and Dan attributes this entirely to my room dimensions, whereas I say it's system dependent. With the Townshend Allegri+ installed there was considerably more power behind those drum strikes which did reverberate around the room far more than usual, so I say the score is one goal to nil in my favour. No doubt 'himself' will still disagree and we probably will still squabble over this for a long time to come.

Another plus trait I found with the Allegri+ is the way it maintains a good relationship between sound level and volume, as in when the volume control is incremented upwards the sound levels increase commensurately without any blare or perceived 'loudness' breaking through and muddying the music. There is nothing worse than when the volume is turned up the system starts 'shouting' or blaring at you and the way the Allegri+ did up the volume level and maintain the same linear amplitude levels was impressive and that shows excellent design and build.

AT A GLANCE

To sum up then, I agree that the Townshend Allegri+ merits an Outstanding Product award and I endorse the nomination unreservedly.

Build Quality: Solid, sturdy and precise

Sound Quality: Natural, dynamic and expressively effortless

Value For Money: Show me a preamp that does more for the money and I'll show you a bacon sandwich with wings.