



THE SUGDEN A21A

Does the name sound familiar? Old time audiophiles will know the name Sugden, because in the dark days of hi-fi, when mass-market electronics seemed poised to swamp music under its dull grey cloak, Sugden was one of a handful of British companies that offered alternatives. Its name became synonymous with integrated amplifiers that didn't have the grey sound of the flashy receivers that were on all the store shelves. We still fondly recall the A25 and the A28, which didn't seem like much...until you turned them on.

Sugden says that the A21 was its original amplifier, though it arrived much later on these shores. When it did finally come, it made something of a splash. Here was a small, affordable amplifier that ran in pure class A, seeming to promise performance at low level that would put larger amplifiers to shame. Sure it ran hot, but energy was all but free then, right?

Ah...the good old days!

The A21 was on the cover of *UHF* No. 28 (that cover is shown on the next page). The issue was published back in 1990, and it had good things to say about the amplifier, for example that "the Sugden A21 marks an important milestone in the company's journey into the higher reaches of high fidelity." That came as no surprise, because by then, it should be noted, we had adopted a Sugden preamplifier (the Au-51c) for our reference system, and we kept it for some years.

The new version (official name: A21 AL Series 2) looks much like the original, but with a new, thicker front panel. The balance control and mono button are gone, as are the labels on the inputs, but there is now a remote control.

We thought we recalled that the original A21 used the excellent binding posts from J. A. Michell. Michell doesn't make those anymore (we know, because we bought the entire remaining stock), but the posts on the A21a *look* like them. The Michell name is not on them, and so we can only conclude that they are knockoffs. They seem much better machined than most of the knockoffs we've seen, fortunately. We were less enthusiastic about the jacks. The A21a has four high level inputs plus the optional phono input. There is no tape loop, but there is both a preamp output and a "tape" output.

Oh yes, the optional phono stage. The amplifier *is* available with a phono board (C\$249 more), accepting either MM or MC phono cartridges, but ours didn't have it installed. If you have deeper pockets, the A21a SE (not tested) is available for C\$4999.

One aspect that hasn't changed is the operating temperature. You can't *quite* raise blisters by touching the amp's side dissipation fins when it is fully warmed up, but you'll want to keep contact as brief as possible. If the cat falls asleep on

An old favorite, reincarnated

top of the amp, it could be curtains for both of them.

The high temperature is the result of the class A operation: the output transistors in push-pull configuration run flat out whether they are needed or not. That smooths out the low-level signals, when one device hands off to the other. That's wasteful, obviously, and the extra energy is dissipated as heat. Because the amplifier is compact, the heat is more concentrated, and its operating temperature is therefore higher. Sugden doesn't recommend leaving the A21a switched on all the time, and we understand *why*. If you have an equipment cabinet, the Sugden will be happier on the top shelf.

Remembering our happy experience with the older amplifier, we rather expected this one to be at least pretty good for the money. We can tell you right off that it caught us completely by surprise, and that the surprise grew and grew with each recording we listened to.

The listening session was held in our Alpha room, with its easy-to-drive Living Voice OBX-R speakers. We figured the Sugden would have an easier time there than it would have had trying to drive the Reference 3a Suprema speakers in our Omega system. Even so, it was up against tough competition: the magnificent Copland CTA-305 tube preamplifier and the powerful Moon W-5LE power amplifier. We wouldn't be going easy on it, but as it turned out we didn't have to!

We set up our Linn Unidisk 1.1 universal player and lined up several demanding recordings, only one of which was an actual Red Book CD. As always we listened to all of the recordings with our reference electronics, and we selected rather loud levels. If the Sugden couldn't follow...well, that would be duly noted.

We began with a favorite, a choral recording that can sound breathtaking for its depth, its coherence and its musical joy, but which is quick to fall apart if *anything* is wrong in the system. It is of course *Now the Green Blade Riseth* (Proprius PRSACD9093). If we selected equipment for reviews at random, rather than choosing products that *might* be all

right, this recording would often send us reaching for the Excedrin bottle.

But not this time. The solo flute which opens the piece sounded magnificently detailed and natural, and it remained audible even once there was a lot more happening. The rest sounded very good as well. The voices of both the men and the women were natural, at once smooth and detailed, as they would be in a live performance. The plucked bass marked the insistent rhythm, and we had no difficulty making out the pipe organ that joins the choir in the final crescendo. Did the Sugden strain a little more than our much powerful reference amplifier on that crescendo? Oh, perhaps a little, but that wasn't what dominated our attention.

What this recording is especially know for is the illusion of depth. That's true of the Red Book CD, and it is doubly true of the SACD version we were listening to. Here again we were pleased with what we heard. The space was large and accommodating.

Well, we would now see what this amplifier is *really* capable of. You wouldn't pick an amplifier this size for lifelike reproduction of a flat-out organ piece like Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor* (Opus 3 CD22031), or would you?

We did, and once again the Sugden rewarded us with a nearly impeccable performance. Even in the *plein jeux* opening passage, which calls for generous use of the pedals, the sound had a fullness and an amplitude that seemed out of sync with the A21a's reduced dimensions, to say nothing of its rated power. And it's not as though we held back on the volume. Reine and Albert both wrote the word "majesty" in their notes. At the same time, the complex counterpoints in the smaller pipes were easy to follow, reproduced as they were with surprising clarity. Distortion? Not known here.

Our next recording, like the first two, offered qualities beyond what a mere CD can produce. It was the Hi-Res version of the Ray Brown Trio's *Soular Energy*, from which we played the old standard, *Take the 'A' Train*. This is a two-sided disc, note. On one side is a high-resolution (96 kHz sampling at 24 bits) playable on any DVD player. But we selected the

other side, a DVD-Audio version with 192 kHz sampling from what was a very good Concord Jazz analog master tape. It isn't actually easy to play a DVD-A if you don't have a video monitor (as our Alpha system doesn't have), but with imagination and the punching of a few buttons we got to the selection we wanted.

"Wow!" was what Albert said once the piece had ended. The three musicians were full-sized, as they should be with properly-made high-resolution media, and there was no shrinking down from the amplifier. Gene Harris's piano introduction was gorgeous, and even the later passages, in which he hits the keys

at the extreme right with considerable force, seemed natural. The soft cymbal seemed to hang in the air, and the gentle brushing of the snare drum added a delicate touch.

Right after the introduction, Ray Brown's commanding bass dictated the strong swing rhythm, before it then took on the melody, something you don't hear bassists do every day. "It's sensuous," said Reine. "Listen to the way his fingers touch the strings of his instrument!"

But could this small amplifier give the bass all of the low-pitched power

that our larger amp could and did? No, of course not, "but the bass has all of the weight it needs to have, and it all hangs together perfectly," said Gerard. It was unanimous.

We had one more DVD-Audio in the mix, the remastered Beatles album created by George Martin and his son Giles for the Cirque du Soleil show, *Love*. We have the deluxe version, with a second disc containing three versions: Dolby Digital, dts, and DVD-A. We popped the disc into our Linn Unidisk, and with no prompting it launched the DVD-A version of the first number, *Because*.

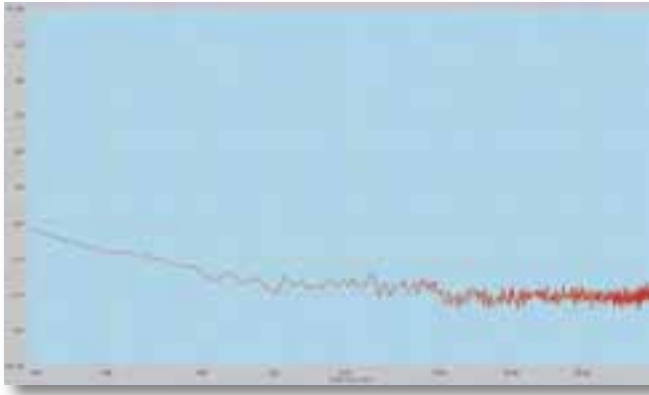
This is an amazing song, a demonstration of the harmony that gave the group the unique sound that changed the musical world. In the *Love* version, small pauses have been inserted between phrases, to let us hear the subtle woodland sounds that the Martins placed behind the music.

It sounded at least as good as it had with our reference components. There was in fact a little more emphasis on the articulation of the voices. "This could actually be a flaw rather than a quality," said Gerard, "but it underlines the way John, Paul, George and Ringo created their sound." Albert and Reine agreed.



SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Sugden A21a
Price: C\$3250
Size (WDH): 43 x 32 x 9 cm
Inputs: Four high level, optional phono, no tape loop
Rated power: 25 watts/channel
Most liked: Extraordinary musicality at every level
Least liked: Give me ventilation, or give me death
Verdict: For Sugden, the hi-fi revolution has never ended



Gibson's expressive voice was astonishing to hear, with every emotional inflection clear, but without an exaggeration that might come at the expense of some other aspect of the song. Lincoln Mayorga's accompanying piano was subtle and delicate, and the cello played with poignant

at 1 kHz. It maintained that across the band, except at 20 Hz, where we got just under 17 watts.

Noise performance, shown in the graph at left, was excellent, remaining below -100 dB at low frequencies, dipping to -120 dB over much of the range

Adjacent input crosstalk, on the other hand, was the worst we have seen in a long time, with leakage at -54 dB at midband, worsening considerably to -34 dB at 10 kHz. If you have a tuner, shut it down while you're listening to something else.

We're still not sure what to make of this amplifier. Lest we give you the wrong impression, it *does* have limits, which are hinted at by our maximum power readings. If we had asked it to drive the large Suprema speakers in our Omega system, as we did with the other integrated amplifier reviewed in this issue, the result would have been different. It is, however, a perfect match for the Alpha system, and it was at home there.

In the right system, it can make you forget that you had any budget constraints whatsoever.



"Their voices are better separated," said Albert, "and that makes the harmony even more successful."

It was time for a final recording, a conventional CD this time, Margie Gibson's *You Keep Coming Back Like a Song*, from her album *Say It With Music* (Sheffield CD-36). This fine recording is also fragile, and it's easy for an amplifier — or pretty much anything else — to mess it up. But at its best...

And it *was* pretty much at its best with the Sugden. Gerard thought her "S" sounds *might* be a little prominent, but even that hint at a slight failing brought protests from the two other panelists.

There was a natural clarity that left each artists his or her rightful place.

Albert put it even more succinctly in his brief notes, which we quote in their entirety: "Margie was there in front of us, and so were her musicians."

Having experienced what can only be called a virtuoso performance, we were curious to see how the Sugden would do on the test bench, though of course no mere measurement could contradict what we had heard on recording after recording.

The Sugden didn't *quite* meet its power rating, clipping at 20.48 watts

CROSSTALK

LISTENING ROOM

Was the original A21 this good? I went back to issue No. 28 and re-read the description. It *was* a good amplifier, no question, probably the best Sugden had ever produced, but it didn't sound like this.

What can I say about this amplifier? I can say that it's really terrific, except that... Except that what? It did everything we asked it to do, and did it in a way that left us looking at each other in amazement. It is a cheap ticket to a very high fidelity system.

True, it has "only" 25 watts per channel of available power. Bear that in mind when you're shopping for speakers, but if you look for speakers as good as this amplifier, they'll have to be some speakers!

—Gerard Rejskind

Was it all a dream?

It *does* happen that I feel I need to pinch myself to make sure an event really occurred. The qualities of this integrated amplifier are beyond anything I had expected. Now,

I might suppose that the surprise originates with the amplifier's modest price, but no. Even if it were to cost a lot more than it does, I would succumb to the same emotions, and I would arrive at the same conclusion. It's a champion.

Image, spaciousness, presence of the artists, nuances, inflections, tints and pastels in the instruments, the voices, the chorales, even in the organ. This goes beyond mere excellence, all the way to transcendence.

Bravo to Sugden, and bravo also to audiophiles who make themselves the gift of the A21a. They surely deserve it. There may never be another opportunity to get a product packing such magic at this sort of price. Strike the iron while it's...well, you know the saying.

—Reine Lessard

I sincerely wasn't prepared for this.

I knew about its ancestor and, being aware of so many technological advances

since then, I was expecting a good, honest performance, something that would make me feel good, as Sugden used to. But *not* this. Not something that would even cast doubts about some aspects of our reference system.

This is no entry-level Sugden, nor is it something to temporarily fill the space between your player and your speakers while you're searching for a two-piece set. This is *it*, folks. This is your next upgrade, wherever you are at, and it will not only replace your pair of amps and interconnects, it might erase any memory of them altogether.

At first, you'll often find yourself watching the space between and around your speakers in disbelief, stuck, as I was, in a raised-eyebrows-drooping-jaw mode. Later on you'll find yourself looking at the considerable amount of change left over to buy more CDs and LPs — bringing joy to your quiet moments.

—Albert Simon