

Play Day

Audiolab's new 6000A Play amplifier has DTS Play-Fi internet connectivity. Noel Keywood tunes in.

Audiolab's 6000A 50W amplifier (£599) has made a name for itself, with clean open sound and plenty of facilities including Bluetooth wireless link and a Phono stage for LP. The new 6000A Play I'm reviewing here adds DTS Play-Fi technology for streaming music from online sources

such as Spotify, or domestic sources such as a networked PC. There is a Play-Fi app to control this, plus a conventional remote control, the two working side-by-side. Price £799.

The 6000A Play is similar in basic spec. to Quad Vena II and Leak Stereo 130 50W amplifiers also in the IAG stable, but there are differences. Measurement revealed

this is a wideband amplifier, the others are not. So think a brighter, more open, even 'fast' sound than from Quad or Leak brands, even though power is the same.

The Audiolab has a Mode function of Integrated / Pre-Power, or Pre alone, adding flexibility for those who want to play around with different combos. As with its stable



mates there's a digital section based on the ESS ES9018 digital convertor chip. This amplifier is technically complex, especially at the price – and that's ignoring Play-Fi. Missing are balanced XLR inputs and USB for computer link; also the remote does not source select.

That's a quick outline of what's on offer here in terms of hardware. Now on to Play-Fi.

There is a generation brought up on wi-fi for whom wires are a lurch back to the past. I'm alluding to my 20 year old son who's not going to be convinced that an ethernet cable is better than wi-fi for watching Netflix. Those who similarly demand a wi-fi link can gaze in happiness at the Audiolab's two external wi-fi aerials at right (looking from front); the aerial at left is for Bluetooth. External aerials give best reception

/ data rate over long distance, but I used ethernet back to the router – as recommended by Audiolab if not by my son – for best results. However, the Play-Fi app connects into the network via the phone's wi-fi link, in my case from an iPhone 10X Pro talking to a recent BT Smart Hub 2 router.

The Play-Fi app isn't the easiest to understand, its user interface is plain peculiar I find, but you get used to it. In addition to commercial on-line music sources, including Amazon Music, Tidal, Qobuz, Internet Radio and many more, it can also play music stored on the 'phone or on a PC (with Windows Media Player set to Streaming), both of which worked fine for me. My router's client list and Windows 10 PC picked up the Audiolab straight away, identifying it as a PlayFi Device, and both sources

could be controlled from the 'phone, volume being synchronised between app and amplifier. I played 24/96 Flac files from the PC without problem, but whilst checking all this I realised Windows Media Player cannot stream DSD natively and the 6000A Play has no USB input for computer connection to stream DSD via DoP, even though the ES9018 DAC has DSD conversion on-board. A work around seems to be loading BluOS onto Windows or Mac – but I shied away from this one! The easiest way to load DSD is from flash memory but that option is not available on the Audiolab either.

Talking digital brings me on to digital options available. There are three filters: Fast, Slow and Phase. Fast is a filter that gives widest bandwidth and best measured performance figure (which is why



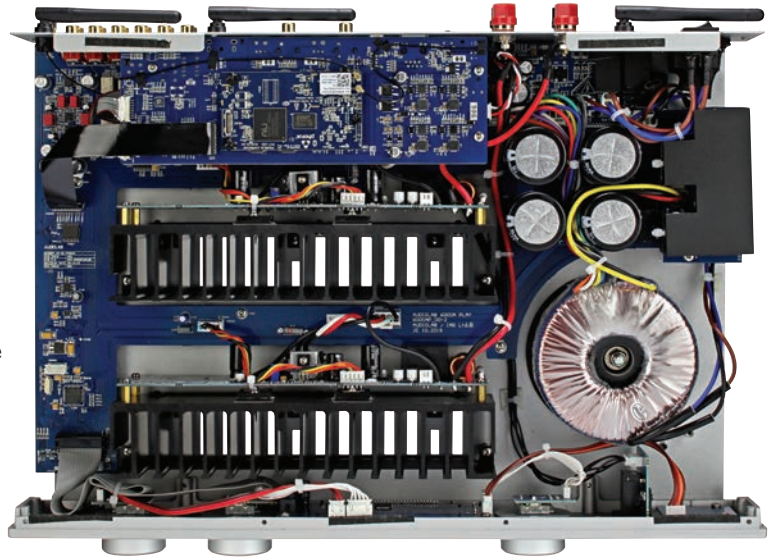
it is commonly used), but a time-domain impulse response that has pre and post ringing of transients. Slow cleans up the impulse response and, I find, sounds easier and more natural; I end up choosing slow filters. Audiolab's Phase option I do not know but they say it is a Slow filter with better phase characteristics. Unfortunately, these are not M-DAC style (John Westlake) filters, but add-ins to the ES9018 that have little effect measurement showed, so no reason to get excited here.

Then there are Normal or 'Phase Lock Loop' (PLL) options. They have nothing to do with phase in the filters, rather it is about capturing a digital signal. The electrical and optical digital 2 inputs can be switched to Wide to capture a signal that has wide phase variation, typically from old digital tape sources, to prevent stuttering.

I was heartened to see that the optical digital input accepts 192kHz sample rate and that the internal ES9018 DAC gives good dynamic range to tease high quality sound from hi-res digital. Not Audiolab M-DAC+ quality but respectable.

And finally the MM phono stage has been given very high gain measurement showed, allowing it to work with moving coil cartridges – another peculiar wrinkle in this product's make up that goes unmentioned.

And then a finally finally. High gain in a phono stage makes it very sensitive. Popping sounds came from one channel whilst the wi-fi system was searching for a local network: the phono stage was picking up RF.



At right a linear power supply with circular toroidal mains transformer. At centre base plate cooling vents beneath the amplifier's heatsinks. Circuit boards are packed with miniature components placed by robots. A complex amplifier.

To listen to LP I ensured the wi-fi was not in search mode by plugging in an ethernet cable link to the server, to over-ride wi-fi linkage. So, providing Play-Fi works on this amplifier, LP works too!

SOUND QUALITY

The Audiolab 6000A Play was connected to our Martin Logan ESL-X hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers via Chord Company Signature Reference cables. Sources were an Oppo UDP-205D Universal player acting as a CD transport, connected with a QED Quartz glass fibre optical cable. I spun LP on our Timestep Evo modified Technics SL-1210 Mk2 turntable, with SME309 arm and

Audio Technica VM750 SH (Shibata) moving magnet cartridge, also an Audio Technica OC9X moving coil.

Running through a slew of uncompressed (high dynamic range) review tracks from CD, as measurement suggested the 6000A Play is very different in sound character to IAG's Quad and Leak amplifiers. It has a bright, clear hue that not only forces out detail but made the close miked guitar strings of Nils Lofgren's guitar in Keith Don't Go quite challenging. There was a sense of forensic insight and the ability to dig up detail.

Skunk Anansie's Hedonism brought out many strengths, notably a powerful and expressive bass line at



Twin wi-fi aerials (left) and a Bluetooth aerial (right) ensure good radio reception at long range. Crucial to wi-fi connectivity was a tiny activation button beside the central RJ45 ethernet connector (centre). The Digital 1 and Digital 2 inputs (centre right) differed in that the latter can have Wide digital capture applied – an unusual function.

start, whilst the jangling (distorted?) guitars did just that – jangled – rather than sounding harsh and muddled; this is a strength of the ES9018 DAC. With Skin clear and strongly

open sound stage, power to kettle drums and good separation between orchestral sections made for drama. I enjoyed this too.

Initially, I used an Audio Technica

easily clear – not crystalline – yet places and keeps images firmly on the sound stage.

CONCLUSION

Audiolab's 6000A Play is a comprehensive package, if with a few omissions such as lack of USB computer link, no XLR inputs and no source select on the remote control. However, balancing that are a raft of great strengths, notably powerful detailed sound that belies its 50W quoted output spec. Add smooth, tidy digital from a great ES9018 DAC and the final deal is very attractive, especially with Play-Fi able to route external digital sources like Tidal, Qobuz, Spotify and Amazon music, plus internet radio, through the fine internal digital section. The tight integration of good digital with a fast detailed amplifier was impressive. I ended up using it as an alternative to our Oppo UPD-205 and Creek Evo 100 combo: it had greater focus. Well worth hearing.



"powerful and expressive bass outside expectations of a 50W amplifier"

embodied centre stage the track sounded better than I am used to – impressive.

The same with WillyDeVillie singing Spanish Harlem (CD). He came over as full bodied, his voice rich with textural content, giving this performance real presence. There was some hardness on vocal pushes – not a soft sound – but also a convincing sense of plausible balance even though I know this recording, where he shouts into the mic, has plenty of sibilant content.

With its ability to dig out atmospheric detail the 6000A Play made a great job of the London Symphony Orchestra playing Holst's Mars, from The Planets. A wide

OC9X moving coil cartridge in our turntable and it worked fine, even though volume had to be turned right up. There was no hiss – but. The OC9X has a hard sounding beryllium cantilever and I felt this was not a best match for the Audiolab. Changing to Audio Technica's VM750SH with its tapered aluminium cantilever and less hard sound was like waving a magic wand. The Audiolab then showed exquisite ability, bettering CD. I was assaulted by the fast drumming in Sing Sing Sing from the Syd Lawrence Orchestra, this Direct Cut LP again showing the Audiolab has powerful and expressive bass outside expectations of a 50W amplifier. It comes over as fast and

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Audiolab 6000A Play produced 50 Watts into 8 Ohms and 90 Watts into 4 Ohms – enough power to go loud in most set-ups.

Distortion measured 0.01% in the midband and the same at 10kHz (both at 1W), showing absence of crossover distortion. At high power the figure remained 0.01% across the audio band.

Via the Aux 1 analogue input frequency response measured flat from 1Hz to 100kHz (-1dB), so this is a very wideband amplifier, unlike IAG's Quad and Leak amplifiers of otherwise similar characteristics. Wideband amps lack warmth but sound 'faster' and apparently more detailed.

The optical S/PDIF digital input worked to 192kHz sample rate, frequency response extending to 37kHz (-1dB) with all three filters, rolling down slowly to the 96kHz upper limit (-5dB). The electrical input gave identical results. The filters had little effect on a 192kHz sample rate input but Slow did slightly curtail CD.

The ESS ES9018 Sabre 32 Series digital-to-analogue converter (DAC) gave a 115dB EIAJ Dynamic Range value from the loudspeaker outputs and same from Pre-out – good if not exceptional figures.

There's no USB input to accept higher sample rates or DSD.

The MM phono stage has very high gain, making it unusually sensitive, just 1.2mV for full output; overload was high at 54mV. Accurate RIAA equalisation gave flat frequency response, but gain rolls down below 20Hz to lessen loudspeaker cone flap from LP warps. The noise figure in dB below full output (21V) looks poor at -66dB, but this is due to high gain. Equivalent input noise – a better measure that reflects what is heard – computes to be a low 0.12µV. High gain allows use of MC cartridges.

Measurement reveals the 6000A Play to be unusual in some areas, but overall it measures well all round. **NK**

Power 55W
Frequency response (-1dB) 1Hz-100kHz
Distortion (10kHz, 1W) 0.01%
Separation (1kHz) 92dB
Noise (IEC A) -103dB
Sensitivity 300mV

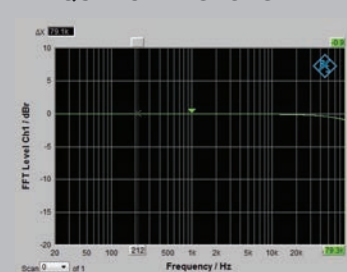
DIGITAL
Frequency response (-1dB) 4Hz-26kHz
Distortion (-60dB, 24bit) 0.04%
Dynamic range (EIAJ) 115dB

PHONO (MM)

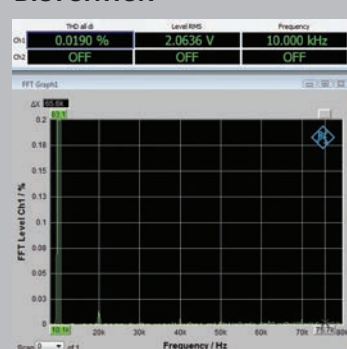
Frequency response (-1dB)

	20Hz-20kHz
Distortion (1kHz, 5mV in)	0.03%
Separation (1kHz)	68dB
Noise (IEC A)	-66dB
Sensitivity	1.2mV
Overload	54mV

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



AUDIOLAB 6000A PLAY £799



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT

Fast powerful sound underpinned by great bass. Not warm, but insightful and gripping.

FOR

- strong insight and detail
- powerful, tight bass
- good digital quality

AGAINST

- no USB
- no XLR
- must have network connection

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