

► **DETAILS**

PRODUCT
Audiolab 8300CD

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
CD Player/DAC

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
444 x 80 x 317mm

FEATURES

- ESS Sabre32 9018 DAC; 32-bit/384kHz PCM, DSD
- Switchable digital filtering
- Digital inputs: 2x coaxial; 2x optical; 1x USB; 1x AES/EBU
- Analogue outputs: 1x stereo RCA; 1x stereo XLR
- Slot-loading CD drive

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Group Ltd

TELEPHONE
01480 447700

WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk



Lab test

David Price puts Audiolab's new 8300A/8300CD integrated amplifier and CD player duo through its paces

Launched in October 1983, Audiolab's original 8000A integrated amplifier was a veritable powerhouse by the standards of the day, with a quoted 50W RMS per channel into 8ohm that virtually doubled into 4ohm. Remarkably, unlike nearly all its rivals, the 8000A could even work into 2ohm loads without going bang. The model was extensively tweaked over the years and by the nineties had become a sort of hi-fi version of the Volkswagen Golf – affordable yet designed and engineered like no others at the price. It lived on for 14 years in its original incarnation, and the 8300A you see here is its latest descendant and arguably most radical

departure. It has been substantially redesigned inside by Jan Ertner, and can function either as an integrated, preamplifier or power amplifier.

The new version uses four bipolar output transistors per channel running in Class AB to give a claimed 75W per channel (into 8ohm, 105W into 4ohm) with a maximum current delivery of 15 amps into difficult loads. The designer says its power amp output stage uses a special complementary feedback topology for linearity and thermal stability, with the idle current kept independent of the temperature of the output transistors. Having the emitter follower deliver additional current only when needed means that

Audiolab's Active Current Drive system can be used, where a microprocessor controller lets the amp supply high currents (+/- 15A) into complex loads if need be. A 300VA toroidal transformer supplies the two mono amplifiers using separate secondary windings, followed by 2x 15,000uF reservoir capacity per channel (60000uF in total).

Built with care

Topologically, the 8300A has been designed to keep the preamp section away from as much noise as possible. It also sports a built-in phono stage, said to have been designed "with care" and featuring MM and MC inputs. Also new is a fascia-mounted OLED ▶



► DETAILS
PRODUCT
 Audiolab 8300A
ORIGIN
 UK/China
TYPE
 Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
 7.8kg
DIMENSIONS
 (WxHxD)
 444 x 80 x 330mm
FEATURES
 • Quoted power:
 2x 75W (8ohm)
 • Class AB operation
 • Inputs: 5x RCA;
 1x XLR; 1x MM/MC
 phono
DISTRIBUTOR
 IAG Group Ltd
TELEPHONE
 01480 447700
WEBSITE
 audiolab.co.uk

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Bi-wire binding posts
- 2 Balanced XLR inputs
- 3 Phono input & earthing terminal
- 4 Asynchronous USB input
- 5 Coaxial & optical digital inputs
- 6 RCA & XLR outputs

display showing volume level, input selection, mode of operation and MM/MC phono setting. The rear has five line-level RCA inputs plus one balanced XLR. Two preamp outputs are fitted, along with a 12V trigger loop and bi-wireable binding posts.

The 8300CD CD player's lineage doesn't go back anywhere as far as its stablemate. It's a light rework of the 8200CD, which appeared in 2011. That's no bad thing, because it was an excellent machine at the price, and an extremely advanced design. It replaces both preamp-equipped and non preamp-equipped variants of its predecessor (the 8200CDP and 8200CD). It sports a new look and a slot-loading transport mechanism, along with the aforementioned full preamp functionality and an improved USB input (32-bit/384kHz rather than its predecessor's 24-bit/96kHz). It now offers DSD playback via USB too; there are four extra filters for DSD playback (in addition to the seven filter settings for PCM files inherited from the 8200CD).

The new Audiolab 8300CD also has a balanced XLR analogue output, and AES/EBU digital in; the former is ideal for feeding the new XLR in on the 8300A. With its preamp functionality, you can now configure the 8300A as a power amplifier, and drive it directly from the 8300CD. The latter has all of its predecessor's rear sockets, including two coaxial and optical digital inputs, upgraded asynchronous USB, single coaxial and optical digital outputs plus single-ended RCA outs and a 12V trigger loop. The fine aluminium finish is available in silver or black.

Sound quality

The 8200A was a well received amplifier four years ago, and still sounds very respectable now. As you might expect, it has a good deal of the 8000A's family sound – meaning a tight, taut, crisp character with powerful yet sinewy bass and a strong,

well-defined soundstage. In truth, the new 8300A doesn't divert far from this, bringing a little more power to the table, and a slightly more open and dynamic nature. It seems a little fresher and less introspective; if we're honest its predecessor could sound a little shut in and mechanical compared with the best of the rest at the price, and there's less of that sense with this new machine.

I initially run it as an integrated amplifier partnered up to my reference dCS Debussy DAC, yet it doesn't sound particularly bothered by its exotic companion, serving up a powerful and lively rendition of The Kink's *Village Green Preservation Society*. This is a warm and soft recording with a lilting musical feel, and not something the 8200A

This integrated has a commanding nature that is obviously up for fun

would automatically sound good with, but the new Audiolab is unfazed and dives into the song with aplomb. You can certainly feel the family character; the 8300A is a long way from being as tonally fulsome as Arcam's FMJ A39 for example (HFC 394), and won't flatter a poor recording. Rather, it gives a spry, detailed and distinctly 'matter of fact' rendition of what it is asked to play – but that doesn't mean it's boring. If the recording is poor it won't guild the lily so to speak, but still likes to get into the groove and power along the song. There's still that slight family 'dryness' that valve amp fans won't warm to, but this generation of Audiolab integrated clearly has a commanding nature that is obviously up for fun. The song



The newest rival to the Audiolab 8300CD is Roksan's K3 CD Di, costing £1,300 (HFC 403). It is more expensive, yet isn't as well presented as the Audiolab – indeed the Roksan looks more agricultural, despite an attractive fascia. Its disc drawer isn't as slick as the Audiolab's slot-loader either, and the underside digital input switching is frankly odd. Still, fire up the Roksan and you soon realise that this company hits the mark with the sound. It's more animated and musical than the 8300CD by a good measure. The same goes for Roksan's partnering K3 integrated amplifier (HFC 396), which although a good bit pricier has a more exuberant sound than the 8300A.

The new OLED displays make operation simple

certainly seems to roll along in a satisfyingly musical way.

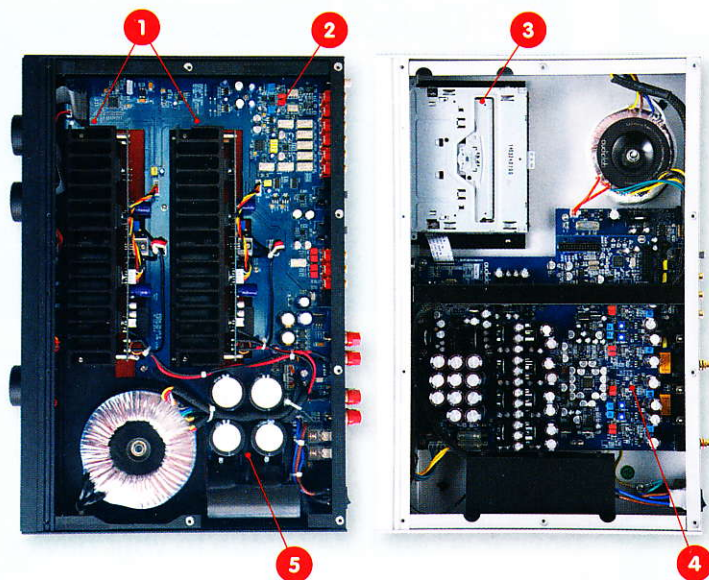
Fed by its partnering 8300CD silver disc spinner, I don't hear quite the drop in fidelity anticipated. The Audiolab CD player is obviously a step or two down from the dCS DAC, but still doesn't embarrass itself. There's a sense that it's very detailed and intricate sounding, but again – like many digital sources using ESS Sabre DAC chips – has a slightly dry tonality that doesn't quite run the full spectrum of tonal colour. Still, in other respects you're quite unprepared for just how good it can sound. For example, Congo Ashanti's *Hail The World Of Jah* has a widescreen soundstage and hangs images back surprisingly deeply. Treble seems a little sweeter than its 8200CD predecessor, and there doesn't seem to be quite as much noise across the midband; its predecessor could appear a little grey and hazy.

Indeed, the new CD player proves quite a surprise. Rhythmically it's not the snappiest of designs, preferring to give a solid, gently flowing sort of musical presentation rather than a frenziedly energetic one, but its appeal is undeniable. This machine has a confident, authoritative sound that's a good deal more svelte and composed than most of its rivals. Feed it some powerful eighties guitar rock, courtesy of The Smiths' *What Difference Does it Make?*, and this rather opaque and thin recording comes over with a surprising degree of smoothness and refinement, yet doesn't sound boring. Again, I am more than a little surprised by this as it seems to have gained subtlety and detail, yet has lost none of its predecessor's punch.

The unit works very well as a digital preamplifier too, with an excellent USB input that gives nothing away to any price rivals. Hi-res PCM via a MacBook Pro running Audirvana is highly enjoyable, the Audiolab bristling with energy and delivering a wonderfully expansive and polished rendition of Chic's *I Want Your Love* at 24/96. The 8300CD is better able to communicate the tonal flavour of the recording than its predecessor, with a fractionally richer and more weighty bass, a subtly less 'grey' midband and silkier treble. Yet despite this it remains very satisfying in musical terms, ably showcasing the superb musicianship that's on this track and its intricate, multi-layered mix. This album certainly isn't the smoothest around and can sound a tad 'toppy' when played back on many rival digital sources, but the Audiolab



IN SIGHT



- 1 Dual mono power amps
- 2 MM/MC phono stage
- 3 Slot-loading CD mechanism
- 4 DAC filter/amplifier stage
- 5 Power supply

WINNING FORMULA

The original Audiolab 8200CD of five years ago was designed by digital whiz John Westlake – also responsible for the legendary Pink Triangle Da Capo, the original Cambridge Audio DACMagic and latterly the *Hi-Fi Choice* 2012 Product of the Year Audiolab M-DAC (HFC 366). Jaws dropped when it came out, because it was technologically highly complex by the standards of the day. It used the (then) brand new ESS Sabre32 9018 DAC chips – a novel hybrid multibit Delta-Sigma design that has gone on to make a great many friends. The redesigned 8300CD continues this with 512 DAC elements (256 per channel) each operating at 84.672MHz

– all digital audio sources, whatever the sample rate, are upsampled or oversampled to this frequency. To go with this, a proprietary, discrete master clock is fitted to reduce jitter. The analogue stages are unchanged, sharing the 8200CD's vast array of smoothing capacitors and regulators, to give as clean a sound as possible. The power supply incorporates 34 regulated supply rails including four ultra-low-noise regulators, with extensive measures against power supply contamination and cross-coupling. The 8300's predecessor had a dry but extremely well resolved sound, and the new machine improves on it still further.

remains a consummate smoothie throughout the duration of the song.

My experience is that this pairing works fractionally better with the 8300CD working as a preamplifier and the 8300A playing the role of a power amplifier, but it is subtle. Working in the conventional way, however, you can take advantage of its surprisingly capable phono stage. Joan Armatrading's *Love And Affection* on vinyl via my Michell GyroDec/Tecno Arm/Lyra turntable is a pleasure. It delivers a noise-free yet gutsy sound with a solid bass, clean and three-dimensional midband and smooth, refined treble. You will do better still if you invest in a good £500 phono stage, but the Audiolab's isn't there simply to tick boxes.

Conclusion

The 8300A is an excellent value integrated amplifier that's an ideal companion to its new CD player and also a fine-sounding product in its own right. Of the two, the 8300CD is the stellar performer, and surely the best-sounding silver disc spinner at the price right now. Not only this, but it is beautifully engineered and feels like the slick piece of design that it is. Both highly recommended, then! ●

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT - CD

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Detailed, authoritative sound; smooth and sophisticated
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Dry tonality not to all tastes
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Superb, class-leading CD player/preamplifier
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT - AMP

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful, clean, detailed sound; facilities; build
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Some rivals are slightly more musically engaging
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Excellent do-it-all mid-price integrated amp
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

Q&A

Jan Ertner

Design engineer, Audiolab



DP: Is Audiolab seeking to reach new markets with the 8300 series?

JE: The previous 8200 components were very well received by reviewers and customers alike. Our intention with the new range was to introduce a new, updated aesthetic, while producing the best CD player and integrated amplifier that Audiolab has ever made. The intended audience remains the same – music lovers seeking an exceptional sonic experience – but the performance is even better.

Why doesn't the 8300A integrated have a USB input?

Our intention was always to stay true to the legacy of the 8000A and make a high-quality stereo integrated amp with fully optimised analogue circuitry. The 8300CD has a great DAC section, of course, and it makes sense to provide access to this DAC for those who wish to optimise the performance of external digital sources, rather than doubling up by adding digital circuitry to the 8300A.

What's special about the phono stage design?

The phono section is a two-stage amplifier design using high-quality audio op-amps. The input stage uses a bipolar amplifier and the main filter stage a FET/bi-polar hybrid amplifier. The op-amps are carefully chosen for the job in hand and to give excellent sonic performance from both MM and MC cartridges.

Why move to a slot-loading mechanism on the 8300CD?

One of the few criticisms levelled at the 8200CD was that the loading tray felt a little flimsy. Slot-loading is quicker and neater, but the mechanism itself adds further advantages. Users are less likely to encounter disc rejection – it will play CDs that the 8200CD might have rejected because of dirt or damage – while increased disc stability and reduced susceptibility to resonance contribute to the 8300CD's improved sound. The new digital buffer circuit is a perfect mate to the asynchronous input of the DAC, too.