

Power Amplifier *Cello* ENCORE Bene, bravo, bis!

Product Review by Andrea della Sala for *Fidelita del Suono*

If someone had told me that one day I would have been having dinner, and moreover in my home town, with Employee #1 from the company that designs and manufactures the Cello brand of electronics, I would have laughed and wondered about his sanity. Instead, once again the actual events of life prove to be more astounding than our wildest dreams.

On a rainy November weekend, I was able to spend time with Jim McCullough, first at the magazine's listening room and then again over dinner. Together with Davide Della Casa, the Italian Cello Distributor, Jim decided to have the world wide premiere of his new Cello Encore power amplifier at FEDELTA DEL SUONO. This honor was most likely bestowed upon us as the result of my earlier review of the Cello Chorale preamp and Rhapsody amplifier (both of which were awarded the Italian HiFi Award 2007 for best electronics) was highly appreciated by the American company.



This was not, as Mr. McCullough explained in a letter following that review, because of the highest possible sonic praise received in that review, but rather because no other reviewer in the world understood, and expressed in print, the true technical reasons behind the sonic excellences of those products.

At the end of that review I wished that I could, just once, get my hands on a more affordable piece of gear from Cello, while still maintaining some trace of the DNA of the bigger Cello amplifier. I am pleased to report that day has now arrived, as Cello has introduced a new stereo amplifier that, while not inexpensive, is affordable to a far greater number of the audiophiles and music lovers around the world than the Rhapsody. Please remember that we are speaking of the brand which always sets its sight on maximum sonic performance as its primary interest, so this is not exactly an entry level product. Still, only a few weeks ago, the mere idea that one would be able to spend only 9500 euros for a Cello amplifier, was either deluding himself, or this price would be corroborating evidence that what was being offered was likely stolen goods.

Over dinner, Jim spoke of meeting Mark Levinson at a public presentation in a HiFi shop in the mid-70s, and joining Madrigal (where the Mark Levinson products were then designed and manufactured) where he worked for 5 years in sales and marketing. He later relocated to Wadia Digital where he spent another 5 years. Ultimately, he was recruited in 1996 by Mark Levinson, to join Cello Music and Film Systems, Inc. Sadly, soon thereafter Cello's undoing began due to some grandiose plans involving the opening of a

number of big and luxurious Cello Showrooms which did not work out. The ultra wealthy people that were expected to be attracted to these Showrooms did not show up and the end of the old Cello company followed.

But Jim had become too personally involved with, and too attached to, the Cello brand, to simply walk away. As he had already committed all of his energy and experience to it, he determined to commit his life savings to acquiring the remaining Cello assets. Even before doing that, one of his first efforts following the closing of the original company was to complete, with his own hands, the manufacture of a \$50,000 order which had been prepaid to the prior company. Under other circumstances the distributor, who had made the payment, would have been left completely burnt by the former Cello business's failure. Jim honorably made good on that order and then, later in 2001 began his own company, Matthew James' Showroom (simply the combination of his son's and his own names), with the encouragement and assistance of many of the existing Cello representatives from around the world.

Is this man some sort of Kamikaze? No, I would rather think that he has displayed the courage of a lion, the type of which is quite rarely found. He continued the Cello business by licensing the use of the Cello brand name and completing the final project in development (the Rhapsody amplifier) when the original Cello company closed its doors. Rather than having completely new products designed, he took existing products and implemented changes, modifying only what he knew had to be changed to improve the final sonic results, leaving untouched that which was already perfect.

Success was right around the corner, and Matthew James' Showroom began to export a significant number of units, achieving unanimous approval from the world's audiophiles, reviewers and music lovers. Interestingly, within the USA the Cello brand still available only from Matthew James' Showroom itself. Contrary to what one might expect, the Cello brand has never had dealers in the USA (except for its own Cello Showrooms back in the 1990s) and is probably better known in overseas markets than at home. For the American brand which more closely represents the audiophile's dream than any other, I am convinced, based upon the strength of the designs, the home market will eventually reflect the glory it receives worldwide.



DESCRIPTION

The Cello Encore is a stereo power amplifier with a separate power supply, one of only a few amplifiers in history to use this particular technical solution. Much more frequently, when presented with a two chassis amp, you would assume you have with a pair of mono amplifiers, each with internal power supplies. Instead, with the Cello, they have concluded that it results in much greater performance by separating the power supply from the amplifying sections rather than by physically separating the two audio channels.

It's not possible for me to determine the effectiveness of this solution: for that I would have to listen to two monophonic Encores, but my preliminary listening impression is that the Cello solution could be right because the sound of this amplifier, with the separate power supply, always seduced and convinced me in the listening room. In fact, the Encore has made me wonder why there have not been more mono amplifiers with separate power supplies designed and manufactured. Certainly, one of the reasons would be the cost but still, I would like to listen some day to a 4 chasses or, in the case of a bi-amplified system, an 8 chasses version of this amplifier. I know I am acting delirious, so we had better move on (we have subsequently learned that just such a configuration is also available from Cello as a bridged mono version of the Encore. Maybe we are finally at the gates of an audiophile version of heaven).

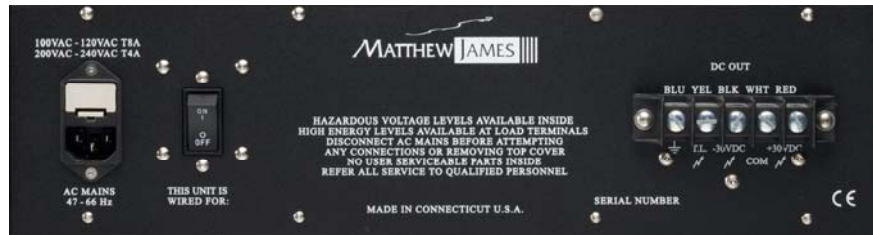


LISTENING

Into our listening room, the Encore amp and Chorale preamp were inserted between the two piece P03/D03 CD player from Esoteric and the B&W Nautilus 800D speakers. After connecting everything and making certain that all was working properly, we left the units to warm up overnight, even though outside a rainstorm was howling. Seeing a flash of lightning, as bright as an air attack, I could not conceal the worry evident on my face regarding leaving the units on all night. But Jim reassured me that I could sleep easily because the well designed units would likely stand whatever may come through the AC line, and he felt the performance would benefit from the additional warm up. And it must be true because first thing in the morning of the next day we able to begin our serious listening.



The first sonic impression was of a great smoothness, with complete control and precision. Even though the power rating is not overwhelming (125w/ch) and the B&W speakers we had on hand are not particularly well suited, the room immediately filled with music. Instruments and voices displayed a dense, palpable physical presence and an extremely refined sound. In all honesty, I must admit I was confused. Had I not been told, in no uncertain terms, that the Encore is a solid state amplifier, I would have been willing to wager we were listening to tube electronics and, at that, ones with world class performance capabilities.



As our time with the Encore was brief, I only listened to the best and most familiar of recordings. Even these performances, with which I am so completely familiar, the instruments and voices were detached from the back wall in a unique manner, so liquid, with so much palpable presence, that it was a bit unnerving. The three dimensionality of the image is total, the type that you do not simply listen to, but rather the kind you are able to *see*. The ability to convey the natural realism of the musical lines is almost unbelievable, and you able to “see” what is in front, what is behind, and even what is in between. The soundstage is very deep and wide, I’m certain this is due in part to the absolute silence between musical transients.

The ability to drive a loudspeaker appeared excellent. If I managed, with quite a committed and determined effort, to reach the slightest hint of strain, it only showed itself when the volume control was past the 3am position. And, in any event, the sound never became harsh or hard, but rather the amplifier’s behaviour when stressed is obviously well considered in the design. Clipping was only noticed as an ever so slight slowing of the sound.

Well, I have to admit it: The sound of the Cello Encore amplifier is sweet like mono-triodes. And while it behaves very much like triodes when you pump the volume a little too much, the incredibly unique thing about this amplifier is that it sounds like a triode, even when the volume is normal! Once more a sonic comparison with tubes. Maybe the Sangrantino wine is still affecting me, but this is my absolutely truthful opinion. The refined sound, the sculpted images, and the convincing dynamic contrasts, these are the aspects which qualify the Cello Encore as one of the best amplifiers I have heard the last 5-6 years.

Reproduction of the lowest frequencies is the litmus test which proves that this is a truly a solid state amplifier. The Encores performance here is extremely controlled, not too fast but firm, powerful and with the natural weight the bass range exhibits in real life. In the middle and upper frequencies you witness the miracle this amplifier is able to demonstrate. To make a film analogy, the Encore demonstrates an extremely refined grain to the sound and there is clear delineation of micro-dynamics at realistic levels. All of these aspects lead to the type of graceful performance belonging to what I had previously defined as possible only with the glow of “amber light” from tubes. Utterly fascinating.

The sound is always pleasant, relaxing I would say, and perfectly suited to those with the time and inclination to stay for hours in front of the system without incurring any listening fatigue. Lucky them.

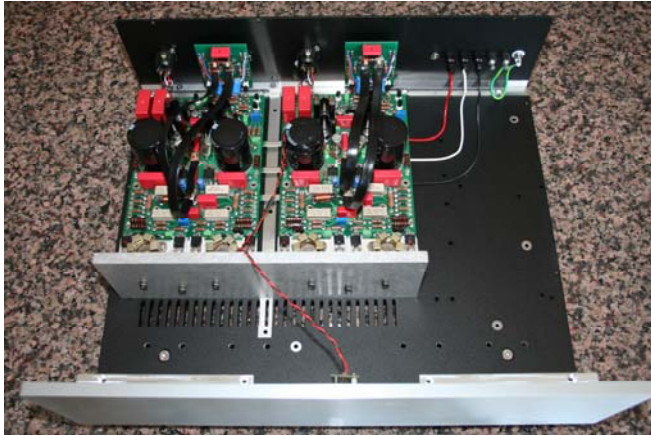
CONCLUSIONS

Intuitively, prior to its arrival, I anticipated the sound of the Encore to be a photocopy, on a smaller scale of its older brother, the previously reviewed Rhapsody amplifier. Instead, my findings indicate that things are not always exactly what we expect. The Cello Encore is indistinguishable from the Rhapsody with regard to its brilliant upper frequencies and the resulting wonderful, airy, three dimensional soundstage. In this regard, the best available today.

The Encore does not demonstrate the desire to merely mimic its older sibling. It was specifically designed to be an amplifier accessible to a greater number audiophiles and music lovers, and not only from an economic point of view. It has a precise personality of it’s own, clearly with the authentic DNA of the Cello sound, convincing and immediate, recreating the aspects of music that are infinitely enchanting, and

capable of doing so within a wide variety of systems. From this point forward, I have a new musical reference standard for power amplifiers with a price range up to 20.000 euros. It is the Cello Encore.

Technical Analysis by Fulvio Ciappetta



As is our standard practice, we've taken the covers of the Encore amplifier and Master power supply to have a look. You will immediately notice that these are not individual mono units, but rather a separation of amplifier channels and regulated power supply.

The inputs are balanced with +/- impedances well chosen resulting in no practical limit to whatever source is chosen. We drove the Encore with a single ended source with excellent results (using Pin #2 as the signal and shorting Pins #1 & 3 within the XLR). In this configuration the input impedance is very high, and without capacitive loading, which avoids any driving problems even if coupled to a tubed preamplifier with a less than robust output capability.

From a design standpoint, the Encore is perfectly coherent with what Jim McCullough described, a classic schematic originally produced more than 20 years ago, in which advances have been made over the intervening time through parts changes, as improvements have been made in component part performance. More importantly, however, there are numerous remarkable enrichments that go beyond mere part changes. We can see that the technicians have considered all parameters of performance, even some which in our experience are unique to these Cello products.

Among these, the AC line filter is completely custom made and, apart from the inductors and filter capacitors of the highest quality, there are discrete components to suppress transients and a very special and unique device which allows for secure grounding without any of the limitations found in other, more simple solutions, used by others. The filtered signal is regulated in the Master, completely eliminating any residual noise from the AC line following rectification. While some manufacturers will consider this level of effort and detail "old school", the results are evident in the listening. There are strong and weak points to any design path chosen, the one here seems to perform particularly well.

The Encore's amplification circuitry is of the "complementary symmetry" type, operating in Class AB, and these exhibit an extremely sweet passage through "zero" when turning from off to on, resulting in imperceptible crossover distortion on the test equipment which is completely inaudible under even the most demanding listening situations. Negative feedback is used judiciously, and is well implemented but, importantly is not used to correct an excess of distortion. Rather, feedback is used in conjunction with the design decision which has the driver stage reach its maximum limit before the output stage reaches its limit. This allows for the perception that the Encore is more powerful than its 125w/ch rating would imply

and where, at worst, transients become a bit more rounded than otherwise would be the case, as power limits are exceeded.

We also note that the benefits of following the manufacturer's suggestion and leaving the units on continuously, resulting in optimum sonic performance at all times. The Encore and Master run practically cool to the touch, and they can be left on without concern for sharp increases in the electric bill.