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Crimson Products

600 Series

Amplification

by Pete Christie

The 'modular' hi-fi system is not an unusual concept. Most decent hi-fi shops will boast examples such as Cyrus, Naim, Meridian, QUAD and the like. In fact, 'designer hi-fi' is a term that springs readily to mind - high quality hi-fi presented in a format which offers the customer a genuine alternative to the traditional 17" wide black box. Unfortunately, interesting designs can quite easily cost interesting amounts of money! Enter the Crimson Products 600 range, an unusual and interesting pre/power design consisting of three basic units offering a far more wallet-friendly alternative. In fact, systems start at £775.00.

These amps are re-engineered versions of the original Crimson Elektrik kits, dating from the mid-eighties. The original 510 battery powered pre-amp and 520 power amp were well regarded in their day.

The review units were brand new, but I managed to clock up 35 hours of running in before I reached for my favourite CDs.

The first listening test I performed was with the CS610C pre-amp and the CS620C stereo power amp. At an all-in cost of under £800.00, I decided to use my Trichord Genesis CD player as a source, and hitched the lot up to my old favourites, the dependable Rogers

LS3/5a's mounted on purpose-built stone stands. With the amps warmed-up and ready to go, my first choice of music was 'She's Already Made Up Her Mind' from the Lyle Lovett album *Joshua Judges Ruth* (MCAD 10475), a simple acoustic guitar and vocal track which tests separation and bass response to the limit. No problem there! Everything was where it was supposed to be, with real clarity and detail.

On to something slightly more difficult. 'Heavenly', from the Harry Connick album *We Are In Love*, (CBS 466736 2). A totally instrument-free zone, with lead vocal and finger snaps centre stage, and harmonies appearing in all directions. It was quickly becoming obvious that the speed and clarity of these amps was really bringing out the dynamics in the music, almost as if the system had more energy.

Trying to confuse them with something awkward, I dug out my ancient recording of the Beach Boys classic, *Surf's Up* (Epic 467835 2) and played the title track. Taking account of the then experimental stereo recording techniques, I was, once again, suitably impressed with the delivery. Crisp, controlled, and involving.

On to something more modern.

The superbly produced. Hearts and Bones from the Paul Simon Album of the same name (Warner Bros, 923 942-2). An easy-rolling song sympathetically produced to allow the laid-back delivery of the lyrics to dominate, whilst still showing the rhythm-sections' skill and dexterity (not easily done!). Again, the combination of clarity and body continued to impress.

I decided to give the superb Jacqueline du Pre/Barbirolli performance of the Elgar *Cello Concerto* (EMI CDC 7 47329 2) an airing. This has to be one of the finest performances of this piece, full of passion and life, and I never felt short changed by the Crimsons. It was exciting and dynamic, and though the amps provided plenty of sparkle, the sound never once became 'glassy'.

It was now that I replaced the stereo CS620C with the two CS630C monoblocs. Same CD player, speakers, and disc, but the difference was an almighty kick up the backside! The soundstage grew in all directions. The overall characteristics were largely unchanged, but now there was more of it; an awful lot more! The deepest notes emanating from the cello were now giving a growl that literally tugged at the hairs on the back of my neck. Let me warn you, laid-back they ain't! Rather than waiting for the signal to be delivered from the CD Player, the Crimsons appeared to be so keen to play the music, they were sucking it in! Rather than let the output signal drift down the cables, the Crimsons seemed to be propelling it to the speakers! And all the while, they were making sonic sense. Whilst they were obviously immediate, I would not describe them as at all 'edgy', and while they were delivering a lot of bass information, they were certainly not booming.

One of my favourite piano pieces is the Adagio from the Beethoven ►

The Crimson Perspective

(In conversation with Martin Moorcroft of Virtual Reality)

So, what do we have then? A pre-amplifier called a CS610C, a stereo power amp called a CS620C, and a couple of mono power amps each called CS630C. The numbers may sound boring and commonplace, but the corresponding boxes are certainly far from mundane. The first thing you notice is the size. Small and neat! In fact, if you stand a standard video tape upright on its longest edge, you have roughly the equivalent front elevation of the CS610C pre-amp and the CS620C stereo power amp! Now that's what I call neat! Even the pre-amp and both monoblocs take up less room than a single "full-size" amplifier. OK, at 360mm (just over 14"), they are fairly deep, but most normal hi-fi furniture can comfortably cope with that. Are they black? No, they're very black! And if you pick one up you cannot fail to be impressed with the superb quality of fit and finish. The outer casing on each model is deep-black anodised, and the front face of the pre-amp is high-gloss black, simply adorned with a vertical array of three small black knobs (power/source/tape, balance, and input select). A larger black volume knob, a small green LED, and a discrete Crimson logo complete the picture. The front face of the amps feature vertical heat-sink fins, a small power knob and a green LED in the top left-hand corner. As far as I am concerned, I would describe the overall visual impact as stunningly simple, and simply stunning.

The rear panel of the pre-amp offers a vertical array of RCA phono sockets, and a 5-Pin DIN socket and grounding terminal for the phono input (which is switchable between MM and MC). That leaves a curious 3-Pin DIN socket. Yes, the days of the PP9 battery are over! The pre-amp is now powered by a 20-Volt mains adaptor! This, as you would expect, is supplied by Crimson,

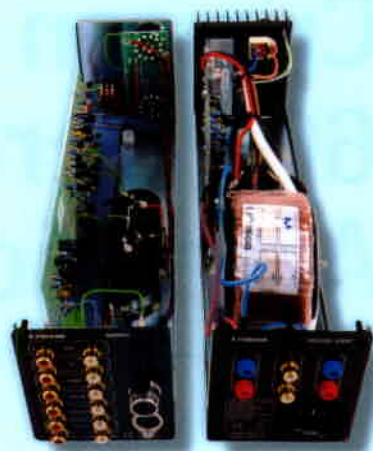
along with high quality single stranded mains leads, and the recommended 45cm long DNM Reson interconnects! I was also supplied with 5m bi-wired lengths of DNM Reson speaker cable.

The rear panels of both power amplifiers are equipped with an IEC mains inlet, phono inputs and speaker connectors. The review amps were fitted with 2mm sockets (ideal for solid core cables), but you can specify 4mm if you must.

When asked to comment on the overall design brief of the Crimson range, MM's reply was fairly straightforward; 'There are only a certain number of ways to build an amplifier. There are only a certain number of amplifier circuits that work with any degree of stability. We just took a basic, very simple amplifier circuit, put some high quality parts into it and set it up properly. That is the essence of a Crimson. There's no Voodoo magic involved!'

So, they're not sitting on a revolutionary design using space-age technology after all! - Shame!

The physical shape of the beast, it turns out, is not down to a design quirk, it is designed that way to give the shortest possible signal path, which makes a big difference. Output devices are bi-polar type, and Crimson use the fastest (and most expensive) that money can buy. The whole lot is run close to the limit in terms of biasing set-up, and this helps to give the lucid sound quality without compromising reliability. In fact, the Crimson's are so well-designed that MM assures me that you can drive the amps into a full short-circuit without causing them any damage. Just unplug from the mains, leave for 10 minutes, re-connect and they're ready to go again! That's one of the reasons they give a three-year warranty. So as the CS630C is designed



to be able to run extremely hard, it becomes an obvious choice for an AV power amp. Imagine the 'grunt' and excitement of a surround-sound system using a CS630C monobloc amplifier for each channel! Frightening!

Turning to the pre-amp, the outboard power supply replaces the batteries of the earlier version. This is far more practical and still prevents the problem of 'hum' leaking into places it isn't wanted. There is the possibility of a higher quality power supply using the same casework as the rest of the range becoming available, but the present 'plug-top' power supply certainly seems to do a perfectly adequate job.

So why are DNM Reson cables/interconnects preferred? Again, the deliberate design philosophy is fairly simple. Solid-core wire is used throughout. As MM explained: 'Houses are wired using solid core, transformers are wired using solid core. - When was the last time you saw a resistor with stranded wire legs?' OK, you've got me there! Even the internal wiring of the Crimson's uses DNM cable, so the integrity is certainly maintained. Does it make a difference? If you are sceptical, try removing the mains power lead supplied and replace it with a bog-standard "kettle lead" alternative, and listen to the resultant loss in clarity!



► *Piano Concerto No.5* (Philips 416 215-1, Sir Colin Davis/Claudio Arrau with the Dresden State Orchestra), and I was again impressed with the tonal representation of the instrument. The slow, lilting quality of this melodic section was given pin-sharp focus, yet the sound contained no harshness, and the accompanying bass was allowed to punctuate rather than take over. And all the time, the impression was that the amps were capable of giving even more. This was proved when I played the final movement of Mahlers *2nd Symphony*, Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra and Chorus conducted by Elishah Inbal (Denon C37 7603 4). It takes a lot of amplifier to control the explosion of passion and sheer volume of information from the combined orchestra and chorus. At no stage did I feel that the Crimson range were struggling. In fact, they gave an impression of total ease, whilst relaying a superbly controlled yet rich and dynamic rendition of the music.

By this stage I decided that I should audition some contemporary speakers, and also try a superior source. I opted for the Helios 2 CD player, and connected the popular B&W CDM1se loudspeakers mounted on a variety of speaker stands.

The effect was fairly predictable, though I was not as pleased with the overall sound. Certainly, though the power and control was evident, with effortless handling of good recordings, I did feel that poorer recordings suffered in becoming slightly disjointed in the midrange. Interestingly, I found that replacing the CDM1's with their smaller brothers the CDM2se's was a better combination.



This, however, would be a retrograde step as changing up to the floor-standing Castle Harlech was to prove. At last, the amps had a load they could really get their teeth into. Repeating the earlier auditions I was treated to the same results, though now, I was more aware of the added dimension created by the power available from the 100 watts/channel monoblocs.

So what's the verdict? I think that the Crimson range offers an extremely stylish, affordable alternative to more traditional pre/power combinations. For small boxes, they deliver a surprisingly big sound that is detailed without appearing cold or analytical, rich without being 'plummy'. Most of all, they are dynamic with an involving sound stage. Their slimline design makes them a definite choice where multi-amping is required, such as home cinema set-ups, or where a lot of power is necessary (try daisy-chaining the monoblocs!). Speaker selection was a fairly painless process, and the supplied cables and interconnects proved to be well-matched with the amps, enabling an overall sonic stability. Reliability is not considered a problem, and the amps are happily given a 3-year manufacturers warranty adding a nice touch of consumer confidence.

Do they Rock and Roll?

Not half they do! 'Out In The Cold' from Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers album *Into The Great Wide Open* (MCA MCD10317)

proved conclusively that a great solo can still make a clapped out old git like me want to reach for a cut-out guitar and leap around the room!

If you are in the market for some new amplification loaded with life and vitality, put them on your audition list - preferably near the top!

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

CS610C Pre-Amplifier

Inputs 4 Line + Phono (MM/MC)
 Nominal Output Level 775mV
 Output Resistance 700 ?
 Maximum Output Level >3.5V r.m.s.
 Sensitivity (All Line Inputs) 250 mV
 Sensitivity (MM) 5.5 mV @ 1KHz into 50 K?
 Sensitivity (MC) 0.25 mV @ 1KHz into 330R
 Dimensions (WxHxD). 95mm x 112mm x 360mm
 Weight 7Kg

CS620C Stereo Amplifier

Details Not Supplied

CS630C Power Amplifier

Power Output 2 x 100W into 8 ohms
 2 x 175W into 4 ohms
 Peak Output Current 17A/Channel
 Input Sensitivity 775mV
 Frequency Response 10Hz to 40KHz at -1dB
 Output Resistance Inductor + Wiring @ 0.1R
 Dimensions (wxhxd). 95mm x 112mm x 360mm

CRIMSON AMPLIFIERS

CS610C Pre-Amplifier	£450.00
CS620C Stereo Power Amplifier	£450.00
CS630C Monoblocs	£800.00 /Pair

Pack Prices

CS610C and CS620C	£775.00
Price includes DNM Reson 45cm interconnect and DNM mains lead.	
CS610 and CS630C x 2	£1075.00
Price includes DNM Reson 45cm interconnect and 2 x DNM mains leads	

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