

TICKLED CRIMSON

**Dominic Todd does the splits with
Crimson Electric's CS610C pre-amp and CS630C monoblocs.**

Hi-fi's rule number one is never judge a component by its looks. Crimson Electric's amplifiers are a fine case in point. For in this year's April issue, the visually-unprepossessing CS610C pre and CS620 power combination trounced all their rivals save the formidable (and £175 more expensive) Bellini and Donizetti from Audio Analogue. Now, Crimson are getting really serious with the introduction of the CS630C monoblocs.

One of Crimson's persuasive trio this month is the same line and phono CS610C which figured prominently back in April. The fully-discrete implementation with its plug-mounted transformer lists amongst its parts an Alps volume pot and Aerovox slit-foil capacitors. But the real stars here are the new CS630C monoblocs. Each pumps out an easy 100watts, the power coming from a vertically-mounted toroidal transformer and Aerovox 10000uF capacitors identical to those in the pre-amp.

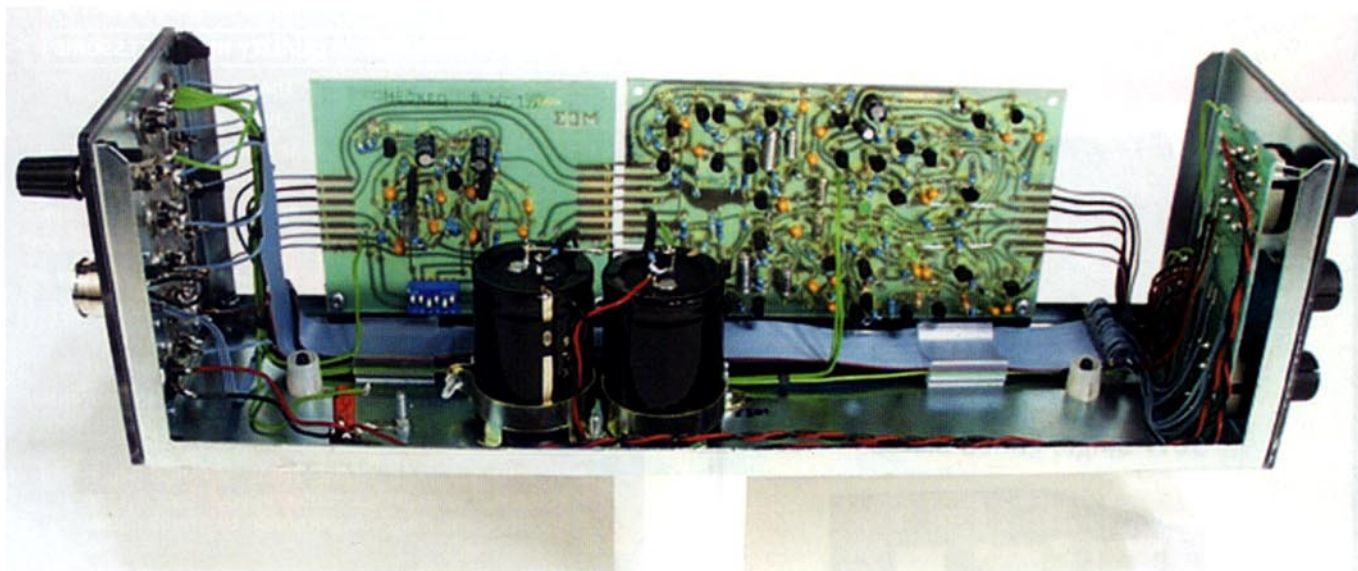
Joy of joys, inside the case on both inputs and outputs, instead of the cheap electric spaghetti too many manufacturers fit, is DNM's own Reson wiring. This is one of my favourite budget/mid-price cables, and the one I use to link 'speakers to amp in my own system. Unusually Crimson's distributors, Virtual Reality Audio Systems, also supply the CS610C and CS630s with DNM interconnects and mains leads, leaving nothing to chance. The only quirk to be aware of with the monoblocs is that they don't accept



traditional 4mm banana plugs - 2mm is the order of the day.

The Crimsons may do an excellent impression of a fan heater circa 1965 aesthetically, but technically they more than pass muster. Anyone expecting them to sound as Heath Robinson as they look is in for a surprise.

With both pre and monoblocs thoroughly burned in and warmed up, 'Daddy-O' by Dave's True Story flowed along the solid-core interconnects. The ecclesiastical setting of this number had no difficulties reaching those 2mm sockets on the rear of the CS630s - the acoustics were crystal clear and blessed



Inside the CS610C, ribbon cable connects the inputs and outputs to the front-panel switches. Tantalum capacitors, a favoured inexpensive audiophile capacitor type, are widely used.

with exactly the right degree of echo. Just as a subwoofer worth its salt fills out a sound stage, so did the Crimson bottom end, with the power and depth available only from the best of the monobloc breed.

The happy by-product of this controlled bass was an addictive rhythm section that set any feet within hearing distance a-tapping. The immediacy of the saxophone was startling too, because of the tonal richness and instrumental texture with which the Crimsons imbued it. Likewise vocals, where focus met power without any of the hardness or sibilance which can blight many a 50watt-plus transistor amplifier.

Echobelly's 'Great Things' isn't nearly as well produced as 'Daddy-O', yet the 610/630 managed a balanced and engrossing version of what can, at best, be described as a 'lightweight' recording. The song ripped along at the hands of precise timing and clear separation, although more complex sections caused a hint of confusion to appear. Freedom from grain didn't have these amps overstepping the smoothness line either, as a suitably raucous guitar proved. Overall, the Crimsons may not have had the insight of some, but there was musical character and listener involvement by the bucket load.

With this type of balance you might expect the 600s not to be totally content with Classical music,

and you'd be pretty much right. Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No3 had realistic piano timbre but the performance was strangely lacking in immediacy. Strings also sounded a little dull and homogenised most of the time, switching to a slight raggedness on crescendos. The composition as a whole was still pleasant - the timing was once again impeccable, and the overall sound cohesive yet dynamic - but I couldn't shake off the feeling that the Crimsons' rendition was weighted in favour of lounge Jazz and Indy thrash.

After the sheer exuberance shown by the line stages, the phono stage came as a bit of a let-down. The output of Moving-Coils was set against relatively large amounts of background noise, and The James Taylor Quartet's 'Whole Lotta Love' missed out on the necessary vibrancy; guitar, for instance, didn't have the incisive 'bite' that it had had on CD. Where the Crimsons pulled up their vinyl socks was in sound staging and imaging.

Returning to CD (Danny Thompson's 'A Full English Breakfast') brought about a welcome return to transparency and intimacy, not comments I'd normally make with respect to CD! The portrayal of soprano saxophone and double-bass was as good as you can get for the money, the musicians' every last breath and movement clearly relayed. And the synergy between

the players was captured complete, making the piece compulsive listening.

With rivals from Linn and Arcam to name but two, Crimson Electric face an uphill struggle convincing punters to look their way. But anyone with £1400 to spend on amplification who ignores the CS610C and CS630Cs will be passing up one of the most involving combos under £1500. The styling may not win any awards, but at least the Crimsons are unobtrusive. Similarly, those after plenty of features should check out Arcam's 10/10P.

When sound is the main criterion, this pre and monoblocs come into their own. Classical music would benefit from a little more transparency, but rival amps which offer this couldn't hope to get close to the sheer grunt of the Crimsons. Those using vinyl as a primary source would do well to look at a separate phono stage too. But most people who are serious about vinyl and have this much money to spend on amplification would probably consider an external phono stage as a matter of course anyway.

At worst the Crimsons are par for the course, at best they're sensational. The fact that they have no real sonic flaws and come complete with a generous package of leads makes them something of an audiophile bargain.

Crimson Electric CS610C
£450

Crimson Electric CS630C
£800/pr
CS610C, CS630C and leads £1075

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WORLD VERDICT



CS610C

The phono stage is the CS610C's main area of weakness. Can sound a touch muddled at times as well.



CS630C

These monoblocs have a tonal richness and bass speed rare amongst powerful amps.

Measured Performance
see p111