

Playback Designs SPA-8

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PLAYBACK DESIGNS is a high-end audio manufacturer that has emerged in the United States in recent years. Its rapid growth and success in business have attracted the attention of the industry. The factory started in designing and manufacturing expensive high-end CD players. The precision and sound quality of its CD players are well-known. In the high-end audio industry, it has opened up a smooth journey and established a solid reputation in the world's major advanced technology audio market in just over ten years. Today, PLAYBACK DESIGNS's flagship CD transport / decoder "two-piece" combination system, the net price is HK \$300,000,- and there are still rich Hi-Fi enthusiasts proud to own it. The success factors of Playback Designs, I will explain in detail below, but the one that most surprised me is the SPA-8 overlord amplifier that PLAYBACK DESIGNS first demonstrated a few months ago at the Munich High End Audio Show. The SPA-8, its majestic style and high price make it "love first with unfinished tune". At the same time, another set of SPA-8 is shipped to Hong Kong first so that China and Hong Kong audiophiles have the opportunity to listen to its sound performance. After I heard it in the audition room of "Stereo Kingdom" in Hong Kong, I couldn't not to agree that this is the best solid-state transistor power amplifier I've ever heard before. In today's atmosphere of high-end audio equipment asking for crazy high prices, the SPA-8 to its price and its sound performance has become a matter of great value and even to be the best value of rare species.

Before discussing the sound performance of SPA-8, let readers understand the impressions that I have listened to many powerful amplifiers in the world for decades. If purely based on the numbers and specifications measured by instruments, the amplifier is rated to be more powerful should generally be better. It's because that when the power amplifier drives the speakers, the output power reaches at certain limit, the sound will be distorted. However, the theory goes to theory, in actual listening, the real power of the amplifier is often not commensurate with the numbers of power output listed. Some of the amplifiers that claim to output a thousand and hundreds of watts per channel do not really sound so powerful. In addition, the sound quality of the high-power amplifier is generally rough. The tone created is not as elegant and delicate as the fine lower power output amplifiers. Looking at the famous branded powerful amplifiers for more than half a century, it can rarely achieve the ideal state of "powerful and delicate". On the other hand, the power amplifier design is either vacuum tube or solid-state type, and the vacuum tube power amplifier has always been my personal favorite, but the powerful tube amplifier has the same problem. The famous and good tube power amplifiers (including CONRAD JOHNSON Premier One and MARANTZ 9) are powerful enough when they burst out to have the strength of the bucket, but the sound is not as elegant and sweet as the fine three-pole tube amplifier. The powerful solid-state amplifier has the same fate. My favorite solid-state amplifiers include MARK LEVINSON ML-3 and MBL 9010/9011, although it can be powerful, it is a bit too heavy especially when it comes to reproduce the chamber music or female solo. It lacks the beautiful music reproduction of the high-quality fine low power output solid-state amplifier (output of 20 to 40 watts per channel). Under such knowledge, I listened carefully to the sound performance of PLAYBACK DESIGNS SPA-8.

SPA-8 is huge, to what extent? In short, it is unexpectedly to be so large, and the volume is about 2 feet by 3 feet, the height is more than 1 foot, which is several times larger than the traditional power amplifier. In addition, what is fascinating at first sight is that the metalwork of its metal chassis which is extremely delicate. Fans who are familiar with PLAYBACK digital equipment know that the sound of their products is elegant, and its exquisite chassis metalwork is also one of the selling points. Although the metal chassis of the CD player is exquisitely hand-made giving people a very good impression, it is not as impressive as the SPA-8 which gives a stunning feel at a glance. I have been used to see/test expensive equipment for many years, but it's still shocking to me when I first saw the SPA-8. It's because I can't imagine that when many people think that High End premium audio has become the sunset industry, there are still manufacturers with the courage and confidence to develop such a top-level playback equipment.

The appearance and the craftsmanship of the SPA-8 is excellent, but whether it is worth buying or not and it still depends on its ability to playback music. The manager of "Stereo Kingdom" (Sound Concepts' showroom) has become an experienced audiophile who is familiar with those good recording CDs. He connected the SPA-8 with PLAYBACK digital equipment to playback a number of CDs including classical, jazz, and explosive big symphony orchestras music styles. In addition, he also played the very popular (must play) audiophile CD in the Greater China, Cai Qin's "Old Song". I was really shocked by the extraordinary sound reproduction of this CD. In summary, there are three characteristics of SPA-8 that make me think that it has broken through the category of traditional powerful solid-state amplifier:

1. The sound is extremely delicate - SPA-8 claims to have the output of 1,600W (4 Ohms) per channel, which is 800W (8 Ohms) as we know it. Historically, with equivalent power output of the famous solid-state power amplifiers including the BURMESTER, FM ACOUSTICS, KRELL, MBL, etc. , have never been able to demonstrate the delicate and sweet tone as well as the subtle changes in the sound of the violin as the PLAYBACK SPA-8. When playing back Anne-Sophie Mutter's latest audiophile recording (please see this CD-review in this issue under the CD section) she played the theme song of the movie is so elegant. When I go home to playback the same CD with several power amplifiers I have at home, I can confirm that only the U.S. high-priced antique 300B amplifier, the WESTERN ELECTRIC 91, can create the same level of delicate violin sound. "Powerful and delicate" was originally an ideal beyond the reach of solid-state amplifiers. Nowadays, PLAYBACK SPA-8 is the first to become the most impressive solid-state power amplifier in history.

2. Infinite control - SPA-8 is infinitely powerful, which is expected, but the one that most widens my ears is its control of big symphony orchestra music. Generally speaking, when playing back the classical music with many of the musical instruments playing together, it will pose a severe challenge to the power amplifier. It is best when playing a single or a few musical instruments with a powerful solid-state amplifier and the sound of the music is full of power, but it is not easy to deal with many different musical instruments in concert, which is often crowded. It feels that the control of SPA-8 is simply the super class - you can still identify individuals in a huge troop of army. The sound field, layering, and positioning of individual instruments are so precise, that I have to admit that, in terms of control, the SPA-8 has outperformed other solid-state power amplifiers and it also outperforms any powerful vacuum tube amplifier I have heard.

3. The sound is sweet & smooth, just like a tube amp. This is the rarest advantage of the PLAYBACK SPA-8. Personally, I think Hi-Fi equipment has been developed for a long time since the middle of the 20th century, and the vacuum tube amplifier is enduring because its sound is sweeter and more appealing than the solid-state amplifier. In other words, it's more "enjoyable/listenable". The famous brands of solid-state amplifiers that have traditionally been able to stand on the market are because the tone is thick & smooth in the music reproduction which is similar to the tube amplifiers. However, in my past experience of listening to all the famous brands of solid-state power amplifiers, even those extremely high end variety, the characters of the sound is still always a bit harsh and not as affinity as the tube amp, but the SPA-8 has a breakthrough performance. When it played back the Japanese live recording of Rodrigoy Gabriela (please see this LP review in this issue), it was amazing. The sharp and dynamic guitar sound was originally easy to give people the feeling of "too Hi-Fi feel" but the characteristic of the SPA-8 reproducing the music with fullness and overtone that makes this CD recording from the beginning to the end to be as sweet, smooth and delicate as the tube sound, and it was totally acceptable. After I went home, I played the same recording for comparison. As a result, among the many classic tube amps and solid-state amps, only the tube amp had the same sweet sound but the richness of the tone of the solid-state amp is obviously not as good as the PLAYBACK. If the designer of the SPA-8 is based on "listening to the sound performance", then he may be a fan of the tube amplifier, or he believes that at its perfect of a solid-state amplifier, it should sound just like a tube amplifier.

After listening to the sound performance of the SPA-8, I can be sure that it has extraordinary performance. Bert Gerlach, who is responsible for designing the analog circuits, should be awarded. When PLAYBACK DESIGNS was founded in 2007, the founder Andreas Koch, the digital expert, has deep research on digital technology, launching its first product of the MPS-5 that was selling at 12,000 US dollars, shortly being a big hit in the market successful because the sound is very analog (musical). In other words, it is just like the tube sound. The audiophiles who are accustomed to listening to the other CD players with the harsh sound would be addicted to the sound of the MPS5 and could never look back. After PLAYBACK became famous, the CD player became more and more expensive, but the sound performance was inseparable that the sound is harmonious and musical. The digital sound of the CD disappeared to be invisible. With this effect, it is necessary to attribute Bert Gerlach who designed the analog circuit. It is because the output "tailgate" on the design of CD player has an analog amplification circuit, which has a significant impact on the sound. The analog circuit designed by Bert Gerlach sounds so elegant and attractive, and it is one of the factors that make PLAYBACK DESIGNS successful, coupled with Andreas Koch's advanced digital knowledge; just like two geniuses working together, PLAYBACK DESIGNS has achieved to be so successful nowadays in the industry.

In terms of its size and price, the PLAYBACK DESIGNS SPA-8 is designed for the rich audiophiles. Under the preference of the most high-end audiophiles in China today, "if it's not expensive enough, then not buying", and the SPA-8 is no need to worry about its sales at all.