

# PS Audio Digital Link III, Trio P-200 Preamplifier, and Trio A-100 Amplifier

The compact, no-frills approach

Barry Willis



Entering its fourth decade of producing high-value audio products, PS Audio works relentlessly to refine every aspect of musical playback. Over the years, the company has made dozens of high-performance audio products at reasonable prices. From its innovative “Power Plant” AC regenerators, to its specialty power cords and outlets, to its many preamps, power amps, and digital-to-analog converters, the company’s history is full of breakthrough designs.

The products reviewed here are three equally priced (\$995 each), look-alike, two-channel components that together can comprise a complete playback chain, minus source, loudspeakers, and cabling. Half the width of most audio gear, these sleek low-profile components, when stacked, measure only 8.5" wide by 8.5" high by 14.75" deep. Minimalist design limits front-panel clutter to a few small buttons and, in the case of the Trio P-200 preamplifier, a small volume control. The back panels of all three units are festooned with heavy-duty gold-plated

connectors (speaker terminals and RCA jacks); each unit also has a pair of XLR connectors for either input or output.

The compact, no-frills approach hides tremendous technical advancements and great performance potential. The first of the three pieces that I experimented with was the Digital Link III, an upsampling/upconverting DAC with coax, optical, and USB inputs, and both balanced and single-ended analog outputs. It went into my main system as a replacement for the April Music Stello DA 100 DAC, reviewed in Issue 165. The Stello is a fine piece, one I have been tremendously happy with since I brought it home from last year’s Consumer Electronics Show, but the PS Audio is in a different league altogether, offering an almost frightening level of detail, dimensionality, and bass impact. I hate to default to one of the oldest clichés

in the audio-reviewing lexicon, but the Digital Link III really did lift a few veils. Inserting it in the system was the sonic equivalent of cleaning your windows at the end of a dusty summer.

The DLIII’s upsampling feature takes standard 44.1kHz CD playback into the high-resolution realm—at user-selectable 96kHz or 192kHz sampling rates. With its discrete Class A analog output looped through a Margules Audio Magenta ADE-24 harmonic sweetener—the most cost-effective improvement you can make to a playback system, in my opinion—the Digital Link III made standard-issue CDs essentially equivalent to their SACD counterparts, even when SACDs are played back through the \$5000 Linn Unidisk SC. Perhaps thanks in part to its discrete Class



A FET output stage, the Digital Link III has an ability to combine fine shadings of detail with tremendous dynamics and a superbly dimensional soundstage with fade-to-black residual noise. It's a fantastically high-value product. PS Audio's Digital Link III is an easy affordable path to upgrading digital playback.

With a Tributaries TX500 power conditioner supplying AC, and using the Linn as a disc transport, I set up the three PS Audio pieces as a stand-alone system driving a pair of DALI IKON 6 loudspeakers (reviewed by Robert E. Greene in Issue 164). A one-meter Nordost Quattro-fil interconnect fed the DAC, whose unbalanced outputs fed the Trio P-200 preamp via Nordost SPM.

## The PS combo was musically satisfying

A bit of funny business here is that even though the Digital Link III has balanced outputs, the P-200 lacks balanced inputs. There appears to be room for them on the back panel, but they simply aren't there. The P-200 has both balanced and unbalanced outputs, however, both active simultaneously, and I used a two-meter pair of balanced SPM to connect it to the A-100 power amp. All fine and well, but the net result is that if you wish to keep signal flow balanced throughout the three-piece system, you can't.

The P-200 is robustly built—it's far heavier than the power amp—and very easy to use. The small button on the left of the front panel lets you step through the three inputs, and the volume control on the right side works in the traditional fashion, with stops at the limits of its rotation. A compact remote control with soft buttons duplicates the front-panel functions, plus offers others, such as balance, phase, and mute. The heart of the P-200's circuitry is PS Audio's "gain cell" technology, claimed to deliver excellent linearity because input signals aren't attenuated or shunted to ground through a potentiometer.

Despite weighing only a few pounds, PS Audio's dual-mono Trio A-100 Class D amp is rated to deliver up to 300Wpc into 4 ohms—a startling example of the degree of efficiency possible using this technology. (In audiophile products, Class D is usually synonymous with "ICEpower"—"ICE" being an acronym for "intelligent, compact, efficient." The intellectual property is jointly owned by its originator and by Denmark's Bang & Olufsen, licensing authority for manufacturers such as PS Audio. For deep background on Class D amps, see our extensive survey of this technology in Issue 166.) The Trio A-100's back panel features both balanced (XLR) and

## Specs & Pricing

### PS AUDIO

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### DIGITAL LINK III

**Type:** 24-bit stereo DAC  
**Inputs:** Optical, coaxial, and USB  
**Outputs:** XLR and RCA  
**Dimensions:** 8.5" x 2.75" x 14.75"  
**Weight:** 10 lbs.  
**Price:** \$995

### TRIO P-200 PREAMPLIFIER

**Inputs:** Three RCA  
**Outputs:** XLR and RCA  
**Dimensions:** 8.5" x 2.75" x 14.75"  
**Weight:** 12 lbs.  
**Price:** \$995

### TRIO A-100 AMPLIFIER

**Power output:** 150Wpc into 8 ohms, 300Wpc into 4 ohms  
**Inputs:** XLR and RCA  
**Dimensions:** 8.5" x 2.75" x 14.75"  
**Weight:** 5 lbs.  
**Price:** \$995

### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Linn Unidisk SC universal disc player; Marantz CC-65SE CD player; April Music Stello DA 100 DAC; Margules Audio Magenta ADE-24 harmonic sweetener; Parasound Halo C2 preamp/processor; Parasound Halo A51 power amp; DALI IKON 6 and IKON 5-channel speaker system; James 105G subwoofer; Kimber Kable Palladian power cords; Kimber Hero interconnects; Nordost Quattro-fil interconnects; Nordost SPM interconnects and speaker cable; APC S15 power conditioner

unbalanced inputs (RCA), with a tiny switch to select one or the other. Another tiny switch alters the A-100 from a stereo amp to a superpower monoblock. True to the ultra-efficient nature of such amplifiers, the A-100 got only slightly warm to the touch even after several hours of playing loud music.

The PS combo was musically satisfying with everything from Isaac Albéniz's "Asturias," heard on Falla: *El Amor Brujo*/Albéniz: *Suite Española* [London] to Pink's "There You Go" from *Can't Take Me Home* [LaFace], offering up a rich orchestral tapestry with the former and get-up-and-dance immediacy with the latter. Dire Straits' 80s classic *Brothers in Arms* [Warner Bros.] was wonderful, with layers of shadings in malevolent, moody pieces like the title cut and "Ride Across the River."

I would have been completely sold on the A-100 were it not for the fact

## An almost frightening level of detail, dimensionality, and impact

that another Class D amp was here for review at the same time, the \$2499 seven-channel Rotel RMB-1077 (see this issue's "Mainstream Multichannel"). Substituting it for the A-100 took the sonic presentation in a much more musical direction. Even though rated at only 100Wpc, the Rotel seemed equally adept at delivering current to the loudspeakers, with tremendous drive and seemingly bottomless bass. More importantly,

it offered rounder tones with more harmonic richness and an undeniable liquidity. The A-100 had a veiled quality by comparison, with a bit of dryness and a tad of astringency. The soundstage was deeper using the Rotel, and so was my feeling of musical satisfaction.

The fact that only the power amp was changed speaks very highly for the PS Audio DAC and preamp. Both delivered the musical goods at a level that belied their just-under-\$1000-each price tags. Actually, all three PS Audio units are very good values, but the crowning jewel in my book is the Digital Link III. The Trio P-200 is an excellent minimalist lineage preamp, one that's ideal for pared-down music systems. And the A-100 is really quite a decent power amp, with an astounding ability to deliver power. **TAS**