



# Three and easy

Exposure's new XM7/XM9 threesome offers serious sound in an impressively small package, says **David Price**

**► DETAILS**  
**PRODUCT**  
Exposure XM7  
**ORIGIN**  
UK  
**TYPE**  
Preamplifier/DAC  
**WEIGHT**  
5kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
218 x 89 x 363mm  
**FEATURES**  
 • 24-bit/192kHz and DSD64-capable DAC  
 • Analogue inputs: 2x RCA  
 • Digital inputs: 2x optical; 2x BNC; 1x USB digital  
 • Headphone jacks: 1x 6.35mm; 1x 3.5mm  
 • Moving-magnet phono input  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Exposure Electronics Ltd.  
**TELEPHONE**  
01273 423877  
**WEBSITE**  
exposurehifi.com

**► DETAILS**  
**PRODUCT**  
Exposure XM9  
**ORIGIN**  
UK  
**TYPE**  
Power amplifier  
**WEIGHT**  
5kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
218 x 89 x 363mm  
**FEATURES**  
 • Quoted power output: 2x 80W RMS (8ohm)  
 • 200VA toroidal power transformer  
 • Balanced and unbalanced inputs  
 • Overload protection  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
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It's difficult to believe – but the wretched, guilty truth is that not everyone that plays music in high-quality stereo wants large areas of their house to be occupied by hi-fi equipment. The world is getting smaller, as house prices go up. Space is money, and people would rather buy less of it, or use what they already have in a better way. It's for this reason that Exposure has created its niche XM series – full-width hi-fi separates are too big for some and it believes it can still pack a serious punch in half-sized boxes.

Trouble is, there's a reason why most equipment comes in packages that are approximately 430mm wide – especially amplifiers. It is very difficult to cool power amps without proper heatsinking; this normally takes up a lot of room inside. Even Class D designs need to be cooled, and it's even more of an issue in Class AB amps like the XM9 monoblocks here. So, for this product, it's all about doing as much as the case size will permit. Another issue is the power transformer; this amp uses a toroidal, which again was chosen to be as big as it was possible

## A propulsive and purposeful sound, aided and abetted by a warm bass

to fit under the hood. In short, Exposure has tried to produce a full-sized hi-fi pre and power amplifier combination in boxes half as wide. The XM7/XM9 is truly that metaphorical quart squeezed into a pint pot.

The XM7 costs £1,236, which is a not inconsiderable sum for something of such diminutive dimensions, but a lot of stuff has been shoehorned inside. It is effectively a DAC/preamplifier with a Wolfson WM8742 DAC chip, serviced by two coaxial and two optical inputs, plus a Class 2 USB. This gives up to 24-bit/192kHz compatibility via the S/PDIFs, and 24-bit/192kHz PCM and DSD64 via the asynchronous USB. Then there are two analogue line-level inputs, plus a moving-magnet phono stage. In addition to the two sets of variable preamp outputs, there's a headphone stage with switchable 6.35mm and 3.5mm sockets.

It has a nicely made aluminium case and base, with an extruded front panel; there's a choice of black or titanium finishes. Whip off the lid and you can see its impressive 200VA toroidal transformer, and high-quality passive componentry has been

specified. Input selection is done via relays for better longevity and discrete transistors are used for the audio output stages (something of an Exposure hallmark). Overall, the unit is well made and works very crisply. The long line of LED indicators at the front gives simple-to-grasp source indication; and there's another blue LED inset into the volume control denoting the motorised potentiometer used; this is one of the functions of the supplied remote control.

The two XM9 mono power amps put out a claimed 80W RMS each into 8ohm, and cost £1,388 per pair. It's a small box, but feels very solid – there's not much open air inside. The large 200VA toroidal power transformer is partly to blame for this, as is it's a direct-coupled Class AB design with discrete Toshiba power transistors. Cascode circuitry is used for improved power supply immunity, says Exposure, and high-quality resistors and capacitors are used in the signal path. The unit can work in either balanced or unbalanced mode, but you have to swap an internal link in order to switch between the two. Bi-wire speaker terminals are fitted to the back panel, and so-called 'non-invasive' current overload protection is fitted.

**Sound quality**

There's something inescapably Exposure about this little threesome, and I mean it in a good way. There's a strong house sound, as you might expect, and that means a fulsome and

warm bass, lots of detail across the midband – which has a wide soundstage – and a smooth yet spacious treble. All of this is packaged in a musically satisfying wrapper, with a good deal of punch for your added enjoyment. It's pretty consistent regardless of source, or whether you're running analogue or digital.

Taken all together – which I'm sure is precisely what Exposure would prefer – the XM7/XM9 trio offers a level of performance roughly similar to an integrated amplifier of its total price. In some ways it's better, actually. The headline news is that

**The Exposure combo throws out lots of detail in the midband**

big, bouncy sound with its well upholstered low end – it's easy on the ear yet satisfies your soul. Supertramp's *Just Another Nervous Wreck* is a quite bright, forward slice of classic rock, mixed no doubt to stand out on US FM radio of the late seventies. It can be a little upper mid-forward on a serious system, but somehow the Exposure threesome smooths it out a touch. That's not to say it makes the music boring; quite the reverse. The result is a propulsive and purposeful sound, aided and abetted by an obviously warm bass. It isn't overly



Competition is tough for pint-sized products; Cyrus' £1,145 Pre 2 DAC/preamp and £1,895 Stereo 200 power amplifier (HFC 398) is a formidable combination offering improved functionality, more upgradeability and higher power – plus a far sleeker design and more sophisticated user interface. Still, the Exposure isn't beaten; sonically it's very competitive with a rich, wide and musical sound that the Cyrus cannot quite match. The latter is more precise and detailed, but lacks the Exposure's *joie de vivre*; the XM7/XM9 combo is more animated and has a natural rhythmic flow that betters the already fine-sounding Cyrus.

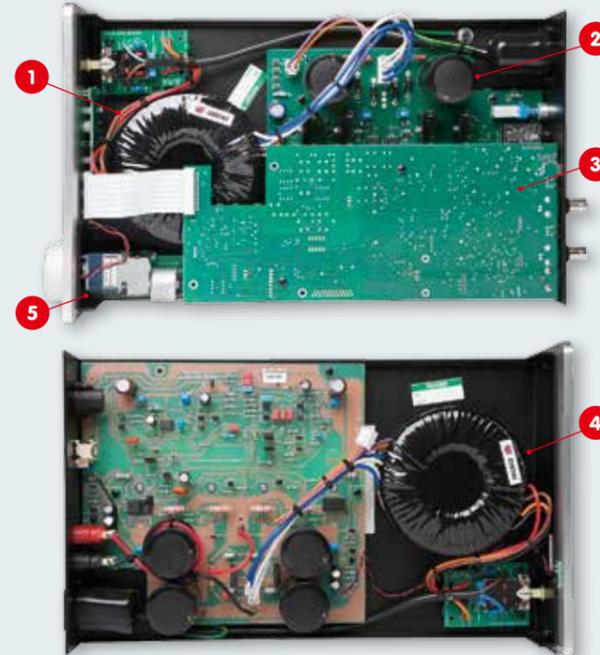
fat and doesn't slur bass guitar notes as such, yet there is a pleasant heft to it that many other similarly priced solid stagers appear to lack. At the same time, the cymbal work is sweet and smooth, whereas sometimes this track can lacerate your lugholes at high levels. In the midband, this amplifier combination throws out lots of detail yet doesn't fire it straight at you, unlike some. Overall, the Exposures strike an interesting and really rather deft balance via the preamp's analogue line input.

**Wide load**

Moving to something a little less produced, and Microdisney's Peel Session version of *Town To Town* is an odd but strangely compulsive indie rock song. Recorded in the BBC Maida Vale studio in the mid-eighties, it wins no prizes for sound quality but is at least direct and unalloyed. The Exposure threesome has fun with this, showing a forceful bass from my CD version via the analogue inputs, while going to the digital input the song is a little clearer and more direct sounding. The DAC section of the preamp is obviously more than just a gimmick, and is well able to make music. Working as a DAC/preamplifier, the XM7 is a real success; it provides a clean signal for the XM9s to really get their teeth into. I am particularly impressed by the size of the soundstage, which really pushes far left and right. The music doesn't hang 'inside' the speakers at relatively low volumes, unlike some. Although it's really good left-to-right, you can raise a criticism over the amplifier's depth perspective. Everything is pretty close to the plane of the loudspeakers, and it doesn't sound terribly three dimensional – something more than compensated for by the width of the stereo image that's available.

The moving-magnet phono stage sounds good. Fed by a fine vinyl source (Michell GyroDec/Rega RB303/Technics EPC205) it makes an extremely nice noise indeed. Isaac Hayes' *Cafe Regio's* is a beautiful classic Stax recording and sounds just right, with a wide and deep soundstage and plenty of detail. Ultimately, it's not quite as good as the DAC section in some respects, but is pretty close and there's never the sense that it lets the side down. The line inputs offer the best potential sound that this preamp can deliver, but in absolute terms – taken alone – the XM7 is a little veiled and two dimensional. No immediate price rivals better it, but fire up the XM9 monoblocks from a significantly more expensive preamp and they're

**IN SIGHT**



- 1 200VA toroidal transformer
- 2 Power supply reservoir capacitor
- 3 USB and digital input circuit board
- 4 200VA toroidal transformer
- 5 Motorised Alps volume potentiometer

**LET'S GET DIGITAL**

It's getting to the stage where every preamp needs to have digital functionality, so it's no surprise that the XM7 is thus equipped. Wolfson's WM8742 DAC chip was chosen for the job – a popular design with a fine reputation for sound quality, although it's not especially radical in design relative to some others. As we saw on Exposure's 3010s2-D integrated amplifier (HFC 397), it is capable of providing a number of digital inputs, which dramatically expands the product's functionality. There are two BNC coaxial inputs and two optical digital inputs, plus one Class 2 USB. This

gives up to 24-bit/192kHz compatibility via the S/PDIFs and 24-bit/192kHz PCM and DSD64 via the asynchronous USB input. Designer Tony Brady has implemented the DAC circuitry well, and the result is a powerful, open sound. Via a MacBook Pro running Audirvana going into the USB input, the preamp serves up a really detailed, three dimensional performance that is unexpected at this price. At 24/192 PCM or DSD, the XM7's digital input really sings; it's a meaningful upgrade to the sort of digital converter you will find in budget CD players or Blu-ray players, etc.

capable of even better results. Auditioned on their own, the XM9s are really quite something; driven direct from a dCS Rossini CD/DAC/preamp no less – via its own volume control – this impressive duo offers great speed and dynamic articulation with Linx's *You're Lying*. This classic slice of early eighties funk is beautifully crafted and the Exposure power amps tell me so in no uncertain terms. Fast, open and three dimensional, they prove well

able to drive more awkward speaker loads to highish volume levels without any complaint.

**Conclusion**

This is a great system. All components match one another visually and make the best of their sonic strengths. Exposure is to be congratulated for coming up with a compact yet highly capable setup that gives audiophiles their listening rooms back ●

**CONNECTIONS**



- 1 Coaxial input
- 2 Pre outputs
- 3 Optical inputs
- 4 Bi-wiring speaker terminals
- 5 Balanced XLR input
- 6 Earth grounding post for turntable
- 7 Line/MM phono stage input

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT: XM7**

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★  
**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★  
**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★  
**FEATURES** ★★★★★  
**OVERALL** ★★★★★

**LIKE:** Compact size; functionality  
**DISLIKE:** Limited analogue inputs  
**WESAY:** Great little half-width preamp/with useful DAC capabilities

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT: XM9**

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★  
**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★  
**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★  
**FEATURES** ★★★★★  
**OVERALL** ★★★★★

**LIKE:** Strong house sound; punch; wide soundstage  
**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price  
**WESAY:** Impressive half-width amp with power output that belies its size

**Q&A**

David Denyer  
Exposure Hi-Fi PR



**DP: What type of buyer is the XM7/XM9 combo made for?**

**DD:** All The XM series – which stands for 'eXposure Mini' – is aimed at all hi-fi purchasers who want seriously good sound, but who don't necessarily have the space to allocate to traditional full-sized separates.

**How does it differ from full-size Exposure separates?**

The XM7/XM9 is based quite closely on the 3010s2's preamplifier section (but without the plug-in discrete phono stage) and 3010s2 mono (but without the large power supply). There were few compromises to the XM7, aside from the inclusion of an IC-based moving-magnet phono stage as per the XM5 integrated amplifier. For 'serious' use the XM3 phono stage should be used – audiophiles who want the XM style and packaging yet still seek a no-compromise vinyl system will love this. As far as the XM9 power amplifier is concerned, this follows the 3010s2 closely – with the exception of the power supply, which is of course smaller to fit the dimensions of the case. This in turn means that output power is a little lower.

**What other audiophile credentials does this combo have?**

Quite a few! The headphone output of the XM7 is shared with the line output stage, and this is a discrete transistor circuit, rather than op-amp based. In the power output stage of the XM9 monoblocks, a Class AB design is used where many other designers of compact amplifiers rely on Class D – which is easier and cheaper, but we feel doesn't sound as good. Also, instead of using MOSFET output devices, we use discrete power output transistors – high quality, high current, high speed Toshiba types, as used in all our amplifiers. We believe this to sound better; all our amplifiers except for the original 2010 have been bipolar from day one.