



Home run

David Price reckons hi-fi is coming home as he listens to this all-British flagship pre/power combo that really scores

There's much debate about the direction the UK economy will take post-Brexit, but we're already seeing a shift to things being made in Britain again. With this in mind, it's good to discover that this flagship pre/power amplifier combination is made here in Blighty. While we expect Bremont watches and Aston Martin cars to be manufactured here, it comes as something of a surprise to learn that Mitchell & Johnson is turning out this £2,598 amplifier combo from a factory based in the Midlands.

As the first two pieces in the company's new top-of-the range 800 Series, they are entirely designed, engineered and built in the UK and company boss David Johnson says that making its top series here means better control of product quality. Founded in 2012 and with its headquarters in London, Johnson says: "Many so-called 'British' companies have been taken over by overseas interests or have production in the Far East. Our ethos is for music lovers to enjoy great sound and build without great financial cost. It's true that our labour rates are higher, but we believe

DETAILS
PRODUCT
Mitchell & Johnson
S800
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Preamplifier
WEIGHT
5kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 310 x 110mm
FEATURES
● 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC
● Analogue inputs: 5x RCA; 1x XLR
● Digital inputs: 3x optical; 3x coaxial; 1x USB Type-B port
● MM/MC phono stage
DISTRIBUTOR
MIAN Distribution
TELEPHONE
01223 782474
WEBSITE
mitchellandjohnson.com

the benefits of UK design, engineering and manufacturing – especially controlling quality – results in significantly better products."

In its short life the company has made a name for itself with low-cost separates, so this flagship pre/power combination is a bold step. The £1,299 S800 flagship preamp is something of a jack of all trades. It sports both moving-coil and moving-magnet phono stages and has a good quality ESS Sabre 9018 DAC with XMOS asynchronous USB input and three optical and three coaxial digital inputs. This makes it the beating heart of any modern hi-fi system, with six analogue inputs – five unbalanced RCAs plus one balanced XLR – including the aforementioned discrete phono stage with op-amp buffer. Outputs include two unbalanced RCA phons plus one balanced XLR. There are fixed-level sockets for left and right subwoofers, and line-level outputs for a recorder. Also onboard is a headphone amplifier stage – based around a Texas Instruments op-amp

– with a full-size front fascia-mounted 6.35mm headphone jack socket.

The fascia is hewn from brushed aluminium with almost flush machined aluminium volume and source selection controls, with standby mode and IR sensors both set deep into it. The volume attenuator itself is a Burr-Brown analogue type using a resistor ladder and digital control chip – giving the best of both worlds. The toggle on/off power switch looks a little 'Heath Robinson', though, and the Source selector wheel on our review sample doesn't move very slickly at all – hopefully it's not representative. There's a centrally mounted blue backlit LCD panel that shows the source selected and the volume level. It is decently readable from a distance, but its blocky, pixelated look is hardly attractive and no match for the fine-pitch OLED displays found on some similarly priced rivals. A full-function remote control is supplied.

The S815 power amplifier shares the same casework, but of course has

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mitchell & Johnson
S815
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Power amplifier
WEIGHT
16kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 310 x 110mm
FEATURES
● Class AB design
● Quoted power output: 2x 150 RMS (8ohm)
● Inputs: 1x RCA; 1x balanced XLR
● VU power meters
DISTRIBUTOR
MIAN Distribution
TELEPHONE
01223 782474
WEBSITE
mitchellandjohnson.com

a different fascia. It features twin stereo power meters – or at least they're marked as showing power output yet oddly are calibrated in volume units, along with a peak LED. They illuminate blue on black, so aren't the easiest things to read – even if they were worth reading. There's a similar on/standby toggle switch to the S800. Around the back, there's both RCA and XLR inputs, with twin gold-plated loudspeaker binding posts. A 12V power link gives simultaneous startup when used in conjunction with the S800 preamp. Inside, Noratel XW eXtra Quiet toroidal transformers are fitted and extensive heatsinking for the two pairs of six Toshiba output transistors, which run in Class AB to produce a claimed 150W RMS per side into 8ohm, and almost twice that into 4. Both preamp and power amp come in a choice of silver or black finishes.

Sound quality

There's something fundamentally right about this Mitchell & Johnson pre/power combo. It's hard to put one's finger on it, because the sound isn't especially showy or dramatic. There's no sonic fireworks, and no shock and awe – yet the more you play music through it, the more you find yourself enjoying it. Given an hour or so to warm up, you can tell it has been well voiced with a decent amount of solid-state punch and thump. Yet it's also fairly subtle and sophisticated too.

Fed from a dCS Debussy DAC, Public Service Broadcasting's *Sputnik* shows the combo's all-round ability. This slice of modern progressive rock with electronica mixed in for good measure, comes over with more clarity than you'd expect for £2,600. Tonally it is spry, with no particular sense of coloration or harshness and it casts a whitish light on the recording rather than tinting it for a smoother listen. Yet there's little in the way of glare, and that makes it easy to listen to for long periods. There's a tidiness to *Sputnik*, which the Mitchell & Johnson duo really

Even when things build to a crescendo the S800 and S815 are totally in control

picks up on, giving a clean window into the mix and letting the listener look around inside.

Rhythmically it's impressive, too – the song's subtle metronomic beat is well carried and the result is the song moves along with a real sense of pace and direction. Moving to REM's *The Flowers Of Guatemala*, a crisp mid-eighties rock recording, and the result is no less fun. Although this pre/power doesn't ram the song's rhythms down your throat, it's nevertheless very much up for fun. The song itself has frequent stops and starts with a relatively slow tempo, ▶



The on/off power toggle is something of an acquired taste

CONNECTIONS



- 1 USB Type-B port
- 2 3x coaxial digital inputs
- 3 3x optical digital inputs
- 4 5x unbalanced RCA analogue inputs
- 5 Unbalanced RCA input from preamp (left channel)
- 6 Balanced XLR input from preamp (right channel)

bounce and body – plus a good deal of detail clearly discernible.

The downsides of this combination are few at the price. In absolute terms it's just a little grey and foggy in the midband, but few price rivals I can think of do better and its treble is decently smooth, but lacks that last nth degree of air and space. Dynamically it is really rather capable – able almost to smash down walls on musical crescendos played at high volumes – yet it doesn't quite track the tiny inflections of players quite as well as some. Bass is solid and workmanlike and turns in a very good result, sounding more like a serious mid-price amp than a budget one.

Conclusion

It's easy to like Mitchell & Johnson's S800/S815 pre/power amplifier combo, and it does a lot of things really rather well for the money. It's designed to be a flexible powerhouse that offers very good value, and the designers have hit the sweet spot. It might lack the ergonomic refinement of more established brands, yet needs to make no apologies for its sound. Well worth an audition, and if the same high standards are met with the rest of the range, we await its arrival with keen interest ●

and this can descend into a dirge when played through the wrong amplifier. Yet this is never the case here and the bass guitar in particular is singled out for its power and precision. Even when things build to a crescendo, the S800/S815 pairing proves to be totally in control and able to keep a grip on the proceedings with a sense of authority and poise.

The combo has been well voiced with decent solid-state punch and thump

Feed these amplifiers some gentle jazz funk in the shape of Preeez's *Caribbean Winter*, and again they make a nice noise. The soundstage is pretty wide and falls back a fair way. It doesn't have the holographic quality of some integrateds at this price, yet what it loses on the roundabouts it gains on the swings, so to speak. Instruments, such as the rhythm guitar, keyboards and vocals are located with a good deal of

precision, and more importantly never seem to get knocked off course as the music builds to a crescendo. The complex solo passage is handled very well, these amplifiers showing the impressive grip they have.

Switching inputs, I move to the preamplifier's internal DAC. I spin up Madness' *Grey Day* on my CD player and sit back to hear a surprisingly engaging and solid sound. If anything, the soundstage improves slightly here, with more solid images stretching a little further left and right. The music bounces along cheerily, and there is a good deal of detail, too. Although in absolute terms it doesn't quite have the panoramic views of the analogue input when fed by a very expensive digital front end or some of the subtlety, the S800 has a decently implemented, high-quality DAC that most won't feel the need to change.

Fed by an Audio-Technica AT-33PTG moving-coil cartridge (*HFC 402*), the built-in phono stage proves surprisingly good considering the price, with a crisp rendition of The Box 'Tops' *The Letter*, with lots of

HOW IT COMPARES

The £1,145 Cyrus Pre2 DAC/preamp and £1,195 Cyrus X Power power amp is a close rival for the S800/S815 – on paper at least. The benefits of the Cyrus combo are its beautiful styling and compactness; the M&J has neither. Sonically the 70W Cyrus combo is a little smoother with a less vivid midband, but it's less powerful and bass seems a tad weak. The optional PSX-R adds thump in the bass and midband clarity. They're quite different, with the Cyrus the more mature combo and the M&J more gutsy and engaging.

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT: S800

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Clean sound; digital inputs; flexibility
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Front panel controls could be smoother in use
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Versatile and capable mid-price preamplifier offering
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT: S815

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Plenty of clean power; soundstage; great musicality
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Meaningless VU meters
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Impressive powerhouse with musical appeal
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



The duo might lack some design chic compared with rivals, but its performance can't be faulted

