



# Advance Paris Playstream A7 Connected Integrated Amplifier Review

## ADVANCE PARIS

## PLAYSTREAM A7 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

AUD \$2,699 / NZD \$2,999 RRP



Advance Paris – initially known as Advance Acoustic until 2013 – has been making hi-fi components since 1995, when it launched a range of five loudspeakers for its domestic French market. Since 2005, it has been exporting worldwide and is now represented in over forty countries. All products are designed at the Paris-based headquarters and manufactured in Asia. The company sells a wide range of hi-fi products across various price points and performance levels, with the Playstream A7 being the highest-specification model in its range.

Advance Paris calls the Playstream A7 a 'Connected Integrated Amplifier', which describes it rather well as its connectivity is outstanding. It hooks up to a home network via Wi-Fi or Ethernet cable to stream hi-res music services, as well as internet radio and music files stored on your phone, computer or NAS. The proprietary Advance Playstream app looks after this, and the amp is DLNA and Airplay compatible, allowing for third-party software to be used. It also connects to a TV with an HDMI ARC input, becoming the backbone of a home AV system.

Five RCA line inputs are included, plus a phono input offering a choice of moving magnet or moving coil with high or low gain on the latter. There are three optical digital inputs and one coaxial, plus a 10-pin connector for the supplied external X-FTB01 Bluetooth module to plug into. Two USB A inputs are located alongside,

with one of them used as a dedicated firmware update port and the other suitable to play the most common audio files from a player or USB storage. There is no provision for a direct connection to a computer. Lastly, it also has a DAB/DAB+ digital tuner and an FM tuner built-in.

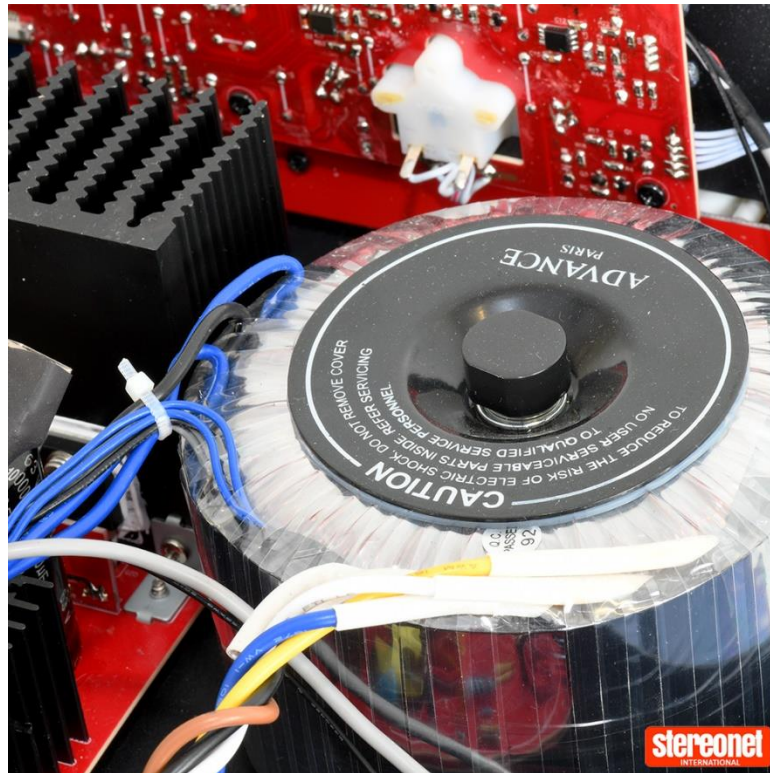


You also get a Record Out stereo RCA output, offering fixed line level out, plus Pre Out which gives variable output for connection to an external power amplifier. It also has the opposite connectivity with Amp In, letting you connect an external preamplifier to use the A7 as a standalone power amplifier. There are two Subwoofer outputs for connecting a pair of active subwoofers, although there is no subwoofer management onboard.

Advance Paris products have a distinctively retro look, and the black brushed aluminium and glass fascia of the A7 stands out even more thanks to its two large dimmable blue backlit VU meters (calibrated in dB and Watt peak) and a shiny multi-purpose volume knob. An array of illuminated touch-sensitive input selectors are under the meters, and are flanked by 3.5mm and 6.3mm headphone sockets. A small display sits between the meters, indicating, among other things, the volume and source settings, plus musical track information when available. Overall, this is a classy-looking device, one that appears more expensive than it is. A comprehensive remote control is included.

The A7 offers a claimed 2x 115W RMS per channel into 8 ohms. It's interesting inasmuch as it normally works in Class AB, but there's a switch on the back panel labelled High Bias, which causes it to work in pure Class A up to 1W, according to the company's technical director, **Cédric Leon**. This means that the output transistors are switched on all the time at lower volume levels, in turn dramatically reducing switching distortion. But if you want efficiency and power, then switching High Bias off is the way to go. Subjectively, the sonic differences between the two modes are subtle, but I did prefer it switched on, especially with quiet listening.

The manufacturer does not supply extensive technical details about the A7, but a peek inside the case shows a large toroidal transformer and eight output transistors mounted to an internal heatsink. This gets rather warm in normal operation, but still shouldn't be a problem with adequate ventilation – indeed, the warmer it became, the better the amp sounded. An Asai Kasei 4490EO DAC chip is fitted, which is limited within the A7 to 24-bit, 192kHz.



The X-FTB01 Bluetooth receiver that is supplied with the A7 simply plugs into the dedicated port at the back of the amplifier, and there's the option of an X-FTB02 receiver which supports the high definition aptX HD codec. Connecting to Bluetooth the first time was painless, as it took about fifteen seconds to pair with my smartphone and start playing music from Spotify. The track name and artist appear on the screen as well as the details, such as 'APT-X 44.1kHz' – which is a nice touch.

Setup is straightforward using the multi-purpose volume control that is pressed in and held for a menu to appear on the screen which sets the network, tone, and more. If a Wi-Fi connection is required, enter the network details while following the prompts on the screen. When the antenna is connected and either DAB or FM is selected, it will automatically scan for available stations. With the Advance Playstream app loaded, you can enter the login details for Tidal, Qobuz, or whatever streaming service is subscribed. Spotify defers to the local Spotify app on your device with the track details displayed on the screen, and the remote control supports the app.

## THE LISTENING

The Advance Paris Playstream A7 has an open, transparent, and musically articulate sound that's impressive for the price. It shows good timing and articulates the music's rhythms well, making for an engaging listening experience. It has a pleasing tonality, too. For example, **Janelle Monae** singing *Givin' Em What They Love* was thoroughly enjoyable, with no shrillness despite the amplifier's ever so slightly 'well lit' balance. This makes for a crisp and defined midrange, yet treble is smooth and extended.

The subtle focus on the midband tends to highlight guitars, synthesisers and vocals, and this aids articulation. Vocal harmonies were well defined and the guitar solo really soared. A little lower down the

frequency scale, there was a conspicuous lack of bass boom. The low end didn't sound thick or congested, which in turn helped to drive the song along. Some may consider this amplifier to sound a little thin as a result, as if there is less meat on the bone, so to speak, but I believe this to be one of its strengths. It made my reference JBL HDI-3800 floorstanding loudspeakers sound tight and taut.



**Kraftwerk's** *Man Machine* from the *Minimum Maximum* album was reproduced with all the agility that you can reasonably expect from an amplifier of this price. The A7 kept pace with the track's tightly syncopated, sinewy rhythms whilst sounding cohesive. Having seen the band live in concert just days before writing this review, it certainly brought back some memories! Although no home sound system is capable of delivering live concert-level dynamics and really visceral deep bass notes, this integrated did very well at capturing the spirit of the event. It didn't just carry the bottom end enthusiastically, but it also imparted the special feeling of a large, open space filled with a cheering and excited audience. This showed the amplifier's talents at soundstaging, and the depth perspective was highly convincing, too.



The A7's built-in network streamer brought no unpleasant surprises, giving a performance almost comparable to a line input fed by my reference Holo Audio Spring 3 DAC – which costs twice the price of the amplifier. Playing Spotify or Apple Music, the A7 has more than adequate performance to satisfy most music lovers – and it does so agreeably, with impressive midrange purity and clean but solid bass. Bluetooth streaming proved decent too, better than expected with a fair amount of air and space. It's certainly good enough to be entertaining, and can be used continuously without fatiguing harshness.



Radio lovers will be spoilt for choice with FM, DAB/DAB+ and streaming internet radio stations available at the touch of the remote. Strangely, AM is missing, but this won't be a deal breaker for most customers. Sound quality is more than acceptable, but this depends heavily on the station and content played. The amplifier's fine sound extends to its headphone outputs, with **Midge Ure's *If I Was*** coming through loud and clear from my Sony WH-1000XM4 phones. The track came across cleanly, with the focus on the well-articulated bass and rhythms. Tonally smooth, long-term headphone listening should prove fatigue-free. Although this is not the most powerful amplifier I have ever auditioned, it has plenty of poke considering its modest price. I found the A7 had no issues driving a variety of loudspeakers that I had to hand. The Encel Gelato compact bookshelf speakers proved to be a good pairing, with Spotify serving *Smoke And Mirrors* by **Gotye** sounding lovely and open. The soundstage was pleasingly wide, the recording had a smooth top-to-bottom tonal balance. At the same time, percussion was confidently delivered with fine musical flow.

If there is one negative aspect to this amplifier, it is the Advance Playstream app. The functionality is rather ordinary, and seems out of step with the numerous connectivity options of the A7. It's a common complaint that apps are not flush with functionality, but thankfully, it is stable, and the remote control is useful and works with streaming apps to change tracks, etc. The A7 is also DLNA compatible, so apps like Bubble UPnP and others with superior search facilities and access to saved playlists can also be used.

## THE VERDICT



The Advance Paris Playstream A7 is a versatile and useful amplifier with more connectivity than you would expect at the price. It is attractively positioned as a one-box platform for all of your AV needs that can expand over time. You just need to add loudspeakers, and perhaps an external source. With a good feature set, fine sound and decent build quality it has truly wide appeal – so cost-conscious buyers should audition one if they can.