

Leema Tucana II Anniversary amplifier

By Jason Kennedy



It doesn't seem that long ago that I reviewed the first Leema Tucana, but the anniversary appellation added to this latest and third incarnation of the company's first integrated amplifier suggests it is longer than I thought. Leema has been making loudspeakers since the late nineties but it wasn't until 2006 that they got into electronics that featured heavily machined and heatsinked casework in the distinctive matte finish that remains to this day.

Made in Welshpool, North Wales, electronics is Leema's bread and butter, although it still makes a range of loudspeakers with names starting with an X (alongside a range of cables that seems to grow on a regular basis), but the focus is on electronics: amplifiers large, smaller, and phono, a music server, an all in one streamer/amp, and a couple of CD players.

The Anniversary edition of the Tucana II integrated is a rather smarter looking and pricier version of the standard amp. While the shiny chrome logo and badge differentiate it aesthetically, the specs go a lot further. The circuit and power ratings remain the same, but the components used within the amp have been seriously upgraded. The PCB traces on the circuit boards, the 'veins' of the amplifier, have twice the amount of copper on them, all the critical capacitors have been changed to Nichicon Muse-series devices – the bees

knees of caps – and the cable that connects the boards to the speaker terminals is now Leema Reference 2; the best cable that the company makes. This has silver-plated copper conductors, and with eight cores per side, it's far more chunky than you will find in many power amps.

The output transistors are precision matched, which is crucial for both timing and imaging. Each power supply for this truly dual mono circuit is driven by a Noratel Xtra Quiet mains transformer, which made not the slightest hint of hum even with my higher than average mains voltage. If there was a picture of the inside, you'd see it gives you some idea of why this amplifier is so much heavier (18kg) than you expect of its fairly conventional scale.

As with the standard Tucana II, this amp is full of features that start with six line inputs, balanced in, tape in/out, and preamp out. Then there's the minijack input on the front panel for smartphones and tablets, alongside a headphone output of the same size. You can adjust gain for each input and hook the Tucana Anniversary up to other Leema components using their proprietary bus system for intelligent control. The biggest physical difference between this and its less shiny brother is the machined aluminium remote; this is from the more expensive products in the catalogue and reflects the build and finish of the amp... it even has chunky rubber feet! ▶

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▶ The Tucana II, with its 150 Watts into eight Ohms that nearly doubles into four, was always a pretty powerful amplifier – more so than most integrated designs – and that remains the case here. What has changed is that the grip that power delivery bestows on the music has been joined by something even more important to an engaging musical experience; speed. It's difficult to combine these two qualities effectively, it's one reason why the 'pace, rhythm, and timing' brands tend to stick to relatively low power outputs. But Leema has proved that 'PRaT' can be consistent with higher power and that is even possible with integrated designs, which makes this amplifier rather special indeed.

It's a funny thing, timing: you can have immensely impressive systems that don't do it very well, but what tends to happen is that when the initial excitement has passed and you've got used to the rock-solid imaging and/or room shaking low end, you don't feel quite so compelled to play a lot of music. Timing is a fundamental part of the musical experience and arguably more important than distortion levels or bandwidth. You can spot a live band down a corridor because of the speed with which notes stop and start; in fact you can do the same with almost any acoustic instrument. And that comes down to immediacy, both of attack and decay. So the extra 25% asked for the Anniversary over the regular Tucana II is a small price to pay for such quality.

With some speakers though, the Anniversary can sound a bit forward. It doesn't suit the PMC Fact.8 floorstanders

that I generally use as a reference. The sound is a bit lean and lacking in warmth. But partnered with the Bowers & Wilkins 803 D3, it's a different story altogether; this is a very good combination thanks to the Leema's power and speed allied with the 803's very low coloration, high power handling, and all-round detail resolving capabilities. With this combination and a Lindemann Musicbook:25DSD source, Nils Frahm's *Spaces* [Erased Tapes], is absolutely mesmerising on every track. It's not the cleanest of recordings, as most of it is live and some captured on cassette, but the Leema manages to keep music and audio quality in proportion, always putting the music first, and that's what makes it so engaging. It's a taut, open and rhythmically stable amplifier that sounds as fresh as you like with 'Judas' from Esperanza Spalding's *Emily's D+Evolution* [HD Tracks], the lyrics being intelligible despite the tempo with which they are sung and the bass lines remaining as sinuous as ever. Kraftwerk's live version of 'Radioactivity' [*Minimum Maximum*, EMI] delivers plenty of scale alongside nicely resolved reverb, and suitably bowel-tickling bass.

Detail is never in short supply and if anything the Leema errs in that direction on the tonal balance front, it's not for those looking to find a valve amp with grunt. It's for anyone who wants to feel the drive of a rocking track at the same time as being able to tell which reverb effect the guitar player is using. The presentation is always refined though; those fat copper tracks and high quality components show themselves in a clean yet calm fashion by letting the subtleties through, while keeping a firm hand on the drive units. This is equally applicable to all music types: Amandine Beyer's violin [JS Bach *Sonatas & Partitas BWV 1001 – 1006*, Zig-Zag Territoires] is both solid and lyrical in equal parts; in fact it sounds beautiful – a true 'close your eyes and you're almost there' presentation.

In the spirit of getting with the now I also tried the headphone output on the end of some Bowers & Wilkins P9 cans, and it sounded pretty damn good. Better even than the headphone output on the Lindemann streamer that was supplying the analogue signal to the amp (and thus has a theoretical advantage). The Tucana has a more dynamic and muscular headphone stage that gave Gregory Porter considerably more presence, it also improved the timing on 'No Love Dying' [*Liquid Spirit*, Blue Note], which shouldn't be a surprise I guess. ▶

▶ Another interesting comparison was to contrast the sound of the volume control on the Lindemann with that on the Tucana II. You can do this by using the Leema's AV input, which is effectively a preamp input as well. Once again, the Leema made its qualities clear with a significantly more vibrant and revealing result when the full output of the streamer was connected to one of its regular line inputs. Using it thus with another loudspeaker system, the Eclipse TD510Mk2 and TD520SW subwoofer, proved a thrilling experience. This single driver speaker has phenomenal speed and paired with the Leema this proved virtually impossible to tear myself away from. Rarely have I been so thoroughly gripped by the muse that track after heavily rotated track rolled by, with absolutely no thought about the passing of time or the world around me. It was probably fortunate that a phone call broke the spell; otherwise this review would not have made the deadline.

The Eclipse is clearly a remarkable speaker, but it won't perform like one with just any old amplifier; the Leema is fundamental to the result. It suggests as much with a number of other speakers, too. Add to this the serious build and finish, the massive feature count, and the sheer power, and you have an amplifier for all seasons. It pays to find a good speaker match and I would recommend warmer rather than leaner tonal balances on that front, but two out of the three speakers I tried worked rather well indeed, which is a good sign. If you're looking for that balance of speed, power, and transparency that so few amps can deliver, the Leema Tucana II Anniversary could be just the ticket. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state, 2-channel integrated amplifier with built-in headphone amplifier.

Analogue inputs: Six single-ended line-level inputs including AV direct (via RCA jacks), one balanced input (via XLR connectors), one tape input (via RCA jacks), one MP3 player input (via 3.5mm jack).

Digital inputs: none.

Analogue outputs: One pre-out (via RCA jacks), one tape out (via RCA jacks).

Input impedance: not specified.

Output impedance: 0.05 Ohms

Headphone Loads: not specified.

Power Output: 150Wpc @ 8 Ohms, 290 Wpc @ 4 Ohms

Bandwidth: Not specified

Distortion: THD (10 Watts RMS 4 Ohms) </+ 0.006%,

THD (max output before clipping, 4 Ohms, 1kHz) </+ 0.006%.

Signal to Noise Ratio: -104dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 110 x 440 x 320mm

Weight: 18kg

Price: £4,995

Manufacturer: Leema Acoustics

URL: www.leema-acoustics.com

