

# The Creek Destiny Integrated Amp

## Creek Moves Upmarket

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The growth in popularity of the integrated amplifier as a true high performance audio component continues. Long a mainstay in UK and European systems, integrated amps continue to improve in performance and to expand in application, evolving away from their past role as temporary budget stop-gap components on the way to the building of no-compromise, high-resolution audio systems. The assumption that a separate preamp and amp combination is inherently of higher quality than an integrated amp is no longer a given.

Creek has long been an established player in the market, building a solid reputation for highly musically communicative integrated amplifiers especially adroit in rhythm, timing, expressiveness, and drive. I've had experience with Creek amplifiers dating back some generations to the old 4040, and have most recently reviewed their excellent A-50iR, the 50 Series being second level (after the EVO Series) in the new Creek lines of audio components. Creek's new Destiny Series is a conscious attempt to move into an upmarket, higher performance category for Creek products, creating a new standard towards which the line has been continually evolving, adding higher and higher abilities in resolution, fine detail, and neutrality to the basic Creek virtues of strong rhythmic drive and the re-creation of the fundamentals of musical communication.

The Destiny integrated amp retails for \$2400. It offers 100 watts/channel into an 8-Ohm load. Like past Creek designs, the Destiny is a high-current design, as its doubling of power (200 Watts/channel into 4 Ohms) and 25 amps of peak current reflect. Fully remote-controlled, the Destiny offers 5 line inputs, a high quality headphone amplifier and jack, and the ability to run two separate sets of speakers. Unusually, the Destiny offers both passive and active preamp operation, switchable from the front panel. Another switch on the underside of the amp (to be operated only when the main amplifier power is switched off) permits choice of 3, 6 or 9 dB of active gain in the preamp section. The Destiny is physically much wider and deeper than the old Creek designs, but offers no fitting problems for standard component shelves. Ventilation, top and bottom, occurs at one-third the width of the amp, which rests on asymmetrically placed sorbothane feet. Remote control of volume is by a motorized ALPS volume knob, quelling purist concerns about degradation of signal quality by the application of remote operation. There is no balance control.

The Destiny took about a week of casual playing to burn-in. Creek, in the interest of responsible electricity usage and component life, does not recommend leaving the unit permanently powered up. It takes about a half-hour for the Destiny to come into song after switch on; alternatively one can leave the amp in 'stand-by' mode during shorter interruptions of listening. Phono input is an option, with Destiny-dedicated internal MC and MM modules available. I used my own batch of 5 different phono

sections when listening to LP. Speaker connection is foolproof, but does not cater to the monstrous spade lugs beloved of US cable enthusiasts. The ability to run 2 different sets of speakers is a feature likely not to be used by most US users, so perhaps dispensing with it and offering 2 sets of conventional 5-way binding posts for those interested in bi-wiring would have eased use in some US applications.

Defining the sound of the Destiny is somewhat difficult because it is really 4 amps in one: the differences between passive and active preamp modes are readily audible, as are the subtler differences in active mode as one switches between 3, 6 and 9 dB of active preamp gain. The use of passive preamps (perhaps we should call them volume-control/input-switchers because there is no *pre-amplification*;) has proven very much a two-edged sword in practical use in my past experience. At their worst, they can produce wraith-like disembodied results with limited dynamic life. Any gains in fine detail and resolution obtained from bypassing an active gain stage are balanced against the possible result of reduced dynamic drive and energy, particularly in the mid-bass and bass regions. Creek specs a 590 mV input drive to achieve its full 100-watt output (amp gain is 33.6 dB); this should be easily achievable by most input devices, including outboard phono stages. The CD standard of 2 volts out (not always achieved in practice by CD players however) should drive the hell out of the Destiny; I never got beyond 12 o'clock on the volume knob when using CD as the source in passive mode. It is hard not to infer that the Destiny is electrically optimized for CD playback.

Audition of the Destiny would seem to confirm that inference: CD playback (given the capabilities of the CD player of course,) is simply superb, with a complete lack of harshness, edge, and other grating distortions contributed by the amp. Sound field re-creation is wide, extending beyond the edges of the loudspeakers, and the sound stage is deep, airy and verging on the ethereal. Particularly vivid is the Destiny's portrayal of vocals: superb diction, parsing, and inflection permit an unprecedented clarity in the understanding of vocal lines and lyrics. Highly resolved differentiation of consonants and vowels and how they are vocally formed is largely the mechanism behind this personally much-valued ability. Listening to John Martyn's mid-career vocal style, where he sings sonic 'Z's' instead of the sibilant 'S' sound to aid the euphony of the vocal line, and occasionally swallows other consonants in aid of melodic flow, was crystal clear to perception. Other subtly expressive vocalists, like the great Tim Buckley and Nick Drake, were a revelation to listen to, both sonically and emotionally. Fortunately, gruffer and more outwardly intense singers like Joe Cocker and Tom Fogarty were equally well served. Delineation of multiple voices is exceptional. Since most music lies in the midrange, the Destiny's excellent vocal performance applies to all the instrumental voices as well. High frequency detail was also excellent, permitting easy decoding of complex studio mixes without the common clinical coldness. Bass quality and control, unlike many amps, actually improved when driving low impedance speakers. The Destiny's playback of CD in passive mode is highly refined, highly detailed, and hard to fault.

Creek's reputation for driving difficult speaker loads continues. It drove the 4-Ohm impedance of the old Infinity Qb and RS7 speakers supremely well, with strong dynamic drive, tight bass control, and the unique ability to extract the full measure of the Infinity's EMIT tweeters, whose response extends to 32 kHz. Unlike some amplifiers whose sound changes when driving low impedances, the Destiny positively thrives, actually sounding better into tough loads. Benign loads like the Harbeth Monitor 30, Rega R1, and Celestion 3 were the proverbial slice of pastry. Somewhat surprising was the Destiny's ability to drive my reference speakers, the Sound Lab

Dynastats. Although the Dynastats produce 88 dB/watt/4 meters and offer an 8-ohm general load, their union of a dynamic woofer with a transformer-loaded capacitive electrostatic panel has made amplifier compatibility unpredictable. The Destiny drove the Dynastats better than any other integrated amp I've tried with them, failing only to extract the last measure of resolution from the electrostatic panels with LP playback. I'd estimate the Creek was extracting about 85% of the Dynastats' potential, an amazing figure considering how many other more highly priced amps just fall flat.

The Destiny did not prove neurotic in its demand for interconnects and speaker cables, although it didn't share the fondness of many UK amps for DNM/Reson Solid Core speaker cables. I had excellent results with XLO PRO, various Audioquests, Origin Live Soli-Core Super, Analysis Plus Oval 9, and my reference Origin Live Reference speaker cable.

The Destiny's sorbothane feet were easily improved upon (sorbothane's isolating properties begin at around 30 Hz) with more effective isolation devices, though the amp's underbody placement of its ventilation grill made conventional 3-piece devices somewhat clumsy to place. My best results were obtained with the Stillpoints Universal Resonance Dampers mounted in the Stillpoints Risers. Experiments with the more expensive and elaborate Stillpoints Component Stand system resulted in increased low-level resolution that was not organized into meaningful patterns, so I did most of my auditioning either neat, or with the Stillpoints/Riser combination.

The Destiny revealed some sensitivity to the quality of the AC line. A 100-degree heat wave that coincided with part of my auditioning time revealed some coarsening and loss of detail as multiple air conditioners running throughout the electric grid degraded the incoming AC. Switching off the house AC while listening made a significant improvement. Similarly, playing the Destiny in a room without grounded AC outlets (using a cheater adaptor) compromised its authority and drive. I did not experiment with aftermarket AC cords, or with power conditioners, connecting the Destiny either directly into the wall receptacle or into the Eichmann multiple outlet strip.

Considering that the average user will likely be running CD as their main source, and given the stupendous improvement in the sonic and musical quality of CD playback in recent new CD players like Creek's own A50 MK II (I did not have Creek's matching Destiny CD player in-house for testing), the Rega Apollo and Saturn, the Cyrus CD 8x, and even universal DVD Video-based players like the Pioneer Elite DV 79AVi, it's not surprising that a company pay particular attention to CD playback quality. Unlike some past strategies to flatter CD playback, the Destiny does not offer cosmetic euphonic tailoring to hide the format's weaknesses. Instead, it offers extreme clarity and very low distortion so that it doesn't multiply or add to the problem. This is a delicate tightrope wire strategy: you want to extract as much information as possible without highlighting the flaws so much that the sonic illusion falls from the wire. Creek treads this delicate balance very well. CD users will love this amp.

Unfortunately, as even its inventors Sony and Philips now freely admit, CD is not a high fidelity medium: its limited bandwidth, inadequate sampling rate, and the fatal necessity of adding dither during the recording process to capture any low level information at all, render it a compromised medium. Given the Destiny's superb rendition of CD playback, I was somewhat surprised at its LP playback. I ran 5

different turntables and a variety of phono sections and cartridges into the Destiny. The contrast between analogue LP and CD was somewhat homogenized. Usually, with other components in my system, the difference between CD and LP playback is night and day. My ultimate LP player – (the Cartridge Man MusicMaker Classic with The Isolator, mounted in the Origin Live Conqueror tonearm on the Origin Live Aurora Gold turntable, and feeding the Graham Slee Reflex phono stage) – produces some very special and very literally real sonic and musical effects that the Destiny could not fully resolve. This LP system's ability to re-create the ambience of the recording hall and to portray the sound of the instruments emerging from and decaying into that ambience was compromised. Additionally, the finest dynamic shadings and rhythmic patterns at the quietist levels within the music were homogenized. The Cartridge Man MusicMaker Classic's superior way with tonal colors, and concomitantly, sonic textures, was also subdued, yielding a tonal palette somewhere between grey and very faint pastel. While mating a \$10,000 LP system to a \$2400 integrated amp might appear incongruous, it does hint at the ultimate limits of the amp.

Sonic performance per se does not always completely correlate with musical performance. It is the organization of sonic elements into musically comprehensible patterns that is crucial. Creek products have always been extremely adept at re-creating the expressive mechanisms of music: tempo, drive, rhythmic flow, punctuation, points of arrival, emphasis and de-emphasis, dynamic shifts and gradations, parsing lines into phrases and connecting phrases into larger musical statements; in short the organization of sound into musically communicative patterns. The Destiny continues that grand Creek tradition. Lovers of bass/drum-driven music will likely find enhanced performance by using the Destiny's active preamp mode.

The only anomaly I ran into when using the Destiny in passive preamp mode was a slight blurring of bass note transients in a narrow band in the upper bass area (roughly at 100 Hz.) Bass notes in that frequency band tended also to get lost in the mix. Low bass and mid bass were not affected. Interestingly, the effect almost disappeared when driving lower impedance speakers. Switching to active preamp mode eliminated the problem altogether, and also resulted in far greater boogie factor, with rhythmic drive and timing significantly more infectious and physically moving. It looks like Creek hasn't hung up its Rock 'n' Roll Shoes: you needn't either – just switch the amp into active mode. There is a slight loss of detail and a slight increase in distortion in active mode, but if you're obsessing about 'air' and 'imaging' when playing Little Richard, the Rolling Stones, The Meters, or George Thorogood, you've probably already missed the Rock and Roll Boat.

The ability to change from passive to active mode by simply pushing a switch on the front panel (the amp automatically mutes the amp and reduces the volume when the Active switch is pressed) gives the Creek Destiny great versatility in playing different types of music, different source formats, and even optimizing different speakers. This versatility allows the Creek to play a wide variety of music, affecting various centers of the listener – from the purely cerebral to the utterly physical - without distorting the expressiveness and artistic intent of the music. While I might prefer to have the passive mode's grace, refinement, and subtlety always available along with the head down drive and boogie fool élan of active mode, having the choice is a fair compromise.

The Creek Destiny is a must audition for those searching for an integrated amp in the increasingly crowded and increasingly competitive \$2000 and up market. Its ability to drive real world speaker loads, extract premium performance from the CD format, the versatility of its preamp modes, and its exceptional musically communicative performance make it an easy and obvious recommendation.

## **Associated Equipment**

### **Analog Front End**

Origin Live Aurora Gold and Standard Kit, 2 Linn Sondek LP12 (one with Origin Live DC motor upgrade,) Merrill/AR turntables.

Origin Live Conqueror, Silver MK II, and fully modified Rega RB250 and RB300 tonearms.

The Cartridge Man MusicMaker III and Classic, Shure V-15 V xMR, Audio Technica AT OC9ML, Talisman Boron, and Denon DL160 phono cartridges.

Graham Slee Elevator EXP, ERA V Gold and Reflex, EAR 834P, Acoustic Signature Tango, Musical Surroundings Phonomenon phono sections.

Ringmat Anniversary LP Support System. Townshend Seismic Sinks.

### **Digital Front End**

Pioneer Elite DV79AVi, Marantz CD 67SE (modified), Rotel RCD 970, Rega Saturn CD players.

### **Amplification**

Meitner STR55 Plus+, Rotel RB980, EICO HF89 power amps.

Meitner PA6i Plus +, Hegeman HAPI One and Two, AMC CVT 1030, EICO ST 84 preamps.

### **Loudspeakers**

Harbeth Monitor 30, Sound Lab Dynastat, Rega R1, Celestion 3 and F15, Infinity Qb and RS7, Spondor 2040 loudspeakers.

### **Cabling**

Monster/Radio Shack, Monster, Audioquest Granite and Midnight, DNM/Reson, XLO PRO, Origin Live Soli-Core S and Reference, Analysis Plus Oval 9 speaker cables.

Kimber PBJ, Tascam Studio, Sumiko Catalyst, DNM/Reson, XLO PRO, Analysis Plus Copper, Origin Live Reference interconnects.

### **Isolation**

Navcom Silencers, Vibrapods and Vibracones, Ganymede VCS, Aurios MIB PRO, Townshend Seismic Sink, Stillpoints URD, Risers and Component Stand.

### **Specifications:**

Power: into 8 Ohms, both channels driven > 100W Power  
into 4 Ohms, one channel driven > 200W

Max Current > 25amps

THD < 0.05% 20Hz - 20Khz

Frequency Response 3Hz - 80Khz - 1dB

+3db +6db +9db Input

Sensitivity 590mv for 100W

Separation > 60dB

Signal to Noise > 105dB

Remote Yes (SRC 2)  
Inputs 5 line inputs + 1 tape loop  
Outputs 4  
Headphone output  
a/b speaker switch

**Price** - \$2399

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