Bowers & Wilkins
705 s3
Métal précieux

Acoustique High End

Audionec EVO 2
PMC MB2 SE
YG Talus & Carmel 3

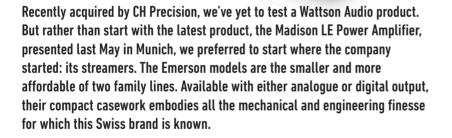**Ferrum Wandla GoldenSound Edition**
Le petit DAC qui n'a pas peur des gros

DIGITAL NETWORK TRANSPORT

WATTSON AUDIO EMERSON DIGITAL

Vincent Guillemin

Recently acquired by CH Precision, we've yet to test a Wattson Audio product. But rather than start with the latest product, the Madison LE Power Amplifier, presented last May in Munich, we preferred to start where the company started: its streamers. The Emerson models are the smaller and more affordable of two family lines. Available with either analogue or digital output, their compact casework embodies all the mechanical and engineering finesse for which this Swiss brand is known.

H aving entered the market with two families of network players, Wattson Audio is in the process of developing its catalogue, having recently added a configurable stereo power amplifier that can be switched for bi-amp or mono operation – if you want to increase the available power and channel separation. Called the Madison LE Amplifier, this unit joins the Madison series, which already includes the Madison Streamer and Madison Streamer LE, the latter featuring selected components and an upgraded power-supply. Below the Madison series, are

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TECHNICAL SHEET

ORIGIN
Switzerland

PRICE
€1,750

DIMENSIONS
104 x 87 x 38 mm

WEIGHT
371g

DIGITAL INPUTS & OUTPUTS
Inputs: 1 x Ethernet RJ45
Outputs: 1 x RCA coaxial SPDIF; 1 x XLR AES/EBU

SAMPLING RATE
Up to PCM 24-bit 192 kHz

FORMATS SUPPORTED
WAV, FLAC, AIFF, ALAC, MP3, AAC, Ogg Vorbis, WMA UPnP/DLNA, AirPlay, TIDAL connect, Roon Ready, Audirvāna

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two Emerson streamers: the first incorporates a DAC and a Leedh digital volume control, producing an analogue output via RCA sockets; the other is purely digital, offering S/PDIF or AES/EBU outputs for connection to a DAC.

IBoth Emerson Analog and Digital models are built into the same slate grey, machined from solid aluminium chassis and entirely hand-crafted in Switzerland. Both are priced at the same €1,650 and use the same network playback architecture, based on a Sitara ARM processor developed by Texas Instruments. As network players, none of Wattson products support USB. For this test, and in anticipation of a forthcoming review of the Madison Streamers, we chose to focus on the Digital version of the Emerson. While the identical price of the two models may come as a surprise, the Digital version justifies its cost in terms of the sheer quality of its coaxial S/PDIF RCA (75 Ω) and AES/EBU XLR (110 Ω) outputs: both are synchronised by the main clock and independently isolated thanks to a pair of broadband RF transformers. On the input end of the chassis, a carefully

chosen connector (PulseJack) is used to connect the little Wattson to the Internet, the company preferring the 100 Mbit/s RJ45 Ethernet connection to the vagaries of Wi-Fi. Beside it is the socket that connects the Emerson to its medical-grade external power supply, which with the on-board power supply circuitry delivers almost infinitesimal noise levels (< 1 µV RMS 10 Hz-100 kHz). Despite its diminutive dimensions, (just 10.4cm long, 8.7cm wide, 3.8cm high but 371g) contains some serious engineering, its bit-perfect technology utilizing separate oscillators operating independently for each output to provide ultra-low jitter (< -135 dBc/Hz at 100 Hz and < 50 fs RMS), with active clock synchronisation at sampling rates up to PCM 24-bit 192 kHz.

With no external controls, the Emerson is operated via a Wattson Audio App. Covering control/settings only on Android, on iOS it incorporates streaming services and airplay. The streaming functionality will extend to Android, but currently you'll need to use an additional App such as MConnect or BubbleUPnP. The Emerson is Roon Ready, Tidal Connect and Audirv na compatible, with Qobuz Connect on the way. TuneIn is included for streaming internet radio stations.

INSTALLATION
We started out by connecting the Emerson coaxially to our Mark Levinson 5101 and Atoll ST300 streamer-DACs. Then we paired it with Ferrum Audio's Polish Wandla DAC, using both AES/EBU and S/PDIF. Its digital output might be limited to 192 kHz, but that proved more than enough to enjoy high-quality, perfectly timed Hi-Res streaming, the purity of which means that this little Swiss player will be perfectly at home in both mid-range and top-flight systems. Like any really good streamer, it is cable dependent and improving the Ethernet cable in particular, can enhance the speed or substance of the sound.

THE SOUND

Normally, the network playback section of our Mark Levinson is seldom bettered by external alternatives costing less than €3,000, but the €1,650 Emerson Digital offers an immediate upgrade. Slightly less direct, the sound is cleaner and more focussed, producing a very open soundstage, especially across the broad midrange. Even with 44.1 kHz files, the sensation of clarity and the neutrality of timbre seems almost reminiscent of analogue, with a rare fluidity for any product in this the price range.

We were surprised to discover that the Wattson Audio App delivered the best musical results, demonstrating the importance of close links between hardware and software developers when it comes to the ideal handling of data packets. The Wattson App delivered a smoother more articulate sense of musical flow. The frequency extremes might not have the shimmer of the mid-band, but the highs are always silky, while the bass doesn't isn't exaggerated or hyped, but remains perfectly in proportion. This musical finesse enabled the Emerson to easily surpass our reference streamer, while matching it for precision - as long as you stop at a 24-bit 192 kHz stream. Note: the performance of this little Wattson can be further enhanced by improving the separate power supply, as we experienced with the Ferrum Hypsos, in a test to be found with the Wandla GoldenSound Edition DAC elsewhere in this issue.

OUR CONCLUSION

Released more than four years ago, the Emerson Digital offers superb musical quality for any listener seeking a network transport with superior reliability and purity. It might not match the versatility of many new entrants to the market, in terms of connectivity (no USB or WiFi), front-panel display or application (currently being updated), but it clearly sets the musical benchmark in its price range, only surpassed by products that are at least twice as expensive. ∎