

AVM Inspiration CS 2.2 system

by Alan Sircom

Back in the late 1970s, the music centre (as it was once called) was the popular choice among non-audio enthusiasts. This was a time before 'small' and 'minimal' were the orders of the day, so they looked like a cross between a studio mixing desk and the flight-deck of an aircraft carrier. It was a good idea in theory, but one that was chronically hampered by the performance of the electronics at the time. However, the second decade of the 21st Century has witnessed the rebirth of the music centre, but this time it comes with great performance in tow. Which means the AVM Inspiration CS 2.2 can be considered the spiritual heir to the music centre, without any sense of the pejorative.

As with its forebears, it's easier to describe what this modern-day take on the music centre doesn't include, than to list what is available in the one comparatively small and well-made box. So, there's no SACD and no DoP DSD support, there's not much in the way of provision for multichannel or home theatre systems, and you can't use the CD mechanism to rip discs to an external computer. It also won't make its own electricity, can't solve quadratic equations, and won't make you like Brussels sprouts (unless pan-fried with garlic and pancetta).

There's a phrase I all but threw away in the last paragraph, that deserves some serious unpicking: 'well-made'. In fact, 'unpicking' is a very good term here too, because at first glance you might struggle to see how it's put together. Although not an entirely screwless case, this brushed black or silver aluminium design drips quality – not in a back-breaking, high-

mass way, but made in the way you'd expect from a country obsessed by car shut-lines and precision engineering. We've seen this before from AVM, but the no-compromise approach to design seen on the company's high-end separates is writ just as large in one small box. It's the feel of the buttons, the resistance on the volume control... all the kind of things that shouldn't make a difference, but bespeak of assured quality.

On the inside, things are positive too. As the name suggests, the Inspiration CS 2.2 features a built-in CD player, but it also has a phono stage, and a surprisingly good MM and MC one at that. It has three analogue inputs alongside coaxial, USB, and Ethernet digital inputs (all automatically upsampling to 24/192), and it has an FM tuner with RDS. There's no DAB, because it can stream internet radio through its UPnP/DLNA Ethernet connection. There is an update USB socket, allowing the Inspiration CS 2.2 to adapt to future changes in audio as and when they emerge. It has a Class D 165W per channel amplifier for loudspeakers and a decent amplifier for headphones. All of which could be describing any one of a number of 'all-in-one' systems, so where does the '21st Century music centre' come in? It comes in for the form of by-passable tone controls, and even loudness, set and adjusted through the blue fluro front panel.

The interface doesn't just include tone controls; you can assign names, trim input levels to precisely match sources, and even skip over unused inputs. These are all 'front end'



aspects of use, in that they are best performed when the Inspiration CS 2.2 is being installed, rather than adjusting them on the fly as the need arises.

Historically, tone control have got some very bad press, sometimes for good reason, but the world (and especially the music world) has changed since the 1980s when they were routinely removed from good audio equipment. Since that time, music has become systematically brighter and more compressed, to help it sell to a wider audience. A small amount of tone shaping applied to some of the victims of 21st Century recording techniques can help. In the worst cases, it's not much more than a token gesture, but judicious use of tone controls can help make Arcade Fire's *Funeral* [Rough Trade] more listenable, but no less oddly, uniquely, and brilliantly baroque-dangerous sounding. In a way, we could do with a return to the slope filter system used by Quad in its preamps from the 1970s to help compensate for modern recording idiosyncrasies, but this might be asking a lot.

AVM has also approached the loudness button with singular intent, making it a parametric loudness button designed to compensate for lower listening levels. This should be imprinted on people who traditionally used the loudness setting as some kind of 'turbo boost' to the sound at all times. AVM's system increases bass and treble as volume decreases, and you control just how much more treble and bass you need for late night, low level listening. This should be set for your loudspeakers, rather than your listening habits, but also to correlate with equal-loudness contours of the human ear.

The front panel controls are small and elegant. There are a series of five multifunction buttons beneath the blue fluoro display, which change function depending on what the Inspiration is accessing, and the fluoro display helps guide you in this. Sandwiched between the slot-load CD player and the volume knob are a line of three buttons (for source selection) and a headphone socket. It's not as minimalist as it sounds, and the user quickly gets to understand the functionality and operation.

This is aided by the RC9 remote. This sits in a charging cradle, which can be fed from one of the rear mounted USB sockets, or through a plug-top USB charger. The RC9 (also used by Cyrus and Electrocompaniet, among others) extends the front panel functionality, and brings a touch of useful display when using it with an UPnP network. Like many computer-side components, the installation is more complicated to describe than it is to do, because it's extremely automated. You basically need to pair the remote to the Inspiration, and then enter the relevant network name and password. You can drill a lot deeper should you require (or in the unlikely event that the automated set-up does not work as planned). There is also an IOS app, which was not available to test but will be out by the time this review goes to press.

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If this suggests a relatively lengthy installation process, it needn't be anything of the sort in reality, but this is one time it's worth breaking the cardinal rule of audio; read the manual. Not because you risk damage, but because you can (and should) configure the Inspiration to taste, and an evening spent systematically matching levels, setting brightness, and making sure everything is speaking to everything else pays dividends. Yes, you can automate this process and have the system up and running within about 20 minutes from opening the box, but why not add personal investment to the financial? The great thing though is this is a one-time action. Once the CS 2.2 is set, it stays set.

In order of preference, the built-in CD player ruled the roost. That being said, the other sources are not far behind. But the CD player gives you the best and most immediate impression of the CS 2.2's overall sound. At first glance, it's almost a contradiction, because it is at once warm, yet fast sounding, but some of that makes you realise just how set in our ways we have all become. There is nothing intrinsically 'slow' about 'warm', and there is nothing intrinsically 'bright' about 'fast' sounding equipment, but because so many 'warm' sounding products are never associated with sounding 'fast' or 'upbeat', we just assume the two elements are entirely disconnected. The CS 2.2 shows it's perfectly possible to achieve both, and the resulting sound is extremely good to live with.

This is an easy sound to enjoy, on all formats; just put on 'One More Cup of Coffee' from *Desire* by Bob Dylan [Columbia, streamed through wired Ethernet from a downloaded CD] and ▶



► note how the percussive speed of the guitar strumming blends seamlessly with His Bobness' impassioned sing-cry vocals, evoking the multi-layered emotionality and force behind the song. This isn't a system to pick out the guitar, and it isn't one to focus on the band or the lyrics (although you can do all that). Instead, it's a system that allows you to cut through and listen to the music. This is something separates users are used to getting, but is only now realised in the single-box world.

Moving to LP simply reinforced this feeling that the system manages to combine a degree of refined, warm, smoothness with speed, dynamics, and detail. It isn't the kind of device that invites close investigation of the sound, however, as you spend a lot of time instead simply enjoying what you are hearing.

AVMs intention here was to shrink a multi-box audio system down into one small box, without sacrificing performance in the process, and to that end, the Inspiration CS 2.2 wholly succeeds. The on-board CD, the phono stage, and the Ethernet connection are all extremely well sorted. There is a limit to how much you can get in one box however, and in this case the limit comes across in a mild foreshortening of soundstage. If you imagine an ideal soundstage as a sphere projecting out from a space midway between the two speakers and about a foot behind the tweeters, and extending well past the loudspeaker position, then the Inspiration CS 2.2 creates something closer to a disc-shaped stage, extending to just beyond the outer edges of the speaker baffle. The good news is there's no reduction of musical scale, and you don't feel you are listening to tiny musicians, or through a letter box; it's simply

that the soundstage is a little smaller than you might find from a series of separates, like the ones from the AVM range. In contrast, the headphone socket has no such foreshortening, and sounds remarkably open and powerful enough to drive most headphones (HiFiMAN HE-6s excepted).

How this all happens in the one box without it sounding like someone emptied a sack of spoons down a fire escape is due to some fairly sophisticated technological advances in the last few years. Class D amplification has come a long way sonically in the last decade and a half, and the AVM Inspiration CS 2.2 is one of a number of fine examples of just what the technology can do, given the chance. Where in the past, Class D was grey and flat sounding, albeit with a fairly good midrange, the latest generations have added more life and energy to the upper and lower registers, and retained that smoothness across the mids. Where Class D of a dozen years ago would crap out at the first sign of a phase angle, the AVM amp modules can take some more 'interesting' loudspeaker loads. Just remember to steer clear of anything swinging much below about two-ohm minimum impedance (in practice, this is unlikely; the kind of loudspeakers that would impose very low impedance load problems would rarely if ever wind up on the end of the AVM CS 2.2).

If I'm being picky, the only limitation to the AVM is its use of BFA-type speaker sockets. The BFA sockets are not a problem in the UK and Europe, where 4mm banana plugs reign supreme, but a lot of the rest of the world uses spade lugs as standard, and although multi-way sockets feature in the larger Evolution CS 5.2, there is no provision for their use here. ►

- ▶ We'll end as we started; the AVM Inspiration CS 2.2 is the music centre of the 21st Century, but this time without the lo-fi baggage that music centres came with back in the day. The drive to downsize is an ever-present one now, and the AVM Inspiration CS 2.2 is one of the best there is for people making that transition. Today's audio buyers have to think smaller, and this system allows you to do just that without wistfully remembering the days when you had a room stuffed with big black boxes. In short, AVM joins the select band of companies that manage to squeeze a quart into a pint pot, and make it sound good. Highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Analogue Inputs: 4x line (RCA), 1x phono (MM, MC)

Digital inputs: S/PDIF coaxial and optical, synchronous USB, LAN and WLAN Ethernet connection

Outputs: 1x pre (RCA), 1x line (RCA), 2x pair 4mm/BFA loudspeaker terminals

Digital outputs: S/PDIF coaxial and optical

Power output: 165W per channel into ohms

Headphone output: Pure Class A amp, 3.5mm jack

CD drive: Slot drive, spring mounted., TEAC derived

Digital audio output: upsampled automatically to 24-bit, 192kHz

Supported media server: UPnP 1.1, UPnP-AV and DLNA-compatible server, Microsoft Windows Media Connect Server (WMDRM 10), DLNA-compatible servers: NAS

Streaming formats: MP3, WMA, AAC, OGG Vorbis, FLAC (192/32 via LAN), WAV (192/32 via LAN), AIFF (192/32 via LAN), ALAC (96/24 via LAN)

Internet radio: vTuner Service, Auto network config., Internet Radio Station database (automatic updates)
FM radio with RDS

Dimensions (WxHxD): 34x9.2x35cm

Weight: 10kg

Finish: Aluminium silver or black, chrome front optional

Price: £3,900

Manufactured by: AVM

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