

Product release

audiolab

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Above Audiolab 9000A in silver finish

Audiolab elevated: the new sound of science

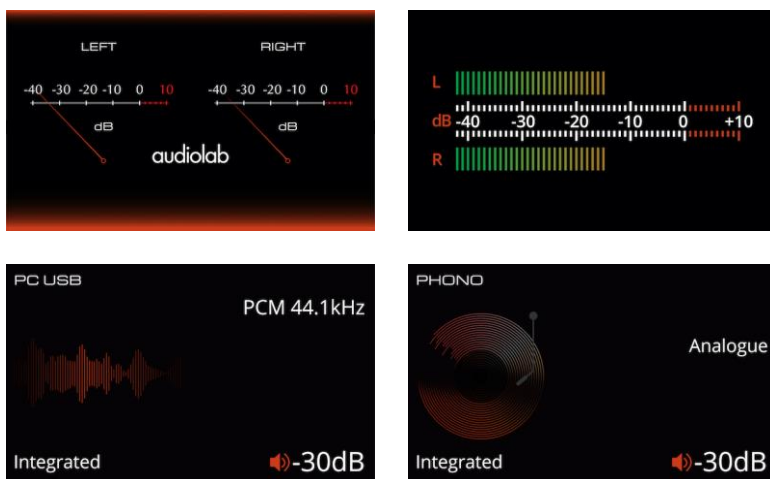
Painstakingly engineered for exceptional sonic performance with all manner of digital and analogue sources, the new 9000A is Audiolab's best-ever integrated stereo amplifier

Audiolab has enjoyed an enviable reputation for amplifier excellence ever since the original 8000A arrived in 1982, establishing itself as the classic step-up model from the 'budget' integrated hi-fi amps of the time. This reputation has remained constant through successive product generations, right up to the 6000A and 8300A, both of which have delighted music lovers at their respective price points in recent years.

As we approach the end of 2022 – 40 years after the launch of the 8000A – it's time to reveal the next generation of Audiolab amplification. The 9000A is the first component in Audiolab's new flagship range, the 9000 Series. It is also the best integrated amplifier Audiolab has ever made.

The 9000A introduces a smart new aesthetic, as befits a new flagship range. Solidly built and impeccably finished, the amp's appearance reflects the crisp elegance and controlled muscularity of its sound. Three rotary controls and an absence of buttons (except for the power switch) give the 9000A's fascia a clean, assured appearance, augmented with a 4.3in colour screen – like a sharp Saville Row suit complemented by a perfectly appointed accessory.

The screen displays a variety of information in a more visually appealing way than most other integrated amps – volume level, input selection, format data and more. It gives access to the amp’s menu system, which includes such options as digital upsampling, input sensitivity adjustment, balance control, automatic standby switching, and volume curtailment when the amp is powered up. It can even be set to display a VU meter in ‘analogue’ or ‘digital’ form, showing real-time decibel levels for the left and right channels – a satisfying graphical representation of the music as it plays. And it can be dimmed or turned off completely, as the user prefers.



Left The 9000A’s GUI, displayed on its 4.3in colour screen, gives access to settings, format data, and even a VU meter display in ‘analogue’ or ‘digital’ form

Classic hi-fi for the modern age

Functionally, the 9000A builds upon the highly successful 6000A, which launched in 2018 and remains one of Britain’s best-selling integrated amps. The 6000A recognised that while an amplifier is still the beating heart of any high-performance audio system, just as it has been for decades, a truly versatile integrated amp now needs to cover many bases – digital and analogue sources, wireless connectivity for portable devices, a phono stage for playing vinyl, and amplification for headphones as well as speakers.

The 9000A is born from the same ideal but ups the ante in every area – cutting-edge digital audio technology, massively upgraded analogue circuitry, more connectivity and a performance that elevates the open, detailed and engaging sound for which the 6000A is famed to an entirely different level.

The 9000A’s lead electronics designer is Jan Ertner – the same man responsible for the 6000A, as well as many other award-winning audio components over the years. He was posed the significant challenge of creating Audiolab’s best-ever integrated amplifier – the very product category that brought the brand to prominence – expanding the 6000A’s high level of functionality whilst delivering flagship performance. The 9000A delivers everything expected of truly high-end hi-fi, but at a price that remains eminently reasonable in return for the quality on offer.

Versatile connectivity

The 9000A incorporates state-of-the-art digital-to-analogue signal conversion, enabling digital sources to be connected directly without an external DAC. A USB Type B input caters for PCs, Macs, smartphones,

tablets and digital storage devices, alongside four S/PDIF digital inputs – two coaxial and two optical. There are also four line-level analogue inputs – three stereo RCA and one stereo XLR for balanced connectivity – plus an MM phono input for a turntable.

Those wishing to stream wirelessly from smartphones and tablets without connecting to the local Wi-Fi network can take advantage of the 9000A's high-spec Bluetooth facility. It's Bluetooth 5 compliant for optimum reliability and range, and includes decoding for high-definition Bluetooth formats aptX HD and LDAC, as well as aptX Low Latency, regular aptX, AAC and SBC.

While this wealth of connectivity is impressive, the 9000A does not include built-in network streaming. From a performance point of view, incorporating network streaming of sufficient quality to match the amp's sonic ambition within the same chassis would have meant compromising performance in other areas – the 9000A is, first and foremost, a high-performance integrated amplifier. Also, not everyone requires network streaming; by developing a separate, dedicated audio streamer for the 9000 Series – set to arrive in early 2023 – Audiolab is able to deliver optimal performance and system flexibility.



Left The 9000A is well stocked with an array of analogue and digital connection options

Digital circuitry

Ever since the much-admired M-DAC launched more than a decade ago, Audiolab has been famed for the performance of its DAC circuitry. The M-DAC was one of the first consumer audio products in the world to use ESS Technology's groundbreaking Sabre32 Reference DAC chips, sharing its use of the ES9018 chip family with other renowned Audiolab components such as the 8200CD, 8300CD and 6000A. Audiolab switched up to a new-generation 32-bit Sabre chip – the ES9038Q2M – for its recently launched Omnia 'just add speakers' streaming system, and has raised the bar again for its new flagship amplifier.

The 9000A incorporates the ES9038PRO – an eight-channel DAC chip that represents the pinnacle of ESS Technology's current Sabre range. This is accompanied by proprietary circuitry to make the most of the chip's HyperStream II architecture and Time Domain Jitter Eliminator technology for unprecedented dynamic range and ultra-low distortion.

No company knows more about making the most of Sabre DAC technology than Audiolab, having worked with it for years through several product generations. Although always technically excellent, these DAC chips are also challenging to implement to maximum effect and must be integrated into a product's circuit design with care to extract their full sonic potential. The post-DAC active filter is a critical element and Audiolab has developed a new circuit that is perfectly tailored to make the most of the ES9038PRO.

The 9000A's hi-res audio support is state-of-the-art, handling PCM to 32-bit/768kHz and DSD to 22.5MHz (DSD512). Every significant hi-res and lossless audio format is catered for, including FLAC, ALAC, AIFF and WAV, as well as compressed legacy formats.

The 9000A also delivers full decoding of MQA, the hi-res streaming technology. This means that the complete 'three unfold' decoding process is performed internally, as opposed to just the final unfold in the manner of an MQA 'renderer', making the 9000A an excellent amplifier for subscribers to Tidal's 'HiFi Plus' tier where Tidal Masters (MQA) content can be found. It is officially Roon Tested too, ensuring it works seamlessly in a Roon audio environment.

Users can opt to upsample digital audio signals to 352.8kHz or 383kHz, and five DAC reconstruction filter settings allow the listener to adjust the sound to suit the source material – particularly useful given the variable quality of digital formats and streaming platforms. No matter how it is connected, via USB, S/PDIF or Bluetooth, every digital source benefits from the exceptional quality of this DAC – you will not find a finer DAC stage in any integrated amplifier anywhere close to the 9000A's retail price.



Left The 9000A is the perfect integrated 'hub' for all manner of digital and analogue sources

Analogue circuitry

The 9000A builds on the expertise Audiolab has built through four decades of Class AB amplifier research and design, pulling out the stops to take the company's time-tested circuit concepts to a new level. With a rated output of 100W per channel into eight ohms – double that of the 6000A – it delivers sufficient power to drive any loudspeakers with consummate ease and plenty in reserve. Some competitors may stretch their power ratings somewhat, but Audiolab rates its amps conservatively – you can be sure that the 9000A will never run short of 'grunt' and always remain firmly in control.

The 9000A's power amplifier is a dual-mono design with entirely separate power supplies for the left and right channels, delivering excellent detail resolution and spacious, well-defined stereo imaging. A low noise 320VA toroidal transformer combines with 60,000uF reservoir capacitance and four output transistors per channel, specifically configured to improve linearity under difficult load conditions and capable of delivering a maximum output current drive of 15A per channel.

This high current drive capability ensures the output stage remains under minimum stress, leaving the rest of the amplifier free to operate under optimal conditions. The result is an amp that delivers wide

ranging, free breathing dynamics whilst retaining a vice-like grip on the music and revealing the subtlest details in any recording.

The preamp section is kept as simple as possible to maintain signal purity, with line input signals passing to a precision, microprocessor-controlled analogue volume stage. Much effort has gone into the physical layout of the 9000A's circuitry, protecting the sensitive preamp section from noise interference. This, plus the use of independent low-noise power supplies for critical stages, helps to deliver a performance on par with much more expensive two-box pre/power amp systems.



Left The 9000A is perfectly formed to become the beating heart of a vibrant and versatile high-performance audio system

Turntables and headphones

Audiolab has developed a new, improved MM phono stage for the 9000A, ensuring vinyl is treated with the same care as digital sources. Thanks to a high-quality, low-noise circuit with precise RIAA equalisation, precision input filtering and an upgraded power supply, every drop of detail that's dug from a record's grooves is conveyed with engaging energy and crystal clarity.

The phono stage handles moving magnet cartridges but is not switchable to suit low output moving coil types, for good reason. Phono stages in integrated amps that cater for both MM and MC cartridges are usually a compromise; a good MC cartridge will invariably benefit significantly from a high-quality offboard phono stage. Rather than cover both bases to a merely adequate degree, Audiolab decided to focus solely on making an excellent MM phono stage – for users of this cartridge type, this is all the phono stage they will need.

Headphone listeners are equally well served by the 9000A's dedicated headphone amplifier. With its current-feedback design and high slew rate, a dynamic and detailed performance with all manner of headphones is assured – a far cry from the elementary headphone outputs of most integrated amps.

Pre and power operational modes

As is traditional with Audiolab's integrated amps, the 9000A's offers three distinct operational modes, reflecting its discrete internal architecture and enabling it to adapt as its user's requirements evolve. The primary mode is 'Integrated' – this combines the pre and power amp stages, for the connection of digital and analogue sources to the amp's inputs and a pair of speakers to its binding posts.

'Pre-Power Mode' disconnects the pre and power amp stages. This allows the 9000A to be used solely as a power amp – for example, connected to an AV processor in a home cinema system. It also enables additional signal processing to be added, by connecting the 9000A's 'preamp out' socket to an external processor, then returning the processor's output to the amp's 'power amp in' socket.

Finally, 'Pre Mode' disables the power amp stage, turning the 9000A into a standalone DAC/preamp. This enables external power amplification to be added, thus providing a possible upgrade path.



Left The 9000A integrated amp and matching 9000CDT CD transport are available in classic Audiolab black as well as silver

High-end audio that shoots for the stars but doesn't cost the Earth

The 9000A is the epitome of affordable high-end audio – build quality to be proud of, versatile functionality without a hint of compromise, and a performance that delivers every detail of the music and brings it to life in captivating style. It delivers remarkable sonic consistency across all manner of digital and analogue sources, always musically engaging yet also refined.

The soundstage it produces is broad and deep, with crisply defined detail revealing the full character of voices and instruments. Impressive dynamic range conveys natural impact, while the amp's transient ability keeps feet tapping with rhythmic music. Deep, fleet-footed bass; expressive and expansive midrange; treble that sings with sweet precision – the 9000A delivers an adroitly balanced performance with all kinds of music, from rock and electronica to classical and jazz. In short, it delivers an open window on the music being played, as all great hi-fi should, engaging the listener with natural, unforced energy that is fully reflective of the source material.

The 9000A is Audiolab's best-ever integrated amplifier, available from mid-November in a choice of silver or black at an RRP of £1999. It is joined at launch by the 9000CDT CD transport, with the 9000N network audio streamer following in Q1 2023 to complete Audiolab's flagship 9000 Series.

Specification summary

- Integrated stereo amplifier with hi-res DAC
- Class AB power amplification: 2x100W into 8 ohms
- DAC stage based around flagship ES9038PRO Sabre chipset
- Supports PCM to 32-bit/768kHz, DSD 64/128/256/512 and full MQA decoding
- Digital upsampling and five user-selectable DAC reconstruction filters
- Class A post-DAC active filter
- Bluetooth 5 streaming with LDAC and aptX HD support
- Certified 'Roon Tested'
- High-performance MM phono stage
- Dedicated current-feedback headphone amp
- Three operational modes: Integrated Mode; Pre-Power Mode; Pre Mode
- 4.3in colour IPS LCD display

Cable inputs

- 1x USB Type B digital (768kHz)
- 4x S/PDIF digital (192kHz)
- 1x stereo XLR balanced analogue
- 4x stereo RCA analogue (3x line; 1x MM phono)
- 1x stereo RCA power amp input
- 1x USB Type A for firmware updates
- 1x 12V trigger

Cable outputs

- Gold-pated speaker binding posts
- 1x 6.3mm headphone output
- 1x stereo RCA preamp output
- 1x 12V trigger