



Townshend Allegri+

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JASON KENNEDY - THE EAR ONLINE

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It can be all too easy to take things for granted. I find, you can use something for years and fail to find anything to better it and still don't climb to the top of the nearest tower and shout about it. But when the manufacturer makes a change to it, the option to right that wrong appears and thus it is with the Townshend Allegri passive preamplifier. I reviewed the original when it was launched some years ago, in 2008 to be exact, and was so blown away that it has remained my reference preamp ever since. There have been one or two active preamplifiers that have come close to it over that time but none that didn't cost over 20 grand that were superior in all respects. The Allegri+ is very similar to its forebear, the same but slightly bigger casework and twin knobs for input selection and volume, and the same operation principle which is that it uses an autotransformer to vary the attenuation of an incoming signal, or change volume as it's known. The Allegri+ differs in functionality by the addition of a mute switch and a front panel input on a minijack, and in appearance by better finishing and knurling on the knobs. The only really fundamental way it has changed is the way that Townshend apply a proprietary process to the copper within the transformers and the wires that connect the whole thing. The Fractal-Wire that Townshend develop is now processed in the UK rather than the US as was previously the case, a move that company founder and engineer Max Townshend says is superior to the earlier one. But he would say that would he not!

In an autotransformer passive the in- and output impedances vary with level such that the source and power amplifier are automatically matched with one another, which in practise means very high transparency with no barriers to dynamics. It also means that cable capacitance doesn't effect performance as it does with some passive designs. The volume control has 24 positions with a -52dB minimum and 0dB maximum, the size of the steps between each position vary with the smallest 1dB steps between positions 11 and 19. Whether this is the area you end up operating within depends largely on the sensitivity of your loudspeakers and how loud you want the music, I found myself using the lower part of the range where the level changes are bigger.

Being passive the Allegri+ is DC coupled with no capacitors in the signal path, it is not a straight wire with gain but a straight wire with variable attenuation, albeit quite a long wire wound around a bobbin. It remains compact and bijou with space for six line inputs and two outputs on the rear and a slimline case that's heavy enough to hold its own against the mass of that many cables but small enough to pack in your overnight bag.



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I have used the Allegri+ for long enough now to appreciate that it is just as transparent, tonally neutral and wide in bandwidth as its predecessor, probably a little more so in fact. Which means that you can hear pretty well everything that the source sends to it, regardless of whether that source is a streamer, a phono stage or a DAC, and that makes the job of reviewing a lot easier. It also makes listening to your favourite music a totally immersive and fabulous experience. I have used other transformer passives in the past but while they can have a smoother more refined character they do not offer the bass extension or the sheer detail resolution of the Allegri+. The Townshend does nothing to polish or sweeten the sound, it gives it to you just the way it is and if you're after maximum fidelity that's the way it should be. Take a look through my source component reviews on this site and beyond and you'll see that the results have often been exemplary, totally engaging and revealing. That's because nigh on all of them have been reviewed with an Allegri, a preamplifier that allows any source to reveal its true colours whatever they may be.

That also includes the many products that have onboard volume controls, which when it comes to DACs in particular is legion. It has been a very rare occasion indeed to find that the Allegri has not sounded better than connecting that product directly to the power amplifier. There is a theoretical advantage in eliminating an interconnect and the wiring of the autotransformer and selector switch but this is virtually always outweighed by the relative quality of attenuation between the source and the Allegri. Bypassing the volume control in most sources and using this preamp results in a more open and dynamic sound with greater transparency to fine detail. Openness is one area where I have not found its equal, it's almost as if it's a characteristic of the Allegri, but the scale of differences between recordings suggests that it is just better at allowing that aspect of the signal to get to the power amp than most other preamps.



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The Allegri+ is genuinely devoid of the characteristics and colourations that are found with the vast majority of preamplifiers, which all add something to the signal by comparison. With transistor designs it's hard to get away from the fine grain that amplification tends to add, basically the presence of electric current overlays itself on the signal and unless the power supply is uncannily good this can be heard. Tube preamps tend to be more obvious and have a warmth that the harmonic distortion of the devices adds, it's a nice and often harmonious colouration but it's still a change. Auto transformers are not without their shortcomings of course but they seem to be smaller than those in active preamps and less obvious than other passive designs.

The Allegri's only shortcoming is that you have to get off the sofa to change volume, which is good for your health of course but a chore nonetheless. Townshend has created the Enigma to provide this and other facilities but it's rather more expensive as a result. The other minor complaint is that the inputs are a little close for the chunkier variety of RCA plugs, it's a small back plate so this is hard to get around without losing an input but if you have a lot of sources and hardcore RCAs it's a consideration.

But these are the strongest criticisms I can come up with in the context of a preamplifier that has few peers and none to my knowledge at anywhere near the same price. And that's before we get to timing, this aspect of music reproduction is very, very important when it comes to recreating an engaging, true to life result with recorded music and the Allegri gets it bang on every time. It doesn't matter what type of music is involved the notes stop and start precisely as the source dictates, with no added smear or overhang.



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I believe the Townshend Allegri+ represents incredible value for money in sound quality terms, it's not big and shiny but it is capable of truly transcendent results of that few preamplifiers are equal to. For this reason the Allegri+ warrants a greater recommendation than our Best Buy and Five Star awards, this product and a very few select others warrant an Editor's Choice, an indication that it is the best product in its class at the time of review.

Specifications:

Type: Passive transformer preamplifier

Analogue inputs: 6x RCA, 3.5mm minijack

Analogue outputs: 2x RCA

Frequency response: 8Hz – 100kHz

Max signal level: 4V RMS 8Hz, 10V RMS 20Hz

Dimensions (HxWxD): 53 x 135 x 326mm

Weight: 2kg

Finish: silver

Price when tested:

£2,495

Manufacturer Details:

Townshend Audio

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<http://www.townshendaudio.com>

Type:

Passive preamplifier

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