

Grandinote Proemio Preamplifier and Silva Power Amplifier

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At £14500 for the pair, the Grandinote Proemio preamp and Silva power amplifier are far from bargain basement fodder, but do they warrant such a price-tag? Stuart Smith finds out.

About Grandinote

Grandinote are based in Italy and headed up by Massimiliano Magri. The company use a technology they call Magnetosolid where solid state components are used in circuits more typical of valve amplifiers. Grandinote say this offers the advantages of both solid state and tube amplifiers. All the low signal stages in the amps are direct coupled without capacitors and every device has its own dedicated power supply. All their amplifiers run in Class A.

First of all let me say that the packaging of both items was very good indeed; sturdy single boxes with plenty of thick cardboard packing, a nice red felt cover over each item and a pair of white gloves for handling.



Proemio Preamplifier

Grandinote's £6500 Proemio is a line preamplifier offering three unbalanced inputs on RCA and three fully balanced inputs on XLR. The balanced XLR inputs can be converted to unbalanced inputs but I didn't mess with them as I had no need to.



Outputs offered are a balanced output and an unbalanced output. It's a full dual-mono constructed preamplifier operating in Class A with no feedback.

Like the Silva power amplifier it is a tad deeper than a standard bit of kit at 40.8cm, a bit higher at 19.6cm and less wide at 31.8cm- it has sort of a shoebox on steroids kind of look about it and on the rack it looks rather attractive with its clean, almost industrial aesthetic.

On the front of the unit there's six buttons that control program and volume (have a look at the photo) and a red LED screen. It's all very minimalist and sits on three solid aluminium hemispheres.

Round the back there's a lot more going on with all the aforementioned inputs and outputs. The only other input on the back of Proemio is the power socket.

Where I come from we have a specific saying when something is well built and solid, but for the purposes here let's temper that phrase a bit and say that this unit is built like a brick outhouse. There's an immediate sense of solidity and that the unit is really well put together. A peek through the slotted aluminium top-plate shows us nicely soldered boards and a neat looking layout.



The review unit came with a basic looking remote that was functional rather than being anything special but I am assured that all Grandinote's retail offerings now come with a rather splendid looking remote control. The supplied remote did end up controlling the Lampizator Big7 DAC too but never mind, I completely lost the supplied remote anyway (found only after the units were returned) and resorted to using the buttons on the front of the Proemio.

Switch on the Proemio and there's a 99 second countdown shows on the front panel and you can do nothing but wait until the unit is up to speed. Choose inputs one to three for the unbalanced RCA inputs and four to six for the balanced inputs. This caught me out when I first used the Proemio (I'd not read the manual) with a balanced input into the top XLR input, though to be fair to Grandinote it is clearly labelled as input 4!



Press the PRG button on the front and you can personalise some of the functions of the amplifier and decide what volume you'd like each of the inputs to open up at...this is a useful function and allows you to set different volumes for each of the inputs automatically. For example you could have your DAC into input one to start at volume eight whilst the Reel to Reel on input three could start at volume 10. This function allows you to compensate if one source is quieter or louder than another without having to fuff with the volume all the time. If you choose not to set the volume for each input it will automatically go to zero when you restart the machine or change input...so worth spending the time to set this up from the off as the resetting to zero soon gets old.

Another feature of the Program button is balance left and right and I'm pleased to see this!

The buttons on the right are labelled vol+, vol- and mute and are self explanatory.

Silva Stereo Power Amplifier

Apart from having only a large black button on the front of the unit the £7995 Silva amplifier looks just like the Proemio. It's bloody heavy though, weighing in at 40Kg! Again this is a full dual mono construction offering up to 37Watts a side in full Class A operation.

Round the back of the unit there's a bit of a break from the norm as the Silva has two power inputs, one for the left channel and one for the right...I like this concept! There's a pair of pretty standard looking but well made speaker posts that will accept spades, bananas and bare wire.



Inputs on the Silva are limited to a pair of fully balanced XLRs only which may limit the amps appeal to some.

The amp runs pretty hot and you'll need to make sure you place it somewhere where there's plenty of ventilation.



Sound

I had the Proemio and Silva in the system for pretty much the whole of their time with us (a couple of months) and used them almost exclusively during this period. All electronics were put through the Lab 12 gordian conditioner on automatic settings. Front end kit used was the Lampizator Big 7 being fed from a Melco unit or laptop, a Tascam 32 reel to reel and AnalogueWorks turntable with Wand arm and OC9III cartridge. Speaker cables for the duration were Tellurium Q Ultra Blacks, whilst interconnects were from Portento, Chord and Tellurium Q. Loudspeakers used were Avantgarde Duo XD, hORNS Mummy and Leema Xens.

First of all I turned the units on and got nothing (see earlier comment and why you should always read the instruction manual) but then when I phoned Jack at UK Distributor BD Audio he soon put me right as to what I'd done! There was now sound but it wasn't good...it was far from acceptable, being grainy and decidedly lo-fi! Another call to Jack and I was told to let both units run for a while to "burn in" which I did, doing no critical listening for a good week or so. These take a lot of running in before they are on song it has to be said and I'd like to see them fully sorted before being sent out to paying customers. That initial turn on and playing your first tune can have a marked impact on the way a person relates to a new piece of kit and I'd suggest it best to get it right out the box rather than having to go through all that fumbling and uncomfortable getting to know you period.

For the most part I used the Proemio/Silva pairing with the Avantgarde Duo XD loudspeakers which many readers will know have active bass and so are really only relevant in assessing the mids and tops of a new piece of equipment in the system...but in this respect I find them so revealing as to be a really useful review tool.

On Jazz program you are treated to a very believable sound with trumpet and guitar sounding as lifelike as I've heard it in the system. There's speed and great bite to the music, with everything stopping and going back to silence when it should. When there are subtle decays these are really nicely portrayed and I put this down to the incredible quietness of the pairing; play no music and you can turn these up to very high volume settings and even through the 103dB sensitive Avantgardes you get nought but a gentle hum...not absolutely dead quiet, but on more real world sensitivity speakers as good as. There's a real feeling here of there being real musicians in the room rather than listening to a recording. Vocals are well projected into the room and presented without adding anything "false" to proceedings; you get the feeling of nothing being forced or artificial. The Grandinotes are not as absolutely transparent as my Class D power amps and Music First pre in the mids, but what they add to the mix is a really pleasant warmth with regards to vocals.

On the 11:11 album by Rodrigo y Gabriela we are treated again to a very realistic portrayal of the music and small nuances in the couples playing style – slaps on the strings or against the guitars body – feel authentic and "in the room". Again the fast attack and decay of the Grandinote pairing make for an exciting, edge of your seat presentation. High frequencies were never harsh, grainy or metallic sounding and again the word that comes to mind is natural. Looking into the stereo mix it's clear that the Grandinote pairing put instruments where they should be and keep them locked there...there's no drifting at all and this leads to a feeling of things being right mix-wise. It also makes the stereo image

more believable/palpable.

Playing techno I felt the need to turn the volume up a little to get the effect I look for with this kind of music. Am I suggesting the Grandinotes are a bit polite and laidback with techno and the like? No I'm not, but to feel the slam and vigour inherent in this kind of music it deserves to be loud and the Grandinotes let you go loud without feeling they are running out of steam or being pushed to hard...but then they're not going to given the Avantgardes' makeup, so let's talk about them with perhaps some speakers that present a bit more of a challenge in the form of the Leema Xens.

Regular readers will be aware I use the Xens when we have less expensive electronics in for review and they're 85dB sensitive and 6 Ohms. They don't go super low but are great speaker in that nearfield studio monitor kind of sense of things. The Grandinote pairing struggled a little to be fair, but then with just 36 Watts on tap they were always going to, that said I've used the Xens with other low powered amps without issue. However, it's time to hook up another pair of speakers in the form of the hORN Mummy, a 95dB sensitive pair of loudspeakers with 12" bass driver and horn loaded tweeter. I've already got a good handle on the Proemio/Silva pairing in the mids and highs and I'm looking here at how the Silva controls and presents bass frequencies and it's good. There's grip and a feeling that the Silva is definitely in control of things. There's also speed and that on-off thing, which if a component can't do in the bass is a deal killer for me – flabby, woolly and overhanging bass is one thing I really cannot abide in a component. The bass guitar on Deep Purple's live version of Smoke On The Water was dirty and powerful...just as it should be whilst double bass had "texture" and (again) a natural feel to it.

My reference preamplifier is the Music First Baby Reference V2 and for the sake of a bit of experimentation I thought it would be fun to pair the Silva with it, connected via the Baby Ref's balanced output of course. First on the turntable was the new Rebolledo album, which is a killer by the way. Speakers in use were the Duos and what a treat this was. As mentioned these speakers are active bass, but somehow this pairing just allowed you to feel more of it – I don't know why this should be (answers on a postcard please). However, the Baby Reference is a passive design and to get realistic (ok, foundation shaking) volumes out the Silva necessitated turning the volume knob all the way to Thirty One (eat your heart our Marshall). With less sensitive speakers the Music First struggled to feed the Silva enough power and as such this would be a deal breaker for me to buy the Silva on its own.

And here we are sort of getting to the crux of the matter; yes the Silva and the Proemio will work with other preamplifiers and other amplifiers, but to get the best out of each of them (with the limited experience I had in this regard – I also hooked up the Coffman Labs tube pre I have here) you really need to see them as a two box integrated... ok I know that's nonsensical, but you get my drift.

Conclusion

So, what is there to add to what has already been said? The Proemio preamplifier and Silva amplifier form a spectacularly natural sounding partnership that gives the listener a great experience that has real class and finesse.

With the two Grandinotes you have a stunningly revealing pairing with slam, speed, energy and when needed elegance and grace. They are clearly made to be used together and play to each others' strengths.

It's clear that you are listening to components that can compete with some of the best out there in the price range and as such, should you be in the market for new amplification and have the required £14 500, they should certainly be on your audition shortlist.

This is definitely one of the best sounds I've heard in the reference system and, had the Silva had more gain and worked more efficiently with the Music First pre it would have been a keeper.

We don't do a Highly Recommended award, but if we did these would certainly have got it.

Pros:

Natural and revealing

Fast and controlled

Very well built



Cons:

Need reasonably sensitive loudspeakers

Really need to be used together

Long run in period

Price:

Proemio: £6500

Silva: £7995

Stuart Smith