

Back to blak

David Price channels the golden age of big black boxes, as he auditions the new Roksan blak integrated amplifier



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Roksan blak

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Integrated amplifier with DSD-capable DAC

WEIGHT
13kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
440 x 140 x 305mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power: 150W RMS (8ohm)
- Inputs: 1x MM phono; 3x RCA line; 1x balanced XLR; 1x USB
- AptX Bluetooth

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There's something very reassuring about a high-end integrated amplifier. While stacks of black boxes might have been the done thing in the early eighties, in today's world, the trend is to downsize, but music fans don't want to hear any less of their beloved recordings. The so-called 'super-integrated' breed ticks all these boxes; it's big but not too big, and promises a sound to rival some more expensive pre/power amplifier combinations.

Roksan, lest we forget, has always made fine-sounding amplification; it has a distinctly muscular-but-musical character that covers more bases than some rival designs, many of which tend to be one or the other. The blak is a new highish-end integrated that pushes out a claimed 2x 150W RMS, and sports a wide range of inputs to make it flexible enough for today's brave new hi-fi world. That means two additions to the amps that we were buying a decade ago – aptX Bluetooth and a moving-magnet phono stage. There's also a USB input connecting to the obligatory DAC.

The blak is a big thing – and heavy too – with a large front-mounted LED

It proves itself adept at bringing together music's rhythmic qualities

display that lights up bright amber. I'm not a fan of the usual blue backlit LCDs, so I love its wilful contrariness, but still you've got to wonder if it will go down well with prospective purchasers. The volume control also gets its own light show with a useful indication to show the level. The three fascia-mounted buttons let you scroll through the inputs – totalling three RCA line ins, a pair of analogue XLRs plus the aforementioned USB type-B, aptX Bluetooth and MM phono stage. As per previous Roksan products, the power switch is hidden underneath the fascia on the left, just to confuse you.

The build quality is very good indeed, and while its chunky brushed aluminium fascia looks thick enough to stop a bullet, it doesn't quite have the immaculate surfacing of some rival Japanese-made products. The pressed steel casework is reassuringly thick and resonance free, and the controls work with a solid – if not exceptionally silky – feel; think Mercedes G-Wagen rather than Lexus RX. The rear panel is equally rugged ▶

with good-quality speaker binding posts. Inside, there's a chunky Noratol toroidal transformer and serious heatsinking for the output devices. A Burr-Brown DSD1794A DAC handles PCM up to 24-bit/192kHz and DSD64 and DSD128, the latter only via the USB socket at the back, which has been properly implemented rather than stuck in as an afterthought. The same can be said of the headphone output, which gets the full might of the power amplifier when it's switched in via another button hidden underneath, this time in the middle.

Sound quality

Anyone that's ever heard a Roksan amplifier before will instantly recognise the house sound of the blak. Powerful, punchy, feisty and tough – it's not the sort of amp that shirks its responsibilities. When asked to drive tricky loudspeakers with powerful dance music like Age Of Love's *Age Of Love*, it rises to the challenge gleefully, and supplies a thunderous yet supple and fluid sound that gets the feet tapping. I find myself transported back to the nineties with this classic trance tune, luxuriating in the blak's rare combination of sheer brute force and pleasing subtlety. This densely mixed electronic track has a combination of sledgehammer bass and ethereal synthesiser work across the midband. The Roksan catches it beautifully, and tops things off with a sweet treble, letting the hi-hat cymbals glisten like stars in the night sky.

Tonally, the Roksan is sweeter than your average muscle amp – and indeed I'd say this is the brand's special selling point, it's 'naughty but nice'. That self same monster bass is deployed to great effect with the opening *Lento Allegro* of Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Symphony No.2*

(*Haitink*). It paints a bold, expansive and powerful picture, with a fulsome bottom end and a clean, delicate treble, while the midband remains even and completely devoid of jagged edges. It's incisive enough to grip the listener, yet never descends into any obvious hardness or grain. Indeed, I'd say the designer has come up with a great balance that sits comfortably across a wide variety of music types. The blak also delivers a quite 'architectural' soundstage; all well ordered with everything in its rightful place. It has a fine sense of depth perspective, possibly not quite the best at the price, but still highly convincing. This natural tonality allied to the confident soundstaging makes for a great sense of 'being there' in the concert hall.

I enjoy the crisp, clean sound across a wide range of hi-res file types

There's a sense of seamlessness to the blak too; it avoids the trap of sounding like two different amplifiers at two different volume levels. Blasting The Dukes' *So Much In Love* at high levels shows this. A slice of classic jazz funk from 1982, this is immaculately produced and beautifully recorded with some of the best session players in the business. This type of music is less about physical scale, instead the emphasis switching to how well it flows. The blak again proves itself adept at bringing together the music's rhythmic qualities – capturing the subtle interplay between bass guitar, drums and keyboards – as well as thumping



Around £250 more than the blak is the latest Naim SuperNait 2. Unlike its predecessor, it's a stripped-down, line-only design. It's a distinctively Naim-sounding product, in the same way the blak could only be Roksan. Power up the Naim and it takes you right into the stalls in front of the stage, rather than a more panoramic view from the circle. It performs the trick of being a headbanger, without sounding in any way course or gritty. It's very involved with the music's rhythms and dynamics, which it tracks tenaciously, but it doesn't quite have the widescreen presentation of the Roksan. Slightly bigger, lazier and sweeter, the Roksan is likely to work better in a wider range of systems and rooms.

The amber LED lightshow is a welcome change from blue, but might not be to everyone's liking

out high levels. Notching the volume down a peg or three, it continues to sound fluid and musical, with a subtly sweet tonality. Its fundamentally well balanced nature makes for an inviting and lustrous sound, that really works for the music.

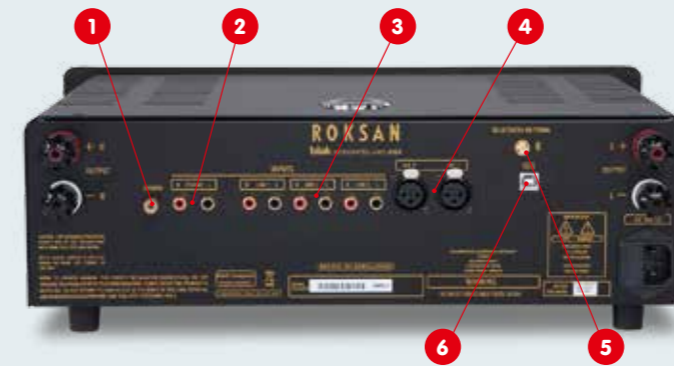
Born to rock

Another challenge is good old unreconstructed rock music, so I cue up REM's *Maps And Legends* from *Fables Of The Reconstruction*. This is a great album, but it was recorded in a cheap London studio back in the early eighties and sounds rather dirge like. Still, the Roksan proves well able to scythe through and bring the music out brilliantly. The beautiful Rickenbacker guitar work and Byrds-like vocal harmonies are carried delicately, the music flowing freely yet punching its way around my listening room with genuine authority. The Roksan's midband is commendably neutral and carries singer Michael Stipe's plaintive vocals very well, too. The amp tracks the song's dynamics adeptly, never sounding breathless or falling to pieces on crescendos and gives a highly natural sound. Again, this type of music really benefits from the amplifier's vast, cathedral-like soundstage going from left to right, and the sheer confidence with which it drives even tricky speaker loads.

The Bluetooth connectivity will be a boon for some, and an irrelevance to others. Personally I like it; sonically it's not a patch on the line inputs, or indeed the DAC running standard digital, let alone hi-res. But the convenience shines through; it's easy to hook up and stable – and you can zip through your favourite tunes on your phone or iPad while doing the ironing. Even when you sit down for a serious listen, it sounds



IN SIGHT



- 1 Earthing post
- 2 MM phono input
- 3 Three sets of RCA line-level inputs
- 4 Analogue balanced XLR input
- 5 Bluetooth antenna
- 6 DSD128-capable USB type-B input

CRACKING THE CASE

The blak wears much of its quality inside its case; this is an extremely well constructed amplifier made of very good components, and it's also neatly and logically arranged under the hood. The thick front panel attaches to a sturdy steel chassis, and on to this is the main board which essentially has a dual mono layout; left and right sides of the power amp are laid out in a mirror-image fashion, with the chunky heatsinks to the far left and far right. The blak's MOSFET power output devices are attached to these, and thanks to the beefy power transformer and high-quality

smoothing capacitors, lets the amp push out 2x 150W into 8ohm, and a not-inconsiderable 230W into 4ohm – enough for most speakers and rooms. The Roksan is biased a fair way into Class A and so runs hotter than many integrateds. All the wiring is very tidy, and the front panel switching is of good quality. The rear panel has the preamplifier and DAC board piggybacking onto it, in order to keep signal paths as short as possible, and this is attached to the front controls by a ribbon cable. On top of this, the Roksan's well-finished pressed steel top case fits.

pleasingly warm and unobtrusive. Hook up your laptop to its USB input, however, and there's a step change for the better. I run the gamut of my ever-expanding hi-res file collection and enjoy the crisp, clean sound across a wide range of music and file types. I particularly love its very subtle and involving, yet strong and beautifully proportioned rendering of Wings' *Band On The Run* at 24/96. It captures the album's characteristically dry sound beautifully yet is never boring – and has the dynamic headroom to fully exploit the lack of compression on the hi-res version of this classic track.

The chunky brushed aluminium fascia looks thick enough to stop a bullet

The built-in DAC implementation is better than the 'merely competent' I had expected. It means the amplifier is quite listenable if digital is your sole source and you don't wish to buy an external DAC – aside from the fact that there's only one digital input, of course. You can do better, but you'll need to spend around £1,000 to really improve on what the blak comes fitted with. It's also worth pointing out that the Roksan has a superb headphone sound, for those of you with a decent pair of cans, and/or neighbours who rather selfishly don't share your taste for Scandinavian death metal at three o'clock in the morning. Indeed, that's the great

thing about this amplifier, it has a good range of facilities that offer high-quality listening in several contexts, not just the conventional line input and speakers configuration. Sonically, the only criticism is that 'it is what it is', which is to say a powerful solid-state amp.

Conclusion

Another redoubtable new product from Roksan, then. The blak will hit the spot for those wanting a good value for money, high-powered and musically satisfying integrated amplifier – one that delivers the sort of punch that you'd normally need to turn to pre-power amplifier combinations to find. Factor in its wide and handy selection of inputs, and the well put together single-box design, and it's an impressive package. Some may think it a bit quirky to use, but others will see it as a charm – certainly, it is never a dull listening companion ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Highly enjoyable sound; loads of power; impressive facilities
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Quirky ergonomics won't suit all tastes
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Loveable, great-value monster integrated amp
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



Q&A

Tufan Hashemi
MD, Roksan Audio



DP: Where does the blak amp fit into the Roksan range?

TH: It has been designed to offer a huge amount of flexibility to our customers with the highest-quality sound performance. It fits in the top bracket, price-wise, of our integrated amplifiers. However, it is important to note that the M2 series is still very much in business alongside it. I see the Caspian series as a purist modular super 'audiophile' range, there is no internal phono stage, headphone, Bluetooth or DAC, for example. The blak is a one-box solution for those seeking optimum sonic performance with a wide range of facilities. The blak system was designed for the most diverse, demanding and discerning customers in terms of aesthetics, useful features, sound performance and build.

Can you tell me about the blak's internal circuit design?

Like all Roksan amplification, it's a Class AB design. If designed competently, Class AB circuits offer an excellent combination of power, current, musical delicacy and detail. In the blak topology it's used to create low distortion and very linear characteristics with superb drive and power. MOSFETs are used in the output stage. We have previously used both MOSFETs and BJTs, but for the performance characteristics we required we found that MOSFETs worked best.

What's unusual about the blak?

There are many attributes. For example, by using the centre switch below the chassis, the circuit completely re-directs from the loudspeaker output section to the headphone output, turning the blak amplifier into a dedicated headphone amp. Also, the integral DAC is not a performance-diluted solution. It is a very serious, high-end and high-quality design not found in other integrated solutions. Add to this, the fact that we have also integrated our brilliant aptX Bluetooth circuit input giving a most apt and completed amplifier solution to the most modern and discerning customer.