



Forty something

Creek Audio is celebrating its big four-0 with the release of the new 4040 A integrated. **Nick Tate** lights the candles and listens in

Our story starts back in the mists of the Seventies when a young Michael Creek was working for his father's audio business – Wyndors Recording Co. Ltd. – learning the ropes in anticipation of one day going it alone. Finally, after a stretch as a design consultant, he decided to branch out on his own, and Creek Audio Systems was formed in 1981. The first Creek CAS4040 was sold on 31 March 1982, to Audio Projects in Leeds, and retailed for just £99. It was a comparatively small 30W RMS per channel solid-state integrated: “based upon an upgraded version of a 10W power amp circuit employed at Wyndors in 1976”, remembers Mike. It was an audacious move, because back at that time the hi-fi world was dominated by the NAD 3020 – an extremely capable 20W amplifier that sounded better than most rivals costing twice its price. All the same, the Creek began to sell very well – with many cash-strapped rookie audiophiles preferring the

CAS4040. The rest, as they say is history. Mike first made 100 pieces with a £4,000 bank loan; by 1985 he was selling 1,200 amps and 350 tuners per month. His total sales were approximately 25,000 CAS4040s by 1991, when he sold the company to TGI group. To cut a long story short, he bought Creek back a couple of years later and has been running it ever since. Launched to celebrate the company's 40th anniversary, in engineering terms there's virtually nothing on the 4040 A similar to the original. The new amp uses a MERUS Infineon Technology Class D amplifier IC, which Mike says has not been used in any high-end amplifier before. It offers very low power consumption and cool operation, with a claimed 95 percent efficiency at full power – plus excellent measured performance. This works with the company's specially developed switching power supply, rated at 350W and voltage-stabilised; it doubles its power output each time the load impedance is halved,

DETAILS
PRODUCT
 Creek 4040 A
ORIGIN
 UK/China
TYPE
 Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
 2kg
DIMENSIONS
 (WxHxD)
 215 x 60 x 255mm
FEATURES
 • Quoted power output: 55W (8ohm)
 • Inputs: 2x RCA; 1x XLR; 1x coaxial; 1x optical; USB
 • aptX HD Bluetooth
 • ESS Sabre ES9018 DAC
DISTRIBUTOR
 Creek Audio
WEBSITE
 creekaudio.com

regardless of the mains voltage. The result is a claimed 55W RMS into 8ohm and twice that into 4. The amp is relatively generous in terms of features; there are two pairs of unbalanced RCA phono and one pair of balanced XLR inputs. The second auxiliary input can be reconfigured to accommodate Creek's Sequel Mk4 phono board. Four digital inputs are fitted; one coaxial, one optical, one USB 2.0 and Bluetooth aptX HD. Digital conversion is courtesy of an ESS Sabre ES9018 stereo DAC.

It has the signature sound of Creek amps of old, but updates it for the 21st century

Operation is easy enough, thanks to the handy menu system via the front panel controls and small display. It sports a range of features including optional automatic shut down. With a power consumption of under 0.5W on standby, 5W on idle and 250W at full tilt, it's a lot cheaper to run than your average valve amplifier. A 6.35mm headphone socket is supplied.

Considering its modest price, this new Creek amp feels well made with a decently finished case and a smooth fascia, plus a fine-pitch display that's just a little on the small side. The back panel is reasonably classy too – with 4mm loudspeaker binding posts with both rear and side entry, plus a spade lug. The 4040 A is available in a choice of black or silver fascias.

Sound quality
 The original Creek CAS4040 had a tonally warm and fulsome sound, one

that was less about physicality than it was musicality. The new 4040 A shares this characteristic, even if it isn't particularly similar in other respects. It's less fluffy and woolly, and more defined; instruments in the mix are better resolved and everything is a lot more explicit. This, of course, is a good thing; the new Creek combines much of the attractive signature sound of Mike Creek's earlier and very impressive amplifiers, but updates things a little for the 21st century. Driving a pair of Cambridge Audio Aero 6 (HFC 382) floorstanders, the 4040 A makes a very nice noise playing classic Eighties pop. Duran Duran's *New Moon On Monday* has a suitably high level of pomp and circumstance, the little Creek amp setting up a surprisingly wide soundstage and generally sounding a lot bigger than its small size suggests.

There's virtually nothing on the new 4040 A similar to the original amplifier

It has a surprising amount of power too, and can go quite loud with little apparent sense of strain – especially when driving more efficient speakers like the aforementioned Aero 6. It lacks the gnarly, grippy bass of more expensive integrations, such as the Exposure 3510 (HFC 485) at four times its price. Yet for its position in life it punches bigger and harder than it should. Importantly, though, it's not just speaker-driving ability that's important, it's what it does with them. The bassline to the Duran Duran track is enjoyably fluid, the amp seemingly having fun with the job in hand. With more rarefied, cerebral indie pop such as Felt's *Primitive Painters*, it successfully captures the track's emotional poignancy. It actually times



The Pro-Ject Stereo Box DS2 has a lot in common with the new Creek. The two integrations are very similar in size and nearly the same weight; both have a dedicated headphone stage, Bluetooth and MM/MC phono cartridge functionality (although it's optional on the Creek). Aesthetically the Pro-Ject wins the day, with its clean fascia and optional magnetic side panels, in a choice of eucalyptus, rosenut and walnut. Sonically though, the warmer, more musical Creek pulls ahead; the Pro-Ject is very good, but lacks its rival's human touch.

The Class D amp modules have not been used in any hi-fi amp



rather well, certainly considering its price, and delivers a rhythmically engaging performance that has me immersed in the song. Switching from my Chord Hugo TT2 (HFC 468) DAC going in to the analogue input, to the Creek's own built-in digital converter, sees a slight reduction in poise and polish, but things still come over in a more direct way. It sounds a little more upfront and unmediated, with a slight improvement in dynamics – as evidenced by the powerful crescendos in the song. It also resolves the multi-layered jangly guitars and stays in control even with the volume turned right up. Feed it some classic modern jazz, such as Herbie Hancock's lovely, lilting *I Have A Dream*, and the Creek sets up a convincingly large soundstage. We're not at the level of amps at twice its price, but it does better for the money than you'd think. The location of the respective instruments in the recorded acoustic is believable and the amp lets you follow each player with relative ease. Better still, it strings everything together well – making for a flowing, fluid rendition of this late-Sixties song. I'd say the original CAS4040

does slightly better in this respect – but it doesn't quite have the detail of the new amp. Even with highbrow classical music, such as the Berlin Philharmonic playing Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* (Karajan, Deutsche Grammophon), the 4040 A makes a very nice noise. It's certainly one of the most 'human' Class D designs I've heard; it lacks the absolute power of bigger and more expensive amps, but is very listenable under normal conditions, even low volumes. This gorgeous piece of music is great fun, ebbing and flowing with ease before reaching powerful, emotional climaxes. In absolute terms it can be a little opaque and soft around the edges, but this never detracts from the overall enjoyment.

Conclusion
 Considering its very modest price and pintpot size, the Creek 4040 A achieves an awful lot. It's fascinating that despite its quite different technological DNA to the original, it retains the very attractive and desirable Creek 'house sound'. Here's hoping the company's next 40 years will be just as fruitful ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Musical, enjoyable sound; packaging

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Trad values in a modern setting

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★