

# Gold Note IS-10 integrated amp/PA-10 EVO power amplifier

Chris Kelly



**R**egular readers may recall that I reviewed the Gold Note PH-5 in Issue 219 and then the matching PSU in Issue 228, and was thoroughly taken with them. More recently, I hosted their stablemates, the IS-10 integrated amp and the matching PA-10 EVO power amp. In the interests of transparency, let me add that I had already bought and paid for the same company's PH-10/PSU combination for my own system, and they formed part of the review system, but my reviews are not influenced by that buying decision.

The IS-10 integrated amplifier is another in the half-width Series 10 components offered by Gold Note. The review sample was finished in the same black anodised aluminium as my two existing pieces, but there also silver and gold options available should the buyer prefer. It weighs in at just 4kg, with the usual Series 10 dimensions of 200x80x260mm (WxHxD).

## Layout

The front panel is laid out just like the PH-10, with a colour screen just left of centre and a control knob on the lower part of the right-hand side. To the left of the screen, at the top, is the now familiar Gold Note logo embossed in gold, then the IR receiver for the remote control and below that, a full-size 6.3mm headphone jack input.

The casework has angled striations along the whole length to help dissipate the heat created within. The rear panel has a lot of socketry but does not feel overcrowded. Two pairs of analogue RCA inputs are in the upper half of the left-hand side. To the right of those is a single RCA, which allows the user to use the IS-10 as a mono amplifier in conjunction with a PA-10 EVO power amplifier, a configuration to which we shall return in due course. Next are two pairs of loudspeaker outputs that can accommodate banana plugs, spades or bare wire connections. The last item in the top row is the IEC power input. >>

EQUIPMENT REVIEW  
Gold Note IS-10/PA-10 EVO

» The bottom row of sockets gives access to the digital wizard within the chassis. From the left, we find inputs for Ethernet, USB-A, an RCA coaxial input and two Toslink optical receivers. In addition, there is a USB-C input (for firmware updates) and boss onto which the user can attach the supplied WiFi antenna.

The technical specifications are impressive, too. As an integrated stereo amplifier, the IS-10 has an output of 90W into 8 Ohms, which rises to a very impressive 280W into 8 or 4 Ohms when used in mono mode with a PA-10 EVO. We shall return to that later.

The D/A Converter is an AKM AK4493 PCM. The quoted frequency response is 5Hz -50kHz, with THD of 0.001% (1kHz @ 1W). The LAN/WLAN wi-fi is 802.11a/b/g/n/ac Dual and (10/433Mbps). Bluetooth is the High Definition 5.0 (44/16).

When describing this as an All-In-One device, Gold Note is not exaggerating. It is Roon Ready and supports the following streaming services - deep breath - AirPlay, MQA, Qobuz, Deezer, Spotify Connect, Tidal, Tidal Connect and vTuner. It also supports UPnP, which means that I can access the library of WAV files held on my Naim UnitiServe. I'll spare you another long list of file-type acronyms - suffice it to say that it can handle almost anything you throw at it.

It is necessary to download the Gold Note app (GN Control) to your mobile device to use your smartphone as a remote and access some of the streaming services (Qobuz, vTuner, Deezer). I logged into my Qobuz account at the first attempt, and it never missed a beat thereafter. The only slight oddity with the app was that it would only run in the portrait orientation on the iPad. I generally use the device in landscape mode, and it took a few days for me to remember that the Gold Note app doesn't switch between the two. This is more of a commentary on me than a critique of the app.

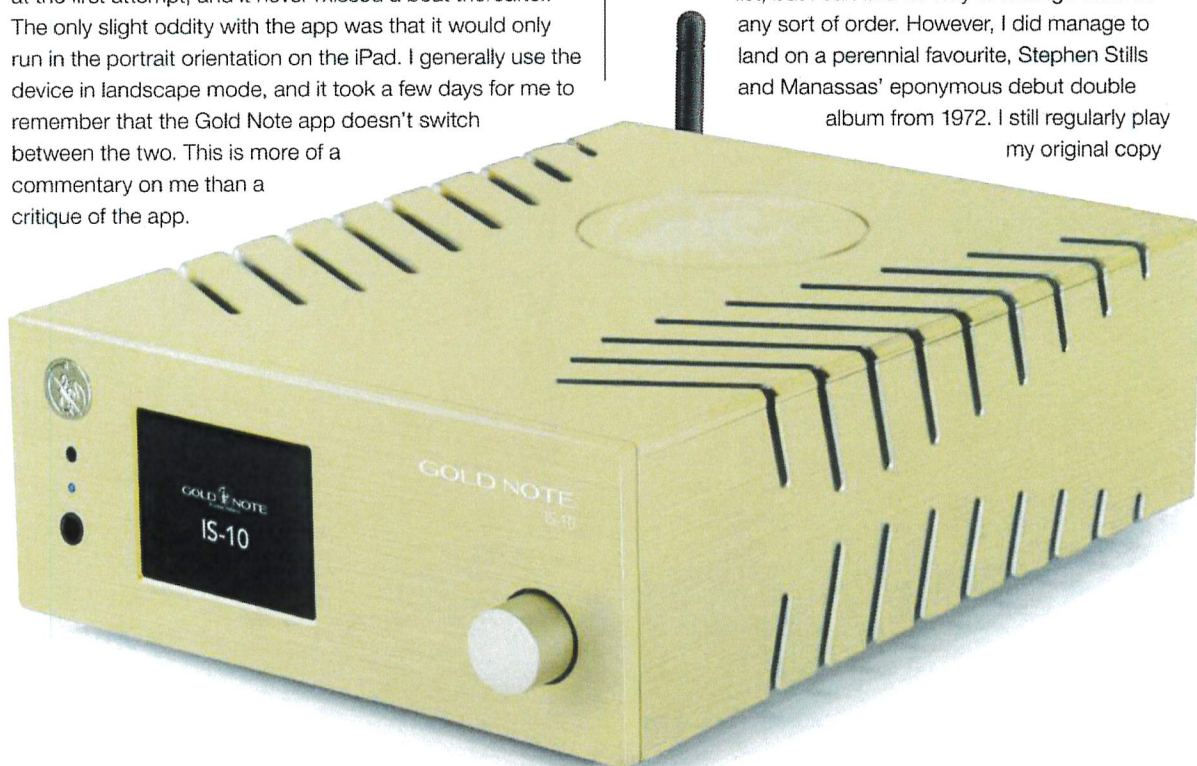
I plugged my PH-10 into the first RCA input pairs using Tellurium Q Statement II interconnects, with my modified Linn Sondek LP using a Vermeer Dark Sabre moving magnet cartridge in the Linn Ittok arm. My AURALiC ARIES Mini streamer was plugged into the coaxial input, and my TV was into one of the two optical inputs. These come with a protective cap installed. Be sure to put them somewhere safe if you need them later - they are small and easily lost.

My Harbeth P3ESRs, sitting upon Harbeth's new bass enhancement stand, the Nelson, were the speakers in use. The speaker cable was Tellurium Q Ultra Black II.

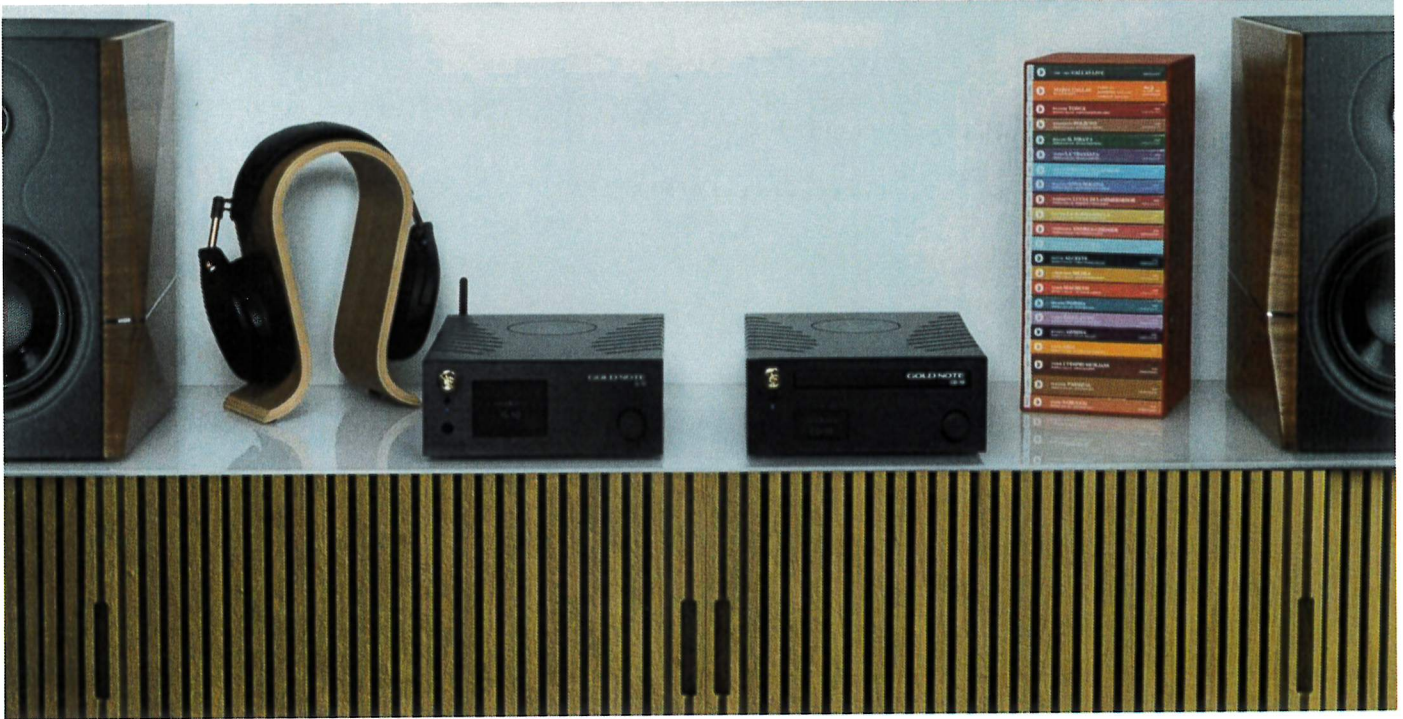
### Listening to the IS-10

It has taken me almost as long to write all that as it actually took to get the system up and running. My experience with all the Gold Note equipment that I have encountered has been that it is well made, easy to set up and easy to use. The user manuals are always well written, concise but with enough detail to be useful. Yes, I do actually read the user manuals of everything that comes into the house - experience has taught me that it usually saves me hours of frustration!

After letting the IS-10 warm up thoroughly for a couple of days I sat down to listen properly, and being lazy I grabbed the iPad, booted up the Gold Note app and got into my Qobuz account, specifically my Favourites section. Does anyone else do what I do, and keep adding albums to that list? It rapidly becomes an absolute hotchpotch, with no logical ordering. The latest selections go to the top of the list, but I can find no way to arrange them in any sort of order. However, I did manage to land on a perennial favourite, Stephen Stills and Manassas' eponymous debut double album from 1972. I still regularly play  
my original copy »



EQUIPMENT REVIEW  
Gold Note IS-10/PA-10 EVO



» on Atlantic Records. Through the IS-10's streamer, it flowed from the Harbeth's diminutive drivers, with every musical strand perfectly delivered and plenty of tuneful bass thanks to Nelson's contribution and irresistible propulsive force. I have greatly admired Mr. Stills' work since I first heard Buffalo Springfield a few years earlier than this release, and I think this album was an artistic high-water mark for him. Much credit must go to his Manassas bandmates, each of whose contribution was delivered with perfect weight by this system.

I roamed randomly through the unwieldy collection I have assembled on Qobuz and was never disappointed with the results. I navigated through the eclectic aggregation of albums, like a slightly intoxicated driver on an unfamiliar mountain road, from the Allman Brothers Band to ZZ Top, with excursions into classical, jazz, folk, reggae, dub, and all sorts of other weird and wonderful stuff.

Switching to vinyl replay a few days later, I revisited my 52-year-old copy of the *Manassas* album. Yes, the sound certainly had more depth. The *Dark Sabre* is astonishingly good at digging out vast amounts of information from ancient and modern grooves. The IS-10 and PH-10 are excellent companions, and I was utterly gripped by the music that flowed through them.

Evenings here tend to see music replay giving way to television as our source of entertainment. This gave the IS-10's optical input a great workout, and it proved to be masterful there too. Spoken word voices sounded truly lifelike, and when the action kicked in, there was plenty of power behind gunfire and explosions.

The final stage of my extensive listening sessions with the IS-10 on its own was to try the headphone output. For this, I used my closed-back AudioQuest Nighthawks (long since discontinued) plugged into a QED extension cable with a 6.3mm jack at the amplifier end. I started by streaming from Qobuz through the IS-10's streamer. I selected Jordi Savali's magnificent recording of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with Le Concert De Nations. The climactic fourth movement evoked a profound emotional reaction in this listener, and as the last notes faded it took some minutes for me to regain my composure. The headphone performance was as good as every other department in the IS-10's offering.

Listening to a record through headphones is always an intense experience for me. Listening to my original 1973 UK pressing of Pink Floyd's peerless *Dark Side Of The Moon* was no exception. I whiled away an entire day playing through the headphone output on the IS-10, and since then, I have used headphones more often with whatever amplifier has been in use.

#### Adding the PA-10 EVO

The second phase of the review was to switch to a dual mono amplifier configuration. This was executed easily once I had got clarification on how to do it from the very helpful team at Airt Audio, the UK distributors for Gold Note products, who had supplied me with the review equipment. Using the RCA sockets on the rear of both boxes, I installed an AudioQuest Pegasus to link them. The IS-10 is smart enough to know that the presence of an RCA plug means »



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» that it has to reconfigure itself as the mono left channel, with the power amplifier beside it taking right channel duties. The part that caused me cognitive dissonance was that the right-hand speaker cable had to be moved to the left channel outputs on the PV-10-EVO. There are also three small push buttons on the rear panel, one of which configures the unit for mono.

With that done, I resumed my listening chair and returned to the Manassas album on Qobuz. Holy Moly! We now had a pair of amplifiers, each of which could deliver more than 250W into an eight ohm load. Clearly, I was not going to jeopardise the welfare of my little Harbeths with injudicious use of the volume control, but I did advance it a little. The outcome was a noticeable increase in musical dynamics and in the precision with which notes stopped and started. The soundstage grew bigger in every direction without ever feeling overblown.

Vinyl replay through this pocket-sized powerhouse amplification was remarkable. It could handle the shimmering, ethereal flute and synths of Shpongle with the same aplomb with which it delivered the down-and-dirty Texas crunch of ZZ Top. When Frank Beard's drums burst into life on the classic track 'La Grange' I could feel the power hitting me right in my flabby midriff. This was a real exercise in controlled power. The last side of Pine Floyd's epic post-Waters live album *Pulse* features some of David Gilmour's finest guitar work, and through the dual mono Gold Note amplification, it had huge emotional and aural heft.

The final phase of the review process was to contrast and compare the built-in streamer of the IS-10 with the AURALiC ARIES Mini. In my system, the pint-sized streamer has been bolstered with a power supply from Network Acoustics, the same company's ENO ethernet filter, and punches well above its size and weight would lead you to expect. Returning to some of the music I had already streamed, there was an added sense of realism to the sound, which I noted as being "more analogue sounding". But the performance gap between the IS-10's built-in streamer and the AURALiC would not have been enough to leave me feeling short-changed if I relied solely on the Italian machine.

### Tour de force

The engineering design team at Gold Note has delivered another sonic tour de force with these System 10 components. I exhausted my Florentine imagery in my last

Gold Note review, but I wish I had left some for this piece. The IS-10 is a wonderfully versatile single-box solution. For anybody coming new to building a great minimalist system, the IS-10 makes an incredibly strong case for itself. Add a pair of the loudspeakers of your choice, and you will have a genuinely impressive system. However... add a PA-10 EVO and you have a true aural heavyweight, in a rather dinky form factor. This a great time to be a buyer - there is an embarrassment of choice out there, so when compiling a shortlist of components to audition, it would be easy to overlook the Gold Note offerings, which would be a severe error. If your current budget only stretches to the IS-10, you will not be disappointed, but start saving again because the PA-10 EVO deserves the small amount of shelf space it will occupy. Once again, I shall end like this - *Bravissima* Gold Note. +

### Technical specifications

#### Gold Note IS-10

Type: Integrated streaming Amp/DAC

Inputs: 4x digital, 2x RCA analogue

Power output: 90W/8Ω (Stereo mode), 280W/8Ω (mono)

Streaming supported: Roon Ready, Tidal Connect, MQA, Airplay, vTuner, Tidal, Qobuz, Deezer, Spotify Connect

Formats supported: PCM (to 32bit/384kHz), DSD to DSD256

Output: Loudspeakers, 6.3mm headphone jack

Finish: Black, Gold, Silver

Dimensions (WxHxD): 20x8x26cm

Weight: 4kg

Price: £2,900, \$3,499, €2,850

#### Gold Note PA-10 EVO

Type: Power amplifier

Inputs: RCA (single-ended), XLR (balanced)

Power output: 2x 140W/8Ω per channel, 250W/8Ω mono

Finish: Black, Gold, Silver

Dimensions (WxHxD): 20x8x26cm

Weight: 3kg

Price: £1,699, \$1,999, €1,750

Manufacturer: Gold Note

www.goldnote.it

UK distributor: Airt Audio

www.airtaudio.com ☎ +44(0)1354 652566