

Advance Paris A12 Apex integrated amplifier

Chris Frankland

It was two years ago that I reviewed my first Advance Paris product, the A12 Classic amplifier (**hi-fi+** Issue 236), and I was very impressed with it. So much so that when I heard about the new Apex range, celebrating their 30th anniversary, I simply had to get one to try.

Advance Paris is a relatively new brand to the UK, but it originally dates back to 1995, when it was established on the outskirts of Paris under the name Advance Acoustic, specialising in loudspeakers. Their first electronics product was an integrated amplifier, launched in 2004, but they did not adopt the name Advance Paris until 2013.

Above the classics

The new Apex range is positioned above the Classic Range, featuring four models in a limited-edition black finish with high-contrast white VU meters on the three amplifiers. These include the 75W A8 Apex (£1,975), the 130W A10 Apex (£2,450), and the 190W A12 Apex (£3,400). They are complemented by the ACD Apex CD player at £890.

What really struck me when I first saw the Advance Paris brand at the Bristol show in 2024 was not just the breadth of its range and its competitive prices, but also the fact that nearly all of the integrated amps use tube preamp stages. The Classic range does, and the Apex range does too. The preamp stage uses two ECC81/12AT7 tubes, which are proudly displayed through the acrylic front panel between the two large VU meters.

Advance Paris states that the Apex range enhances everything customers loved in the Classic range with premium components and modern connectivity.

The A12 Apex employs a dual-mono configuration with two upgraded toroidal transformers for high power and notable enhancements to its DAC. It features lower-noise power supplies, precise ESS Technology voltage regulators, and premium resistors, capacitors, and op-amps. While the A12 Classic I reviewed used a Burr Brown PCM1796 chipset, the new A12 Apex benefits from the high-end and highly regarded ESS 9039 chipset. The A10 and A8 utilise the ESS 9018.



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Spoilt for choice

The A12 Apex is packed with inputs and connectivity options. The DAC offers three coaxial and three optical inputs, one AES/EBU input, and a USB input designed for use with a computer, although I am told it can also accept the digital output from a CD player, transport, or streamer.

In addition to wired inputs for streamers or CD players, there is an HDMI eARC input to receive audio output from a television. The A12 Apex can also be paired with the company's optional A-BTC Bluetooth dongle, enabling control from your phone or other Bluetooth-enabled device. Advance Paris offers compact streamer modules that connect to the amp's AUX sockets – the WTX-500 (£100) and the WTX-700 EVO (£150) – as well as a separate WTX StreamTubes streamer priced at £500.

I was pleased to see that vinyl enthusiasts have not been overlooked either, as it features a phono input suitable for both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges. A three-way switch on the rear panel provides three gain options – MC Low for cartridges with an output below 0.6mV, MC High for those with a higher output, and MM for moving magnets. You can select a load capacitance of 100pF, 200pF or 300pF for moving magnets, but there is no adjustable input impedance loading for moving coils.

Headphones covered

If you are a headphone user, the A12 Apex has you covered, with both 6.3mm and 3.5mm jack outputs located at the bottom right-hand corner of the front panel. Toggle switches on the back panel allow you to select between three gain settings (-4dB, 0dB, and +6dB) and a 0Ω setting for low-impedance models or 100Ω for headphones with an impedance between 100 and 600Ω.

As you examine the back panel more closely, you will find that it features XLR preamp out sockets, allowing you to connect it to an external power amplifier. An RCA AMP IN connection receives the output signal from a home cinema receiver, enabling it to control the signal to your front speakers while utilising the power amp section of the A12 Apex. You will also find two line-level XLR inputs and RCA inputs for CD, three AUX, record out and preamp out. Two subwoofer outputs complete the line-up.

The final adjustment option is a High Bias toggle on the rear panel. In NORMAL mode, the amp runs in Class A up to 5W, but when switched to HIGH, it remains in Class A up to 8-10W.

From the remote control, you can also adjust the amp's bass and treble tone controls or disable them, which is how I left them.

Pick a source, any source...

I used the digital output from a Hi-Fi Rose RS250 streamer into the amp's DAC, a Gold Note CD10 CD player into its CD input, and a Michell Gyrodec SE turntable fitted with a Rega RB330 arm and Gold Note Donatello Gold moving coil cartridge into its phono input. Speakers were the excellent Piega Coax 411 stand-mounts. I also had a top-brand rival amp of similar power, spec, and price on hand to act as a benchmark.

Kicking off with the streamer, I played the beautiful ballad 'Beautiful Fools' from Jo Harrop's *Tracks of a Tear* album. Her sensual, smooth vocal style was well captured with great emotion and phrasing. The vibrato in her voice was also better conveyed by the A12 Apex than by its rival. You could also hear more decay on cymbals, while the bass line was tighter and moved more effectively. Its rival just seemed to slow things down.

The track 'Red Moon' by Tom Misch was also revealing, with his unusual guitar sound very well captured by the A12 Apex. Subtle details and note shapes were very good, and the bass line was deep and tight, allowing me to listen more closely to the drum and percussion lines.

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Next, I switched to the Gold Note CD10 CD player and began with the track 'Honey Dipped' from Dave Koz's *Saxophonic* album. Immediately, the A12 Apex effectively captured the style, sound, and phrasing of Koz's alto saxophone, and the bass line moved well, whereas on its rival, the track's pace seemed more sluggish. Jerry Hey's trumpet was also clearer and better differentiated from Koz's saxophone, while the drums were tighter and more explosive.



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» One of my favourite guitarists is Peter White, so I wanted to see how the A12 Apex would handle 'I Can See Clearly Now' from his *Groovin'* CD. Once again, it impressed with its openness and articulation on White's guitar, with his distinctive sound and style well conveyed, while the lilting bass line that drives the track along moved well and had good weight and control. Its rival was a bit overblown and did not provide the subtle insights into his playing that the A12 Apex offered.

And vinyl-ly...

As you are still reeling from that dreadful pun, I finally switched to playing some vinyl. I turned to one of my many all-time favourite test albums, Larry Carlton's *Discovery*, and the track 'Hello Tomorrow'.

The A12 Apex was not found lacking and the album's dynamic and detailed sound was well presented, with great insights into the subtleties of Carlton's skilful guitar play and great grip and movement on the track's sinuous bass line. Drums and percussion were dynamic, detailed and exciting.

Switching to 'It's Your Thing' from Christian McBride's recent *Conversations* album, the A12 Apex really captured Dee Dee Bridgewater's exuberant, sassy vocal style and McBride's fluid and flamboyant acoustic bass play. Its rival was more laid-back and lost some of the track's fun, rhythmic urgency.

Before calling it a day, I wanted to explore the effects of the amp's High Bias option. When I tested this on the A12 Classic, the results were somewhat inconclusive, but I must say that on the A12 Apex, I found that High Bias was more open and incisive on guitars and sax, more fluid and eloquent on bass lines, and more delicate on percussion. The overall balance was more relaxed, and the sound was more musically compelling.

Sometimes more is more

The Advance Paris A12 Apex offers a lot of amplifier for the money. It is well crafted and beautifully finished, with plenty of power to drive any speaker. It has all the flexibility and connectivity you could need, combined with excellent sound on all inputs – well balanced, dynamic, detailed and persuasive. It makes music enjoyable, allows you to hear what the musicians are playing and how, and gets your foot tapping along to the beat. It is excellent value for money, and I recommend it wholeheartedly. +

Technical specifications

Type: Class AB integrated amplifier

Analogue inputs: 5 RCA line level, 1 MM/MC phono, 2 line-level XLR

Digital inputs: 3 optical, 3 coax, 1 USB, 1 AES/EBU, 1 HDMI eARC

Analogue outputs: Record out, preamp out, 1 XLR, 2 subwoofer out

Power output: 190W into 8 ohms, 292W into 4 ohms

Frequency response: 20Hz – 80kHz ±1dB (43W, 8Ω)

Distortion: 0.047% (135W, 1kHz, 8Ω)

Signal to noise ratio: 104.8dB (135W, 1kHz, 8Ω)

DAC: ESS9039

Dimensions (WxHxD): 43 x 19.2 x 45.4 cm

Weight: 21.9kg

Price: £3,400 €3,490, \$4,999

Manufacturer: Advance Paris

advanceparis.com

UK distributor: Decent Audio

decentaudio.co.uk ☎ +44(0)1642 263765