

Audio Synthesis Passion Ultimate

A remote integrated line controller rivals the best active pre-amps



PRICE £1295

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Compact handset offers finely graded volume steps. Main unit has an illuminated numeric display

Audio Synthesis has remained a staunch supporter of passive line control, culminating in the Shalco switched units denoted the Baby SE and PRO Balanced. Production of the Passion 8 satisfied the requirement for remote control. While this unit set exacting standards for sound quality at any price, the control interface was noisy (mechanical switches) and unfamiliar in action (it mutes between volume steps).

The company has now launched the remote controlled Passion — compact, neat, silent and with finely graded volume steps complete with an illuminated numeric display. Named the 'Ultimate', it is a finely finished 'bar' shaped enclosure in extruded alloy, with four line inputs (including direct), and one set of outputs, all in a WBT gold plated phono format.

Milled from a solid alloy block, the compact handset has a long range and provides input select, gain offset, volume, balance and mute. Its sophisticated control system includes menu access where balance (+/-15dB), display brightness (nine settings) and alphanumeric naming of inputs can be set. 60 nominal steps of 1dB resolution are provided plus standby and non-invasive relay muting. Power for the remote function (remember this is a passive controller with no moving nor active components) is provided by a low voltage line cord supply — safety authorised.

Input switching and attenuation are done optically — a single Vishay foil resistor leading to a light controlled shunt resistor driven by an

accurately programmed and balanced light source.

Used with moderate length cabling plus kind source and load impedances — source less than 1k, load greater than 20k ohms/200pf — the Passion Ultimate sounded very good, although not quite as good as the manual Passion.

At its limit, this switched design gave a touch more dynamic contrast, a little more 'speed' and slightly tighter bass. I still find the old Passion Baby rates in the mid 30s — say 34 — on my usual listening-test scoring, so it has stood the test of time very well.

But putting aside the old manual unit and considering the new Ultimate in its own right, the score hovered at a substantially good 31. Was I disappointed? Certainly not! For the money, this remotely integrated line controller was top of the class, rivaling active pre-amps at up to three or four times the price. Its great clarity and low level resolution, plus excellent stereo images, fine depth and a very natural character, both in the mid and treble, are all on its side. The Ultimate was free from artifice and very easy to live with; the remote was appealing, useful and worked really well.

Audio Synthesis may have fretted about whether the Ultimate would match the Baby Passion — I discovered that it didn't need to. This is one of the world's best remotely controlled passive line units, and when well matched, capable of taking on more costly examples of the line control art.

WORDS: MARTIN COLLINS

TECHNOLOGY

In the lab the Passion Ultimate measured as you would expect — no noise or distortion, with a wide bandwidth if used sensibly and at normal settings. Satisfactory figures for input and output impedance were achieved.

It's not uncommon for programmed step controls to run out of resolution at the extremes. For the Ultimate, the first few steps don't alter an intrinsic loss of about 1.5dB for a 100k load referenced to the 'zero' setting, -20 was accurate at -20dB, -40 was -40dB and so on down to -5 indicated. At this point the rate of attenuation stopped until mute was invoked at better than -110dB.

Channel balance was excellent throughout — up to 1dB of loss by 20kHz may be experienced in the last steps to full level, but at normal settings (depending on power amp sensitivity — say 0.6V for 100W) of -10 to -20, the response extended typically to 60kHz, -3dB, perhaps -0.3 by 20kHz.

KEY FEATURES

- Handset milled from solid alloy block
- Four line inputs (including direct) and one set of outputs
- Excellent clarity, stereo images and low level resolution