

Chord Electronics BerTTi

Stereo power amplifier

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Does anyone truly understand model numbers? Of course 'Px7 S2e' *means* something, just as surely as 'QE65QN90CATXXU' *means* something. It's just that you'd have to have been in the planning meetings to find out exactly what those model numbers – real model numbers, relating to real audio/video products you can buy right now – refer to. The 'consumer electronics' industry in general, and the 'hi-fi' industry in particular, tends to take itself pretty seriously, in much the same way that the National Association of Funeral Directors takes itself seriously – hence impenetrable, important-sounding model names to describe otherwise-straightforward products. If you're looking for 'levity', you haven't really come to the right place.

There is bound to be an exception, though – otherwise, could we really call it a rule? The most obvious exception is Chord Electronics. Oh, this is a company that is as serious and high-minded as they come where the performance

of its products is concerned – but unlike its numerous nominal competitors, Chord Electronics likes to enjoy itself when it comes to the look and, especially, the names of its products. Not for Chord Electronics the likes of 'GS1000i' or even 'Master Reference', oh dear me no. 'Qutest' or 'Hugo' or 'DAVE' are the sort of thing that Chord Electronics likes to call its products. Or 'BerTTi'.

Ultima trickle down

To be honest I'm not even surprised. The moment that Chord Electronics decided to let its ground-breaking 'Ultima' amplifier topology trickle down to its relatively affordable 'Table Top' range of components, and conjure a replacement for that range's 'TToby' stereo power amplifier, the die was cast – and so here's a brand new compact stereo power amplifier to complement the 'Hugo TT2' DAC/pre/headphone amp and 'Hugo M Scaler' table-top components. It's called 'BerTTi', because of course it is.

Even Chord Electronics has to concede that a stereo power amplifier of usefully compact, table top-friendly





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» dimensions (59 × 235 × 256mm, H×W×D) is no place to be experimenting with form or aesthetics, though. The company is usually almost as keen on an assertive look and a carefully complicated user interface as it is oddball model name, but BerTTi looks (whisper it) quite sensible. It's a beautifully finished box built of aircraft-grade aluminium, and is available in ('jett') black or ('argent') silver. Aside from a recess bearing the manufacturer's logo and a single polycarbonate sphere functioning as a power switch (and which glows in one of just two colours depending on what's what, power-wise), BerTTi is an anonymous and consequently most unChord-like looking box.

Rational panel

Things are no less rational on the rear panel. Connections consist of balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA inputs, two pairs of high-current speaker-binding terminals, a 12v trigger and a kettle-lead input for mains power. Design flourishes and impenetrable control options are conspicuous only by their absence.

On the inside, though, we start to get a bit more of a Chord Electronics flavour. This is the smallest and most affordable 'Ultima' amplifier Chord has delivered until now, but it seems the need to make it both relatively compact and relatively inexpensive hasn't prevented the company implementing it properly.

'Ultima' amplifier topology is designed for power, speed and high peak output current. It continuously monitors the electrical and thermal performance for each MOSFET power device, adding an extra layer of control in the power components' topology and lowering every distortion

mode. It's intended to drive even unhelpfully demanding loudspeakers, to serve up instantaneous power, and to eliminate any possibility of signal degradation. An additional auxiliary power rail at the front end provides additional voltage to drive those custom-made MOSFETs, and Chord's advanced error-correction technology monitors and instantly corrects the input signal ahead of the output stage.

The result is a fully balanced stereo power amplifier that can muster 75 watts of Class A/B power (into an 8Ω load) for each channel. And that only occupies half of a regular hi-fi rack shelf.

As The Maker intended

Some of the testing here is conducted as The Maker intended – with BerTTi doing its thing only after a signal from a Rega Apollo CD player (via its digital optical output) and from a Samsung Galaxy S21 Ultra smartphone (using aptX Bluetooth) has been attended to by an M-Scaler and Hugo TT2. This, I'm confident, constitutes a wildly overspecified desktop audio system – and so the rest of the testing happens with BerTTi providing amplification for a Cambridge Audio CXN v2 streaming preamp using the same source equipment. In each case, the Chord is connected to a pair of Bowers & Wilkins 705 S3 loudspeakers bolted to their dedicated FS-700 S3 stands using QED Signature Revelation speaker cable.

While this is, by Chord Electronics' standards, an affordable little power amplifier, it is by any realistic measure an expensive piece of equipment. But it doesn't require an awful lot of listening to reveal that BerTTi, frivolous model





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» name notwithstanding, is a thrillingly capable and endlessly listenable device that makes an extremely sturdy case for costing what it does.

There's a thoroughly agnostic attitude to BerTTi that means its specific sonic talents aren't restricted to any particular genre or style of music – in fact, it's difficult to establish if it even has a preference. No matter if it's CDs of Fridge's *The Sun* [Text Records] or *The Complete Matrix Tapes* by The Velvet Underground [Universal Music], no matter if it's wireless streams of Arooj Aftab's *Vulture Prince* [New Amsterdam] or *The Record* by Boygenius [Interscope], when it's amplified by BerTTi it seems unlikely in the extreme you're not getting a full, vividly rendered picture.

There isn't an aspect of music reproduction at which this Chord doesn't excel. Its tonality is supremely neutral – there's no overcooking or understating here, just a naturalistic and convincing rendition of a performance at the precise temperature at which it was recorded. This is particularly evident in the lower frequencies – BerTTi delivers bass sounds with plenty of substance and no little momentum, but is deft enough to allow the finest details as much expression as the broad strokes. Authority over the low end is absolute – this amplifier fairly *snaps* into the leading edge of low-frequency events. Rhythmic expression, therefore, sounds instinctive in its correctness – BerTTi is an extremely persuasive listen.

Seamless integration

Integration with the rest of the frequency range is so smooth as to be seamless. The top end balances crunchy substance with shine and, when necessary, bite – and it's as loaded with detail as the opposite end. If there's a harmonic overtone, a transient occurrence at the back or the edge of the stage, the Chord is on it like a hawk – and it's adroit enough to give each of these instances the proper weight and context.

BerTTi's powers of communication through the midrange are what's most compelling, though. Every singer it comes into contact with sounds exquisitely recorded, in an emotional state approaching transcendence, and as eloquent as WB Yeats. Detail retrieval is flat-out fanatical here – if there is information available regarding technique, breath-control, palate noises, you name it... the Chord will notify you. And as a result, even those vocal performances you're entirely familiar with will be illuminated.

What else? Well, despite its unremarkable 75 watts per channel of power this amplifier is capable of putting

significant distance between the dynamic extremes of 'quite quiet' and 'bloody loud' that some recordings are founded on, and it's just as adept when it comes to identifying the less overt but no less significant harmonic variations that are sometimes present in the 'quite quiet' sections. There's no stress or even effort apparent when it turns up the wick, either – the BerTTi just tracks dynamic fluctuations faithfully, and doesn't alter its sonic characteristics in the slightest as it does so.

Locking in place

It's able to create a large, organised and persuasive soundstage, too, locking individual elements of a recording in place but allowing them to interact with all the others at the same time. It makes it easy to identify specific strands of a recording, but the positivity of its layout is such that the sensation of 'performance' is tangible – even if a recording is as much about silences and absences as it is the actual occurrences.

In all honesty, BerTTi is an overspecified overachiever if it's truly to be considered a 'table-top' device. But as is surely apparent by now, Chord Electronics isn't about to let considerations regarding appropriate applications get in the way of either its ability to engineer an extraordinarily accomplished stereo power amplifier nor the opportunity to give it an inane name. +

Technical specifications

Type Class AB stereo power amplifier

Analogue inputs One pair gold-plated unbalanced RCA jacks; one pair gold-plated balanced XLR jacks; one 12v trigger input (Chord Electronics auto-start)

Analogue outputs One pair high-current gold-plated speaker terminals

Power output 75 watts RMS per channel @ 0.005% THD into 8 Ohms

Input impedance 100kΩ unbalanced/balanced

Gain 30dB

Total Harmonic Distortion 0.008%

Signal to Noise Ratio 87dB (A-weighted)

Dimensions (HxWxD) 59 × 235 × 256mm

Weight 3.75kg

Price £3,995, \$5,250

Manufacturer/distributor Chord Electronics

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