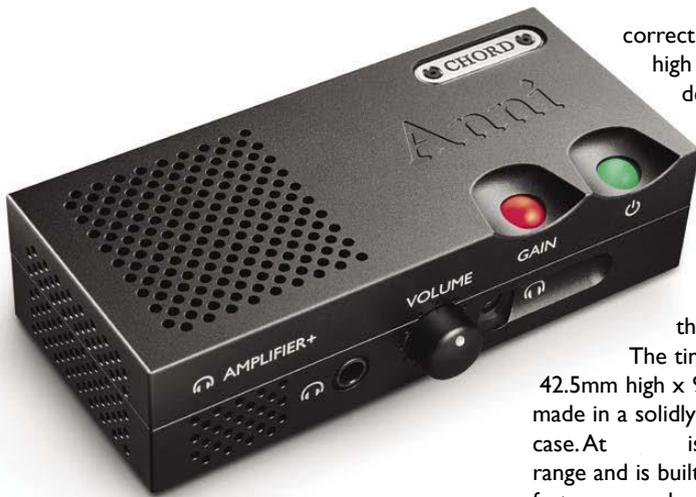


SOUNDBITES



CHORD ELECTRONICS ANNI :

I'm not afraid to admit when I am confused by a product, and the Chord Electronics Anni is a product that really did have me scratching my head when it comes to what it is meant to be and the type of customer it is aimed at. It says 'amplifier+' on the front and the press release I was sent bills it as a 'desktop amplifier+' capable of driving headphones and compact loudspeakers. The instruction manual, however, says that it is a 'next-generation headphone amplifier' that is also capable of driving loudspeakers, irrespective of size. Confused? Well, I certainly was.

But what kind of use is it meant for? 'Desktop' suggests it is intended for use in a small room, maybe hooked up to a computer as a digital music source and a pair of small desktop speakers. That is all very well but you will need to add a DAC at least, and that, if you choose one at the level of the Qutest, ups the combo to £1000, which would buy you a decent amp with built-in DAC and much more power. And for such applications, wouldn't a wireless speaker be the usual choice?

Anyway, I decided to assess the Anni in two ways. First off, as a headphone amp pure and simple, and then as an amplifier driving a pair of small desktop speakers.

The manual tells us that Chord set out to design a powerful headphone amp capable of driving any headphones and that to this end they incorporated the Ultima amplifier technology that was previously only found in its top amplifiers. Rated at 10W into 8 ohms, the Anni uses dual feed-forward error

correction circuitry to deliver high peak currents that detects if it is being over-driven and collapses the waveform on each over-driven half-cycle, which it says means it does not clip like other amplifiers, thus avoiding harm to the amplifier or speakers.

The tiny Anni (160mm wide x 42.5mm high x 96.6mm deep) is nicely made in a solidly machined aluminium case. At £100 it is part of the Qutest range and is built on the same form factor, so can be stacked in Chord's QSS (Qutest Stand System) modular rack along with the Qutest DAC and Huei phono stage.

And you will need those, or at least something like them, because the Anni has no DAC built-in, nor a phono stage. Nor does it have Bluetooth or wi-fi connectivity. On the back there are two line level inputs, a DC in and out and two sets of 4mm speaker terminals. The front is minimalist with just 6.3mm and 3.5mm headphone output jacks, a volume control-cum-input selector and Chord's signature, quirky illuminated coloured buttons on the top. The lefthand one selects high (glows red) and low (blue) gain, and the righthand one switches it on and off – it starts green, turns cyan when the unit is ready to use and red indicates standby. When you turn it on, you will also notice the noise of a cooling fan, but to be honest I did not find it intrusive.

SOUND QUALITY

I started my listening to the Anni using it as a headphone amplifier. My music source was the excellent Pro-Ject Stream Box Ultra streamer with its PreBox Digital S2 DAC. Headphones used were the Focal Clear.

First track I played was I Can See Clearly Now from guitarist Peter White's Groovin' album. From the first few notes the Anni impressed with its openness and articulation, revealing nuances in his play and how he held and shaped notes. Bass line was powerful and tuneful while percussion was crisp and lively. All in all, the sound was well balanced and very easy to listen to.

Switching to Build Me Up from Bones by Sarah Jarosz, the Anni

impressed again with how it handled not only her voice and mandolin, but also by how well it separated the cello and violin backing and gave the cello great weight and poise.

Track after track brought the same result, with Anni seducing me with its dynamics, power, poise and articulation on vocals – all delivered without any harsh edges. I quickly popped on a very well respected headphone amp that I knew well at around £800, and the Anni showed it a clean pair of heels. The other model lacked its warmth, 'humanity' on vocals and sheer drive and was rather more clinical. Something I could never accuse the Anni of.



Two line level inputs are provided plus 4mm sockets for speakers.

I am afraid that my enthusiasm did not extend to its performance as a pure amplifier. I hooked it up to a pair of PSB P3 desktop speakers and have to say that the Anni's sound was slow, rather 'closed-in' and uninvolved. It had no get up and go. I quickly switched to a Rega Brio I had to hand (circa £600) and it was chalk and cheese. On the Brio, the music came to life and was more involving.

CONCLUSION

This makes my conclusion difficult. As a headphone amplifier, the Anni was excellent and I suspect it will see off most things at the price and probably more. As such, I highly recommend it. As an amplifier, it did not impress. How much that matters to the end user will depend on the use they have in mind for it. **CF**

[Chord Electronics
www.chordelectronics.co.uk
+44 (0)1622 721444]

My thanks to Home Media and Sevenoaks Sound & Vision in Maidstone for their assistance.