

Equipment Report



Ypsilon Phaethon Neo SE Integrated Amplifier

Divine

Jacob Heilbrunn

One of the standout rooms at the 2025 Munich High End show featured the union of Kaiser loudspeakers from Germany and Ypsilon gear from Greece. That union was fitting, as the first king of modern Greece was Prince Otto of Bavaria, who reigned over it from 1832 until 1862. The Hellenic flag is the same blue-and-white color as that of Bavaria.

In Munich, Ypsilon's head honcho, Demetris Baklavas, showcased his new anniversary preamplifier as well as a prototype SET amplifier that employed the mighty GM70 tube. To say that I was impressed by the sound would be an understatement. Baklavas, you could say, has devised a very special Grecian formula, one that centers around the hand-wound transformers he manufactures in Athens and that have become coveted throughout the audio industry.

So, when Baklavas indicated that he was eager to send

me a hybrid tube-transistor Phaethon integrated amplifier, I was most curious to audition it. I have listened to a variety of Ypsilon equipment over the years, including the Aelius amplifier and the PST 100 Mk. 2 preamplifier, but never heard the company's integrated amplifier. The original Phaethon was reviewed a decade ago in TAS by Neil Gader, who was quite smitten by it: "At the Olympian heights where the Phaethon resides, only a handful of amps challenge it, but overall, and in my experience, there are none better." In Greek

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Specs & Pricing

Output power: 110Wpc @ 8 ohm, 180Wpc @ 4 ohms	Weight: 77 pounds
Bandwidth: 11Hz–70Hz –3dB	Price: Phaethon standard version, \$27,000, SE version, \$50,000
Output impedance: 0.7 ohms	The Audio Salon (U.S. Distributor)
Input impedance: 47k ohms	2525 Michigan Avenue, Suite F1
Gain: 21dB	Santa Monica, CA 90404
Inputs: 3 RCA, 1 XLR	maier@theaudiosalon.com
Dimensions: 400 x 184 x 425mm	(310) 863-0863

mythology, Phaethon is the mortal son of a god, who attempts to ride his father's solar chariot. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term "Phaethon" referred to a sporty four-wheeled carriage drawn by one or two horses. Would the revamped Phaethon provide me with as exhilarating a sonic ride as it did Neil?

Baklavas told me that there were no fewer than three versions of the original Phaethon. The standard version had copper windings in the transformer and the SE silver ones. Each had three gain stages, and the input and driver stage were formed from a double triode—either the 6H30P or the 5687 tube. As with all Ypsilon amplifiers, Baklavas employed an interstage coupling transformer between the driver tube and the MOSFET-based output stage. In addition, Ypsilon produced a third, low-gain version of the Phaethon designed primarily for horn loudspeakers. It was a two-gain stage design. Now comes the Phaethon Neo SE integrated amplifier.

What's changed? Baklavas explained that he now deploys a special ultra-high-voltage solid-state device in the driver stage, a tubed input stage centered on a single triode EC8010 Siemens tube, and an upgraded output stage to improve the overall performance of the Phaethon Neo. The most that he will divulge about the output stage is that it "uses different output devices now," bringing it closer to the sound that "our single-ended triode amps possess, since it is only using three pairs of output devices." Fewer output devices, in my experience, is always a plus. Baklavas adds that a "new high-resolution front display offers the option to select different character colors, and a new microcontroller offers quick response over the functions of the amplifier, all of it developed by my son, Lucas, who is now a partner in the company."

When I hooked up the \$50,000 110Wpc Phaethon to my 109dB-sensitive Avantgarde Trio G3 horn loudspeakers, the sound came as something of a shock. It seemed sterile and uninvolved, the very opposite of what I had previously experienced with Ypsilon products. Good grief! Had Baklavas changed his house sound that drastically, I wondered. Not to fear. After about 100 hours of playing, the Phaethon started to emerge like a chick

from its shell. Another several hundred hours and it emerged in full glory. Like earlier Ypsilon products, it excelled in tonal purity, delineation of musical lines, and an extended treble. But all these qualities were improved—and it now added a solid and textured bass to the mix, something that I think previous Ypsilon products slightly scanted in comparison to their American counterparts. The result is a great leap forward for Ypsilon.

The first thing that I noticed was the precise pitch definition of the Phaethon, whether the instrument was harpsichord or trumpet. Take Lilian Gordis' new double album of Bach's harpsichord works. This exemplary album was recorded in the Doopsgezinde Kerk in Haarlem, the Netherlands, where the eminent harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt had made a number of recordings. Gordis, who is a rising star in the classical firmament, pos-

sesses a clarity of touch that comes through beautifully in the Doopsgezinde Kerk and that the Ypsilon rendered with remarkable fidelity. What my TAS colleague and chum Jonathan Valin has eloquently referred to as the "action" of an instrument—the sense of a note being created and launched into space by an acoustic instrument—was conveyed by the Phaethon in a convincing and persuasive fashion. In particular, it captured Gordis' propulsive sense of rhythm and her interpretive flair, which makes this music from the 18th century sound as vital as ever. To hear Bach's work reproduced with such precision, passion, and refinement was a real pleasure.

Ditto for brass instruments. In heavy, if not the heaviest, rotation recently in my system have been performances by the German Brass, led by the renowned trumpeter Matthias Höfs. Brass can be quite treacherous to record. The



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multifarious overtones produced by brass instruments, especially in the treble region, often seem to collide and fracture on lesser recordings. The combination of the 8-box CH Precision 10 Series digital system (review pending) and the Phaethon, however, seemed to render such issues an afterthought. No digital nasties here. Instead, the Ypsilon gear faithfully reproduced the sonorous flow of this brass choir playing a transcription of the adagio movement of Bach's Harpsichord Concert No. 8 in D Minor. Especially captivating were the seemingly endless decays that trailed off into the sonic distance in this slow movement, followed by a jaunty rendition of the opening movement of the Fugue in C Major that nailed the transient attacks of the piping piccolo trumpets. Heavenly indeed.

Then there was a Concord label recording from 1975 of Ruby Braff and George Barnes composed of songs by Rodgers and Hart (whose partnership and breakup was movingly dramatized in the recent film directed by Richard Linklater, *Blue Moon*). Braff, who idolized Louis Armstrong, played cornet, not trumpet, during his long career and sought to ensure that the great jazz standards did not fall by the wayside. No one deplored the lurch of jazz into the abyss of fusion more than Braff, who was a top-flight, if famously temperamental, performer.

This is probably one of his finest albums, both for the playing and recording quality. He and Barnes, who accompanied Braff on guitar, seemed to have an intuitive feeling for the music they were playing, something that the Phaethon rendered palpably obvious on numbers such as "Lover," where passages between the two burst out of the Avantgarde Trios with remarkable dynamic force. Others highlighted the antiphonal effects of the cornet and guitar responding to each other. When it came to a low noise floor, the Phaethon was also no slouch. You could hear just about every shading and nuance in Braff's playing, not to mention the virtuosic lyricism. In this regard, I was struck by the Phaethon's ability to reproduce pianissimo passages without

any sense of blur or opacity. Instead, these passages possessed a particularly riveting character precisely because they were at once so lucidly quiet and vivid.

The Phaethon could also rock it out. To test what the late Harry Pearson liked to call the "testicular region," I listened to the band Aerosmith playing "Walk This Way." From the opening two-measure drum solo by Joey Kramer, it was off to the races. The Phaethon dove into the mid-bass (where most of the sense of power of a stereo system resides) and delivered the raw guitar work unflinchingly and unhesitatingly at heroic volume levels. There was a guttural quality to the guitars, fuller than what solid state delivers and more realistic, at least in my view. It seems as though only tubes can offer that kind of visceral aggression when you're playing rock 'n' roll. Something similar occurred on Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean," which the Phaethon delivered without any sense of breakup or confusion. This

isn't the kind of music that I spend a huge amount of time listening to, which is probably a good thing for the preservation of my ears, but it does provide an honest test of the dynamic capabilities of the Phaethon.

As it happens, I was also riveted by the Pablo LP *Warm Breeze*, which features the Count Basie orchestra. This album, recorded in 1981, contains some extremely dynamic passages on songs such as "C.B. Express," the opening number. The drum whacks were of an order that you simply wouldn't expect on vinyl. Once again, CH Precision played a role here as I relied on its P10 phono-stage. But the Phaethon simply sailed through this music with aplomb. Similarly, I was impressed by the definition of massed strings in the third movement of Shostakovich's 8th Symphony, performed by Andrew Litton and the Dallas Symphony. The movement had a majestic grandeur to it, especially with the tremolo of the snare drum and the deafening bass drum at the close of the movement.

The Phaethon is a significant accomplishment. It should be carefully mated to any prospective loudspeaker, given that it does not possess the sheer power of separates like my darTZeel NHB-18NS preamplifier and NHB-468 Mk 2 monoblock amplifiers. It also delivers a warmer sound than most purely solid-state equipment, including the darTZeel, which I found to be slightly more accurate but not as melodious. An elegantly conceived piece of equipment, the Phaethon never sounds less than divine.

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