



Everything all at once

Audiolab enters the all-in-one sector with a product that offers a very comprehensive specification. **Ed Selley** shakes it down

A product's name is rarely the work of a moment. Choosing something memorable, relevant and that doesn't mean something wildly unsuitable can take a while to agree on. It speaks to a certain degree of confidence on Audiolab's part that its first foray into the all-in-one market wears the name Omnia; Latin for 'everything.' As a statement of faith in the specification, it's fairly emphatic. A measure of Audiolab's confidence being well founded is that the list of features the Omnia doesn't have that can be found in its key competition is limited to HDMI ARC and AirPlay. From there, the list of things it can do is long and extremely impressive. What makes it relatively unusual is that it has a 'three-pronged' approach to accommodating digital. The most conventional of these is the inclusion of a streaming module making use of the DTS Play-Fi interface. This can also access locally stored content and stream direct from a variety of streaming services.

This is partnered with a selection of digital inputs: two coaxial, two optical and a USB-B port offering the highest sample rate handling of any connection on the Omnia, with 768kHz PCM and DSD512 supported. This USB connection also has its own Roon profile too. Then, most unusually of all, there's a CD mechanism built in which puts it in a fairly specialist category of products offering this trio of options. All of the digital connections (and the Bluetooth input) are decoded by an ESS ES9038Q2M 32-bit DAC, which is both a fairly high-spec device and something that Audiolab has a huge amount of experience implementing. This is further supported by an analogue section that is barely less comprehensive. Three RCA line inputs are joined by a moving-magnet phono stage that uses the same JFET based circuit that was introduced in the 6000A Play. There is a power amp in and preamp out and a 6.35mm headphone socket. Internally, the Omnia eschews any Class D-based

DETAILS
PRODUCT
Audiolab Omnia
ORIGIN
UK/China
TYPE
All-in-one system
WEIGHT
9.1kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 156 x 327mm
FEATURES
• Claimed power output: 2x 50W (8ohm)
• Connections: 3x stereo RCA inputs; MM phono; power amp in; preamp out
• Digital board: 2x optical; 2x coaxial; USB B; DTS Play-Fi streaming; Bluetooth
DISTRIBUTOR
IAG
TELEPHONE
01480 452561
WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk

solution in favour of a Class AB amplifier offering 50W into 8ohm and 75W into 4ohm. This outputs via a single set of speaker terminals. There are more powerful options available, but there are not many price appropriate speakers that the Audiolab will struggle with. This is a significant amount of functionality to implement in one box and the manner it has been done yields mixed results. The Omnia has plenty of inputs, but they can only be cycled through (in either direction) rather than accessed directly – save

The digital section gives an excellent demo of Audiolab's know-how in this area

for CD, Bluetooth and USB, which Audiolab has allocated buttons for on the remote. Navigating around the features never feels especially rapid and this same slight lack of urgency is present on Play-Fi too – which is not as slick to browse and use as some rival operating systems. Used in isolation, the Omnia is cohesive but rival products (admittedly juggling rather less connectivity) make it feel a little sluggish. There is very little anywhere near the price as well made as this, though. The all-metal chassis is finished to an exceptionally high standard with little in the way of visible fixings. Everything feels carefully and extensively thought out. I find myself a little torn on the looks; part of me would have preferred something closer to Audiolab's separates, but I can also appreciate how carefully the

company has worked features like the right hand-mounted power button into something a little different. The decision to fit the large display is a good one. It's easy to see what the Omnia is doing at a glance and to access the various setup menus and the digital VU meters and/or the display can be turned off completely if it's a distraction

Sound quality

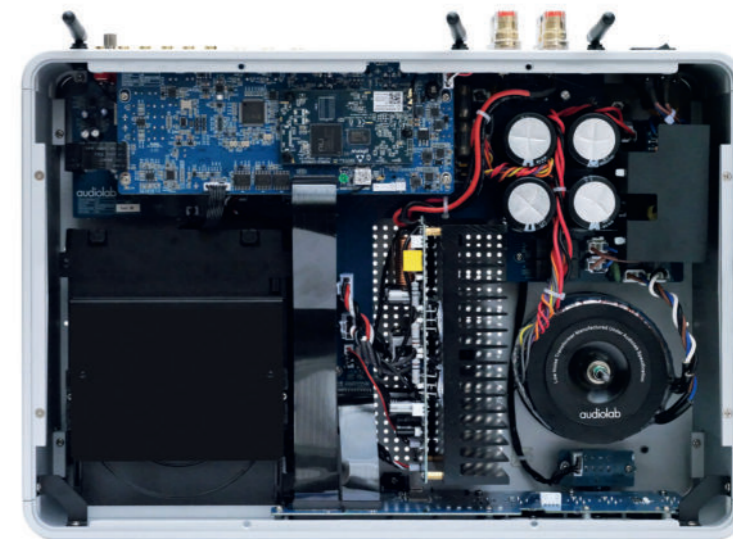
The principle reason why most people will tolerate any operating foibles is because the Omnia offers a level of performance that very little under £2,000 can get anywhere near. Listen to the oddly named but very engaging *Oochya!* by Stereophonics and it takes this solid but by no means stellar recording and ensures that it sounds usefully refined. Critically, it does this without smoothing off so many of the rough edges that the band's character is lost. Kelly Jones sounds like Kelly Jones and the infectious get up and go of *Running Around My Brain* is beautifully captured.

Some of this is down to clearly discernible Audiolab DNA at work. The Omnia might look rather different to the 6000A Series that came before it, but some of the same balance is present across the analogue and digital sections. The digital board in particular is a truly excellent demonstration of Audiolab's know-how in this area. In keeping with many components that use an ESS DAC, the Omnia is capable of tremendous detail retrieval; the highly distinctive hang percussive instrument that the Portico Quartet uses to such great effect on *Monument* is beautifully defined and given the weight and scale it deserves as the centrepiece. This is achieved without the slightly 'etched' presentation that can sometimes come with it. Revisiting some of the CDs I've never



The challenge Omnia faces will be from people who are not necessarily sure that they need everything it does (perhaps most specifically, if they will go and rip an extant CD collection and stream it instead). If you decide to go down that particular route, NAD's C700 (HFC 486) comes into play. It can't quite match the functionality of the Omnia, but the integration of its functionality into BluOS and the fitment of that HDMI ARC connection means it's easier to use across the smaller range of things it does. The strength in depth of the Audiolab is hard to ignore, though.

HDMI ARC and AirPlay are the only real things missing here



got around to ripping, the Omnia sounds genuinely invigorating. The analogue section doesn't let the side down either. I'm not completely sure what you'd be joining to those line input connections that the Audiolab doesn't already do in its own chassis, but connecting a Chord Qutest DAC (HFC 436) over RCA demonstrates the amplification of the Omnia is very closely tonally matched to the digital side and that it doesn't give very much away over USB to the standalone DAC.

The phono stage is also something of a star. Connected to a Rega Planar 10 (HFC 456) mounting a Vertere Sabre (HFC 483) moving-magnet cartridge, the Omnia is able to do justice to this considerably more expensive vinyl front end. Of all the various functionality aspects this is perhaps the part with the most overt character and makes itself felt in a manner that is wholly benign. The gorgeous *Build A Problem* by Dodie is possessed of a fraction of extra warmth and engagement across the midrange that emphasises the glorious production and Dodie's ear for arrangement.

The levels of gain available from the phono stage are a little lower than from the analogue line section or digital inputs, but even here with both the Spondor A1 (HFC 460) and Focal Kanta No1 (HFC 454) the Omnia is never low on headroom – although some of the smoothness and refinement that it possesses at lower levels is lost as volume climbs. This also applies to the headphone output, which does its best work with reasonably sensitive designs

Conclusion

Being asked to choose partnering transducers that give at least a passing nod to sensitivity is hardly the end of the world, though. It's one of a series of small trade offs; the other two being that slightly clunky interface and the somewhat anodyne appearance. If you can accept these, what you get in return is a device that offers a tremendous spec and sounds excellent across all of it. It isn't perfect, but the Omnia's 'one box to rule them all' thinking has resulted in one of the best all-in-one systems available under two grand ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Excellent functionality with strong performance; well made
DISLIKE: Slightly sluggish to operate
WE SAY: A superb all-in-one that offers excellent performance across its wide spread of connections

OVERALL

