



Coming up Roses

HiFi Rose takes its unique recipe and tunes it to source equipment. But are these unusual features enough to win over **Ed Selley**?

After an exciting few early years where all manner of different configurations and specs have been tried, network streamers have settled into a more recognisable pattern in terms of what they do and how they do it. This homogenisation makes HiFi Rose all the more interesting. The South Korean company has developed a bespoke streaming platform that does the things we expect a streamer to do, but with some intriguing add-ons.

The basics of the RS250A are conventional enough. A replacement for the original RS250, it is able to operate as a line-level device and as a preamp, thanks to an on-board volume control. Decoding can realistically be seen as state of the art, with PCM handled to 768kHz and DSD to 512 all decoded via an ESS ES9028 PRO DAC paired with a low noise phase oscillator. HiFi Rose has paid particular attention to the output stage, employing discrete op amps throughout. Unlike some less expensive devices from the company, the

RS250A also has a linear power supply with IEC socket on the rear.

As well as reading a network library, there is a hard-drive bay on the underside, which can make the RS250A effectively self-contained. It can also access Qobuz, Tidal, Apple Music and Spotify. All this is tied together by a dedicated interface that looks and feels different to most rivals. Built on an Android platform, the entire front fascia is a touchscreen.

This is backed up by a dedicated control app and Bluetooth remote. The app is periodically awkward; it's ability to take a less than perfectly stored library on a NAS drive and make it an orderly set of albums onscreen is somewhat lacking, but it has some lovely touches in terms of how it looks and feels. HiFi Rose has also ensured that the RS250A is fully Roon compatible. The remote is a useful extra control point.

Where it really departs from the competition, however, is the connectivity and functionality that goes with it. It is competitive with

DETAILS

PRODUCT
HiFi Rose RS250A

ORIGIN
South Korea

TYPE
Audio video streamer/DAC/preamp

WEIGHT
3.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
278 x 83 x 231mm

FEATURES
• Supports sample rates up to 32-bit/768kHz PCM and DSD512

• Digital inputs: 1x USB-B port; 1x coaxial; 1x optical
• Roon compatible

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

WEBSITE
eng.hifirose.com
henleyaudio.co.uk

most rivals so long as you don't need balanced connections. The RCA analogue out is partnered with USB, optical and coaxial in and outputs. More unusually, the RS250A has an analogue input on an RCA connection too. There is an HDMI out as well. This is there because it can access video content through a dedicated app and via Tidal. Oddly, what it cannot do is read any video content over network or on the internal drive, so it can't be seen as media hub.

Aesthetically, though, the HiFi Rose is a genuinely striking thing. Any

It's a head-nodding, grin-inducing, utterly captivating experience

product of this nature will live or die on the quality of the display and this one has excellent contrast and colour, and responds quickly and effectively to input. The rest of the casework is relatively unadorned, but finished to a very high standard. Of particular note is the lack of an external wireless aerial, still a fairly rare thing and something that has been omitted here while maintaining excellent wireless performance. Black and silver finishes are available.

Sound quality

Before I launch fully into how the RS250A sounds, it's worth celebrating that setting it up is an object lesson in how to make the process user-friendly. It displays clear prompts as to what it's up to, lays menus out in a way that generally makes sense and demonstrates unconditional stability

in the time it is on test. If you are looking to dip a toe into streaming for the first time, this is likely to make it an entirely pleasant experience.

There are, of course, additional benefits beyond reliability. Connected to a Naim Supernait 3 (HFC 456) and Mission 700 speakers (HFC 496), the RS250A reveals a slightly different presentation to many of the products that feature ESS decoding. The glorious, prog-adjacent *Sympatico People* that opens WH Lung's *Incidental Music* is given a richness and tinge of warmth that makes the sweeping guitars feel more human and involving. When Joe Evan's haunting vocals join the sound, he's given a texture and sheer presence that makes for an extremely compelling listen.

This is aided by a commendable level of bass weight. There are digital

Products of this kind live or die on the quality of the display and this one is superb

sources at the same sort of price that can hit harder than the RS250A, but there is always enough low-end force to make recordings sound believable. Furthermore, the low-end that it is particularly talented at is the point where the midrange fills out into bass. This means the instrumental swell as the Hidden Orchestra's *Spoken* reaches its crescendo is something you feel as well as hear.

What I find very impressive about this is that there is no discernible evidence that the RS250A is lacking in speed or cohesion, which can sometimes be the case when listening to anything as full-bodied as this. The live performance of *Go!* by Public Service Broadcasting absolutely flies along, peppered with the snippets of Apollo mission commentary and the

HOW IT COMPARES

The RS250A is similar in many ways to the Zidoo Neo Alpha we looked at in HFC 492. The more bare-bones software install of the Zidoo is some way behind the HiFi Rose, but it offers the scope to be a complete audio and video hub in a way that the RS250A, with its more locked-down system cannot do. There's no hiding that the HiFi Rose is more fun to look at and use, though. Despite employing very similar decoding, the Zidoo is more energetic and forceful in its presentation but lacks the warmth and engagement that the HiFi Rose brings to music.

The entire front fascia operates as a touchscreen



euphoric crowd. It's a head-nodding, grin-inducing, utterly captivating experience and one that holds up commendably well even when the RS250A is removed from the rhythmically surefooted Naim and Mission. This live performance isn't quite as effortlessly spacious as it is on some devices I've played it on, but most of those are much more expensive than the RS250A is.

I enjoy using the video functionality far more than I thought I would. I can't help but think that the ability to watch external content would be more useful still, but the internal content is more engaging than you might expect. The software allows for content to either be displayed on the front panel or a TV (but not both at the same time) and I find myself losing a few happy hours exploring music videos. Older videos in particular are a wonderful addition to

the sonics that the RS250A delivers and Tidal is very well stocked with them. You don't have to use it – Tidal can run perfectly happily in audio only – but you might find it more engaging than you think.

Conclusion

In fact, you might find the whole prospect of the RS250A surprisingly satisfying. It's easy to look at the basic design and video playback functionality and assume that it's a gimmick, but the core functionality is so well sorted that it can be judged as a sober and carefully engineered network streamer that's absolutely competitive with anything at the price. It then goes on to add enough extra features to be something altogether more special. HiFi Rose might still be a relatively new name in the UK, but with products like this, it's rapidly becoming a must-audition ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Engaging and fluid sound; intriguing features; build

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** App struggles with messy libraries; it can't read video over network

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A fabulous-sounding streamer that offers something different to the rest

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★