



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Fonel Emotion

by Paul Messenger

**R**ight up until the early 1980s, wood was still occasionally found decorating hi-fi electronics – remember Arcam's original and very popular A60 with a wooden sleeve covering a metal chassis? But the writing had been on the wall since the late-1960s, when the Japanese brands first started appearing with their shiny silver fronts and steel cases.

Barring loudspeakers, turntables and some Italian brands, metalwork remains the dominant feature of virtually every component on the hi-fi market today. Which is maybe a pity, but it does provide one solid reason for welcoming the arrival of equipment from Fonel Audio, which features some beautiful lacquer-finished wood strips around the visual periphery. And there's a matching remote control handset that's as easy on the eyes as it is on the hands.

That's not the only thing that's unusual about this integrated amplifier. In fact I'd go so far as to describe this £5,525 Emotion as downright idiosyncratic, but that of course makes reviewing it all the more interesting!

To start with, it has mixed parentage. But in this case it isn't the usual 'designed in some European country and made in China' gestation. Instead the unit is actually made in Berlin but apparently has some design input from the Ukraine, which is probably a unique combination in the world of hi-fi (and elsewhere!)

I'll freely admit I know absolutely nothing of the Ukraine hi-fi scene, and can't make head nor tail of the Slavic Ukrainian language (complete with Cyrillic alphabet) which is the alternative to German or English on the website. Frankly, and at least in its English translation, the website is not all that helpful; its 'about us' section was aspirational rather than informative.

That probably unique heritage is by no means the only unusual thing about the Emotion. It comes in two distinct versions – a Class AB version that can deliver 300W/channel from MOSFET output pairs, and a hybrid (thermionic/solid state) Class A version that is rated at just 25W. Both share the same impressively solidly built casework, the control surfaces and pre-amplifier; our sample was one of the low power Class A examples.

It would have been nice to have been able to examine the innards and give some indication of the contents, but unfortunately, the lid resisted all attempts to remove it. My Torx bit happily removed seven of the securing bolts, but had absolutely no effect on the eighth. Black mark to QC; short of brutally bending the lid or drilling the bolt, there was no way of getting the lid off. Peeking inside I could see at least one glowing valve, though there was no sign of an output transformer.

Although the brochure's details are no more useful than the website, the user manual proved considerably more informative, though its regular lapses into

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► Deulich (the German equivalent of Franglais) was sometimes baffling. The reason I got the manual was because I wanted to find out how to adjust the front panel illumination. The relevant (verbatim cut'n'pasted) part of the manual reads as follows:

*"After approximately 10 sec. scolded you the power switch at the back, and keep you pressed thereby the key at the front side: IN 1 - to program around the brightness of the volume indicators or to program IN 2-um the remaining light emitting diodes. The control system goes into the attitude, with which the brightness of the light emitting diodes at the volume indicator indicates the level to the brightness of the light emitting diodes which can be programmed."*

I therefore decided not to try and adjust the display brightness.

Happily there were also a few clues about the basic ingredients that allow some educated guesswork. The whole thing operates under microprocessor logic control, and is free from global negative feedback. The pre-amplifier has gold-contact relays, and an Alps electronic volume Engine, while valve drivers feed FET output stages.

Although the ergonomics are generally rather good, one obvious criticism is that, in my opinion at least, there simply aren't enough inputs for many people in the modern world. There are just four line inputs, which in itself may be rather limiting, but only two are regular RCA phono pairs; another pair has balanced XLR sockets; and the final pair (on RCA phonos) by-pass the volume control and feed the power amp directly at full gain (a connection type normally expected to be used in conjunction with an AV processor). Whether that very limited complement of inputs will be sufficient will naturally depend

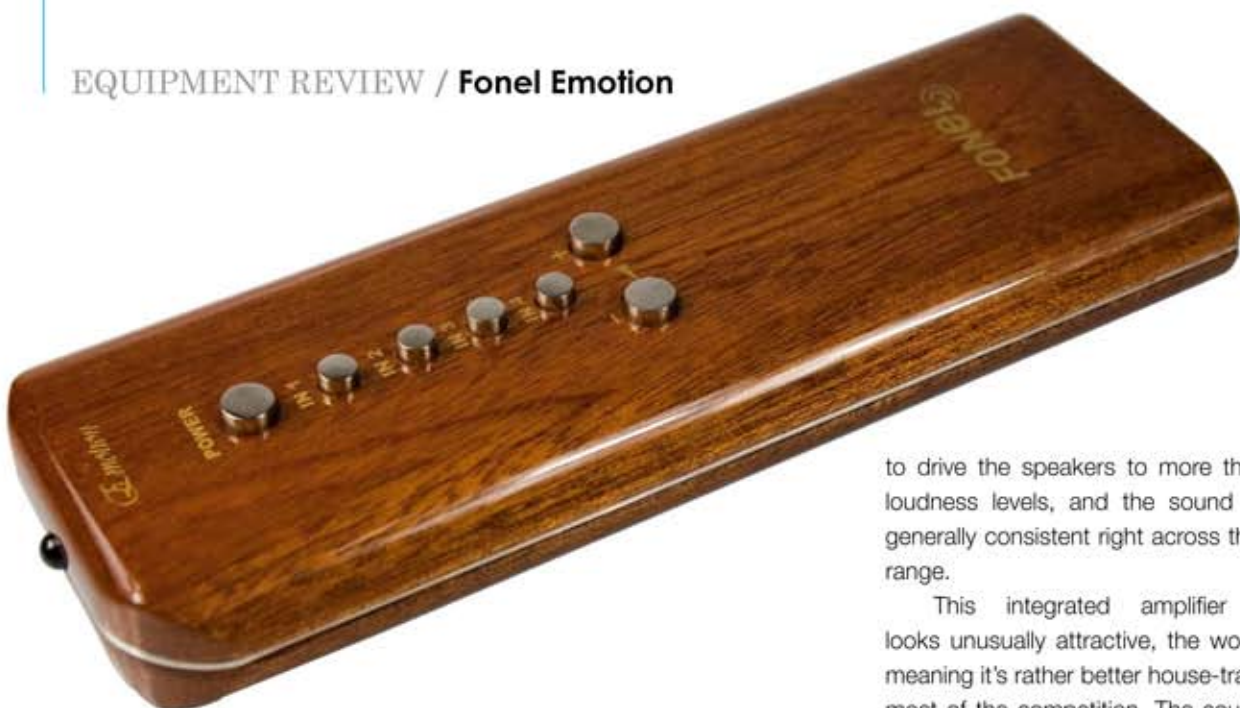
on how many sources the system uses, but I have to admit it wouldn't be enough for my needs.

If that's the bad news, the good news is that this is a very pleasant amplifier to use, thanks largely to a remote handset that's nice to the touch and refreshingly simple. There's no volume knob as such, but a circular pattern of around 30 LEDs covering about 240 degrees provides good visual feedback, as do little LED telltales above the various front panel buttons. One might complain of some oversimplification: there's neither mono switch nor balance control, two useful features that are all too often omitted from today's equipment in my opinion. There's no mute button either, and the controls and telltales on the amplifier itself are just below the thick wooden trim, so are difficult to see when standing in front. However, the best feature of all is that the actual law of the volume control is exceptionally good, allowing plenty of scope for delicate and fine adjustments at the quiet end of its operating range.

Besides the inputs, the rear panel has two switchable pairs of multi-way speaker socket/binders, plus (surprisingly) a 6.3mm ►







▶ headphone socket. Switch-on is followed by a 45sec delay while things stabilise, while achieving full performance takes a further 15-20 minutes. The Class A output inevitably means that the unit generates a fair amount of heat, but power consumption is quoted at a reasonably modest <150W, and even that is conservative as 120W was measured in practice.

The Emotion was very easy to install, and was connected up to a pair of PMC IB2i speakers using Vertex Moncayo speaker cable. Sources were a Naim CDS3/555PS CD player, a Magnum Dynalab MD106T tuner (via balanced), a Linn/Rega/Soundsmith record player (variable output direct to power amp). Because of the limited number of inputs, TV and Mac/DAC sources were switched via a Naim NAC552 pre-amp record-out.

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While it doesn't set any new standards in absolute terms, the sound quality is really rather good, especially in an integrated amplifier context. Its character is essentially sweet and open, if just a little forward and 'shiny', tending to emphasise the midband somewhat ahead of the extremes.

That midband is certainly its best feature, with fine expression and plenty of subtle textural detail. Voices are reproduced particularly well, making is relatively easy to distinguish and follow song lyrics, and the emotional messages come through very well.

The bass end of things is handled pretty well. It hangs on in there OK, with good basic timing and decent weight, but punch, authority and drive do seem a little softened. While there's no untidiness at the top end, it does seem to lack a little delicacy and ultimate transparency here. Interestingly, this seemed more obvious via the single-ended (phono) inputs than the balanced input. Conversely, although it wasn't possible to ensure a true like-for-like comparison, the sound via the 'direct-to-power-amp' did seem a little harsher than the others.

The IB2i isn't the most sensitive of loudspeakers, and Class A operation means relatively low power output, yet there seemed to be plenty available

to drive the speakers to more than ample loudness levels, and the sound remained generally consistent right across the volume range.

This integrated amplifier certainly looks unusually attractive, the wooden trim meaning it's rather better house-trained than most of the competition. The sound quality is very satisfactory, and indeed satisfying. While it does slightly favour the midband, that midband is sweet and expressive, while the modest power output seemed more than adequate. The ergonomics are mostly excellent, so the only real complaint is that the four rather mixed inputs might not be enough for many users in today's multi-source world. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Inputs:** 2x RCA phono line level  
 1x RCA phono direct-to-power-amp  
 1xXLR balanced  
**Outputs:** 2x speaker pairs (switchable)  
 1x headphones (6.3mm)  
**Output power:** 2x25W  
**THD:** < 0.02% (rated power)  
 < 0.005% (1W)  
**Power consumption:** < 150 W  
**Signal-to-noise ratio:** -98 dB  
**Input resistance:** 47kohm  
**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 430x132x432mm  
**Weight:** 29.2kg

**Price:** £5,525

### UK Distributor:

Ikon Audio Consultants

Tel: 01473 217 853

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