

## Advance Paris A10 Apex; the amp you always promised yourself

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### Advance Paris A10 Apex integrated amplifier

These are exciting times for Advance Paris. The company has gone from being an interesting organisation sniffing around the edges of mainstream acceptance to one on the cusp of becoming part of the established order. You can buy their products in a healthy selection of dealers, including a nationwide chain and some interesting products are lurking in the offing as well.

The A10 Apex you see here is an encapsulated example of what has fuelled the company's progress. I have been very keen to get my hands on one because I spent some time with the original A10 (sans Apex) and came away decidedly impressed. It was a big, characterful thing that did a huge amount with considerable proficiency and I felt it was a couple of rough edges away from being one of the strongest amps you could buy for the money. The A10 Apex seeks to achieve that title.

Most of the basic functionality of the A10 Apex mirrors that of its predecessor. At its core is a Class A/B amp that outputs a claimed 130 watts into 8 ohms which rises to 198W into 4. This figure needs to be judged against Advance Paris quoting a THD figure at a rather lower 90 watts suggesting that the 130 watt output is a 'beyond the red line' measurement. The most significant deviation from standard practise is in the preamp though. The A10 Apex uses a pair of ECC81 twin triode tubes in the preamp circuit. This is a low voltage part of the circuit and, used within its designed envelope, the ECC81 has more than respectable performance. It also has favourable overload characteristics. They are a permanent part of the circuit and cannot be bypassed.

The preamp that these tubes are a part of is a perfect antidote to anyone who feels that modern integrated amps can be a bit restrictive in connectivity terms. Analogue inputs comprise

a single XLR input supported by five RCA line inputs and a direct input for AV integration. There is an internal MM phono stage that features adjustable capacitance; something that's fairly uncommon with internal phono stages and that can be very useful to have. There is additionally a tape loop out, a stereo pre-out and two dedicated subwoofer outputs. Even with a considerable collection of legacy sources, you should be OK.



Of course, this is 2026 so the A10 Apex's healthy quantity of analogue inputs is supported by a digital board that sees some upgrades over the original A10. A single USB-B input is supported by three optical, one coaxial and one HDMI eARC input. Decoding is handled by an ESS 9018 DAC of unspecified level which supports sample rates up to 384kHz for PCM and DSD256 into the USB input, with the optical and coaxial connections topping out at 192kHz. Believe it or not, this actually represents a slight reduction of available inputs over the original A10 which sported an HDMI Audio input; a niche addition but potentially handy. Despite this, the A10 Apex pretty much has an input for any occasion.

What isn't present is any form of on board streaming or provision for Bluetooth. In the case of the latter, there is a proprietary connection to the company's own module and there are also external Advance Paris streaming options too. More importantly, I do think this is the correct decision in terms of ensuring a decent lifespan for the A10 Apex. If we work on the principle that the connections are unlikely to see any radical changes and the move to 700kHz+ streaming is also something that's some way off, the A10 sports the connections it needs to work happily for years with sources being updated as required.

To differentiate the A10 Apex from its predecessor, Advance Paris has tweaked the aesthetics and, in the time it's been here, I've become extremely impressed at how some small changes have made a surprising difference to how I perceive it. The changes themselves are entirely mundane when you type them out; the volume knob and power button are now black not brushed metal and the VU meters are white on black rather than the blue tint they were before and the font has been tweaked a little.

The thing is though, these little tweaks combine to give the A10 Apex a cleaner and more visually harmonious appearance than before. With the original, it felt like it was trying a bit too hard. I felt that the blue VU meters and the tube window; **backlit in a red hue somewhere between a submarine bridge and the Reeperbahn**, felt overly fussy. Here, the window retains



its... distinctive... hue but, with only white lighting on the rest of the amp, it's far less obtrusive. It feels more grown up and is nicer to live with. This is helped further by the inclusion of an excellent remote control with direct input selection (not a luxury on an amp with 13 inputs) and the means to drive supporting Advance Paris source equipment too. Aside from the 30 second warm up time after switching it on, the A10 Apex is entirely 'normal' to live with.

Advance Paris doesn't give too much information on what the Apex modifications actually entail but, having diligently wired the A10 Apex up in the manner I did its predecessor, I can say with reasonable confidence that the sonic changes are the auditory equivalent of those visual tweaks; small on their own but cumulatively adding up to something more significant.

### Sound quality

With the A10 Apex taking a USB feed direct from a Roon Nucleus, the way that it gets stuck into *Trumpets of Michel-Ange* by Ibrahim Maalouf is both enormously entertaining and extremely instructive. I've been using this album a great deal for testing of late because it's both a tremendous piece of recording and mastering and because beyond the technical excellence, it's music that positively fizzles with joy and energy. What the A10 Apex does exceptionally well and meaningfully better than its predecessor is reveal this joy.

Now, I am completely aware that for those of you with a more numbers focused approach to these things that 'joy' is not a particularly well defined parameter but it does hinge on an amplifier doing a few more definable things effectively. The restless energy and tempo of many tracks is something that the A10 Apex handles well, maintaining composure and definition that allows complex rhythms and timing to be followed and enjoyed. There is enough detail present that individual flourishes are brought to your attention but they're never separated from the context of the wider piece.

There's something else too and it's a key part of the performance that the A10 Apex can deliver. With the original A10, the presence of those valves in the preamp section was largely positive but there were points, particularly where the more uncivilised ends of my music collection came out, that it robbed the presentation of some of its bite and attack. Here, I can play Scratch Massive's *Nox Anima* at the thoroughly antisocial levels the album demands and the A10 Apex hits hard, hits fast and keeps on hitting.

The clever bit of this is that those ECC81s still make their presence felt. Maud Geffray's lovely vocal turns are rich and vibrant elements of humanity in the wider electronic soundfield. It's never overt or showy but there is a sweetness to what the A10 Apex does across the midrange and upper registers that makes it a tremendous partner. Even paired with the Focal Kanta No1; **a speaker that qualifies as 'forgiving for a Focal' but realistically isn't by most other metrics, the result is a superbly judged top end.**

These improvements make themselves felt beyond the USB input too. When I tested the phono stage of the original A10, I enjoyed the low noise levels which ensured it sounded usefully detailed but I felt it lacked a bit of dynamic and excitement. With the Apex, it's still possible to argue that there are more potent phono stages at the c£500 point but the internal unit does a better job of delivering the vibrancy of John Grant's *Pale Green Ghosts* than its predecessor did. It's a phono stage that is more than good enough to play a meaningful role in your balance of media and if you suddenly decide you want to take vinyl more seriously, it's not as if you don't have a few spare inputs.

This flexibility is unchanged from the original A10 and it's something that Advance Paris does very well. You can bolt something simple but pleasant to use like a Bluesound Node Nano to one of the digital inputs and it's a self-contained streaming system. Then, flick the TV on and,

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so long as you have popped into the menu to engage the CEC settings, the A10 Apex will effortlessly pivot roles and sound every bit as good used that way. It's equipped in such a way that you can use it pretty much however you choose and it's likely to put in a convincing performance across its broad spread of connections.



### Verdict

You might feel that it's VU meter based laziness to make this comparison but **using the A10 Apex more than anything else reminds me of a McIntosh**. The same wide spread of inputs and the unflappability with which it performs across all of them is very reminiscent of the big American integrations (although, it's worth noting that the A10 has direct input selection at £2,450 while the ten grand plus Macs do not) and the appeal of a bit of visual flair while it goes about its business isn't hard to understand. What the A10 Apex does it take this flexibility and spruce up the performance to the point where there aren't many rivals for the sheer proficiency on offer here. Advance Paris is now a force to be reckoned with and the competition should be paying attention.

### Pros

- Engaging, energetic and highly musical sound
- Excellent connectivity with extensive analogue and digital inputs
- Improved dynamics, timing and attack over the original A10
- Smooth, refined tube-assisted midrange and treble
- Strong built-in phono stage with adjustable capacitance
- Attractive styling with attractive VU meters and quality remote
- Powerful, versatile performer across multiple sources

### Cons

- No built-in streaming functionality
- Bluetooth requires an optional external module
- Tube warm-up period after power-on
- Large, heavy design may not suit all installations



The ear is all about great music and great sound. It is written by hard bitten audio enthusiasts who strive to find the most engaging, entertaining and great value components and music of the highest calibre. This really is what living is all about.