Convert Technologies Plato Class A media player

by Jason Kennedy

A lot has happened with the Plato all-in-one streamer, recorder, and amplifier since the last one came my way nearly a year ago, not the least of which is the company has changed its name from Entotem to Convert Technologies; not because it went bust, but because no one could pronounce the word! The Plato itself is a rather more polished piece of kit than it was; build and finish feel a lot better, thanks in part to a matt rather than high gloss paintwork (the latter is still available at a premium). The big change, however, is there are now four Platos: Lite starting at £1,899; Pre/source without amplification from £2,400; the standard model at £2,999, and this range topping Class A version with a 2TB HDD for £3,999. You can have SSDs up to the same size if that appeals.

In all its guises, the Plato is a comprehensively equipped device that can stream music and movies from onboard and/ or offboard libraries. It also has a phono input with variable loading in software and a remarkably well thought out recording function to enable vinyl ripping. Oddly, there is no means of ripping silver discs save for recording them in real time from a CD player. Loading digital music files can only be achieved via USB; you stick a drive into the socket on the front and use the touch screen to have its contents imported into the Plato. It is also an internet radio with full search facilities for tracking down your favourite station without trawling through categories – a much appreciated upgrade on most of the competition. There is also now a fully formed Plato app to run the device; this is Android based as is the OS for the machine itself and currently doesn't allow streaming services like TIDAL on the player. You can, however, use a Chromecast dongle to achieve the same ends at a very reasonable price.

As the name implies, this Plato has a Class A amplifier onboard, which seems like a radical choice for a product that appears to be aiming at the wider market place, but an admirable choice nonetheless. It has a thicker bass and extra (hidden) metalwork to cope with the heat implications of this purist technology but is not a typical example of its kind. If it were a classic Class A design, it would need a lot more heatsinking, even a 15 Watt output needs a lot of cooling power if your output devices are going to be on all the time. What Convert has done is develop a feed-forward system to enable Class A operation that converts the incoming signal to digital (if necessary) and samples it to assess signal size. It uses this data to adjust the bias of the output ▶

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transistors, which means that they are only 'on' as much as and for as long as they need to be. It's a variable scaling system that means you can have Class A sound without large amounts of heat. If demand gets too great for the available Class A power, it switches to Class B, which takes output up to 50 Watts. It seems like a clever idea, especially if you are dealing with digital signals.

Streaming systems are only as good as their control apps, almost regardless of how good they sound: if you can't play the music you want to with the minimum of fuss, streamers are a waste of space. Convert appreciates this and has been doing a lot of work to refine and expand the capabilities of the Plato app. It shows album art at a good size in the library views. Playing an album or track requires slightly different actions depending on which menu you are in; sometimes one tap, sometimes a longer press to bring up the play menu that offers options of whether to play or queue a track or album. A useful facility is the option to edit metadata tags via the app. Digital libraries are rarely as well organised as the images might suggest, and incorrect or unknown titles and missing artwork are commonplace, especially if you use formats that don't export metadata (like WAV). I do like the way that it can show artwork and title info for external sources – play a vinyl record and it uses Gracenote to look up the album's info and put it on the screen.

Convert has also added some useful options for moving music from Plato to a phone or tablet. Plato's download feature will transfer data and convert it on the fly if the destination device cannot cope with, say, 24-bit material. You can also export the data to a USB device and choose a file format that suits the intended application. The only thing you can't do is manage content from the desktop of your PC; this is presumably because of the Android factor and hardly a disaster, but it does make things a bit less straightforward.

Plato now uses a Sabre DAC instead of the Wolfson it started out with, but this does not allow DSD streaming and is limited to 24-bit/192kHz. Personally, I don't see this to be a problem, but high-res DSD fans may disagree. What is clearly missing is an easy way to change volume when the tablet has gone to sleep: a knob on the unit or a remote handset would improve ergonomics no end.

In my system, those 15 Watts go a surprisingly long way. My PMC Fact.8 speakers are not especially efficient, but neither are they are a challenging load and they worked rather nicely with the Plato, which has a typically relaxed Class A presentation, effortless and very open. The bass is subtle and full without being overly soft and has substance but not muscle; rather, it sounds

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▶ natural with acoustic material. It doesn't have the grip of a Class AB design, but you get a degree of finesse that such amps rarely achieve. So double bass is articulate and timbrally strong whilst remaining timely and precise. Plato has an easy sense of timing; there's no leaning on leading edges, no apparent grain in the mids or highs, just a fluency and musicality that's very easy to enjoy. Live jazz is therefore very well served, and the better the recording the more obvious this is. With more typical recordings such as Kurt Vile's *b'lieve I'm goin down…* [Matador] you can hear the 'loudness' produced by compression and other studio devices with considerably greater clarity than is usually the case. It has always been thus with Class A, and I recall valve amplifiers doing the same thing. If you listen to a lot of mainstream material, this effect might be enough to make the standard Plato a more sensible option. It's a question of whether you value effortlessness and transparency over the ability to make a wider variety of material sound good. On the whole I think that it's worth having the qualities offered by this Plato over its brethren.

It works better with digital sources than analogue ones, since with the latter you can hear the loss of transparency that the ADC/DAC process amplification process introduces. But fundamentally it puts the performance before the mechanics. It's easy to forget about the technology and be drawn into the music. Which can mean that there is a euphony about the sound. That's usually the case with glass based Class A, but here Convert seems to have achieved the transparency of the approach without sacrificing tonal accuracy or detail. It's not a typically detailed sound, but there is an awful lot to listen to if you want to focus on the minutiae. I really enjoyed a rather good album called *Mr Machine* by The Brandt Brauer Frick Ensemble [Studio !K7], which is essentially electronica played on acoustic instruments. Here some drum sticks tapped against one another sounded so real I could almost grab them and the deep low notes of the timpani were superbly reverberant, textured, and fulsome.

Those enamoured of image precision may be less impressed. The Plato Class A has a rounded and even slightly soft presentation by class AB standards, but then again, as the drum sticks demonstrated, this doesn't undermine its virtual reality capabilities too badly. Piano fares well too, with Brendel's *The Complete Beethoven Sonatas* [Philips] the emphasis is not so much on the virtuosity as the beauty of the composition. I guess there is a little bit of romance in the Plato's sound but that's another way of saying that harder edged amps mask that quality with the fine grain that they add to everything.

The Plato Class A proves that you can have everything in one box and enjoy decent sound quality. Its character won't be to all tastes, but for those more interested in the aesthetic and emotional qualities of music this is a very tempting package. Add in the many features and you have a sound (and video) system that will turn anyone with a pair of reasonably sensitive speakers into (even more of) a music nut. ✚

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Music and video server, recorder and streamer with built-in storage, DAC and class A amplifier

Storage: 2TB hard drive for music and video data storage

Analogue Inputs: Three unbalanced (via RCA jacks), MM/MC phono stage

Digital Inputs: One coaxial S/PDIF (via RCA jacks), three TOSLink

DAC Resolution/Supported Digital Formats: FLAC/ALAC/WAV/ MP3, etc. Sampling rate for D/A conversion up to 192 kHz/24 bit

Analogue Outputs: One stereo unbalanced (via RCA jacks)

Digital Outputs: Two TOSLink

Frequency Response: Not specified

Distortion (THD): <0.0008% 1kHz - 8Ω, 1W <0.0008% 1kHz - 8Ω, 50W <0.001% 10kHz - 4Ω, 1W <0.001% 10kHz - 4Ω, 10W

User Interface: 5-inch touchscreen display (on main unit), Plato app for Android/iOS

Other Features: Automatic tagging for vinyl rips

Dimensions (H×W×D): 130 × 370 × 301mm

Weight: 15kg

Price: £3,999

Manufacturer: Convert Technologies

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