

AUDIO WITH PERSONALITY

Wicked Digital cooks up a rich, character-filled desktop speaker system.

For many, stereo equipment isn't merely a way to make noise, it's a deeply personal expression of their inner self. And, not everyone's inner self is a cheaply-made set of plastic speakers with an obscene sub.

Some of us are a little different. Some of us are a metallic orange dwarf valve amp. Thankfully, Wicked Digital has cooked up a desktop-sized stereo system with just that someone in mind.

The Italian-designed headliner of Wicked's stereo system is the Carot One Enestolo, a Class D integrated amplifier with a tube pre-amp stage.

Make no mistake, the Carot's a discussion piece: it's suited up in a sparkling anodised aluminium casing in a less-than-subtle shade of blazing orange with a glowing-blue bulb towering out the top. While not for everyone, I personally find it a little spiffy.

Besides being a bit of a character, the Carot's engineering is idiosyncratic too – there aren't many Class D valve amps designed for desktops – and maybe there should be more.

As with any valve amp, the Carot takes a moment to wake up. Once it does, you'll find the warmth and resonance that makes this older style of amplifier a perennial favourite of audiophiles. It's also a versatile little device, with a 3.5mm input and output on the front of the Carot for iPods and headphones respectively, and RCA ins and speaker outs on the back.

Paired with the Role Audio speakers, which are sturdily built and rather loud for their size,

Role Audio Skiff speakers

Role Audio
www.wickeddigital.com.au

Pros: Beautifully clear, detailed in the mid-range.

Cons: Very little in the way of bass.

RRP \$499



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there's a good level of detail in the generous mid-range, and fine clarity in the top end without being shrill. There's not much heft in the low end, though, no ports on the back of the speakers and no real bass to speak of.

However, as a stereo system for the computer, it's obviously designed to be listened to in a near-field environment, so the lack of bass certainly isn't a dealbreaker.

No doubt, the Carot's a decent size for something that offers a much richer sound than most regular PC speakers. However,

its idiosyncratic design causes something of a problem. Because the pre-amp and amplifier are essentially two discrete devices in the same unit, one needs to be manually connected to the other via a cable on the rear, and both need to be turned on separately.

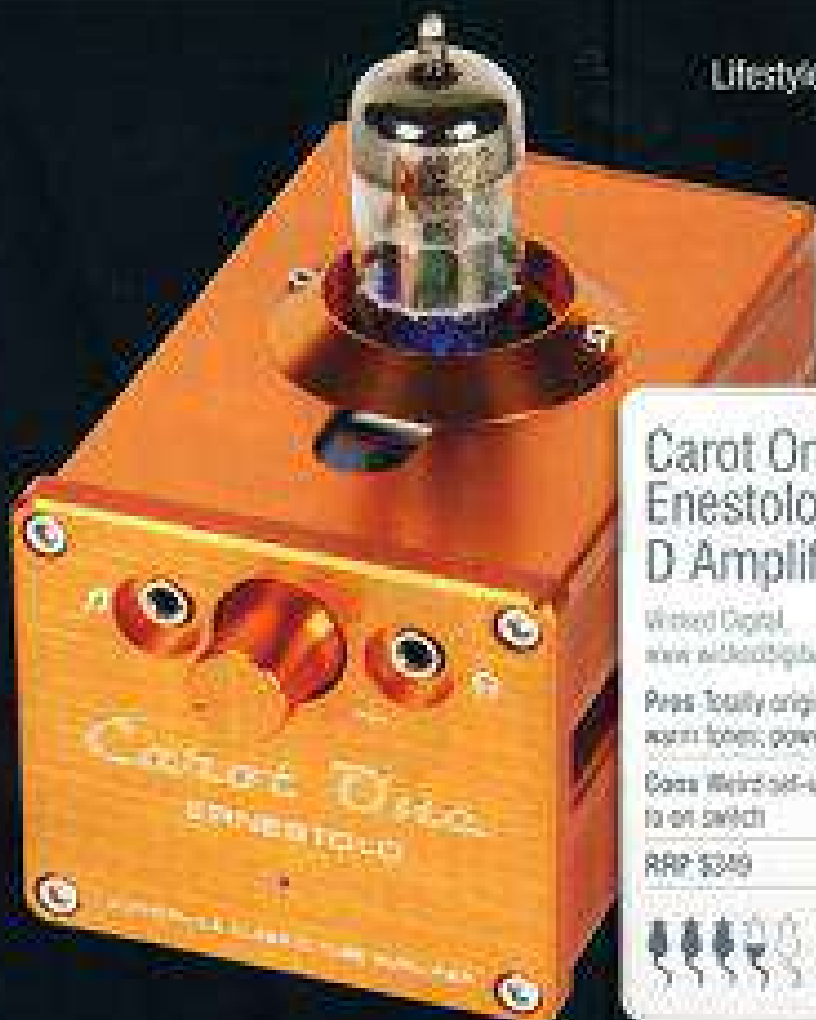
Worse, the Carot's diminutive size means the mass of cabling – and double power supplies – make the system surprisingly bulky, along with making access to the pre-amp's On switch really difficult. Its counter-intuitive and frankly clumsy setup mars what is otherwise a fine-sounding and individual amp.

Traditionally, amplifiers take most of the credit for good sound quality, but there are other components that are critically important to the production of sweet tunes. Wicked Digital knows this, which is why the particular desktop package includes the HRT MusicStreamer II+.

The unassuming grey box is a digital-to-analogue converter, or DAC, a device that translates the binary data of a music file into the voltage understood by your amplifier.

Of course, your computer already has some variety of DAC built into its soundcard, and the iPod traditionally used the relatively respectable Wolfson brand to convert its data. But standard-issue componentry is anathema to the audiophile, so for really clear sound quality an external DAC is a must.

And, to my ears, adding one of these inexpensive units is the



Carot One Enestolo Class D Amplifier

Wicked Digital
www.wickeddigital.com.au

Pros: totally original design; warm tones; powerful sound

Cons: weird set-up; poor access to an switch

RRP: \$349



HRT Music Streamer II+ DAC

Wicked Digital
www.wickeddigital.com.au

Pros: marked improvement in sound quality from a very small unit

Cons: Removes volume controls from computer

RRP: \$399



simplest way to markedly improve your system. HRT's latest decoder is a streamlined, minimalist contribution to the category, and one that can rumble with the best of them in terms of sound quality.

The Streamer II+ connects to the Mac via a USB cable, from which it steals power, and links through to the amp with standard RCA cums.

Comparing music piped through the DAC to audio from a 3.5mm connection demonstrates a marked difference. Depth and detail are obviously improved through the Streamer II+, particularly on lossless audio files, and compressed formats down to about 128kbps do sound noticeably clearer.

It also snubs up your computer's power supply, which is a welcome function given the level of nasty interference from the battery or mains that's picked up via a USB cable. Apparently, the Music Streamer II+ 'regenerates' power, separating data streams and

energy from the host computer – pretty cool stuff.

It may be this process that prompted its designers to remove the ability to change the volume via the computer if it's plugged into, setting a standardized output level that forces listeners to adjust the volume on the amplifier. It is confusing when you first encounter it, and inconvenient in practice, particularly when the amp in question only has 'rather soft' and 'really loud' settings.

Australian Macworld's buying advice: Taken as a whole, Wicked Digital's desktop audio selection certainly sounds richer than a great many of the computer speaker systems on the market, and has more character than all of them put together. But it's a fiddly system to put together, and one that comes at a considerable cost. In the end, though, can you really put a price on personality? □

— TIM GREY