

# Start ME UP

## Borderline Addiction

Exposure 3010S CD Player and 3010S Integrated Amplifier

Wayne Garcia

**A**udio critics seem to forget that the people buying the stuff they write about are doing so for a pretty simple reason: to get musical pleasure. And while it is their job to convey how successfully or not a component accomplishes this, after reading about tube-like warmth, liquid midranges, punchy bass, and silky highs, some readers may find themselves exasperatedly pleading, “Okay, fine—but tell me if I’m going to enjoy listening to this thing!”

I’ll get to the whys and hows in a bit, but the first thing you need to know about the Exposure 3010S CD player and integrated amplifier is this—yes, you will very much enjoy listening to music with these items. They deliver the goods by beautifully balancing detail with warmth, rhythmic precision with lyricism, and delicacy with power.

Exposure’s Web site proclaims, “Proudly Made in England by Music Lovers,” which from what I’ve been able to gather remains true, even though Exposure’s parent company is now Malaysian. I also understand that some metal and circuit-board work is done in Malaysia, with design and assembly taking place in Great Britain, in order to help the company meet its goal of building high-performance gear of moderate cost.

Founded in 1974 by John Farlowe, a designer who once worked with Pink Floyd, The Who, and David Bowie, Exposure had a spotty history in North America until Canada’s Bluebird Music took over distribution in 2005. Since then, Exposure has been getting a lot more of same—and so have Bluebird’s other brands, which include Chord Electronics, Van den Hul, and Neat Acoustics speakers.



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The 3010S Series, which also includes a power amplifier, fits between Exposure's budget 2010S Series and its top-end Classic Series. The CD player sells for \$2695 and the integrated amp for \$2295 (add \$495 for the optional phono card). And though the 3010S line is cosmetically as plain as can be, the casework and faceplates are fashioned of aluminum and built solidly, conveying a nice sense of heft.

As the "S" designation implies, these units were once known as the 3010 Series. According to chief designer Tony Brady, "The sound has been refined to be tauter in the lower-end and more open in the treble, without compromising on richness in the midrange."

The latest 3010S CD player is said to benefit from a large toroidal transformer with separate windings for the transport and audio stages, a new custom-made CD transport, Burr-Brown DACs, a discrete output stage, and a high-stability crystal clock reference and power-supply regulator for the transport and audio stages that are said to result in very low jitter.

The 110Wpc 3010S integrated amplifier sports a larger power supply than its predecessor and features a custom-made toroidal transformer, as well as custom power-supply caps, shorter signal paths, improved component parts, and what are said to be faster bipolar output transistors. A remote control is included that functions for both units.

What this brief technical description cannot tell you, however, is that Exposure's "Proudly Made in England by Music Lovers" tagline isn't just marketing BS. It's clear that the people behind these products know what music sounds like and are able to design components that bring music's emotional and intellectual power alive in a way that makes both standouts in their price class.

Although I listened to them separately, it quickly became apparent that these 3010S components were designed together,

and as good as they are on their own they have a special synergy when paired.

For example, when I placed the CD player into my reference system and popped HK Gruber's *Frankenstein!!* [Chandos] into the tray, I immediately noticed how articulate the composer's own highly expressive style of singspiel was, complete with comically exaggerated rolled "Rs" and hard, practically spit-out consonants. The orchestra itself was laid out with impressive breadth and depth; there was also good air and detail, although initially a bit of hardness. (You will want to heed the manufacturer's notice that it takes at least 48 hours for these items to "run-in." They sound relatively hard and bright at first power-up, become noticeably warmer and easier over the first few hours, and really blossom by the second or third day. Leave them continuously on during this period, playing music as much as possible.)

The real magic began to happen when I placed the integrated amplifier in the system. Lingering electronic artifacts on *Frankenstein!!* started to vanish, leaving a highly natural-sounding and easy—not the same as mellow—sonic presentation, from the bloom of a harp to the taps of a timpani to the rhythmic thrust of cellos and basses to the ear-splitting brightness of a toy whistle. Gruber's expressive vocal remained intact, but he now sounded that much more believably "real," and the overall tonal balance was rich and warm, but not overly so. Again the word "natural" sums it up best.

The opener from Radiohead's *In Rainbows* [TBD Records], "15 Step," was presented with a large, bold soundscape of wide separation, dense atmospherics, deep punchy bass lines, and complex harmonics. The amplifier's 110Wpc rating seemed conservative; even when the 3010S was played at a fairly healthy level, the sound remained smooth, easy, and unforced.

As should be the case with good high-end components, the presentation morphed dramatically from record to record. With



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the Nels Cline Singers' *The Giant Pin* [Cryptogramophone], I got an inherently warm but largely uncolored sound (the Exposure gear had also been running for a few days by this point), with excellent detail and a wonderful sense of how guitarist Cline and his rhythm section were completely locked in to each other's playing. (Check out the relatively improvised, free jazz composition "Fly Fly.")

The 3010S integrated amp's optional mc phono card was also impressive, which, for \$495, makes it a superb value for vinyl spinners. It, too, displayed the qualities that so easily won me over to this Exposure duo. Whether it was the tonally rich orchestration of Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* [Merge], with its underlying knotty rhythmic tracks, the loping acoustic guitars and back porch intimacy of Johnny Cash's rich easy baritone combined with Bob Dylan's sweet faux-Okie tenor on *Nashville Skyline's* "Girl From The North Country" [Columbia], or the angular, almost choppy strings of the Arditti Quartet playing Henze's String Quartet No. 1 [Wergo], the 3010S again sounded very natural and musically "right." As each recording demands, it can be either sweet and mellow, lean and mean, or a combination of the above in various guises.

In short, these Exposure electronics do what great audio should—step aside and let the music do the talking. But to suggest that they merely "get out of the way" does injustice to Exposure's efforts. The 3010S CD player and integrated amplifier make listening to music so intensely involving that it borders on an addiction. **TAS**

**BLUEBIRD MUSIC LIMITED**  
4500 Witmer Industrial  
Estates  
Niagara Falls, NY  
(416) 638-8207  
bluebirdmusic.com

Dimensions: 17.3" x 4.5" x 11.8"  
Weight: 27.5 lbs.  
Price: \$2295 (add \$495 for mm or mc phono cards)

*3010S compact disc player*  
Outputs: RCA analog, coax, and optical digital  
Dimensions: 17.3" x 3.5" x 11.8"  
Weight: 12.5 lbs.  
Price: \$2695

**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**  
TW Acoustic Raven One turntable; Tri-Planar Ultimate VII arm; Transfiguration Axia cartridge; Nagra CDC compact disc player; Artemis Labs PL-1 phono stage and LA-1 line stage, Kharma MP150 monoblock amplifiers and Mini Exquisite loudspeakers; Tara Labs Zero interconnects, Omega speaker cables, The One power cords, and AD-10B Power Screen; Finite Elemente Spider equipment rack

*3010S integrated amplifier*  
Power output: 110Wpc into 8 ohms  
Inputs: Five line-level, aux/ phono  
Outputs: Two preamp, one tape, one bi-wire speaker (banana only)