

Thrax Dionysos

THIS HIGH END PRE-AMP FROM BULGARIA FEATURES A SEDUCTIVE COMBINATION OF VALVES, TRANSFORMERS AND FULL REMOTE CONTROL



I'm ashamed to say that the name Thrax meant nothing when I first heard it. I was put straight and suitably embarrassed when told that it was a reference to Thrace, an ancient world kingdom to the north of Greece that more or less corresponds to Bulgaria today.

Come to think of it, I don't know a great deal about Bulgaria either, and wasn't really aware that it had a hi-fi industry at all. A wine industry, yes, but it has never been a visible player on the world hi-fi map. That may well be because it backed the losing side during WWII, and then languished behind the iron curtain until 1989.

It might be too early to state that Bulgaria is about to become a hot bed of high end hi-fi manufacture, but that certainly isn't beyond the bounds of possibility, judging by the manufacturing and sound quality of the Thrax components I've seen and tried.

The *Dionysos* pre-amplifier that is the subject of this review is a very lovely, beautifully made and costly line level control unit. Its current price is 15,000 Euros, and UK distribution will probably be via Hifitraders.com (Tel: 07842 126218), though this has yet to be finalised at the time of writing. Stablemates include an elaborate and advanced *Orpheus* phono stage, plus a spectacular *Spartacus* mono amplifier.

Thrax strongly believes in the superiority of valves for amplification, so *Dionysos* is essentially a transformer-coupled single-ended triode design. However, while the actual signal handling follows best audiophile practice and also employs a number

of interesting and unusual techniques, the whole unit is under microprocessor control, which enables full remote control operation. Add to that styling which has a good slice of originality, plus a quality of build and fit that is simply breathtaking, and it becomes clear that the *Dionysos* has serious state-of-art qualifications and pretensions. (I didn't actually dismantle a *Dionysos* pre-amp, but did watch an *Orpheus* being opened for internal adjustments, and that left me very convinced about the fine engineering and exceptional component quality.)

I have much sympathy for those who choose the valve route in searching for audio nirvana. Valve-based equipment simply seems to sound superior in a number of respects, especially through the midband, but very few examples offer the same level of user convenience as their solid state competitors, such as full remote control. In this regard the Thrax will face competition from established US brands like Audio Research and Conrad Johnson, but these are the exceptions to the thermionic norm.

Available in black or silver finish, *Dionysos* doesn't look or feel like a valve pre-amplifier, as it's a relatively slim unit, just 12cm high, and the whole unit is encased in alloy slabs. (Ventilation holes are deemed unnecessary as few valves are used and the thermal capacity is high.) It also weighs a considerable 15kg as it's constructed from hefty machined plates of aircraft grade aluminium.

The *piece de resistance*, however, is the beautifully sculpted front panel which insets the six buttons (and associated LEDs), the volume knob and the twin display windows, each within its own individually scalloped recess. Symmetry is maintained around the central large and shiny volume knob. It's immediately flanked by the two display windows that show the volume levels for the left and right channels as soon as these are adjusted. The six buttons – three on each side – are concerned with switching the various inputs.

I've noticed that commentators and manufacturers tend to treat the remote handset as an afterthought, whereas in fact it will probably receive a lot more use – and is therefore much more important – than the front panel controls. The good news is that the *Dionysos* handset is generally excellent – a sensibly compact unit that feels reassuringly solid and has just the right number of buttons (13 *in toto*) needed to control the pre-amp. The layout is intelligently intuitive, the 'feel' is excellent, and the only possible criticism is that

the identical buttons lack shape differentiation. Incidentally, the handset does add a balance control to those available on the pre-amp itself.

Dionysos has a choice of six inputs – four single-ended phono pairs (each with associated ground/float switches) plus two pairs of balanced XLRs. Unusually, absolute phase may be selected and pre-set individually for each input, which is a nice touch. It even has the facility that assists those wishing to use their high end stereo system as two channels of a multi-channel home cinema set-up, as one (or more!) inputs may be pre-set to any given volume setting to integrate with an AV processor.

Two pairs of identical outputs are provided, in either single-ended RCA/phono or balanced XLR, to assist in bi-amping. A fixed-level ‘record-out’ phono pair is also provided. Indeed, the only thing that *Dionysos* doesn’t have that I would have liked is a mono facility. It’s not essential, but I do find it useful from time to time, especially when playing some of my older vinyl discs.

Having seen how much skill and effort had been required to get inside the *Orpheus*, I made no attempt to dismantle the *Dionysos*, so I’ll try to summarise the manufacturer’s description of the internals. Do note, however, that design details of the *Dionysos* are still undergoing evolution. The main circuitry uses a *6b6n* double-triode valve, and transformers are used extensively, partly on the inputs (and outputs), ensuring good isolation, providing balanced differential connections and controlling bandwidths. Like the better passive devices we have tried recently, the volume control is also transformer-based, using multiple winding ratios to deliver superior quality through good power transfer and low noise. The power supply uses a C-core transformer with two identical windings arranged so that their fields cancel each other out, and this means that it may be mounted within the same enclosure as the pre-amp circuitry.

Performance

The best word I can come up with to describe the sound of the *Dionysos* is delicious, as it certainly is, especially through a glorious midband. Background noise is effectively non-existent, tonality is first class, and I often found myself picking up on lyrics and phrasing that had previously been obscure.

However, that shouldn’t be taken to mean that everything is necessarily sweetness and light. Although the action of the volume control is equally delicious, the useable dynamic range did prove a little problematic in practice – arguably the main downside of adopting the multi-tap transformer approach.

This volume control has 32 steps, covering a



range of 64dB (-46dB to +18dB). That’s more or less comparable with the top class transformer-based passive control units like the Townshend *Glastonbury Pre-1* and Music First *Reference* we have tried (*HIFICRITIC Vol5 No3*), which MC found very satisfactory, but I did encounter some difficulties nonetheless. However, this had less to do with the total range and the number of steps available than where the spread was positioned in overall gain terms. I have a penchant for listening very late at night, and power amplifier sensitivities do vary significantly. Put the two together and I found it difficult to play the system quietly enough with some sources, especially when using the relatively sensitive Naim *NAP500* power amp. This difficulty was less acute with my single-ended Howes *PX-4* triode monoblocks, which have a lower sensitivity, but could still prove problematic with some sources. Under my conditions it would have been very useful to have been able to drop the overall gain by 10dB or even 20dB, as I never found myself using the top half of the available range.

Another minor ergonomic difficulty I encountered concerned the action of the remote handset, which had the rather irritating habit of jumping two steps at a time. This could be particularly exasperating when adjusting the channel balance. I also encountered occasional intermittent mechanical hum from the pre-amp itself (not through the speakers), but I gather this has now been eliminated by a minor transformer modification.

To some extent the Thrax *Dionysos* is still evolving, but its capability of delivering state-of-the-art sound quality is unmistakable. The top end might perhaps be a shade more transparent and extended, but the beautifully dynamic and expressive midband is more than fair compensation. Tonal colours, stereo soundstaging and noise levels are all exemplary, and in a very real sense this unit combines the best of active pre-amplifier dynamics with passive transformer transparency. Recommended, provided it’s partnered with low sensitivity power amplification.

Contact:
Thrax Audio
Tel: 00 359 2988 9555
www.thrax.bg