

Product Review - Theta Dreadnaught Multi-Channel Power Amplifier December, 2001

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Specifications:

Two to Ten Single-Ended Channels (100 Watts RMS per Channel into 8 Ohms); One to Five Fully Balanced Channels (200 Watts RMS per Channel, into 8 Ohms)

MFR: 0.3 Hz - 250 kHz \pm 3 dB

Inputs: RCA, XLR 10 kOhm Impedance, RS232 Input for Software Updates

S/N R: 100 dB

THD + Noise: 1.25%

Size: 8 1/2" H x 17" 1/2 W x 23 1/2" D

Weight: 100 Pounds

MSRP: \$6,000 USA as Configured

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Introduction

These amplifiers are being gobbled up so fast, it took me a long time to get one. But it was worth the wait. The Theta Dreadnaught has been around to the point that it is called "venerable", but this is the first time I have had one in our lab for extensive listening.

Like other Theta products, the Dreadnaught is configurable for individual needs and tastes. It can have up to 10 channels at 100 watts per channel, or 5 channels at 200 watts per channel. If you need to upgrade your Dreadnaught to more modules or different modules, the old ones just get removed and the new ones plugged in. Our review unit arrived with five 200 watt fully balanced modules installed.

Layout

The front of the amplifier comes in either satin aluminum or black. There is an On/Off button and Surround button. Three LEDs indicate Surround, Thermal, and Standby. The amplifier is biased well into Class A, probably about 15 watts on each channel, so it runs very warm. As a result, the Surround button is used to activate or inactivate the surround channel amplifier modules when you are using the system just to play two-channel music or sound. The Thermal LED comes on if the amplifier gets too hot, such as when using a low impedance speaker at high volume. Standby keeps the modules warm with a trickle current, so that they are ready to go instantly when you turn on the sound system.

The rear panel, shown in the photo below, has the input jacks and speaker terminals. A main power toggle is also there, along with the main fuse, triggers for turning it on with another component, such as your surround sound processor, and a grounded AC connection.



An amplifier module is shown in the photo below, number 1. Everything is in the module except for the power transformer, which is in the main chassis and serves all the modules. In photo 2, you can see a close-up of the input jacks, and the presence of one toggle for switching between RCA and XLR inputs, as well as a toggle for assigning the module to the front stereo or surround buss. If it is Stereo, it is on all the time, while if it is Buss, it gets turned off when the front panel buttons are used to select two-channel listening. This saves electricity and therefore, the consumer's money.



Photo 3 shows the LEDs for indicating that the module has shut down because it is too hot (Thermal) and if one of the rail fuses has blown. The speaker binding

post is shown in photo 4. It appears to be designed primarily for use with spade lugs, but I managed to fit two banana plugs in there. The knurled knob tightens down both the + and - posts at the same time. I don't care for this type of speaker binding post, but only because I like to use banana plugs. For those who use spades, these posts will really lock and load.

Performance

I tested the Dreadnaught with a Toshiba SD-6200 DVD Player, Denon DVM-4800 DVD Player, Theta Casablanca II Surround Sound Processor, Krix Esoterix Mark II Speakers, and Threshold ES-500 Electrostatic Speakers. Cables were Nordost and BetterCables. I used balanced cables to connect the Casablanca to the Dreadnaught since our Casablanca is fully balanced as well. Video was through a Sony 10HT projector. A PS Audio P1200 Power Plant cleaned the AC. I did not use any of our subwoofers for these tests.

Well, the Dreadnaught is **some** amplifier! As is typical with a fully balanced design, it is quiet when things are paused. No background noise at all. Because of the Class A, it is detailed and very musical. Most of the time, we don't need more than a few watts for any of the channels. People are talking or walking or driving around. It is only during the action sequences that we need all those big watts. And, the Dreadnaught really delivers when required. It is truly a massive product.

"Pearl Harbor" - Chapters 22 and 24. The attack scenes on Pearl Harbor in this movie may very well be the most astounding ever filmed. Yes, a lot of it is computer graphics, but it is very well done, and it is very demanding on the audio system. I ran the Dreadnaught full range even on our electrostatics, the it did not flinch in the slightest. All sounds were very clear and detailed no matter how many bullets and explosions were happening at the same instant.

"Jurassic Park" - The opening to this great film has the rustle of bushes, clanging of metal cages, people giving instructions, and dinosaurs roaring. Not to mention John Williams' terrific score. The Dreadnaught does it with aplomb. With some products, I have difficulty understanding the hunter telling the workers what to do, but not here.

"The Matrix" - Chapter 29 is where Neo and Trinity shoot up the lobby of the building where Morpheus is being held captive. Gun shots take tremendous energy to produce accurately and cleanly in an audio system, and that is why I use it for tests. The Dreadnaught sounded so good, I just sat back and enjoyed the scene.

"The Phantom Menace" - Chapter 22. The Pod Race in this movie is already a legend. On a big screen, it is breathtaking, but it also takes a big sound system to handle it, with pod sounds coming from all channels. A lesser amplifier would

sound mushy with such sound tracks, but the Dreadnaught gave me everything I wanted.

"Saving Private Ryan" - Chapter 2. Even if this movie did not win "Best Picture" at the Academy Awards, Spielberg gave us a new standard in war movie fight scenes. Of course, the Normandy Invasion on June 6, 1944 is a horrific event no matter how the story is told. Chapter 2 chronicles the landing. Amongst bodies being blown apart by rockets and machine guns, the only way to see this is a large screen and plenty of amplifier power. The Dreadnaught is just made for such visual and audio experiences. Maybe if all young people could see this scene with a big system, everyone would be so scared of war, the next one would be cancelled.

DVD-Audio. Using the new Denon DVM-4800 DVD Player, which has DVD-A output, I found the Dreadnaught could be as sweet with 24/96 five-channel symphonic music as it had been mean and nasty with intense action movies. DVD-A really is the next plateau in music listening, and even though it will sound pretty good on a small system, it has to be heard in a Dreadnaught-class arena to appreciate its full capabilities. For example, Telarc's "1812 Overture" (available on both DVD-A and SACD) is thunderous . . . especially in the climactic section with the cannons. Tchaikovsky would have loved to hear a recording of his music on the Dreadnaught.

To summarize the sonic characteristics of the Dreadnaught, I would say it has a forward high end (not harsh, just obvious), a neutral mid-range, and a deep, tight bass (as opposed to a warm, tubby bass).

Conclusion

Like the Casablanca II, the Theta Dreadnaught is state of the art technology and extremely high quality. It delivers as much power as you, your speakers, and the wall studs, can handle. It is reasonably priced for what you get, and you get a lot. A highly recommended product.

- John E. Johnson, Jr. -