

Hifi Insights

Leema Acoustics Tucana II ANNIVERSARY EDITION review

By Dominic Marsh

I recall having evaluated some Leema products before, namely their Elements integrated amplifier and Libra DAC, then more recently the Tucana Mark II integrated amplifier. I was pretty impressed with the Tucana II, so while the memory of that amplifier's performance was still fresh in my recollection Leema sent me over their "Anniversary Edition" for review. It is a statement product to celebrate 10 years of being in business and my word the company has moved on in leaps and bounds during that relatively short period and their passion is clearly evidenced in their products, particularly so this product.

CONSTRUCTION

Like all other Leema electronics, the Tucana Anniversary Edition amplifier is built like the proverbial out-house and there is nothing at all flimsy or cheap in it's build quality. Ergonomically too it is an absolute peach to operate, with all controls and indicators working flawlessly and reliably too for good measure. I particularly loved the volume control with it's circle of LEDs to indicate the exact setting. Not the approximate setting mind, but the EXACT setting, which I will explain in due course, but I will say it is just about the best I have found on a modern amplifier with a digital volume control, as I hate with a passion any volume control that needs the skilled hands of an open heart surgeon to get an accurate volume setting. Very well done, Leema.

Outwardly, the new Tucana amplifier looks no different to either of it's two predecessor (Tucana Mark 1 and 2), but the Anniversary Edition moves up a big notch over the "Tucana II" model, with a shiny badge denoting that it is the Anniversary Edition and bright silvered Leema logo on the faceplate, which easily sets it apart from the Tucana II which has neither of these adornments.

Taking a tour around the outward physical aspects then, the volume control knob is surrounded by 2 small coloured LED's marked HEAT and PROTECT which are self explanatory and the PROTECT LED flashes 3 times during power up to show the circuitry is working, then the 32 small blue LED's which flash 8 times during the power up sequence. It is interesting to note that the volume control is quite a complex circuit consisting of a 32 bit microprocessor plus an expensive high resolution encoder and some complex mathematics to arrive at 0.5dB increments on the volume control, which in use is utterly seamless.



To the left of the volume control we find two 3.5mm sockets for headphones connection and MP3 signal input, then to the right of the volume control we find the infra red remote control window, then to the centre of the front panel we find a series of four illuminated push switches labeled “GAIN”, “BAL”, “MUTE” and “TAPE”. To the right we have a set of seven illuminated push buttons for source selection, labeled “BALANCED”, “CD”, “TUNER”, “AUX”, “MULTI 1”, “MULTI 2 / MP3” and “AV DIRECT”. Finally, we find the mains power/standby button which has a blue LED which illuminates in standby mode, which thankfully isn’t too bright in ambient light although it throws quite a pencil beam across the room as I discovered one night when I went into my darkened listening room for a pair of glasses and didn’t switch any lights on.

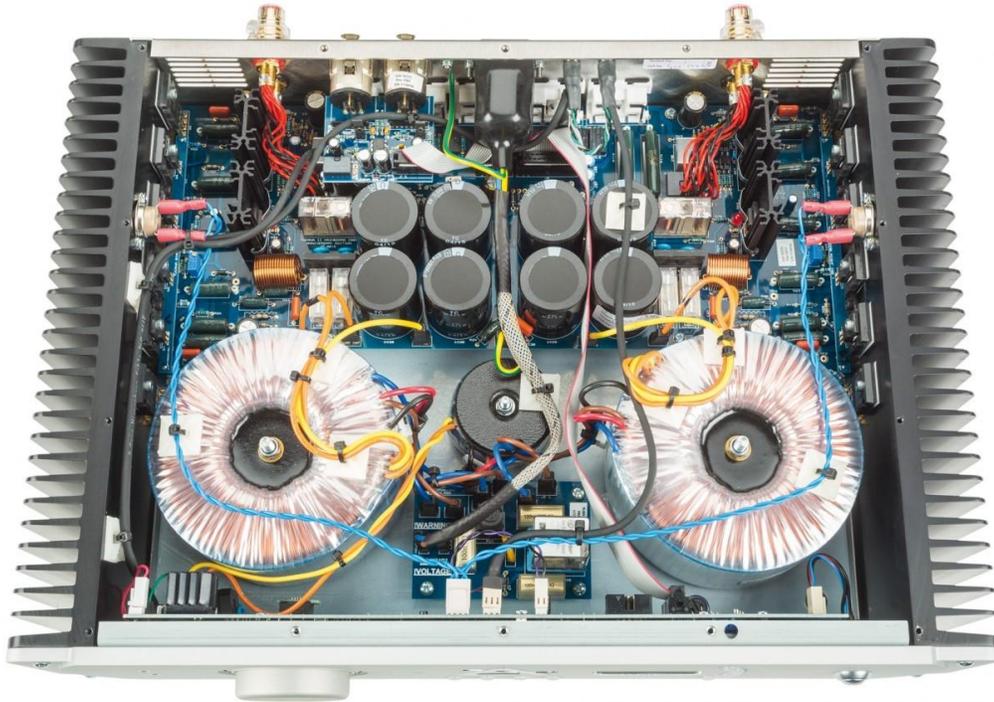
To the rear we find reading from left to right, a pair of loudspeaker binding posts for the right hand speaker, then two LIPS sockets which connects to other Leema products with the same connections for system control, then a mains IEC inlet socket, then a pair of balanced XLR input sockets, then below these connections we find a row of single ended RCA sockets labeled “TAPE” (input and output), “AV”, “MULTI 2” and “MULTI 1”, “AUX”, “TUNER” “CD” and “PRE OUT”. All of the inputs have individual gain settings. Finally there is another pair of loudspeaker binding posts for the left hand speaker.



On the subject of speaker binding posts, I found some clear plastic shrouds fitted to the posts which prevented me using my main speaker cables with spade connectors fitted and the handbook/instruction manual clearly states that banana plugs are to be used for speaker connections to the amplifier. I can only presume that some jobsworth safety “experts” have deemed that using spade connectors to an amplifier now poses a serious health and safety risk in some way so they have been banned. It was more than annoying when they decided to put plastic plus into speaker binding posts to stop the use of banana plugs, but if they have now added spade connectors to that banned list or so it appears, then how the heck are we supposed to connect loudspeaker cables???? I despair at the so-called nanny state, I really do. Because the amplifier produces 35 volts with immense current delivery at the speaker terminals, so US and EU rules dictate these shrouds must be fitted, so if I ever became fortunate enough to own one of these amplifiers I would remove them immediately and Leema can supply instructions for safely doing so. That of course is the owner’s decision and at their own risk, but Leema are simply complying with these statutory directives.

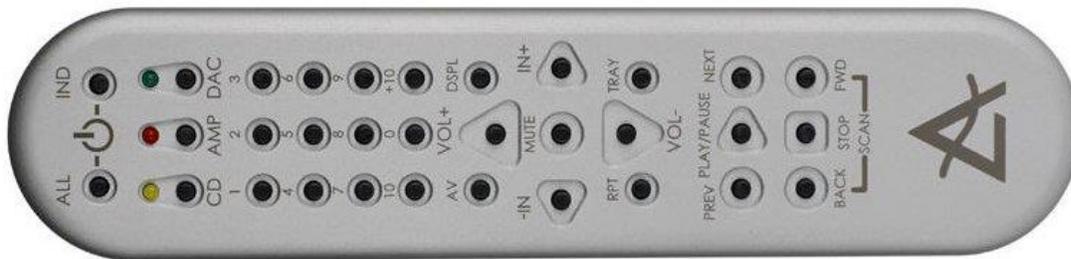
A silvered logo and a shiny badge doesn’t exactly justify a £1,000+ price hike over the price of a standard Tucana II model, so that begs the question what have Leema done to the product to differentiate it from it’s cheaper sibling?

The components are not rolled on the thighs of dusky maidens dressed in coconut shells and grass skirts during production, if that’s what you are thinking. No sir. Under the hood there is a list of worthwhile enhancements going on, like extra thick gold plated copper tracks on the PCB’s for increased conductivity, all capacitors within the signal paths are upgraded to Nichicon Muse, mains transformers are much bigger Noratel Xtraquiet types wound for low mechanical and electrical noise and Leema’s own 16 core Reference 2 cables are used as hook up wire to connect PCB’s to external connectors. I am told they are not the easiest cables to strip and solder, with no less than 64 cable ends to prepare, so the production build team deserve a medal for their patience and fortitude.



Included with the amplifier is Leema's new Focus remote control handset and this too has Leema's fastidious attention to detail written all over it. It took me a while to familiarise myself with the button layout, as the volume adjustment buttons are spang in the middle amongst other buttons and I had to look before pressing to make sure. Not one microgramme of plastic here folks, it is a heavy lump of alloy casting supported on four small rubber feet, with buttons that work positively and a nice touch for me was the LEDs which light up on the function selected. It is rather heavy and has it's own microclimate surrounding it as well, as even in a warm room it is still cold to the touch. The weight is impressive too and I amply demonstrated that when my dog tried to steal my digestive biscuit, but a light tap on the cranium with the remote control meant he desisted immediately and slunk off, sans biscuit and didn't risk another attempt at cookie larceny. No animals were permanently harmed during the writing of this review.

I was inspecting the underside of it and noted the lack of a battery compartment cover and any visible screws to change the batteries which are 2 x AAA type. Checked the owner's manual and no mention is made of battery replacement, but the secret is to unscrew the 4 rubber feet and voila, the rear panel comes off complete. Leema will hopefully now include that information in the owner's manual, as it has already perplexed some owners apparently. The remote is built from scratch in house, using miniature push switches rated for 10,000,000 presses and let me assure you all I didn't put that claim to the test. The case is machined for Leema by a company in Oxfordshire and the text is laser etched in Hampshire. Bead blasting and anodising is carried out in Buckinghamshire. Boy, is this thing engineered and well travelled too for good measure it seems.



I found the external appearance of the amplifier very refreshing in not being the same boring flat sided rectangular box with knobs on the front, as it was running outwith of the mainstream herd's appearance and instantly recognizable as a Leema product. Sort of reminds me of the Monty Python sketch "How to recognize a Larch tree from a distance", so all I had to do was swap the word Larch for Leema. Not a Python fan? Please yourselves.

Price at time of review: GBP £4995.00

SOUND QUALITY

Press the standby button on the front panel and the amplifier begins it's powering up routine. The Protect LED flashes 3 times, then the 32 blue LEDs surrounding the volume control flash 8 times and the volume resets to a preset low level.

With a specification rating capable of delivering 150 watts per channel in to 8 ohms and 290 watts into 4 ohms and can also muster 520 watts into 2 ohms no less, it would suggest a very powerful amplifier and so it proved to be during the listening sessions. Lee Taylor (The LEE of LEEMA) tells me that the amplifier is impervious to load impedance vagaries and will easily drive those "difficult" speakers whose impedance curve drops below 1.5 ohms, in fact he says it will drag music out of a rusty nail if needs be. I will take his word on that, but I get his meaning, if not in the strictest literal sense of course.

In one word I would describe it as "muscular", but not in a brutish way at all and you could liken that level of power with a champion bodybuilder, in that you wouldn't start a fight with him as you know you would lose before you began and him knowing his own strength so he doesn't have to prove it to anyone, least of all you. Just measure his biceps and be very nice to the man.

That solid power of course manifests itself in bass output, whereby a drum sounds like a drum at close range, losing none of the heft and power that's there, including the harmonics generated by the drum's shell. My resident power amp is rated at 200 watts per channel, but it easily lost to the Leema unit in the way the power was delivered, with a firm depth of solidity that was perceived as just slightly lacking in my own amplifier. Both amps could deliver the "punch in the guts" power from a kick drum beat, but the Leema took that one stage further by allowing you to hear what the drum skin and shell was doing, very clearly and very concisely, plus whether a hard or soft beater was being used. All the while the amplifier is dealing with delivering high power for bass energy, it still does not lose the plot in nuances and fine details and as such it is pretty much unruffled whatever genre of music you throw at it and that is in essence why the Leema Tucana Anniversary Edition has so few rivals.

With the arrival of a pair of Audiovector SR3 Avantgardes for review, this was a pairing that just HAD to happen. I had a brief hearing of these speakers at the 2017 Bristol Hifi Show being driven by a compact Exposure system. During this particular visit to the show I had lurking in my prized Hifi Pig pink shoulder bag some of my own CDs in the hope some exhibitors could tear themselves away from their library of specially selected plinky plonk music and give my offerings a whirl. Of course, I had in my bag Fink's "Wheels Beneath My Feet" album which I was itching to be played and the results I heard at Bristol were nothing like what I was used to at home with the exception of one room, the Exposure room using the Audiovectors. That began my quest to review a pair of these speakers and happy to say Audiovector were more than happy to oblige, so look out for the full review of these speakers soon in Hifi Pig Magazine.

The Leema amplifier and the Audiovector SR3s were a very sweet listen indeed. Notice I use the word "sweet" here and they were a joy to listen to. Smooth flowing, very powerful and yet highly controlled, bass in particular was as solid as a brick wall, completely unshakeable in fact. I never once found the sound lacklustre or laid back either let me add, this pair didn't fatigue either and I could listen for many hours and be completely absorbed by the sound. The very top end treble didn't have the clarity and dynamics for my own personal listening preferences, but I do know many of our readers intensely dislike sharp defined treble registers, so if you belong to this group of people, then be heartened in the knowledge this pairing would please you tremendously. As an add-on to this although not entirely relevant to this review, I recently bought a Lyngdorf power amp with 200 watts on tap and the bass sounded decidedly off with the Audiovector Avantgarde SR3s and worse still, I couldn't fathom out why. This hifi caper has its inexplicable quirks at times.

Another pair of speakers in for review was a pair of hORNS Aria 1 speakers, so it would be rude not to harness them to the Leema amplifier as well while they were here. In my resident system, the hORNS had a rather subdued bass offering, with sublime treble and midrange which more than compensated for that. Paired to the Leema amplifier though, the bass registers certainly perked up, producing a better balanced sound from top to bottom ends of the spectrum. Synergy at play here methinks and I would say that the bass softness of the Arias were better matched to the strong power delivery traits of the Leema amplifier.

I also have a pair of Roksan TR5 speakers here and they too were connected to the Leema amplifier. I was amazed that out of the 4 pairs of speakers connected to the Leema, these were the best tonally balanced out of the 4. Neither bass nor treble dominated proceedings and they managed to walk that fine line between exciting and dynamic and overblown and overpowering. This meant you could enjoy an extended listening session without becoming jaded or fatigued.

Then we move on to my current resident speakers, the Pylon Diamond Monitors I reviewed earlier this year for Hifi Pig and had to have after hearing them in action. These speakers deserve the epithet "Monitors" and really do live up to their name. They are fast, dynamic, insightful and tuneful, with a bass output that you wouldn't expect from a box of their relatively small size and they easily ousted my then floor standing speakers with ease. The best thing about these speakers is they are a great reviewing tool as well, because what you feed into them is very clearly heard, warts and all. When plumbed up to the Leema amplifier, the character of the Leema changed completely. What perked up the hORNS speakers and was "sweet" with the Audiovector SR3 Avantgardes was no more, instead I got a lively and punchy amplifier with a tremendous amount of accuracy and refinement in the midband and treble region, with micro dynamics portrayed excellently. I love these speakers because of their in your face, bite your shins kind of presentation and they pull no punches which I personally adore, but may not be to other's tastes and I am very comfortable with that. As with the hORNS Aria 1 speakers the Leema amplifier addressed and married well with the speakers, whereas with the Pylon speakers it was the other way around in my perception with the Leema amplifier then was a prime case of ripping of the sheep's clothing and finding the wolf hiding underneath.

Needless to say, the Leema comfortably passed every benchmark recording I fed into it and when it came to Fink's "Wheels Beneath My Feet" album, I kid you not I played that album five times in a row just for the sheer pleasure of it and the thought of using the album as a "test" soon disappeared.

CONCLUSION

My recollection of the Tucana Mark II amplifier was that it was just a tad finicky about what speakers it was paired with to give of it's best. The Tucana Anniversary Edition was happy with whatever speakers it was paired with and the best part for me was being able to crank up the volume control with not the slightest trace of blare, no matter how high the sound level increased, in fact my hearing was at it's topmost level of tolerance, yet the amplifier sounded like it wasn't even breaking into a sweat. I cannot recall any amplifier being able to do that, although some have come close.

The sound is truly effortless in every respect and I really do admire it's ability to untangle really complex music and keep it all firmly in it's place without getting knotted up in the slightest.

I give the Leema Tucana II Anniversary Edition Amplifier a Hifi Insights PLATINUM AWARD without any hesitation as it rightly deserves this honour.



HIFI INSIGHTS PLATINUM AWARD

BUILD QUALITY: In the price band the Tucana occupies, it is a class leading amplifier.

SOUND QUALITY: Peerless.

VALUE FOR MONEY: I can easily see this as a long term keeper amplifier, so will save money during it's lifetime by not "upgrading". The build is worth every penny on it's own.

PROS: Superb build and sonic attributes make this a must audition product.

CONS: Not cheap by any means, but true quality never is. Refine your busking skills or sell a kidney if you are a true audiophile.

Dominic Marsh

Hifi Insights Magazine

SPECIFICATIONS:

Output Power: 150W rms 8 Ohms/Channel

Output Power: 290W rms 4 Ohms/Ch

Output Power: 520W rms 2 Ohms/Ch

THD: 0.004%

Noise: < -100 dB

Frequency Response: 5 Hz - 100 kHz (+0/-3 dB)

Number of balanced Inputs (XLR): 1

Number of un-balanced Inputs (RCA): 6

Tape Input: 1

Tape Output: 1

MP3 Inputs: 1

Headphone Outputs: 1

Pre-out Outputs: 1

Channel gain adjust for each individual input

Mute Button: Yes

Balance Adjust: (left/Right)

Thermal Protection: Yes

LIPS® system: Master or Slave

LIPS® system: Master or Slave

Dimensions: 440*320*110mm

Carton: 590*450*210mm

Weight: 18Kg