



Chord progression

With the tabletop-sized TToby power amp retired, CE's BerTTi replacement ushers in bold new tech. **David Vivian** is impressed

When Chord Electronics launched Anni, a tiny 10W desktop integrated amp intended to buddy up with the identically sized Qutest DAC and Huei (HFC 436 and 459 respectively) phono stage it was a real drop the mic moment in the realm of didn't-see-that-coming. That the same advanced tech should headline the spec sheet for the new 75W per channel BerTTi power amp – which replaces the 50Wpc TToby as a tabletop form factor partner for its redoubtable Hugo TT2 (HFC 468) DAC/preamp/headphone amp – is a less audacious move, but no less significant. Indeed, company boss and chief designer, John Franks, has called it a dramatic upgrade and the very justification for having a TToby successor.

TToby was conceived as a natural partner for the original Hugo TT, its production overlapping with the introduction of the Hugo TT2 in 2019. I've used the pairing as a reference for well over a year now and, unsurprisingly, they play extremely well together, delivering a synergistic performance of such high quality and dynamic ability I can't think of another duo that can match

them for the money. So I'm intrigued. I ask Franks what it is that BerTTi brings to the party that raises the collective game?

"The primary difference is there are two independent feed-forward error-correction pathways within the drive circuitry of each amplifier," he confirms. "Each one continuously monitors the custom-made MOSFET power devices at the rear of the amplifiers and directly compensates for any non-linearity or power condition happening within each of the amplifiers' power devices.

"Additionally, I've included a new 400kHz super-low-noise auxiliary power supply, which boosts the aux rails well above the main rails, allowing for more power voltage swing and hence, more headroom for complex transients that are exceeding the average music signals. This new circuitry adds an extra layer of control in the power components' topology that lowers all distortion modes when compared with ordinary high-quality amplifier designs. BerTTi can therefore drive speakers, from bookshelf types to the hardest-to-drive floorstanders, without difficulty."

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Chord Electronics BerTTi

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Custom MOSFET power amplifier

WEIGHT
3.75kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
235 x 59 x 256mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power: 2x 75W RMS (8ohm)
- 1x stereo pair of balanced XLRs
- 1x stereo pair of gold-plated unbalanced RCA

DISTRIBUTOR
Chord Electronics

WEBSITE
chordelectronics.co.uk

All right, in plain terms BerTTi is a fully balanced Class A/B stereo power amplifier delivering 75W per channel into 8ohm and 110W into 4ohm (50/100W for TToby). It has both balanced and unbalanced inputs, chunky gold-plated speaker terminals and, like TToby before it, extremely robust two-piece casework (now with bevelled top edge section supporting the Chord Electronics badge) precision-machined from solid aircraft-grade aluminium and finely finished in either Jett Black or Argent Silver. Another departure from TToby

Sustained precision and focus allow the music's presence to swell and solidify

is the addition of a larger LED button front dead centre that, when the mains inlet is switched on under the IEC plug, cycles between red (mains fed), green (standby) and blue (ready).

Following the Hugo TT 2's 20 percent price reduction last September, both devices now have price parity at £4,000 each. So going for a BerTTi is something of a no-brainer if you've already invested in a Hugo TT2 – especially if that's been joined by a Hugo M Scaler, which adds the ability to upscale audio to 705.6kHz – 16 times CD's native resolution. But the new power amp shouldn't be regarded as a slave to the company's tabletop aesthetic. Tried with Hegel's HD30 (HFC 468) streaming DAC/preamp – admittedly a jarring visual mismatch – the results are equally compelling, the compact powerhouse even-handedly revealing the presentational differences between the Hegel and Hugo, transparent to contrasting assets and all given full reign.

Sound quality

There's an old audiophile trick regarding setting an ideal listening volume, one mostly ignored these days given the level of decibel abuse some headphone wearers are willing to accept. It's a fascinating effect even so, and helpful here. The style of music isn't critical. What's important is nailing the spot on the volume scale – and there is only one – that's truly sweet; the G-spot where the question of loudness disappears and it just seems right.

It means winding up the volume until the music is playing as loud as you think it will reasonably go. Not party loud – who listens critically at parties? – but loud enough to impress a friend. Then back it off a scintilla, a couple of notches at most. And here's the thing. The music doesn't sound any less loud, but it does sound a whole lot better. It has more – not less – impact. The leading edges are sharper, the timbres more natural, the dynamics less compressed. Rhythmically, things are tighter and more coherent, harder hitting and easier to follow at the same time.

But that's the physics of the thing. Electronic hardware is no different to flesh and blood. Push even slightly too hard and things tend to slip over the edge, lose their grip. It might not be immediately obvious, but a feeling of unease soon takes hold. Backing off restores focus and equilibrium without pulling the force of the experience – a practical example of less being so much more. If you want to substantively adjust the size of the performance envelope to exercise more dynamic stability and less volume constraint, you need a more capable amp. And this is what I'm witnessing here.

Larry Carlton And Robben Ford Live In Tokyo, their 2007 album, is a fair test – one of the cleanest and most dynamic live recordings ever committed to a playback medium in



Leema's Anniversary Edition Hydra II power amp is a little pricier than the BerTTi, but for that you get a generous 148W per channel and the option to bridge to mono. Sonically it exudes plenty of poise and refinement, revealing significant new musical insights that only come from sophisticated and sensitive signal handling. At first, this refinement can seem at odds with power duties and one somehow expects more fireworks, but the longer I listen the more there is to appreciate control over force. Despite its lower quoted output, BerTTi seems to have a little more of the latter.



my opinion and bountiful bluesy sonic fodder for any power amp worth its salt to get its teeth into. The result should have startling life and authority, taut drum strikes and bass, effortless dynamic reach, palpable midband presence and intelligibility. Both amps pull it off spectacularly, but it's clear the TToby has the narrower volume sweet spot in which to sound its absolute best. Make no mistake, its absolute best is, to my ears, a very credible evocation of the basic high-end Chord Electronics house sound – fast, clear, detailed and dynamic – and close enough to BerTTi on first listen to question the nature of the intended improvement.

But that response changes. Just at the point you feel, almost subliminally, the TToby needs a fractional tug back on the volume to settle and optimise its performance during the building fretwork frenzy of *Cold Gold*, BerTTi is actually soaring away to its own ultimate click-back moment, squaring its shoulders and consolidating its best effort. It's this extra headroom and control that makes the biggest

difference, delivering more confidently sustained precision and focus which, in turn, allows the music's presence to swell and solidify. Once sampled, it's hard to go back.

With prolonged acquaintance playing numerous musical genres, the surprising thing that emerges is how much less 'character' BerTTi has than TToby. Its latest power amp is more fluid, refined, resolving, muscular and neutral – more solidly reference class. TToby is still a brilliantly precise, transparent, gutsy, entertaining performer, but ultimately lacks BerTTi's finesse, control, insight and resolve.

Conclusion

Not for the first time, context is everything. TToby has comfortably seen off numerous power amp alternates I've hooked up to the Hugo TT2, leaving me to conclude it doesn't get much better, and with it back in situ after the departure of BerTTi, I still believe that. But the plain fact is if BerTTi represents the future, I've heard it, and it works wonders ●

The Jett Black or Argent Silver chassis looks more traditional than some of its other products



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Compact size; terrific build quality; true high-end sound

DISLIKE: Nothing of note at the price

WE SAY: A world-class power amplifier, only in a smaller package