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Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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Just add speakers

While others integrate systems and speakers to create all-in-ones, T+A is heading in the other direction. **Andrew Everard** listens in

By any standards, the Caruso system was always something of an outlier in the T+A range. Yes, the company already had the compact Cala streaming receiver, but most of its lineup comprises hefty and beautifully engineered separates with monikers such as MP 2000 R MkII and SD 3100 HV – in other words, just what you expect from a very German brand whose name is all about Theory and Application.

Launched back in 2008, the original Caruso, however, was different: here was T+A doing lifestyle, with a substantially proportioned 'nothing to add' one-box network audio option,

complete with an all-new operating system, a total of 200W of amplification plus DSP for active drive of channels for the onboard speaker units, and even user-selectable ambient lighting – and all for £3,000. The range later developed with the addition of the updated Caruso Blu, which added Blu-ray playback to the party.

Now there's a new Caruso, and it's not only more compact than the original, but also rather different in concept: the £3,000 Caruso R we have before us may still have amplification onboard, but now the internal speakers of the original are missing, and the unit has been

DETAILS
PRODUCT
 T+A Caruso R
ORIGIN
 Germany/China
TYPE
 Network receiver
WEIGHT
 7.5kg
DIMENSIONS
 (WxHxD)
 290 x 210 x 290mm
FEATURES
 • Quoted power output: 2x 50W (8ohm)
 • Bluetooth/AirPlay 2
 • Compatible with files up to 24-bit/192kHz
DISTRIBUTOR
 The Audio Business
TELEPHONE
 01249 704669
WEBSITE
 theaudiobusiness.co.uk
 ta-hifi.de

designed to drive conventional external speakers. Launched alongside it are two speaker choices – the floorstanding S10 towers, at £2,500 a pair and the £1,300 cube-shaped R10, designed as a visual match for the Caruso R for those swish loft apartment lifestyle pictures – but of course it's also perfectly possible to pair the new models with speakers of your choice.

It's a tribute to the original design that the latest version still looks very contemporary, its all-black main body – here with gloss side-panels replacing the speaker grilles – sandwiched between anodised aluminium top and bottom plates. It creates a striking impression in the room even in this smaller iteration, which is just 21cm tall and 29cm wide and deep. What's more, the company's Navigator operating system, which is at the heart of Caruso, serves the new model extremely well, albeit in a form heavily adapted to the changed proportions and up-to-date requirements, not to mention the adoption of a 7in landscape format screen in place of the original's upright orientation.

The specification here is pretty comprehensive: as well as a slot-loading CD player at the top of the

front panel and internal FM/DAB+/internet radio capability, the last of those using the Airable platform, the Caruso R has extensive network capability, courtesy of a new streaming module bringing with it compatibility with Amazon Music HD, Deezer, Qobuz, Spotify Connect and Tidal. The network streaming section can handle PCM content at up to 24-bit/192kHz – there's none of that chasing ever-higher bit-rates or DSD versions here. There's also a USB port to allow music to be played from storage devices and the Bluetooth implementation can both receive audio from portable devices and play out, for example to wireless headphones in what's called 'sink and source' working. Apple AirPlay 2

Weight and richness allied to fine levels of detail instantly involve the listener

rounds out the wireless capability, while network connection is via Ethernet or wi-fi.

What's more, the Caruso R offers control via the unit's large touchscreen, the supplied remote handset, T+A's Caruso app or Alexa voice controls, with a 'button' on the screen should you wish to turn off the Alexa microphones on the top-plate if you're concerned about privacy.

Rather like that image of a swan gliding serenely while its legs are going like the clappers beneath the water, the cool, simple looks of the front of the Caruso R belies a very

busy rear panel. No fewer than three antennae are supplied, for example: compact ones for wi-fi and Bluetooth and a good old-fashioned telescopic one for radio, though you could use an external aerial instead – for the best reception and to keep the look cleaner. There are also two Ethernet ports to allow the unit to connect to a home network and provide an output to feed other devices.

Two sets of analogue inputs are on hand, along with optical and coaxial digital inputs and that USB Type A for storage devices, while – in addition to terminals to connect the speakers – there are variable-level preouts for hooking up to an external amplifier or active speakers, a mono subwoofer output and also a headphone socket.

And here we come to my only quibbles about the ergonomics of the Caruso R: I get the need to keep the front panel tidy, but both the headphone socket and the USB port would be more conveniently placed there, allowing easier access. Yes, there's that Bluetooth headphone implementation and all the streaming capability, but putting those sockets on the front would save a good deal of fumbling around behind the unit. Also a little surprising these days is the lack of any USB Type B port to which a computer could be connected, but I guess again T+A reckons it's got all that covered off with the wireless options.

The Caruso R also has a range of adjustments and features in its menu system: aside from 12 presets apiece for both FM and DAB, plus five programmable alarms, there's also selectable input sensitivity; tone and balance controls, a loudness setting to



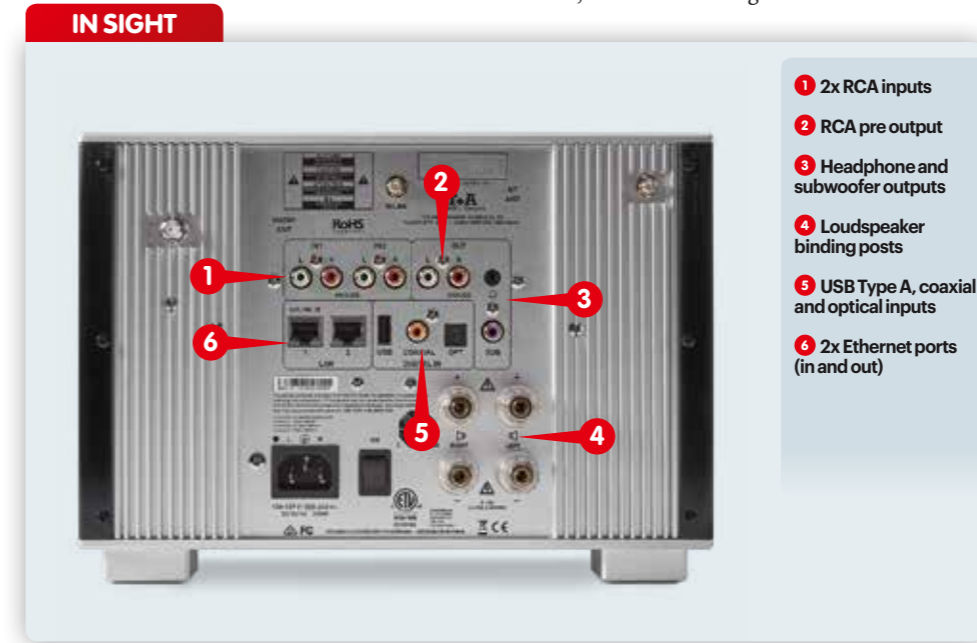
The cube-shaped R10 and S10 floorstander are a great match for the Caruso R

boost low frequencies when playing at low levels and a choice of two 'contour' modes to adjust clarity and warmth; and variable subwoofer crossover and level settings. The loudspeaker outputs and the preouts can also be switched on and off independently – which could be handy if you were using the preouts to drive an amplifier and speakers in a second 'zone' – and the user can designate favourite sources for quick access or indeed mark unused sources to be skipped.

Sound quality

For all the wide-ranging flexibility here, the Caruso R is pretty easy to install and setup, the app making it simple to connect it to the home network and link it to local storage and streaming services – though you can also do all this from the front-panel touchscreen – and the audio connections holding no fear for anyone who's ever plugged in a conventional amplifier. As is seemingly inevitable these days, the review unit immediately launches into a slightly lengthy automatic firmware update procedure as soon as it's in touch with the internet, but beyond that all is plain sailing – helped no end by that large, clear touchscreen display, which is mirrored on the exemplary app.

The matching speakers haven't been supplied for this review, but the unit has enough power to drive a wide range of third-party choices: the onboard amplification delivers 50W into 8ohm, doubling into a 4ohm



- 1 2x RCA inputs
- 2 RCA pre output
- 3 Headphone and subwoofer outputs
- 4 Loudspeaker binding posts
- 5 USB Type A, coaxial and optical inputs
- 6 2x Ethernet ports (in and out)



load, with peak output at 50 percent more. That proves to be more than sufficient for the speakers with which I try the T+A, including the Scansonic M20 reviewed in the last issue and my own Neat Iota Xplorer (HFC 435), both of which are driven and controlled with authority, whether from network or online sources, or the excellent onboard CD player.

The balance here is more refined and mature than red in tooth and claw, meaning that the Caruso R puts up a fine showing with First Aid Kit's live *Who By Fire* set of Leonard Cohen

The Caruso R offers control via its large 7in touchscreen, remote, app or Alexa



covers. A small tweak of the contour controls brings out more of the presence of the set, but that apart the immediate impression is of weight and richness allied to fine levels of detail, instantly involving the listener in the performances. There's not quite the speed and drive you'd get from the similarly priced models in the Naim Uniti range, for example, or from NAD's M-series all-in-one streaming amplifiers, but the generosity of the T+A sound combined with the ease of listening it offers is hard to overlook.

While that means the Caruso R isn't entirely crisp with the rhythms of some vintage Bob Marley or even more elderly John Coltrane, there's no denying the bass weight it delivers with the reggae or the way a jazz bass and drums combo is filled out to underpin a soloist. And the same goes with Eric Clapton's *Just One Night* album, in which the stellar cast of backing musicians ensure one of the guitarist's better live recordings, even if doesn't quite capture him at the top of his game – yes, the T+A remains warm and just a little safe, but then that suits this set rather well.

Conclusion

Move back into the Caruso R's comfort zone, with high-quality recordings from Justin Bieber's *Justice* set to the powerful vocals of Loretta Lynn on her *Still Woman Enough*

HOW IT COMPARES

The most obvious starting point is NAD's M10 (HFC 451), at £2,200. There's no CD, but there is touchscreen control, a wide range of streaming options and a useful 100W output. If you want more, the bigger M33 (HFC 466), at £4,000, packs 200W into its full-size casework. However, if you want to play (and rip) your CDs as well as streaming audio from network and online sources, the Naim Uniti Star (HFC 433), at £3,600 has a built-in disc drive and can even act as a server to deliver music to other products from the company's Uniti and Mu-so ranges, and its high-end network players.

album, taking in some demo-quality jazz along the way, and the sound here is bewitching enough to command plenty of listening time – not just because it's so easy to enjoy, but also because it draws the listener in. Yes, it would be easy to accuse the Caruso R's balance of being 'lifestyle hi-fi' or even being designed for those traditionally left unmoved by audiophile systems, but instead it reflects a sonic approach that's apparent across the T+A range, right up to its massive amplification components: from their operation to their presentation, the company's products seem determined to prove that musical enjoyment needn't be difficult and the Caruso R simply offers that thinking in miniature, and with supreme style ●

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OUR VERDICT

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ | LIKE: Ease of setup and use; warm, rich, enjoyable sound |
| VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Headphone and USB ports would be better on the front |
| BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ | WE SAY: Hugely attractive designer hi-fi with an involving sound, slick styling and superb build |
| FEATURES ★★★★★ | |

OVERALL

