



Voice box

With a look that's sure to show up any kit it's partnered with, the Röst is set to impress. **Chris Ward** finds out if beauty is skin deep

Norwegian audio specialist Hegel has recently been naming its products, rather than giving them the more traditional alpha-numeric model numbers. The Röst (voice) is a network-capable integrated amplifier and if you've felt hi-fi's obsession with black or silver boxes is a bit plain, you could well find its creamy, off-white casework very refreshing. These clean lines are complimented by a crisp, white text OLED display, making for a very modern, minimalist amplifier. The only downside of this fresh styling is your existing components are unlikely to match aesthetically and may well look dated. But this possibly underlines the Hegel philosophy around removing anything extraneous to musical enjoyment. The Röst is crying out to be the only hi-fi component on show in the modern home.

The gently curved, solid aluminium fascia is home to a 6.35mm headphone output and twin rotary controls that smoothly adjust input and volume. Around the back it accepts analogue signals via balanced XLRs or two pairs of unbalanced RCA inputs, one of which is configurable for fixed gain AV use. Digital inputs are generous with three optical, a USB and one coaxial input as well as an Ethernet network connection that enables the player to stream music files via UPnP/DLNA or AirPlay. Hegel imagines a highly connected future and envisages the Röst seamlessly fitting into a smart home environment, fully controlled by a phone or tablet. However, a quality remote is provided that operates all functions and can even turn off the display. Connections are completed via a pre-out for the addition of power amplification or subwoofer

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Hegel Röst
ORIGIN
Norway
TYPE
Integrated amplifier/DAC/network music player
WEIGHT
12kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 100 x 310mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 75W (8ohm)
• Inputs: balanced XLR analogue; 2x unbalanced RCA inputs; coaxial; 3x optical; USB-B; Ethernet; AirPlay
• 6.35mm headphone socket
DISTRIBUTOR
Hegel Music Systems, Oslo
TELEPHONE
00 47 22605660
WEBSITE
hegel.com

and very sturdy speaker binding posts accept all connection types. Construction is of a very high quality. The Röst could be considered the love child of other well-regarded Hegel products. Broadly speaking, it has the chassis and power output of the H80 (HFC 391), the DAC and headphone stage from the H160 (HFC 394) and the connectivity and output stages of the H360 (HFC 401). This already compelling cocktail is then enhanced through the addition of silky new paintwork, a cutting-edge OLED display and the implementation of Hegel's latest iteration of its patented SoundEngine technology that eschews the traditional use of global negative feedback to stabilise the amplifier, instead claiming to use a form of local 'feed forward' technology to achieve superior results. Put simply, this proprietary signal handling technology claims to achieve very low distortion and a very high damping factor, creating stronger grip and control of your speakers than the claimed 75W alone would suggest. The UK price of £2,200 places the Röst integrated amp at a slightly lower point than Hegel's more powerful H160 (£2,450). Given the Röst has less power, but employs the latest SoundEngine technologies from the flagship H360 integrated, this feels like good value.

Digital signal processing maxes out at 24-bit/192kHz via coaxial, optical and network connections with the USB input able to handle 24-bit/96kHz files. DSD fans may be disappointed, but this specification covers the vast majority of listening habits. I connect up reference Cadence Arca speakers to the amp's beefy speaker connections with Black Rhodium Foxtrot speaker cable (HFC 412) and use my reference Shanling CD-T100 player to provide an analogue signal via Artisan Ultimate Silver Dream interconnects (HFC 390) and a digital coaxial feed via Missing Link Dark Art 75ohm cable to compare and contrast the Röst's amplification and DAC

With its off-white chassis, the Röst exudes Scandi design chic

qualities. I also connect my MacBook Pro via The Chord Company USB SilverPlus cable (HFC 407) as well as an Ethernet connection to access stored music files.

Sound quality

Playing *Broken Promise* by Scroobius Pip on CD via an analogue input reveals many virtues. The plaintive opening notes ring clear and true and are accurately surrounded by a light haze of recorded static as the deep reverb of fingers sliding over guitar strings describes an inky black and notably deep soundscape. By contrast, Pip's voice enters centre stage front with a presence and grittiness that creates superb three-dimensionality and a dynamic realism that is highly compelling. A deep, throbbing bassline drops into the mix and 75W of amplification have rarely sounded so authoritative. Hegel's house sound has always had a cleanliness that can sound like a strong control over bass – all the depth but tauter, and a shade drier than competitors. Here, it is a little more luscious and fulsome than I expect. To put this in context, the Röst shares the same power output of the entry-level H80 integrated but balances this against a relatively high damping factor of over 2,000 that places its speaker-driving muscle between the H160 and H360 integrated amplifiers. Numbers can't tell the whole story, but the outcome is an excellent sonic balance of a firm grip with some succulent juiciness around the lowest registers. This epic track builds and builds. Poetic vocals become fiercer, deep bass becomes more menacing and guitar riffs more insistent. This talented amplifier resolves all this intensity and takes the increasing drama in its stride to deliver accuracy and emotional dynamics in equal measure. Replaying the same track via a digital coaxial connection shows the onboard

DAC is implemented very well, able to deliver excellent subtlety and very natural timing and communication. Via the internal DAC, the track's opening static is even better resolved and has a touch more electricity, the voice feels more present, pressing forward out of the plane of the speakers and deep bass gains a touch more rasp and heft. Spellbinding. Playing a lossless CD file of Agnes Obel's *The Curse* via the USB input confirms the onboard DAC is a very refined performer. The Röst differentiates short, bounced *spiccato* notes on violin and cello from the slightly different timbre of both instruments being played *pizzicato*. Bowed cello and violin notes have

The Röst can be considered a veritable hub of digital connectivity

superb depth, texture and purity. Hegel claims that SoundEngine avoids the traditional use of negative feedback, yet achieves a far more stable amplifier that also cancels crossover distortion, especially around higher frequencies. In practice, the sound has a notable cleanliness that allows tiny micro-dynamic details to shine through. This serves to create a very wide and deep, spacious soundscape where the perceived air around acoustic performers in particular feels highly realistic. Obel's vocals have real richness and presence, with masses of reverberant information placing her in a large acoustic recording space. Timing and rhythmic qualities feel very natural and music just flows as it should. The amp is very transparent, but never forensic. You get masses of insight and musical detail, but it's all delivered without

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Variable line output
- 2 Ethernet network connection
- 3 USB Type-B digital input
- 4 Coaxial and optical digital inputs
- 5 Balanced XLR inputs
- 6 Unbalanced line inputs

Q&A

Anders Ertzeid

VP sales & marketing,
Hegel Music Systems



CW: Who do you see as the customer for the Röst?

AE: We see two main types of customers. Firstly, people with an above average interest in music and sound quality, who want a high degree of connectivity and a contemporary look that will fit in a modern living room, but aren't convinced that even high-quality Bluetooth speakers can meet this brief. Secondly, people using custom integrators to automate their homes. The Röst presents opportunities for control and integration that no other high-quality, two-channel amp on the planet has. It should be the obvious choice.

How does the Röst take this kind of seamless, smart control forward?

The Röst is an IP-controllable unit with a fairly large memory. It is the first of its kind to have Control4 (a leading home automation manufacturer) software built in. And one can write two-way drivers to use it with any kind of device, or even, via a server, devices like Amazon Echo.

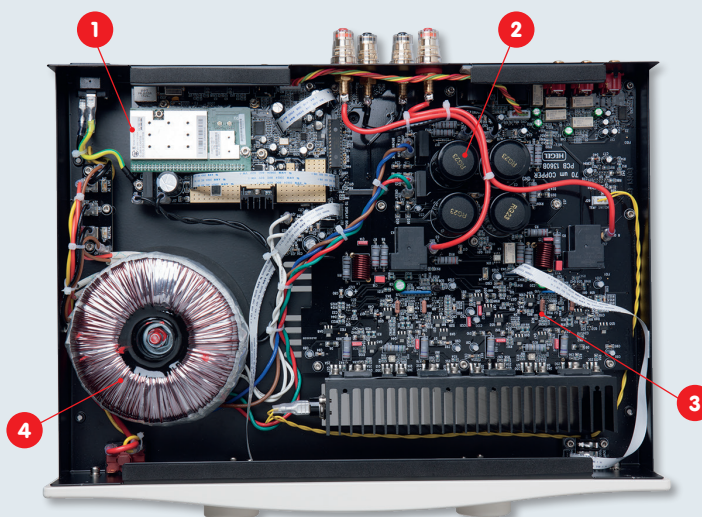
Is high damping factor an important part of Hegel's philosophy?

In our view, a high damping factor simply means you have a stable amplifier. Without a stable amplifier you lose bass control. Hegel knows how to achieve bass control without also getting distortion issues into the bargain. Our SoundEngine technology delivers a high damping factor, without high distortion and ensures the very dynamic and rhythmic Hegel sound.

What led to the naming of this amp and the new white finish?

Röst means voice, and this Röst is the voice of modern Hegel. It is also an island at the Westernmost part of the Lofoten archipelago. In actual fact, all Hegel products start with baby names during R&D. Most of them have been characters from Winnie the Pooh! Re the colour: we wanted it to stand out, and white goes very well with wood furniture and the décor of many modern homes. The colour also signifies the purity of Scandinavian style.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Network circuitry
- 2 Power supply capacitor bank
- 3 SoundEngine feed forward circuits
- 4 Custom built, ultra-silent toroidal transformer

unnecessarily drawing attention to itself. The piano joins the ensemble and feels like a full-scale instrument. Hi-fi often struggles to give credible piano performances, but here the timbre and scale of the keyboard is reproduced very well. Melodies from the piano, vocals and strings blend and counterpoint each other in a very balanced and even-handed way. A beguiling and subtle performance, stunningly portrayed.

The network connection is simplicity itself, with the Röst easily discoverable as an output device once connected to my network via the Ethernet input. I experiment with AirPlay, signified by the word appearing ticked on the display. Care is needed after connection as volume control can now be shared between the amplifier and your playback software of choice, so just check levels before you press play. Selecting a 16/44.1 file of *Dice* by Finley Quayle from a connected NAS drive reveals the Röst is adept at making modest files sound very good. The opening, high frequencies feel sweet and well extended as they dance across the wide soundstage. Solid bass notes reach seismic depths but have loads of fine detail, control and agility. Quayle's voice has a rounded warmth, yet plenty of fine filigree detail and the plectrum strokes on guitar have a crisp, incisive snap without ever sounding brittle or sharp. This track builds with many lush and complex layers and rhythms, but the Röst is never wrong footed.

Conclusion

Hegel has brought together many fine qualities from across its product range in one slim, modern, eye-catching

box. The amp punches well above its modest power output and is comfortable driving tricky speaker loads. The Röst has a generous array of inputs and can be considered a veritable hub of digital connectivity, with the possible exception that the absence of DSD processing could be considered an omission by those seeking greater future-proofing. That said, Hegel is masterly at integrating DACs within integrated amplifiers, seeming to have a real talent for making even the most modest music files sound very refined. Music lovers with a flair for understated interior design and a desire to control everything from a single smart device now have a product that ticks all their boxes. It's easy to see how many prospective customers will delight in plumbing the Röst with a network connection and a couple of other discrete sources to create a modern hi-fi setup that looks very elegant and understated but sounds extremely accomplished. The Röst looks and sounds great and is a joy to use ●

HOW IT COMPARES

Exposure's 3010S2D (HFC 397) is a strong all-round integrated at £2,060, including the optional DAC module. It achieves a great balance between connectivity, power and musicality. The Exposure has slightly more power but the Hegel has a cleaner, more dynamic delivery. The Röst also takes smart control to brand new heights. The Cyrus Lyric 09 (HFC 384) in its optional 'stone' colour is possibly the closest competitor in terms of balancing an elegant design with high-fidelity sound credentials. Both amps have a very fresh appearance that may win over customers that want style and substance. As always, use your eyes and ears at a quality dealer.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Clean delivery; bass control; connectivity; aesthetics

DISLIKE: Can make partnering electronics look a bit dated

WE SAY: Advanced amplifier and digital hub that deserves to be shown off

★★★★★