



Power play

Hegel's latest integrated sets out to score a hole in one. **Chris Ward** checks out the versatile component with a low handicap

All-in-one integrated amplifiers are increasingly like golfers – they need to do three things well. Golfers need to drive with power, play accurate iron shots and then putt straight. The modern breed of integrated amplifier ideally needs some muscle for speaker control, preamplifier sections need gentle finesse around delicate signals and onboard DACs need to 'sync' an increasing amount of data in all the right places. Yet golfers and one-box amplifiers often struggle with one of these skills and put in an average score. Then along comes a Tiger.

The H360 is Hegel's latest integrated amp and is set to replace the outgoing H300. It claims a similar healthy output of 250W into 8ohm and 420W into 4ohm, but with completely new power supplies and output stages claiming to enable

50 percent more current delivery. Certainly lifting the 25kg of this latest Hegel offering confirms this is a whole lot of amplifier, and that there may well be a lot more going on under the bonnet. The balanced analogue input is completely revised and draws upon its reference P30 preamp. Hegel has also incorporated a separate transformer and power supply for the preamp and DAC with a view to lowering noise and distortion. A brand new DAC utilises AKM chips and a new master clock to raise data handling to 24-bit/192kHz for all inputs as well as native DSD64/128 for the 'non-asynchronous' USB input Hegel prefers. Furthermore, its patented SoundEngine technology has been revisited and is claimed to achieve lower distortion and a high damping factor of 4,000.

The H360 looks almost identical to those that precede it. It shares the

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Hegel H360
ORIGIN
Norway
TYPE
Integrated amplifier/DAC/network music player
WEIGHT
25kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 150 x 410mm
FEATURES
● Claimed power output: 2x 250W (8ohm)
● 1x coaxial; 3x optical; 1x USB-B digital inputs; 1x Ethernet port
● 1x RCA; 1x home theatre; 1x XLR analogue inputs
● Fixed and variable line-level outputs
DISTRIBUTOR
Hegel Music Systems, Oslo
TELEPHONE
00 47 22605660
WEBSITE
hegel.com

same minimalist design with ultra simplistic blue-lit LED display flanked by rotary controls that change source input and volume. The headphone output stage of the H160 (HFC 394) has been ditched to focus maximum budget on speaker duties. For analogue inputs it has a single dedicated analogue RCA input alongside a fixed-level RCA input designed for home theatre applications (reconfigurable to be a regular RCA input) and the revised balanced analogue XLR input for those with balanced sources. Digital inputs include three optical inputs, one digital coaxial, a single USB input and a network connection to access stored music files on a NAS and enable control via UPnP or AirPlay.

The H360 comes with a purposeful metal remote, but don't expect to access a world of features with it. Instead, Hegel claims to focus entirely on lower distortion, eradicating noise, and stronger phase and timing performance. Control via the remote is easy and once plumbed to a network, further control via a phone or iPad is slick, fast and uncomplicated.

Sound quality

I warm the H360 through with the INXS track *Elegantly Wasted* on CD, feeding the amp's onboard DAC via the coaxial connection. From the opening cow bells, bass and springy

guitar riff I'm immediately struck by just how incredibly fast and ultra clean this amplifier sounds. I've come to recognise and appreciate the slightly lean and clean Hegel house sound, but here every quality is taken to new heights. Improvements are clear and profound. Percussion has extra punch and speed, tambourines shimmer with extra vitality, bass lines are taut and dry but now have more incisive force and extra musicality. Hutchence's lazy vocals are rich, yet every tiny inflection of his sultry voice conveys real emotion and places him in a solid three-dimensional soundstage. This track sounds simple, but trips up many amps with weaker

Minimalism is the buzz word here, with just a couple of dials and a simple blue display

timing or an inability to resolve detail around fast-changing transients across dense, well-recorded layers.

Connecting my Timestep T-01MC (HFC 371) phono stage to the analogue input I spin Robert Wyatt's *Shipbuilding* on 12in vinyl, which confirms that the H360 is just as strong with analogue signals. The opening expressive brushwork on the drum skin sets out a deep, dark and wide acoustic space from which the insistent but plaintive piano and doleful double bass rise in unison. The forceful bass tones of both instruments are similar but distinct and I clearly hear the difference between reverberating piano and plucked bass strings. Wyatt's fragile, wistful voice is portrayed beautifully and the amplifier handles every tiny lilt and syncopation of this epic track with complete mastery.

Playing Brian Eno's evocative *An Ending (Ascend)* as a lossless rip via the USB input, I'm treated to a captivating performance. What seems like a single resonating wine glass passes to another and to another, each time a different related tone of rising intensity, until a complex, revolving cascade of tones, overtones and ringing harmonics floats between and wide beyond the speakers. Huge brooding bass notes join with ultra high harmonics to create a pulsing pattern of gently shifting sonic colours and textures. If you think ambient music is easy for an amplifier, you may be startled by what you haven't heard. Here the H360 is in complete control, layering subtle, haunting tones over richly detailed shimmering layers, with deep drones and mosquito-like highs handled with equal aplomb.

Hegel is an audiophile brand through and through, and the H360 now supports native DSD64/128 via USB to prove it, but it also prides itself on making more modest music

files sound good. Accessing my iTunes library through the network connection I remotely play a humble AAC file of Nils Lofgren's *Bass & Drum Intro* and I am truly surprised by the richness and three-dimensional definition of the soundscape. Deep bass has excellent leading-edge detail and the charged acoustic atmosphere of this live performance is expertly communicated. The H360 really has no right to deliver such an impressive level of playback from such modest ingredients.

It's easy to view this product as the meeting of some pretty high-end hi-fi with the convenience of a one-box lifestyle product. Attention to the preamplifier, power supplies, DAC and power output sections all seem to yield excellent new sonic results for critical listening.

The balanced analogue input is also really well executed and the quality of speaker control is excellent. On the

Midband and treble handling is excellent and even has a hint of valve-like flow

convenience front, the H360 is very comfortable acting as a complete entertainment hub across a raft of inputs and Hegel's refinements around simple network access makes more casual listening a breeze.

Some bass addicts may find the H360 rather dry for their tastes, but lower octaves are most certainly there and powerfully managed. The claimed damping factor of 4,000 needs some acclimatisation, especially if some of the bass you're used to actually comes from an amp that's losing control. The H360 really suits speakers that only give their best from strong control and demand plenty of current to reproduce large dynamic

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Right channel speaker binding posts
- 2 Balanced XLR inputs
- 3 Fixed and variable line-level inputs
- 4 Network port
- 5 Coaxial, optical, USB-B inputs

Q&A

Anders Ertzeid

Sales manager,
Hegel Music Systems



CW: Is the H360 the result of know-how from Hegel's separate components brought together?

AE: In a way, yes. There are many elements that have been drawn from all the learnings of our reference separates, although I think it is more accurate to say the H360 is an accumulation of the knowledge we have gathered over the last 20 years.

What improvements have been made to benefit performance?

One of the really big improvements came from creating a completely separate power supply for the volume attenuator and the DAC. We started addressing this in the H160, but we went all out in the H360. Noise pollution is lowered considerably and brings this integrated far closer to the performance of our separates.

Why would you say that the damping factor is so important?

We think high damping is a vital component in making loudspeakers sound as good as they can, especially around bass control. Many people blame loudspeakers for faults that can actually lie in the amplifier.

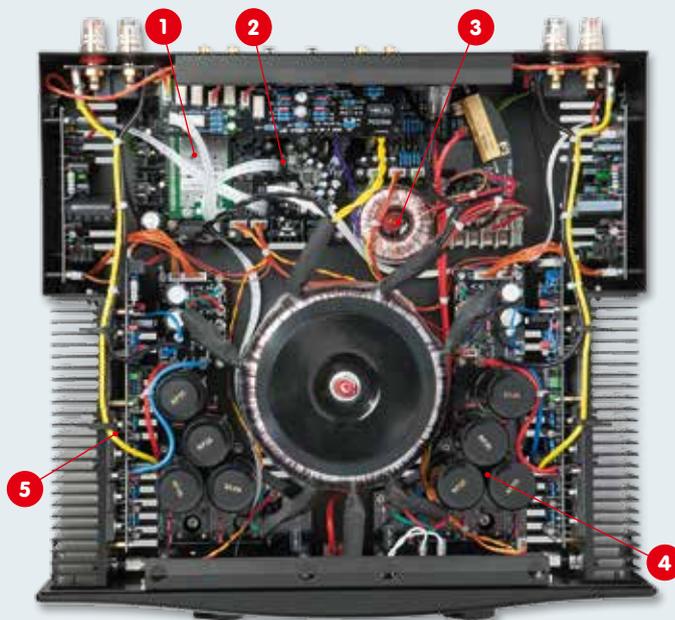
The H360 has great timing - what's the secret?

When using digital inputs we take great care to reduce jitter, but overall the amplifier also has very low distortion and very fast output stages. All these attributes add up to help timing and simply ensure music flows as it should.

How would you describe the Hegel house sound?

Like music! Our whole ideology is about not polluting the signal with noise or distortion. This is what drives everything we do.

IN SIGHT



- 1 AirPlay and UPnP receiver
- 2 AKM 4450 DAC chip
- 3 DAC and volume transformer
- 4 Right channel capacitor bank
- 5 Left channel output stage

HOW IT COMPARES

Prospective buyers may look to Naim's SuperUniti (HFC 357) or Devialet's 120 (HFC 386) as quality 'all-in-one' propositions around this budget. Naim's one-box solution punches way beyond its 80W and also favours a far lower damping factor that may suit your taste. And while the Naim has great rhythm and timing, to my ear it doesn't quite match the Hegel's control and transparency. Devialet uses an exotic cocktail of Class A/B and D amplification and provides phono stage options that could appeal to vinyl fans. The Devialet also incorporates speaker matching software to optimise performance, but head-to-head, I'd favour the H360. As ever, visit a dealer and listen before you buy.

swings, including some standmount designs that only create quality bass when muscled. If you have more sensitive speakers or an easier load, this just means the H360 will deliver the goods without breaking into a sweat. Midband and treble handling is excellent and even has a hint of valve-like flow, belying its cutting edge solid-state technologies. The cleanliness of the sound and low perceived distortion conveys a kind of sweetness without grain that is very well judged and easy to enjoy for long periods without fatigue.

This integrated amplifier might be likened to Tiger Woods in his heyday. Majestic power when needed, subtle finesse when delicacy is required and utterly confident precision when it counts most. Yet, in summary I want to change my sporting analogy. In Hegel combining its extensive know-how around lowering distortion, eradicating noise and preserving phase and transient timing, the H360 is achieving something that is much greater than the sum of the beneficial parts. It's the effect of watching a truly talented footballer like Messi or Cantona on the ball - time slows down and skill just expresses itself beautifully. Every track I've listened to feels more relaxed, less hurried, more expansive and more personal somehow. Music I know extremely well is refreshed and the artist's intent becomes clearer. It's not a matter of extra detail revealed,

it's just effortless, unhampered communication. The sheer cleanliness of the H360's delivery means I'm better able to understand and enjoy my music.

Conclusion

Qualities of Hegel's best preamp, best power amp and best DAC have now been brought together in the H360. £3,400 is a tidy sum for an integrated amplifier, but you may choose to look at it as a heavily discounted set of separates expertly optimised with short signal paths into a single unpretentious box. The integrated amplifier is coming of age again, and in the H360 Hegel has created a new reference product in its range that looks to be creating a whole new benchmark performance for others to try their best to match ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Ultra-clean and engaging sound with high transparency and grip; DAC integration
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Display shows basic info only
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Hegel brings together its standalone component expertise in one appealing, multi-talented unit
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL

