



# Trew colours

*Proof that features and good sound aren't incompatible*

**PRODUCT** Astin Trew AT2000

**TYPE** Integrated amplifier

**PRICE** £1,349

**KEY FEATURES** Size (WxHxD): 43x11x39.7cm  
 ● Weight: 12.2kg ● Power output: 65W (8 ohm)/  
 85W (4 ohm) ● Inputs: 5x line, 1x RCA, 1x balanced  
 ● Outputs: 1x line, 1x preamp, 1x subwoofer

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For a long time now we've been told that when it comes to sound quality, less is more, so tone controls have been banished along with flicking UV meters and most other fripperies, some of which seemed fundamental to earlier generations. But with today's multi-source mayhem and the need to integrate our personal music players into the hi-fi, features have started to make a comeback.

One company that's clearly into giving us flexibility is Astin Trew, one of the more recent entrants to the 'designed in the UK, built in China' arena, which has carved out a niche by adding valves to the solid-state circuits in its CD player and pre/power amplifiers. The features on its new AT2000 integrated are not of the old-school variety – there are still no tone controls – but are instead designed to make the amp rather more multiroom-friendly than most and to offer the iPod user something with which to engage. For the MP3 crowd, there's a front-panel mini-jack input, as well as headphone sockets for full-size and 3.5mm jacks, something we've never seen before. These are both connected to a dedicated headphone amplifier, which might come as a pleasant surprise to those used to the quality of an MP3 player's output.

The back panel reveals a slew of socketry that's designed to make integration into a multiroom system easy, including inputs and outputs for Cat 5 cables terminated in RJ45 plugs and an RS-232 port for control from a data bus. Alternatively, there are inputs and outputs for remote control with a cabled system such as might be used where the amp is hidden out of sight. The manual suggests

power supply for the power-amp section, supplying quiescent current to the MOSFET output devices. This is presumably why there's only a small difference between outputs into eight- and four-ohm loads.

## SOUND QUALITY

Although the valve plays only a small part in this circuit – the signal doesn't pass

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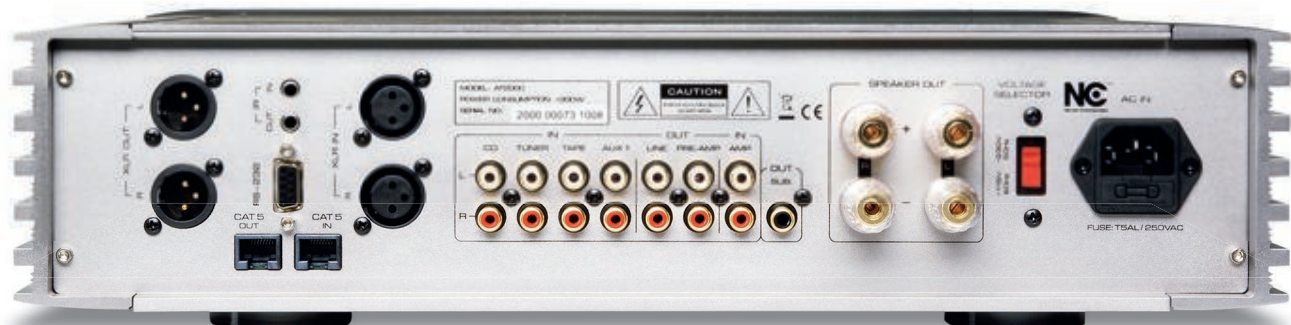
ways of combining AT2000s in multiroom set-ups and, where sound quality is the goal, encourages the use of balanced leads between amplifiers, which is unusual in such set-ups, but undoubtedly good advice.

That balanced input is one of five line inputs offered and sits alongside pre, line and subwoofer outputs. The last are a very rare feature in the stereo world, but a sensible one given the unpopularity of large speakers in the contemporary domestic environment! Another input dubbed 'amp in' gives direct access to the power amp, bypassing volume, and therefore could be used to incorporate this amp into a home cinema system.

We mentioned that Astin Trew has a predilection for combining valves with transistors in its designs – the AT3500 CD player, for instance, has one in its output stage, and so, despite appearances, does this integrated. It doesn't sit in the signal chain per se, but rather operates within the

through it – there's something of a glass-audio quality to the sound of this integrated. It has the nimbleness and realism that we associate with good valve designs and, while it has more power than most vacuum-driven devices, it doesn't have the sense of power one associates with transistors. This is something you either love or loathe, and fans of valve designs are very much in the latter camp. At *Hi-Fi Choice* we quite like a bit of grip in the bass, but accept that the musicality that's achieved without it is rather beguiling.

The AT2000 is a remarkably transparent amp in all important respects – it produces attractively open results and reflects the quality and nature of the incoming signal with a very natural and fluent precision. There's no sense here of the sound being mechanical or etched; rather, instruments and voices are placed in the context in which they were recorded. So Peter Gabriel's voice has a lot of space around it and has a ▶

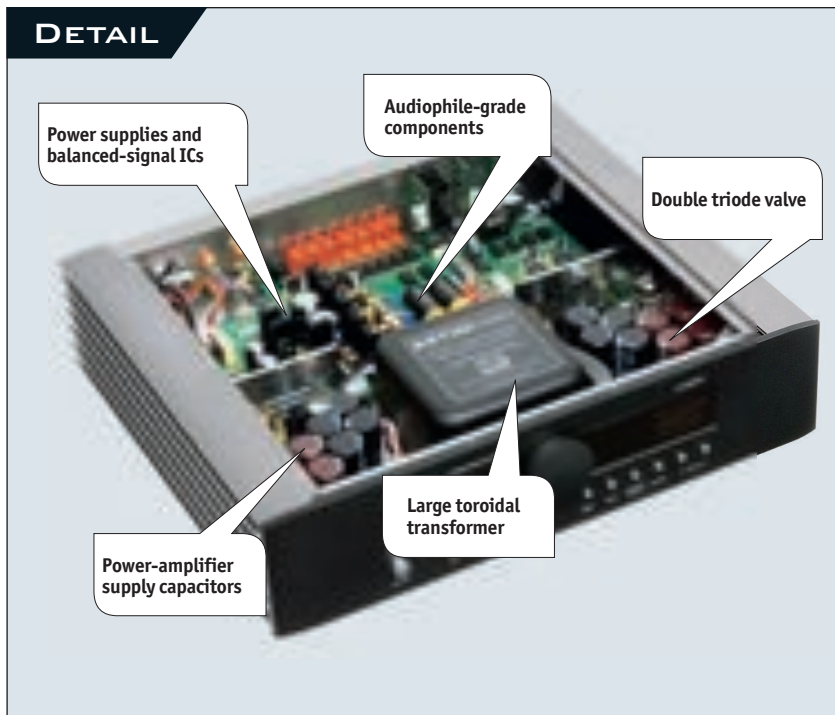


## NEVER CONNECTED

The preamp section is biased to operate in class A and benefits from the presence of a Never Connected power supply. This is a licensed technology created by Fenson & Co that's used in components including ECS preamps, Michell turntable electronics and Trichord phono stages as well as other AT designs. Its purpose is to isolate the audio electronics from the ever-increasing levels of pollution on the mains, something which is an issue in every system used in the urban environment and beyond. It's claimed to be as noise-free as batteries, but with the benefit of high voltage and low impedance that you get with the mains. Effectively it means that the amplifier's power supply doesn't 'see' the mains in all its noisy glory, as is usually the case.

▀ good sense of stereo solidity on the song *Musical Box* (from the Genesis album *Nursery Cryme*), while the double-bass-playing on Frank Zappa's *The Ocean is the Ultimate Solution* is dirty and compressed. With that, however, you can appreciate the quality of playing and composition as well as you can with better recordings. More powerful and grippy-sounding pure solid-state amps will give the latter more drive and urgency, but also tend not to have the transparency on offer here, a transparency that means the better recordings in our record collection are very easy to appreciate indeed.

The AT2000 has been priced to compete with the likes of Arcam's A38 (now £1,300). Regular readers of *Hi-Fi Choice* will recall how well the A38 fared in a recent *Ultimate Group Test*, so we pulled it in for comparison with the Astin Trew – and we have to say that the newcomer comfortably held its own. While the Arcam has a beefier bottom end, it's not able to resolve fine detail with the clarity of the AT, although both have a similar grip on timing. However, if you appreciate instrumental and vocal timbre or just want a more realistic sound, then the AT definitely has the edge. At least, it does with Guru QM10 loudspeakers (£1,695; see page 68), which are, perhaps, not a typical partnership choice, even if they are remarkably musical.



**“It’s the sort of amp that will work well with vinyl, where the smooth top end combined with great dynamics will exploit its skills.”**

We brought in the PMC GB1i floorstander (£1,330) to act as a more realistic partner, and its more open and relaxed style revealed more of the AT's own openness and low-level resolving powers.

With a more appropriate source than our reference Resolution Audio Opus 21 – namely the Cambridge Audio 840C – things went well so long as we stuck with refined software. Barb Jungr was as dynamic and three-dimensional as ever, but putting on the more challenging *Third World Love*, with their trumpet-led jazz vibes, did reveal the CD player's relatively coarse top end. This is a difficult album to get enjoyable results from, and the amplifier's transparency did reveal why. Although very competent, the Cambridge isn't a match for dearer machines in a revealing context such as this.

It's the sort of amp that will work extremely well with vinyl, where the smooth top end

combined with great dynamics will exploit its skills. There's no phono input, sadly, but that's what standalone phono stages were made for.

With the AT2000, Astin Trew is offering a genuine alternative to the majority of integrated models in this price range. It's a design of such subtlety and finesse that it rivals Sugden's classic A21 amp, but without the thermal and power challenges of that model. The fact that it offers so much flexibility is the icing on a highly musical cake. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

VERDICT	
<b>SOUND</b> ★★★★★	<b>PRO</b> A transparent- and realistic-sounding integrated amplifier with a dynamic character that really engages. A highly flexible model with some unusual features.
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	
<b>BUILD</b> ★★★★★	<b>CON</b> Not as obviously powerful as some, and it would be nice to have a phono input. Does anyone need two headphone sockets, though?
<b>VALUE</b> ★★★★★	
<b>CONCLUSION</b> If you're looking for subtlety rather than slam and you prefer the timbral and timing qualities of music to its bone-crunching potential, then the excellent AT2000 is a serious contender for your money.	
<b>HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE</b> ★★★★★	
URL <a href="http://www.techradar.com/498574">www.techradar.com/498574</a>	