



Constellation Virgo II pre-amp
Constellation Centaur stereo power amp

STAR STRUCK!

The high-end audio arena is filled to the brim with gear linking the promise of trend-setting innovation, cutting-edge technology and flashy aesthetics to stratospheric price tags. But it takes more than that to create a hi-fi star - let alone a Constellation ...

 **constellation** audio



Constellation is an American audio company created with the objective of creating the best audio components in the world – a brave intention, but hardly a mould-breaking one.

What does set the California-based firm apart from so many others, however, is its collaborative approach: its owners gathered what they considered to be the cream of the audio world's engineers and designers, and set them the target of creating something extraordinary.

This so-called dream team includes some of the brightest stars in audio – and together they form a constellation of designers that is greater than the sum

of its parts. It's also the origin of the company's name.

John Curl, Bascom King, Keith Allsop, Peter Madnick and Demian Martin, amongst several other audio luminaries, have worked for many of the best marques in the business – and by combining their knowledge and experience, Constellation has a formidable pool of expertise at its disposal.

The aesthetics of the Constellation gear also deserve credit: they are the work of Alex Rasmussen and Bard Babineaux of industrial design firm Neal Feay, and prove that audio doesn't have to be restricted to large, bland boxes.

Six years after launching the brand,

Constellation's product offering has grown to embrace three distinct ranges. There's the top-end, cost-no-object Reference range; the slightly more affordable, but still dear and sophisticated Performance range; and the recently added, even more accessible Inspiration.

The Virgo II line stage and Centaur stereo power amp both belong to the Performance range, which makes up the bulk of the Constellation product offering. It's worth spending a bit of time discussing the aesthetics, as they are so different from the hi-fi norm.

The Virgo II's thick, highly rigid alloy casework features an embossed pattern that adds texture and tactile appeal,



while the enclosure itself is unusually shaped, including a negatively sloped fascia with a recessed display and minimalist switchgear. Even the serif font of the display has designer appeal.

The rear panel shows off the symmetrical circuit approach by grouping left and right inputs separately. The four stereo inputs are offered in both balanced XLR and single-ended RCA formats, while there are two output sets, again featuring both XLR and RCA options.

A separate, dedicated power supply using separate R-Core transformers, rectifiers and capacitors for the left and right channels, looks after the Virgo II's power needs.

It feeds the pre-amp via a trio of proprietary sockets that deliver DC to the left and right channels independently, with the third feed looking after the control electronics. This arrangement emphasises the Virgo II's dual-mono configuration, while offering enhanced AC filtration and a cleaner overall DC supply.

At the heart of the Virgo II is a fully complementary, fully balanced pre-amp circuit, dubbed a Line Stage Gain Module

by Constellation. It features mirror-imaged circuits amplifying the positive and negative halves of the audio signal to achieve a perfectly balanced signal. The circuits employ carefully selected field-effect transistors and unique servo circuits that automatically address signal anomalies.

The analogue circuit boards are mounted on top of thick metal plates suspended on an elastomeric suspension that isolates the circuitry from vibration. Dubbed 'rafts' by Constellation, these elastomer-mounted plates also house the control circuits, which are suspended below them.

The 432 x 230 pixel LCD touchscreen display is integral to the Virgo II's intuitive operation. It makes accessing the pre-amp's full suite of features a simple affair, while a solid aluminium remote handset looks after armchair control.

The big Centaur stereo power amplifier (a mono version is also available) features a similar aesthetic approach to the Virgo II, but in a larger form factor. Of note is the wide, slim, bar-like power switch that dominates the textured, bevelled front panel, while the embossed metal surfaces, please the eye.

The side panels are equally eye-catching, with a latticework-like treatment that not only allows sufficient airflow for the sake of cooling, but looks super-cool too!

The rear panel offers a choice of three inputs. Two of these are balanced and employ XLR input sockets, but they are not duplicate sets: the one is labelled 'balanced' and the other 'direct'. The third input provides a single-ended RCA option.

The 'direct' XLR input is meant to be used with matching Constellation pre-amps such as the Virgo II, and removes the Centaur's own Line Stage Gain Module (identical to that of the Virgo II) from the signal path, thus simplifying the signal's passage and promising enhanced levels of detail and signal purity.

Big, bold binding posts ensure the positive connection of even large-gauge speaker cabling.

The Line Stage Gain Module fitted to the Centaur is specifically meant for use with non-Constellation pre-amps, allowing the conversion of incoming signals from the pre-amp to full-balanced spec.

At the core of the Centaur's design philosophy is a modular approach using a Constellation designed, top-notch 125 watt single-ended amplifier in a modular format that allows multiple modules to be employed in tandem when a more powerful amplifier is required.

The benefit is that the sonic signature remains identical, regardless of the number of modules employed, but with the advantage of doubling the power output.

Constellation's balanced drive design is a fully complementary circuit topology that, according to the company, achieves a perfect balance between the positive and negative halves of the audio signal by incorporating the amplifier modules in matched pairs with identical N-type output transistors.

Underpinning the amplifier stages in the Centaur is a 1 600 watt toroidal power supply with separate windings for the left and right channels, combined with substantial storage capacitors and fully regulated power supplies.

The high-current delivery of the amplifier suggests immunity from difficult speaker loads, while the ability of the Centaur to double its rated power from 250 watts into 8 ohms, to 500 watts into 4 ohms –

Associated Equipment

McIntosh Labs kW 1.2 monoblocks
McIntosh Labs C2500 pre-amp/DAC
Linn DS media streamer
Magico S3 loudspeakers
Magico Q7 loudspeakers
Supra Sword interlinks and speaker cable
Supra power cables and CAT 7 network cable

Software

Bob James – Botero
Claire Martin – Time and Place
Willie & Lobo – The Music of Puerto Vallarta Squeeze
Ludovico Einaudi – In a Time Lapse
Bob Sauls – Out of the Darkness
Siri Svale Band – Blackbird
Barenaked Ladies – Born on a Pirate Ship
Niels Tybo Trio – Unexpected
Beethoven – Symphony No 5 – Kleiber / Vienna Philharmonic

and then to up that to 800 watts into 2 ohms – indicates impressive inherent stability.

However, for all their impressive credentials, it's whether the Constellations can deliver in sonic terms that really matters. I auditioned the duo in the large listening studio at Audio Excellence, partnered at first by the Magico S3s I reviewed last year, and then with the majestic Magico Q7s.

I also took some time ahead of the Constellation audition to listen to the S3's being driven by the beefy McIntosh Labs kW 1.2 monoblocks, partnered by a McIntosh C2500 pre-amp – components I know well and had heard in the same studio before, to act as a sonic reference point.

Audio Excellence's Klaus Wagner put together an eclectic mix of music, queued up on the Linn DS, to put the Constellations through their paces.

Starting off with 'Sphere' off the Bob James set *Botero*, the Constellations sounded lucid and inviting, opening up the soundstage to create a generous, three-dimensional music image on which the instruments were presented with vivid realism.

James' piano had just the right ring and resonance, soaring above the energetic, robust bass lines and the full, rich acoustic

guitar riffs. I liked the way the system expressed the rapport between the players, and the delicate shifts in intonation that wouldn't be nearly as apparent on a less revealing system.

There was a fullness to the sound that added to the tonal impact of the instruments, which sounded natural and almost organic. The level of fine detail on offer added to this sense of completeness, so that the result was a vivid, full-hued sonic picture.

Claire Martin's version of the David Bowie classic, 'The Man Who Sold The World' struts and sways with tango-laced sassiness, the strings

attacking the melody with real intent, and the bass providing a deep and gorgeous foundation for the music.

The Constellations afforded the music plenty of space, providing a lavish backdrop for Martin's expressive vocals and exquisite phrasing. I enjoyed the immediacy and accessibility of the performance, which made it easy to become completely engrossed in the music.

Ludovico Einaudi's brooding sonic landscapes and melancholy melodies aren't everybody's cup of musical tea, but the Constellations served up this somewhat eclectic fare with all the

VITAL STATS

Virgo II

Frequency response	10 Hz – 200 kHz (±0,5 dB)
THD + N	<0,001% (20 Hz – 20 kHz, @ 2V out)
Inputs	4x XLR stereo, 4x RCA stereo
Outputs	2x XLR stereo, 2x RCA stereo
Dimensions (HxWxD).....	140 x 432 x 400 mm (pre-amp) 127 x 152 x 368 mm (power supply)
Weight	10 kg (pre-amp), 7,1 kg (power supply)

Centaur Stereo

Power output	2x 250 watts (8 ohms, 1 kHz, @ 1% THD + N) 2x 500 watts (4 ohms, 1 kHz, @ 1% THD + N)
Frequency response.....	10 Hz – 100 kHz (±0,5 dB)
THD + N	<0,05% (1 kHz @ rated power)
Inputs	2x XLR stereo, 1x RCA stereo
Outputs	Binding posts
Dimensions (HxWxD).....	280 x 432 x 508 mm
Weight	22,7 kg

PRICE

Virgo II:	R355 000
Centaur Stereo:	R385 000

VERDICT

Superior in design, execution and sonic performance, this pre/power amplifier combination combines truthfulness and authenticity with real, compelling emotive appeal. Top class in every respect

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OUR RATING: 92 / 100





flair and splendour it deserves. They drilled down to the very core of the music, extracting levels of detail and ambience that allowed the richness and the passion of the music to be accurately, compellingly reflected.

Again, tonal range was particularly impressive, with the very low frequencies present on this recording never allowed to dominate, but always rendered to full, tactile effect. And besides, the effortless delivery of the big Centaur ensured that music's flow and pace was perfectly maintained, adding to the overall integrity of the sound.

I have rarely heard Johnny Cash sounding more evocative than on 'Solitary Man' played through this system. The acoustic guitars tingle and sparkle, and are spread across the entire width of the sound-stage, while Cash's typically nonchalant vocals sound particularly poignant.

The Constellations managed to extract both music and emotion with such

conviction, such close attention to nuance and subtlety, that it was impossible not to be drawn into the essence and the heart of the music.

When Klaus swapped out the S3 speaker for the regal Q7s, the Constellations weren't in the least intimidated by these close on R3-million speakers. They continued delivering their musical wares with insight, depth and detail – but the big Magicos were able to make so much more of that harvest: the already prodigious bass became even deeper and more succinct, the stage increased not only in size but dimensional believability, while the tonal intensity seemed even more acute, more visceral than before.

I listened to a lot more music before my time was up, but every track only served to further emphasise the

integrity and realism of this pre/power combination's delivery. Regardless of how well you know a track, be prepared for the Constellations to not only reveal more, but to contextualise that extra info to glorious, riveting effect.

It's not just about uncovering more detail by keeping noise floors ultra low, nor the fact that the Constellations clearly manage to retain and deliver a higher percentage of that fine, almost inaudible information that sets excellence apart from average.

The real appeal of the Constellations is not just their truthfulness and authenticity, born from an ability to portray the scale and the grandeur of a performance, but also the intimacy, the anguish, the excitement – yes ultimately, the soul – of the music.

And once you've heard music reproduced with such intent, nothing else ever sounds the same. Prepare to be starstruck!

Deon Schoeman

