



## Ensemble B-50 "Tiger" integrated amplifier

Guy Lemcoe | Jun 6, 2008 | First Published: May 6, 1991

Psst! Got a minute? I'd like to bend your ears a bit and tell you about a component that'll lift you from the doldrums of audio angst and transport you to the relaxing calm induced through the enjoyment of music. That's what it's done for me, and I'm so excited about it I can't wait to tell you.

Imagine an amplifier which will fill your room with sound yet doesn't require two people to lift and a pallet to sit on. Imagine an amplifier you don't have to sell something to own.

Imagine an amplifier which will look right at home sitting beside your treasured art objects. Imagine an amplifier which, for its price, sets (for my ears and in my system) new standards in midrange warmth, transparency, and definition.

Imagine an amplifier capable of recreating a soundstage so tangible you're not aware of the boundaries of your listening room.

Imagine a "hybrid" amplifier rivaling the best tube designs in the conveyance of music without glare in a palpable space—oozing liquidity, maintaining timbral accuracy, and preserving the music's pulse.

Imagine an amplifier which summons forth bass with pitch definition and body, treble with pristine clarity and air. Imagine an amplifier you can listen to for hours without fatigue, so drawn in to the music that you don't want the experience to end.

Finally, imagine an amplifier which, if you've forsaken LPs, is all you need to control your line-level sources—the money you save by not having to buy a preamp can be spent on *music*. Sound too good to be true? Listen up and learn.

Ensemble, incorporated in 1986 and based in Switzerland, markets and distributes to the international audio world such products as loudspeakers, speaker cable, interconnect, isolation transformers, and amplifiers. The philosophy of the company focuses on the final musical experience as perceived and felt, where "the refinement of each component contributes to a whole whose essence is music itself." As an example of Ensemble's commitment to the music experience, the company commissioned a string quartet from the English composer Stephen Dodgson (which premiered at the Cheltenham Festival played by the Chilingirian String Quartet). In addition, Ensemble distributes selected LPs and CDs from the US, UK, Italy,



and Norway. Future activities for this enterprising company include the making of original recordings.

The Ensemble PA-1 and Reference loudspeakers, manufactured by Pawel Acoustics of Switzerland, are familiar to readers of this magazine. If you've read Dick Olsher's rave review in the June 1990 issue, you know he found them to set new standards for small speakers—the Reference serving as such in Dick's system, the PA-1 not falling far behind. The Ensemble B-50 and B-35 integrated amps, along with other Ensemble electronic components, made their stateside debuts a year ago at *Stereophile's* 1990 High End Hi-Fi Show in New York City. They are designed by Frederic Gautier of Solen and manufactured in the French "Silicon Valley" near Grenoble.

The B-50 "Tiger" amplifier is styled unlike any other in my experience: trapezoidal in shape, it resembles more a stylized spacecraft than an audio component. I like the futuristic look—it never fails to elicit positive comment from my friends, male *and* female. The generous, top-mounted heatsinks angle rearward from the left and right sides of the front panel, forming a central, triangular area which covers the massive toroidal transformer (guaranteed to induce hum into low-level signal sources...make sure they're at least 3' away). The front panel is basic and uncluttered. A smoothly operating volume knob is located in the left corner. On the right are five internally lit pushbuttons for source selection (Tape, CD, Video, Tuner, and Aux) and a rocker-switch power control. That's it.

I wish there was a mono switch, however. I find listening to rechanneled stereo LPs maddening without such a provision. I also miss a balance control, which I find useful for correcting sloppily mixed or mastered recordings. The pushbuttons, which also serve as handy mute controls (just push a button with no signal to achieve silence) are labeled at the factory for the usual sources. I would like to see replaceable labels used here so each user could identify his/her own choices. The amplified and equalized phono signal received from the PA-2 Phono Module (or other unit) is connected to the Aux inputs. The PA-2 receives power from the B-50 via a small, Camac-like connection on the rear panel labeled VA and located just below the left speaker outputs. The B-50 inverts neither line nor phono signal polarity.

The fit and finish of the solid, anodized aluminum chassis is excellent. My review sample was black, but steel-blue is available as well as champagne (on special order). Due to the B-50's shape, the back panel is narrower than the front. Consequently, the six sets of gold-plated, female Tiffanys are placed quite close together. Those audiophiles using the latest and greatest "macho" interconnect should bring it along to their Ensemble dealer for a test fitting. The Ensemble Supraflux interconnect (with superb RCA connectors) fit snugly, with just enough room for maneuvering my not-so-skinny fingers. The low-profile banana sockets (*ie*, holes) for the loudspeaker connections are also closely spaced. Those listeners with garden-hose size speaker cable may be out of luck trying to fit their cable to the amp. There just isn't enough room around the speaker outputs to safely dress the connectors and cable. Ensemble's own Hotline speaker cable, spade-lug-terminated and fitted into gold-plated, 3-way banana plugs, fits cramped but securely. The best solution would be to terminate your speaker cable with male bananas which will fit straight-in to the

female sockets.

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