

Axxess Forté 1, 2 and 3 integrated amplifiers

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Traditionally, when a review focuses on a 'good, better, best' ascending trio of components, the reason for that ascension is pretty straightforward. Sometimes an amplifier or streaming platform will gain extra functionality as you head up the range, taking something rather bare bones and adding more to it as the available budget increases. In other cases, the same basic functionality is augmented by higher power, or more elaborate power supply arrangements. More prosaically, sometimes the ascending models look nicer; making use of finish options that incur costs too high for the basic model to have them.

None of these things apply to the Axxess Forté range of amplifiers. Receiving all three at once is akin to a game of spot the difference designed to induce psychosis on the part of the participant. All three models have the same connectivity. They are based around the same amplifier platform and, were it not for the fact that Axxess has helpfully written the model number on the back of each of them, I would be making no guarantees on putting them back in the correct box. Despite all signs pointing to there being no logical progression at all, Axxess is adamant there is and it has to do with a technical aspect that features across the wider Audio Group Denmark portfolio.

Tesla Coils

All three Forté amplifiers make use of component the company refers to as a 'Tesla Coil'; a description that for those of us who played rather too many computer games in the nineties brings to mind a giant, lightning spewing device that blows things up but in this case refers to another piece of innovative thinking from Tesla. Each coil is a matching pair of coils, wound in opposite directions that results in one coil and one counter coil in close company with one another. At the scale that Axxess is using them inside components, they act as compact step down devices that respond to unwanted high frequency noise and quell it.

These coils are built in four distinct types by Axxess; passive, active, square and zirconium of which the latter three feature in the Forté models. The active coils are intended to suppress unwanted noise on the mains or incoming signal (something that they do more effectively than the passive models. Square coils are similar in function but are built into circuit boards to respond to specific noisy areas. The zirconium coils have a degree of secrecy to them and only feature in the Forté 2 and 3 models which get four apiece. Each level of Forté has more coils so where the Forté 1 has 36 active coils and 72 square coils, the Forté 3 has 108 active and 216 square coils, with the four zirconium units for good measure. »





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» This is partnered with varying number of dither circuits, designed to induce specific noise in a controlled fashion to extract detail beneath the normal noise floor. The combination of controlled noise introduction which can then be suppressed once it has performed the required role is the cornerstone of many Audio Group Denmark products and each level of Forté adds another three of them to the package.

Same amp, three ways

This unique hardware is applied to the same basic amplifier, which makes use of Pascal Class D modules to deliver 100 watts into eight ohms. This receives power from a 'resonant mode power supply' inspired by sister brand Aavik that combines low noise floor with the means to supply high levels of instantaneous power when required. No figure is quoted into four ohms but none of the Fortés »



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» have struggled with the pair of Bowers & Wilkins 702 S3 Signatures that have been on hand for testing.

Power is made available to a digital section built around a custom one-bit DAC that is bespoke to Audio Group Denmark. This claims to 'preserve the analogue signature' of a digital signal while offering fast data processing and insensitivity to noise. Sample rate handling is not specified but seems to be PCM to 384kHz and DSD to 256 along with MQA support. A UPnP module, USB, coaxial and optical inputs make use of this decoding.

At the time of testing (May 2024), the Fortés were not Roon certified but the app strongly hints that certification is planned. Analogue connections are limited to a single RCA input and an RCA preout and there is also a single ended headphone socket. At £4,999 where the Forté 1 enters the market, this feels in keeping with a few designs at the price but it leaves the £10,000 Forté 3 feeling a little more limited. There is an Audio Group Denmark streaming app which offers a solid if unremarkable streaming control point and Tidal and Spotify Connect are supported too. A pair of USB A sockets also allow the Fortés to read content off hard drives.

Identical, but different

As noted right at the beginning, all three amps have an identical appearance (although, thanks to the Forté 3 having a bottom plate made of copper, it's heavier than the other models) and I've oscillated between being less than keen and rather fond of it. On the plus side the Axxess industrial design is unlikely to be confused with anything else. I really like the oversize black on red display which can

be read even some considerable distance away from the amp and the remote handset supplied with all models is genuinely pleasant to use. The overall standard of build is extremely good too (although, as with connectivity, it's more impressive at five grand than it is at ten).

Against this, I dislike not having direct input selection on either the remote or the control app and the 370mm width doesn't necessarily fit with other devices but how much this will matter is going to depend on how you choose to partner the Fortés. As a person with a TV in close attendance, I feel that the do it all credentials of the Fortés would have been boosted by HDMI ARC but the optical input will work fine in this role too, albeit with less synchronisation.

Given that the decoding and amplification of the Forté is the same across all the levels it is sold at, it is perhaps just as well that these fundamentals are very good. The 100 watts of available power has been more than enough for any of the listening I've undertaken here the underlying presentation of this amp is very satisfying. Initially tested via the resident Chord Electronics Hugo TT2 and M Scaler via the analogue input, the impression it gives with the title track of Hayden Thorpe's *Diviner* [Domino] is a beautifully judged combination of almost liquid smoothness with sufficient dynamics to convey the life and energy in Thorpe's distinctive falsetto.

Ask the internal DAC to take responsibility for the same files streamed via USB from a Roon Nucleus and arguably the Forté 1 is even more impressive. Given it is a built in module in an amp that costs less than the Chord duo



» does on their own, the performance is very close, with the same compelling feeling of tonal realism and overall levels of refinement that borders on the lush without sounding bloomy or overblown. High quality recordings sound truly opulent while also keeping less than perfect material entirely listenable. Only a reduction in the perceived width and depth of the soundstage really sets it apart.

Deceptively Energetic

The Forté 1 is also deceptively energetic too. The gloriously frenzied *Us* on Regina Spektor's *Soviet Kitsch* [Shoptifter] is gloriously full bodied but the rapid piano refrain and Spektor's rapid vocal delivery absolutely crackle with energy. The Axxess can be slightly disorientating at points because aspects of what it does convince you that the presentation is fundamentally gentle while all the time, it is perfectly capable of going like the clappers. This is further aided by a level of bass extension that, even aided by the Bowers & Wilkins hardly being a retiring wallflower in this regard is deep, controlled and positively seismic at times.

The acid test of Audio Group Denmark's design approach comes when you substitute the Forté 2 and connect exactly the same set of connections to the same back panel and use the usefully calibrated volume control to ensure that precisely the same level is selected. The basic attributes of the amp do not change; you'd be surprised if they did but those additional coils and dither circuits do move things on and getting a handle on what is happening is not the work of a moment. The Forté 1 has nothing you would perceive to be an audible noise floor that would require efforts to lower it. Then you listen to the Forté 2 and, against everything your brain insisted when you listened to the basic amp, there is more signal.

This means that larger scale material like the sumptuous *The Olympians* by the group of the same name [Daptone] is both more vivid and more tangibly real than before. The definition of each individual musician is easier to discern and some of the slight reduction in width I noted from the original DAC is restored as well. Trying to describe in writing an effect that is essentially a unique phenomenon of a single company is vexingly difficult but the closest parallel I can draw is to better phono stages and step up transformers in a signal path. The character of the turntable never changes, you simply resolve more of what it is capable of. Even this description is imperfect because the Forté 2 is every bit as lush and forgiving as before. It is at once, the same amplifier and a better one.

Repeat the same experiment with the Forté 3 and it becomes clear that while Axxess has a unique approach to good/better/best, it is not immune to the law of diminishing returns. This is a better amplifier than the Forté 2; it demonstrates particular gains via the analogue input over and above what the middle tier amp can achieve, making it a more capable device for use with a turntable and there

are further gains in the perception of more signal but they feel like smaller steps forward for which a larger sum of money is required to unlock. This applies to the wider world of high end audio (high end anything in fact) but it's made more apparent by the looks, functionality and general feel of the three amplifiers being otherwise identical.

Sweet Spot

This does mean that for me, the sweet spot of this trio is the Forté 2 but that doesn't quite tell the whole story. I admire that Axxess has built the three levels of Forté because they speak to a different way of building and retailing product that will appeal to many people over and above more traditional approaches. In 2024, functionality alone is not generally enough to create a compelling reason to spend more on something and attempts to differentiate devices on it can feel either wholly artificial or leave some devices hobbled by deliberately omitting features to justify a higher tier. The Forté's go about the idea of added value in a completely different way and, while I think this still results in a sweet spot in the range, I admire that they have taken a design to its logical conclusion in the form of the Forté 3.

The sweet spot for me though is the Forté 2, which sits in the space occupied by devices like the Ayre EX-8 we looked at in issue 231, appealing to people who have used one box systems up until this point. The Forté platform will be every bit as convenient and easy to live with while offering more performance considerably in excess of more terrestrial competition. This is an innovative and technically fascinating approach to the business of making an amplifier but it is one rooted in practicality and user friendliness and that delivers a level of performance that would be very foolish to ignore. +

Technical specifications

Type; Integrated Streaming Amplifier

Digital input: 1 x Toslink optical 1 x BNC S/P DIF 1 x USB B

Output: Pre out – RCA 1 x Speaker output 1 x Headphones – 1/4" jack

Connectivity: 1 x Network – LAN RJ-45 2 x USB A: Max. storage (HDD) capacity 2 TB

Analog input: 1 x Line – RCA

Output Power 2x 100 watts

Dimensions W x D x H: 370 x 420 x 110 mm

Weight: Forté 1: 7.9 kg, Forté 2: 8.1 kg, Forté 3: 9.0 kg

Price: £4,999, \$5,500, €5,000 (Forté 1), £6,999, \$8,000, €7,500 (Forté 2), £9,999, \$11,000, €10,000 (Forté 3)

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