

Hegel Röst network integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

Hegel Music Systems has come up against the Law of Unintended Consequences with its new Röst integrated amplifier. The flexible, easily networkable, white-fronted integrated amplifier came as a result of direct requests from the iChummy North Americans and style-conscious Danes, and it has sold extremely well everywhere in the world... except for North America and Denmark! Give people what they want, it seems, and they always want something else.

Those two countries dismissing Röst (pronounced somewhere between 'roost' and 'rust' for non-Scandi ears) are missing a trick, because this is a truly outstanding one box, does-almost-everything device. How much of an 'everything' largely depends on you. If you have a Control4 multiroom system, Röst is one IP address away from seamlessly joining in a two-way conversation with your home. If you have Apple devices, you can connect using AirPlay, or you can use Röst with any sort of network storage, even Sonos Connect.

The 75W per channel Röst is also a distillation of all the best bits of Hegel's recent highlights; it has the latest version of the company's SoundEngine localised feed-forward amplifier design from the H360, and applying that to something very close to the popular H80 amplifier chassis and circuit and running with it. This meets what is basically the DAC and headphone amp stage of the H160, and then mixes its own special sauce into the recipe for connectivity to Ethernet connection for all those next-generation audio sources.

Röst has two potential 'bonuses', which can go either way on the 'bonus' continuum. Living so much of its life through Ethernet, Röst has no need of any kind of wireless connectivity, as it's expected that wireless access occurs upstream at the Wi-Fi router point. By not including its own wireless connectivity, Röst is preventing possible wireless clashes on a network. That all being said, the inclusion of some kind of Bluetooth receiver would be useful, for those short-range signals that won't be transmitted across a network, but are mandatory for all teenagers.

Next, Hegel's built-in digital converters support 24-bit, 192kHz PCM audio files through coaxial, optical, and Ethernet

connections, and only 24/94 through its USB input. Unlike the company's standalone HD12 and HD30 DACs, Röst and the other Hegel integrated amps do not support DSD. This, however, fits well into an Ethernet view of the world, as the ability to stream DSD files across a LAN is not entirely robust. The fact USB is capped at 96kHz probably also fits in with the intended customer base for Röst: this is an audiophile-grade product for people who would never consider themselves audiophiles, rather than those who are prepared to faff around with dedicated drivers for higher resolution audio. In other words, it's the high-performance sounding amplifier for system integrators and the multiroom systems they provide, and it's the one visible box in a more comprehensive system hidden away in a plant room somewhere. That is not to say Röst cannot be used in a more conventional audio setting, but those self-evident strengths are as much about its ease of integration into a larger network as they are as a great sounding amplifier.

Hegel doesn't use what it refers to as 'asynchronous upsampling' in any of its digital processing. Everyone else calls this 'SRC' or 'Sample Rate Conversion'. Hegel avoids this because it folds jitter errors into the 'to analogue' part of a DAC. Instead, Hegel developed its 'syncroDAC' system that works in lock-step with the master clock.

Nevertheless, there are going to be people who view products as a simple numbers game, and will skip over Röst because they see figures like '24/96' and '75W'. This is perhaps something Hegel has always had to deal with, however; as those who listen, not those who obsess over numbers, buy the H80. I can already see the comments section of our website boiling over with the self-righteous purchase avoiders puffing up their chests to tell the world, "No DSD... I'm out!" once again. But here's the thing: even if Röst did support DSD, they would still be 'out' because it wouldn't be the right grade of DSD, it doesn't support MQA, isn't Roon Ready, on any one of a rolling series of 'next gen' options that help them limit the field to precisely no products on the market. Yes, in fairness, I would like to see Röst have some kind of Roon and TIDAL integration, and maybe have ▶





- ▶ the option of greater than 24/96 through its USB input. But I'm the kind of audio nerd that Röst is only tangentially aimed toward.

Physically, the two big differences between Röst and previous integrated amps by Hegel are the display and the finish. The display is an OLED design and an order of magnitude more sophisticated than the big blue LED read-out of previous Hegel designs (in fairness, previous Hegel designs didn't need as sophisticated a display, as source and volume were all that was needed).

The white finish was tougher to implement than it looks. Hegel wanted Röst to have a modern and elegant appeal, but not something that will quickly turn to that kind of dirty yellow when white plastic meets heat, sun, and age. It also wanted to create something that didn't have the texture of old orange peel. Ultimately, Hegel went ol' school and used thick white paint over the aluminium and steel chassis. This created its own set of idiosyncrasies to resolve, but resolved they were, and the overall look is actually really sophisticated and a world away from the black or silver finishes common to most audio electronics. I'm not going to play the 'battle of the sexes' card here, but it's fair to say that the relatively limited set of amp colour options available to most amp makers does make a lot of audio electronics hidden from view, and Röst is one of the rare exceptions.

This could be a review of two amplifiers in one. The first is the conventional audio amplifier. The second is the amplifier designed to sit at the sharp end of a network connected and possibly multi-room concept designed by system integrators. But, in reality, the integration part extends well into Röst's core, and as a result, it behaves like a Hegel amplifier, with benefits.

In fact, it behaves like a Hegel amplifier with all the latest technology in place. This is more profound than you might first think, because it makes plugging an Ethernet-connected audio system no more threatening than hooking up a CD

player. The advantage – to real-world users and system integrators alike – is it's not the kind of network-connected device that requires a lot of cross-referencing of the manual. Control4 installers simply look to the website for the relevant IP control codes for toggling power, operating source control, volume level, mute, and – if need be – resetting Röst. There is also a YouTube video showing how to connect it into a Control4 network. It can be controlled with the supplied remote, runs on conventional IR codes for those wanting a more customised one-controller system... and in all other ways acts like an amplifier with a DAC. Like the best in consumer electronics, Röst can never be 'future proofed' (because we don't know what the future will bring – smart lawns and interactive e-socks notwithstanding), but it is about as 'now-proofed' as it's possible to get.

All this would be as nothing for the audiophile if it didn't sound good, but fortunately Hegel has a reputation for making fine-sounding amplifiers, and Röst does not undermine that reputation. In fact, if anything, Röst is currently the best sounding of all Hegel amps, unless you need the power of the H360 and beyond. More to the point, the knee-jerk need for extra power might not be as important as you think, unless you use a specifically current-hungry loudspeaker design, because I have heard Röst effortlessly drive loudspeakers it has absolutely no right being able to drive, like Magicos. And it drives them well. Of course, more real-world system partners exist (Hegel often demonstrates with KEF, and anything from LS50 to Blade 2 would be a fine combination). I went with the more extreme test and used Röst with the Wilson Audio Duette Series 2; a speaker worth roughly 10x the cost of the amplifier. While I wouldn't recommend such a combination on price-balance grounds, in terms of performance it sang sweetly. I also used Hegel's own excellent Mohican CD player, Airplay, and connected it to my Naim UnitiServe-fronted UPnP network: nothing phased Röst at all. ▶

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▶ The joy of Röst – and perhaps what marks it out best as a ‘now-proofed’ product – is that it is exceptionally forgiving of signal, yet doesn’t do this at the expense of excellent performance; it all comes down to the file quality. Airplay is the great arbiter, here – the ‘Mastered for iTunes’ version of the title track of *Rennen* by producer Christopher Taylor’s alter ego SOHN [4AD] is fairly typical of the kind of material this might play – because it can so easily sound thin, nasal, bright, and reedy. But through Röst, these elements are held at bay to let the music out.

When it comes to playing fine recordings – say, the ripped-to-WAV CD of Joni Mitchell’s ‘Court And Spark’, played by Herbie Hancock and Norah Jones on Hancock’s 2007 album *River: The Joni Letters* [Verve] – Röst gives the music its chance to shine, with outstandingly open dynamics and imaging, and a tonality that is entirely free from artifice.

Hegel’s signature detailed, slightly forward presentation, with very tight, deep, and ordered bass is still in full effect, but placed side-by-side with the H80, there is slightly more refinement and order to the sound. Not a massive step forward – the H80 already scores highly on the ‘refinement’ and ‘order’ stakes – but there is a small, but distinct improvement upon what came before. Again staying with the good recordings, playing several *Contrapunctus* by J.S. Bach from *Bach: The Art of Fugue* played by the Emerson Quartet [DG] through CD, there is a greater authority and sense of ‘in the room’ presence through Röst, which – like the H80 before it – accounts for the ‘fighting above its weight class’ performance.

There’s one last aspect of Hegel’s Röst that deserves a lot of credit: that headphone socket is no afterthought. It’s a fine expression of the Hegel sound, remastered for in-head use. It drives surprisingly difficult loads extremely well, doesn’t scream ‘leading edge detail’ at the listener, is refined, sophisticated, and makes a sound that you might expect from a more esoteric dedicated headphone amplifier. Granted, if you are a true headphonista, the filigree resolution and absolute detail you get from a top-class standalone system out-performs Röst, but for the long game of just sitting down and listening to music, the overall balance of the Hegel’s headphone output is easier to live with.

I confess I was struggling to find a way of describing Hegel’s Röst without using the ‘audio Swiss Army Knife’

phrase already well in circulation. Jet lag helped and I found the answer at about 4am as I jolted awake in a hotel room in Las Vegas: MacGyver! And I apologise profusely to the people in the adjacent room for shouting ‘MacGyver!’ out loud at 4am (I think they might have thought it was my safe word). But, the Hegel Röst fits that ‘MacGyver’ concept well, although fortunately it’s mercifully free from the late-1980s fashion sense of the original. It really is a ‘do anything’ kind of amplifier that – armed with little more than the tools it comes with out of the box – can work easily with absolutely any music source, and integrates with surprisingly sophisticated home network or home automation systems with equally surprising ease. If you think audio deserves to break free of the Man Cave, or even if you don’t and simply want a damn good amplifier with network benefits, the Hegel Röst is highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier with network connected DAC

Power output: 2 × 75 W into 8 Ohms

Minimum load: 2 Ohms

Analog inputs: 1 × balanced (XLR), 2 × unbalanced (RCA)

Digital inputs: 1 × coaxial S/PDIF, 3 × optical S/PDIF, 1 × USB, 1 × Network

Line level output: 1 × unbalanced variable (RCA)

Frequency response: 5 Hz–100 kHz

Signal-to-noise ratio: More than 100 dB

Crosstalk: Less than -100 dB

Distortion: Less than 0.01% @ 50 W 8 Ohms 1kHz

Intermodulation: Less than 0.01% (19 kHz + 20 kHz)

Damping factor: More than 2000 (main power output stage)

Dimensions (H×W×D): 8cm (10cm w/feet) × 43cm × 31cm

Weight: 12kg

Price: £2,200

Manufactured by: Hegel Music Systems

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