



Review

Symphonic Line RG14 Edition

Integrated amplifier with remote control,
high quality MM&MC phono inputs
& high quality headphone socket

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An integrated amplifier this time around and it's the RG14 Edition from a less well known company that goes by the name of Symphonic Line. They are a German company that was started in 1984 by High End Society Pioneer Rolf Gemein. His products come with a whiff of exclusivity, with every single product being made by hand in Germany, piece by piece until we have the final product. There is something about the company I really like; it's hard to say why, but just looking at the website and the designs of their products I find there to be a real honesty about what they are trying to achieve. The website is basic, and with many errors but somehow this makes me feel like they aren't yet ANOTHER company with a bigger marketing budget than a research or manufacturing budget. The chassis of all these integrated amps are the same general design too, only varying in colour choices and internal components, which has got to save money. Nothing about the standard design aesthetics are angular, colourful or even very interesting in design, just a rather generic sized box, very German. Ok, ok they do offer a 100% chrome finish but I'm going to ignore that if you don't mind, I can't think of anything worse! Anyway what I'm getting at is that there is a sense of innocence here, I sense real passion with this company, not just a business, but a love of the music.

The RG14 Edition is the same as the RG14 in every way except the fact that the Edition has an MM/MC phono-stage, a remote control for volume and a 450 VA mu-metal transformer as opposed to 420. In the UK you pay an extra £450 for the 'Edition' which takes the cost from £2400 up to £2850 with the standard finish, and £3415 if you want the chrome... Prices seem to have gone up over the years as upgrades have been made to capacitors etc but here in the UK, [Ikon Audio Consultants.com](http://IkonAudioConsultants.com) tell me these are the latest prices from them. We will take their word as well as they are the go to place to purchase one of these. General specs are pretty promising with a 100W per channel into 8 Ohms and a damping factor of 300 which is claimed to control any driver. We have a listed weight of 24kg which is pretty darn heavy for a box this size I have to say. Measurements are pretty normal, 450 x 100 x 380 mm so nothing that's going to result in a rack change. We have the phono input as I mentioned MM or MC switchable. We also have only single ended RCA inputs for CD, Tuner, AUX, and Tape. Something we don't have here is no tone controls or any way of EQ-ing the sound. Rolf clearly has an idea of what he considers correct, and you cannot adjust it. For me, that's great, neither Sonny nor I ever use EQ or tone controls, but I understand there are people that do so it's worth noting.



Something else you get with the RG14 is a headphone output, now usually when headphone outputs are included on Hi-Fi gear they are pretty tragic. This isn't the case here though and I will talk a little more about it later. Yes it gets its own section! It's that impressive!

As German As They Come:

At first sight, its boxy black chassis looks solid, the rather thick 10mm front aluminium panel is beautifully cut with clean sharp edges and the slightly larger profile of the front is a nice touch. The solidity of the whole product is great; you really can't fault the materials and craftsmanship of the chassis. I will mention that up close the front panel and main body are different. The front panel is lovely brushed aluminium in black while the main body is more of a spray paint finish, both fine in their own right but they are different.

Something of varying importance to people is knob feel, you all know what I'm talking about and I have to conclude I really like the way the pots are engineered on the RG14. To power on it's a one-step click which is the same difficulty as all the other digital step knobs such as the input selector for consistency and quality throughout. The analogue volume pot is larger than the others and it is smooth and sturdy. All the knobs are matt silver and feel of really good quality and the bevelled edges are well engineered and consistent that can only mean top marks here from me.



My first point of uncertainty about the design is the logo and labels on the front panel. All writing on the front is recessed and silver like a deep etch which looks to have been done by some sort of CNC equipment so no worries there.





My only quibble is that the calligraphic symphonic line logo isn't continued to the knob labels or product name, it just bugs me. The combination of upper and lower case calligraphy and block capitals just confuses me a little, and I have had people comment on how it looks a bit "cheap". Having said this, while on a rack you probably won't notice and I can't see it being a reason for someone to not buy the amp.

Moving on to the rear of the product, here we have all the normal RCA connections, no space-age unnecessary attempts at improving the connections, just straight up sturdy RCA's, an earth, some very sturdy high quality speaker terminals and a little switch to choose between MM/MC connection.



Something else I noticed when plugging in the Audiomica speaker cables I use was that the banana plugs weren't a tight fit; they were VERY easy to pull out and push in. I also tried some of my dad's vintage Audioquest snakes he has on his system and the bananas on those are also pretty loose. I must stress I never had any issues with cutting out or anything like that; I just noticed it wasn't as tight as I was used to.

Overall the build is pretty faultless, a bit of a tank by all accounts but seriously, what else did you expect from a product hand made in Germany?!



How About a Little Performance:

The amp is a bit of a bruiser; to me it sounds more than 100wpc. Seriously right, you get this thing past 10 'o' clock on the pot and you are loud, even in a big room you are pushing it, it's not just the volume though, the handle it has on drivers is the thing that impresses. There is a firm grasp of the power so everything remains composed and unchanged from the characteristics of the amp at low volumes. It doesn't become 'shouty' or edgy it remains in control and never sounds out of breath. Having said all this, it's really not one of those amps where you feel the need to play up loud to get the best out of your musical experience. The RG14 has an effortless dynamism that has the immediate attack capable of shocking and surprising as well as being able to pick up the subtle rises and falls of the track with control and accuracy. It's a strange quality to understand but when comparing to other amps they sound 'steppy' when building to a crescendo whereas with the RG14 it's smooth, realistic and musical in comparison. We also have great body to the sound which combined with an excellent timbre, makes for a fantastic tonal balanced that you cannot help but fall in love with and especially with classical music I have found this area to be a triumph.

The outcome of these initial impressions is a really musical, involving sound with an emotive engagement that puts you in the music. One of those bits of electronics that gets you sitting listening to an album all the way through, without even realising you've just lost an hour or so. Let's go into a little more detail though....

The Bottom



I mentioned the fullness to the sound a moment ago and that is a characteristic continued into the lower end of the spectrum. It's an area that has some really nice qualities but obviously these won't be for everyone. What I'm talking about is the fact that there is a good amount of bass quantity not overblown and not too light but specifically it's the decay that might divide. If you are someone that loves a really fast attacking and super agile bass this might not be your favourite amp. What we have instead is a slightly slower decay and a really deep extension which stays definitive and in line. This slightly slower decay is a great addition and attributing factor to the musical nature of the amp. Bass guitars are a prime example of the fluidity and texture this amp offers in the bass. Plucks on the strings don't sound restricted or held back, it's a looser state of affairs but seriously, I don't mean sloppy or muddled it just seems to let the instruments and bass notes speak for themselves in a really lovely way. The dynamic nature is strong in this section and the ability to hit you hard with a big old mid bass thump is complimented by great extension, I mentioned it a second ago but I find that it has the completing factor to a system, with bass extension like this I also find you are much less genre specific which makes this amp pretty versatile too.

The great bass timbre, extension and freeness given to the bottom end by a steady, controlled decay mean that many will love the bottom end of this amp. Having said this people that prefer a quicker punchier low end will admire the RG14 for what it does but might not want it in their system.

The Middle

The RG14 continues to impress with an open and inviting mid-range. This is a lovely combination with a smooth and warm sound which you don't normally hear with solid state amplifiers. Usually you would get openness but with a colder thinner sounding vocal, not the case here. We get a lovely texture to vocals which are combined with the full bodied sound to give a wonderful tone, this applies to strings and brass too, great timbre which makes any genre a little bit more enjoyable for me. What I enjoy most of all though is something I don't hand out lightly and that's an emotive connection. Here is where you can get sucked in and dissolved by the RG14, it's very easy to get lost when you have an emotional experience with music and I personally find this amp to convey it in spades. Some people will prefer a more detailed and crisp performance than the Symphonic Line and fair play to them, I usually prefer that sound too, but I've got to be honest, I love the connection and musical involvement I get from this luscious, musical sound.

Vocals are well positioned too, well centred with good separation from any bleed or influence from elsewhere. The whole stage is imaged well to be honest, you can be assured that even on thicker recordings nothing gets muddled or conjoined if not intended. We have great height, good depth and a generally really well presented performance, this is if you partner the RG14 with equally capable gear though, but I shall speak more on that later.

The Top

There isn't much more to say other than we have a nice presence and we never have any sibilance, treble continues the musical nature and I have never been in a position where it's harsh or screechy. The RG14 does have impressive precision and clarity up top, lots of amplifiers do, but it's just so effortless and in such a connected way to the music, nothing feels artificially sparkly or shimmery, its well-articulated too, no splashy "woolly" treble that sometimes comes with amps that have some of



the positives of this one. If I had to pick a criticism, it is a little relaxed and I personally prefer a little more treble presence than this, however on my LS50's it's a lovely combination, they like a big powerful amp and the slightly reserved treble does bring them away from a more analytical bookshelf towards a musical one. It's a combination has given good synergy that I've really enjoyed in the treble.

The Phono and 'Edition'

Is the 'Edition' version worth the extra expense for the MC stage, and remote control? Well it's difficult to say, because I personally wouldn't care if I had a remote control or not especially as it solely controls volume, no input selector or power on. In terms of the MC phono stage, I don't own a MC stylus so I obviously wouldn't justify the extra expense, however what I can tell you is that the MM stage is pretty darn good which was a huge surprise. In my experience the integrated amps tend to have a quality that hovers around average at best. This really isn't the case though, we have a lovely open presentation that's as effortless and musical as you would like. We continue all the best characteristics of the other inputs and it's really nice to have a really capable phono-stage within such a capable amp, if analogue is your game it really is a one box symphony.

Transparency and Matching



Right here we come to the more difficult section. The signature of this amp usually lends itself to a fairly forgiving sound... not here though. You really have to feed this amp with good quality stuff for it to be as enjoyable as it can be. Vinyl tends to sound fantastic and so do fairly well recorded FLAC files but if you throw a below par recording of any format, you will notice. It's important to feed this



amp as well as it deserves, but it goes further than that, you need to make sure your partnering equipment is good enough too. I found that it would show up weaker points in your system, but the amp itself does a good job of disappearing. Synergy really is important; you really have to keep your equipment happy. The Amphion Argon 1 was an extremely successful pairing with a fantastically involving 'full' sounding experience that really defied my expectations of such a modestly sized speaker. The LS50's were allowed to shine too with a real dynamism and bags of detail which showed why this £800 speaker is so well regarded.

An important thing to remember is to try and avoid pairing less demanding speakers with this amp. It throws a bit of a weight at your speakers that defies its 100Wpc spec. I've heard this amp in lower spec systems just to see if it would bring life to it but it didn't, it revealed every fault and didn't sound as I knew it could, it didn't work. The combination with the PSB Imagine T was an example of a pairing that didn't cut the mustard, with the PSB's sounding flawed to say the least. I also took it to a family member's house to try in his system and other than telling us just how good the phono-stage was, it pulled apart his vintage Royd speakers, so much in fact that he bought a new pair of Focal's a couple of weeks later. But seriously if you feed this amp well and you give it some good speakers, you won't be disappointed with what it can throw up, believe me.



Headphone Out

Much like the phono issue, loudspeaker amplifiers tend to have an absolutely horrid headphone out but the Symphonic Line has a bloody good crack and it doesn't do a bad job at all. We have a pretty good handle on what a headphone amp should be about. It's not an afterthought; it should be given



the attention it deserves if it is going to be put into the product. The HD800's sounded smoother and not at all bright or splashy like they stereotypically sound on poor quality headphone amps. The RG14 headphone amp has good depth and a really nice musical nature; it is similar to the sound of the loudspeaker amp, just with a lack of a little detail and not quite the level of finesse.

The combination with the ZMF Master Model was very comfortable and one of the least fatiguing combinations I have heard. The symphonic seemed to have a much better grip on the planar driver than I was expecting too. A little more detail and refinement and we would be talking about a very acceptable headphone amp indeed. Nevertheless, it's a great addition to the amp that for what it is it can't really be complained about; it's definitely a worthwhile, well executed addition to a very capable amp.

To Conclude:

With prices starting at just £2400 in the UK, the RG14 is a real glimpse into high end integrated amps. If you have a great source and set of suitably oomph hungry speakers then this amp will bring you closer to your music, it will make you feel involved and connected. It makes you want to get your vinyl collection spinning and you can't help but get lost in the music. If you prefer a clinical, analytical sound with super sparkle up top then it's not going to be for you, but for a musical experience it is very good. It's really impressed me how everything it sets out to do and be, gets done really well and you can't really ask for more than that.

Manufacturer: www.symphonic-line.com

UK Distribution: www.IkonAudioConsultants.com