



State Of The Art

Without a real headphone amplifier listening to music via headphones is only half the fun. In edition 4/2012 we introduced the Burson Audio HA-160D. Now the Australians go one better and with Soloist and Conductor present two more highlights.

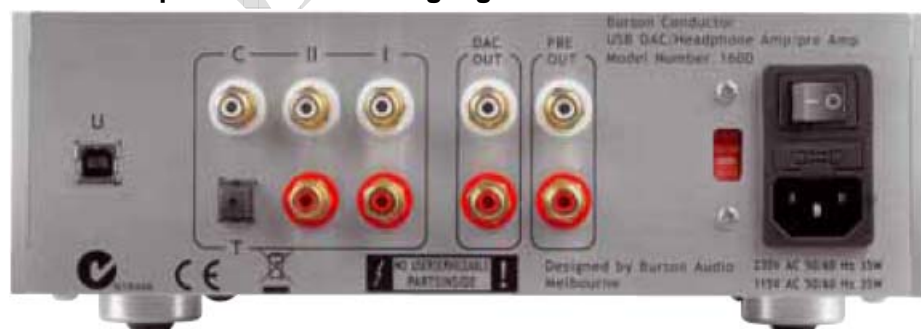


Illustration: Conductor with additional digital inputs, unbalanced USB port and analog DAC pre-out

Often headphones are “only” connected to the respective headphone jacks of a power amplifier. However, there are

special amplifiers, which are exactly tuned to the requirements of the converters in the headphones. Already in edition 4/2012 we introduced the excellent sounding Burson Audio HA-160D, which can even be used as a pre-stage for hi-fi equipment and as a high-quality DAC.

Burson Audio Soloist and Conductor

The small, highly motivated team of engineers in Melbourne, Australia, previously inspired the experts with excellent sounding components as a developer of profound circuitries, such as power adapters, discrete operation amplifiers and DAC boards. Obviously the success with the HA-160D has inspired the Australians to develop two more headphone amps. Both models – Soloist and Conductor – have been refined in several acoustic-relevant details. While the Conductor as the “larger” device besides pre-stage and power section for the headphones provides an additional, powerful DAC, the digital section is missing in the “smaller” Soloist. Besides DAC and sales price both units are based on the same circuitries. But why is a special headphone amplifier needed? Although, contrary to speakers, headphones also need high voltages, due to their high impedance of approx. 30–600 ohms (speakers have 4–8 ohms) only little power is needed. A power amplifier primarily is to provide higher amperage and is respectively designed; headphone jacks generally are neglected and branched off via a voltage divider with high damping. On the other hand, both Bursons process signals with significantly lower noise and distortion, since their special, discrete designed Class-A amplifier circuits are optimized for headphone impedances. This circuit as well as the entire power adapter was completely reworked compared to the HA-160D and now provides higher dynamics with lower noise background. For volume control Burson Audio further prefers an expensive, highly precise fine-adjustable rotary control, which controls the volume via a network of selected, individual (!) resistors. Channel synchronization with maximum $\pm 0.5\text{dB}$ deviation is the result; values of which even good power amplifiers can only dream. New for Soloist and Conductor is also a three-stage switch to select the basic gain. In this way both low-volume and louder headphone models can be operated within the optimum adjustment range. Both models come with analog inputs (3 for Soloist, 2 for Conductor) and pre-stage outputs; in addition the Conductor provides three digital inputs (optical, coax and USB).



Zwei kleine Tipptaster in der massiven Gehäusefront dienen zur Quellenwahl und Einstellung der Grundverstärkung des Kopfhörer-Verstärkers

Getrennte Stromversorgung für die digitale und analoge Sektion. Vorne im Bild: der mit selektierten Einzelwiderständen bestückte Lautstärke-Drehwähler



len Abweichung von $\pm 0.5\text{ dB}$ ist die Folge

Two small push-buttons on the solid front panel are used to select the source and setting the basic gain of the headphone amplifier

Separate power supply for the digital and analog sections. On the front panel: the rotary volume control with selected individual resistors

Conductor DAC Both headphone amplifiers are elaborately crafted. Extremely solid, low-resonance metal housings made of solid aluminum provide an adequate home for the elaborate electronics. In the larger housing of the Conductor in addition a DAC board with an ESS SABRE32, possibly the best and most expensive converter, resides. In this way digital data from PC or music streamer can be directly sent via USB, Toslink or coax input to the Conductor. Processing of digital data (max 24-bit/196 kHz, via USB also unbalanced mode) in the converter takes place on extremely high level; the native power supply of the digital section goes just about without saying. In addition to its digital and analog inputs the Conductor comes with one DAC pre-out and master-Pre-out and therefore acts perfectly as a high-quality pre-amplifier, external DAC and headphone amplifier at the same time.

Practice Six kilograms of live weight for the Conductor and still 4.5 kg for the Soloist, perfect workmanship on the solid metal housing and the rich “clacking” of the handy volume control make it plain without any doubt that Burson Audio is serious about Conductor and Soloist. A view inside the headphone amplifier shows immense circuitry efforts for all components; only extremely high-quality and selected components are used. Our listening test with an Audeze LCD-2, a Sennheiser HD800 and Beyerdynamic DT990 opened downright new dimensions of listening to music via headphones. With unbelievably precise spatial representation the headphones nearly lose all “in-head localization”, the music plays on a virtual stage in front of the listener. The finest details are meticulously processed by Soloist and Conductor, complex sound structures are arranged to a transparent image and all is merged to a harmonious, emotional and sweeping performance. Both models also share the crisp dynamics, the clear and precise low bass as well as airy brilliance. While Soloist and Conductor for analog signals play on the same high level, Conductor caps it all off at digital input. With a pinch cleaner, clearer and even more love to detail it plays back music on cloud nine – fascinating!

Conclusion With the new Soloist and Conductor Burson Audio has surpassed itself: Better sounding headphone amplifiers can hardly be found on this planet. Both offer unbelievably precise, delicate and at the same time dynamic reproduction, establishing new, never heard musical details. Soloist and Conductor are of excellent workmanship and thanks to sufficient connectivity can even be used as fully adequate pre-amplifiers for the hi-fi system. In addition Conductor is an absolute universal talent with its reference class DAC. Superior listening to music via headphone is downright ennobled with the Burson Audio Soloist or Conductor – both receive unlimited reference status.

Michael Voigt



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Headphone amplifier/DAC

Price	approx. 1,770 Euro
Marketing	HiFi Tuning, Berlin
Phone	030 3966741
Internet	www.hifi-tuning.com

Features

Dimensions (W x H x D)	255 x 80 x 265mm
Weight	6 kg
Versions	brushed aluminum, 24-bit/196 kHz DAC

Connectivity

2 x RCA, 1 x USB, 1 x Coax, 1 x Toslink
2 x stereo pre-out (RCA)

Burson Audio "Conductor"

Rating

Short and sweet:

- ⊕ Reference class DAC
- ⊕ discrete designed volume control

Sound	70%	1+
Lab	15%	1+
Practice	15%	1+

	Referenzklasse	
	Preis/Leistung	Note
	gut - sehr gut	1+

HiFi Test

TV HIFI

Reference class

Price/performance	Score
good - very good	1+



Headphone amplifier

Price	approx. 1,000 Euro
Marketing	HiFi Tuning, Berlin
Phone	030 3966741
Internet	www.hifi-tuning.com

Features:

Dimensions (W x H x D)	255 x 80 x 180mm
Weight	4.5 kg
Versions	brushed aluminum

Connectivity

3 x RCA, 1 x stereo pre-out

Burson Audio "Soloist"

Short and sweet:

- + three level presets
- + discrete designed volume control

Sound	70%	1+
Lab	15%	1+
Practice	15%	1.0

	Referenzklasse	
	Preis/Leistung	Note
	sehr gut	1+

HiFi Test

TV HIFI

Reference class

Price/performance	Score
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Very good	1+
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