

hardware review

Burson Soloist Voyager headphone amp packs a punch

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Burson Audio Soloist Voyager headphone amplifier

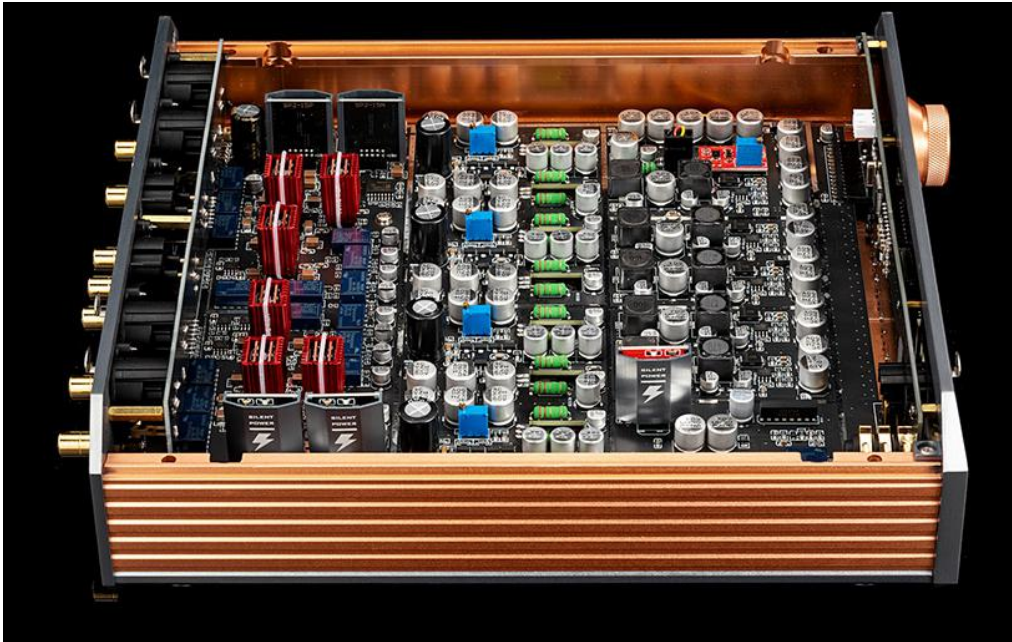
The days when it would have been fair to characterise Burson as one of the best-kept secrets in the UK and European audio scene are rapidly receding in the rear-view mirror as the Australian brand steadily gains traction here. Burson was founded 28 years ago and now from its design and manufacturing facility in Melbourne offers a range of headphone and speaker amplifiers, some with integrated DACs, as well as plug-in discrete op-amps for studio and high-end domestic audio.

Burson's Soloist 3XGT headphone amplifier and its Timekeeper 3XGT monoblock amplifiers have been favourably evaluated by a number of European reviewers – me included. Indeed, I liked the Soloist so much when I reviewed it in 2020 that I bought one and until recently used it as my reference headphone amplifier. The Timekeepers too would have found a place on my kit table had I need at the time for compact but strongly-performing Class A monoblocks. Both of those Burson products punched above their respective price-points.

The Burson house sound – not apparent to me when I evaluated the Soloist 3XGT back in 2020 but now, after hearing four different products from the company and nine from other headphone amplifier brands – is plain to hear. The sonic aesthetic is what some might want to call valvy. It is still unmistakably solid state, but it does tip more towards the warmer end of the spectrum than some of the alternatives at or around a similar price point. Burson's preference for Class A operation is the major contributor here.

True to form, the newly-launched Soloist Voyager headphone amplifier is also Class A, drawing a not inconsiderable 80 Watts from the wall socket whether it is playing music or simply idling. Into a load of 16 Ohms the Voyager outputs a maximum of 10 Watts, putting it among the more muscular dedicated headphone amplifiers currently available.

Alert readers having absorbed the power statistics in the previous paragraph will expect the Voyager to get warm, and so it does, the top of the chassis becoming hot to the touch – but not dangerously so – after 15 minutes or so of high output operation. There are no cooling fins on show; the aluminium casework acts as a unitary radiator and is augmented by an internal cooling fan that blows hot air out of a slot in the rear panel. Some potential buyers dismissed the Soloist 3XGT – which by the way remains in Burson's product line-up – because it too uses an internal cooling fan. I never found the fan in my own sample to be intrusive and the unit in the Voyager is quieter still, to the point of being undetectable.



The circuit of the Voyager and that of the current version of the Soloist 3XGT have a lot in common. Both are dual-differential dual-mono affairs using Burson's own plug-in discrete op-amps and silent-power modules, the latter an electrically much quieter alternative to the off-the-shelf regulators more generally used by the audio industry. The Voyager is available in two versions; standard and deluxe, the latter equipped with a higher-grade wall-wart and enhanced op-amps and silent power modules. All three items are available separately so that owners of the standard Voyager can bring theirs up to deluxe spec simply by using the better wall-wart and, after lifting the Voyager's lid, swapping out the plug-in op-amps and power modules.

In common with many alternative headphone amplifiers, the Voyager can be used as a system preamplifier. There are balanced and single-ended line stage outputs on the rear panel along with a sub-out RCA socket. On the front panel are a balanced 4-pin XLR socket, a 6.3mm single-ended socket, and what I had assumed to be a pentaconn socket but turns out to be an input for a gaming headset with microphone. On a high-end headphone amplifier? Don't ask me. I guess it must be an Aussie thing.

The Susvara factor

I did nearly all of my listening using a borrowed Susvara headphone thanks to the remarkable tolerance of HiFiMan's UK representative Mark Ramos. Since the Susvara arrived a few months





ago I've tried it on seven different amplifiers and can say that its reputation for being hard to drive is rather more apocryphal than factual. Yes, to really hit its low-end and tonal density straps it requires more current than most other headphones, but many contemporary amplifiers provide the necessary get-up-and-go, Voyager included. At the Susvara's 60 Ohms impedance the Voyager delivers a stout 260 mA and 15.5Volts, and to characterise as emphatic the way that Susvara responds to such a juicing would be to understate the case.

Some readers might be surprised to hear that just like them, most reviewers – this one included – are on a journey of discovery. It's true that reviewers will likely have experience of a far greater range of audio kit over a given year, and thereby be able to offer a more widely referenced view, but that view can be challenged by fresh experiences just as much as it can for regular consumers who encounter a new and unfamiliar product. That's why on the rare occasions when I am pressed by a reader to name my favourite product in a particular category, I always preface my recommendation with the word 'today'. Next month I might have heard a product that upends my thinking.

I mention this by way of noting that a couple of years ago on these very pages I praised the Benchmark HPA4. Now, with the benefit of hindsight and having had a good number of similarly aspiring alternatives through my hands, I have a different perspective. While the HPA4 is an impressive engineering achievement, delivers a deathly quiet background and therefore a high level of detail, it counters this major plus with a comparative deficit in terms of dynamic expression. Some buyers are clearly not bothered by it, but I was.

The Burson Soloist 3XGT that I reviewed sometime after the HPA4 boasted measurements nowhere near as quiet, but it caused a re-evaluation of my hierarchy of reference products, grabbing my ears with a level of dynamic expression and engagement that just sounded – it has to be said – much more like live music.

Imperfect

The Soloist 3XGT was not without flaws either though. In my review I criticised the user interface that did not allow the white OLED display to be turned off for nighttime listening. I also pointed out that the omission of a balance control for headphone listening (the line stage output does allow channel balance to be altered) was strange given that most if not all of the competition enable non-symmetrical hearing to be adjusted for.

The Voyager has almost the same physical dimensions as the Soloist 3XGT, the same mix of inputs and outputs, and a practically identical user interface and display. Burson has remedied the over-sensitive menu selection and volume control that annoyed some buyers of the early Soloist 3XGT, and the display is now blue, rather than penetrating white, but it still cannot be turned off. The menu item that might be assumed to turn off the display actually causes the Voyager to completely shut down after 20 minutes of inactivity in order to save energy. True, you'll not be looking at a bright display, but you'll not be listening to music either. The Voyager also doesn't allow headphone output balance to be adjusted, even though most users still don't have symmetrical hearing.

Perhaps Burson doesn't want to pay its Indian I/O coding contractor to make the necessary changes, or perhaps fixes would involve disruptive hardware tweaks. Whatever the reason, these are odd mis-steps, especially on what is billed as a flagship model. I'll also mention the 4-pin XLR output socket that Burson still specifies. In contrast to outputs used on many competing

Burson Soloist Voyager

products, the Voyager socket (and that of the Soloist 3XGT) is the capturing variety that requires a latch to be pressed downwards in order to release the attached headphone cable. There's a reason why non-latching sockets are a better idea and it's to do with the human propensity for inattention. A knock at the front door, a ringing phone in the next room, a shout from the kitchen. Suddenly the cable is momentarily at full stretch before the headphone is wrenched to the floor and the soldered joints in the cable give way. It happens.



The Voyager may be at heart a development of the Soloist 3XGT, and retain what I regard as three of its unnecessary flaws, but I don't consider any of them to be a deal-breaker. The sonic performance gains over the Soloist 3XGT are significant, lending justification to the higher price.

Sound quality

I suspect that the Voyager's chosen price point – as near as dammit the same as the Benchmark HPA4 – is no coincidence. However, the Burson provides a very different listening experience. On its middle of three gain settings (five Watts), and with the volume control at around one third of its travel, the review sample Voyager took the direct 6 Volt balanced output of a Mola Mola Tambaqui DAC and gave a master-class in dynamic expression, with startling slammy energy throughout the audio band and at the lower end a satisfying degree of depth and power. I then dialled the Tambaqui's output back to 2 Volts and put the Voyager on its high gain (10 Watts) setting. It's not my usual musical fare, but the Voyager tempted me to cue-up *Never Mind*, the opening track on Infected Mushroom's album *Army of Mushrooms*. Skull-rattling, brain-pounding. Choose your adjective. The Voyager and Susvara combination delivered more than sufficient weight, slam and tonal texture to surely delight the most extreme bass-head.

The Voyager is about more than grunt though. While its noise floor of 116dB, compared to the 3XGT's 112dB, is hardly standard-setting, it is enough to allow the Voyager to transcribe a level of subtle detail that is right up there with the best. The Burson house sound, as already noted, is on the rich side, and the Voyager sounds less open and airy than some of the competition, seeming to offer a smaller helping of the top-end information that allows us to discern specificity and thereby more easily buy into the illusion of a sound stage. However, after extended listening I stopped fretting about the sonic balance and just enjoyed things for the way they were. The fact is that the top-end detail *is* there, sound stage too, but the Voyager just turns a bit less of a spotlight on it than some other high-end alternatives. To put this observation in terms of magnitude that students of head-fi might recognise, the difference in top-end voicing here is less significant than that between, say, the Susvara and Audeze's LCD5

flagship headphone. It is the result of legitimate voicing choices, not shortcomings of a technical nature.

The Voyager's textural detail is strong throughout most of the audio band, but having played a wide range of recorded material I did feel that at the low-end it gives away some grip and control. That may be a result of the low damping factor that attends Burson's particular implementation of Class A amplification, but whatever the reason the overall effect is to leave some forms of deep bass sounding powerful, but perhaps not as nuanced as some other amplifiers can achieve.

Voyager verdict

Consumer preferences are wildly variable, but I suspect that the Voyager will have particular, but by no means exclusive appeal, to buyers whose musical diet consists primarily of rock and electronica. If that were my bag I'd almost certainly make the Voyager my go-to amplifier. Here, the Voyager's sonic qualities, its combination of dynamic expression and detail transcription, put most alternatives in its shade.

Buyers with more catholic musical tastes that include, for example, chamber music and un-amplified jazz might find the Voyager just a bit too much on the rich side and seek instead an alternative with what they regard as a more neutral presentation. That observation should not be read as a criticism, by the way; more as a helpful pointer towards what can be expected by anyone flirting with the idea of auditioning a Voyager. And auditioning a Voyager is what I'd encourage all readers with money in their pocket for a decent headphone amplifier to do. Driving the Susvara headphone, the Burson Soloist Voyager made a properly credible claim to be the end-game headphone amplifier that its designers intend it to be.

Specifications

Type: headphone amplifier/preamplifier

Analogue inputs: 2x single-ended RCA, 2x balanced XLR

Analogue outputs: single-ended RCA, balanced XLR, sub out RCA

Headphone outputs: 6.35mm headphone jack, 3.5mm headphone jack, 4-pin XLR

Output impedance: 0.5ohm

Suitable for headphones: > 8ohm

Headphone output power: 10W into 16 Ohms

Dimensions (HxWxD): 85 x 265 x 270 mm

Weight: 5kg

Warranty: 2 years

