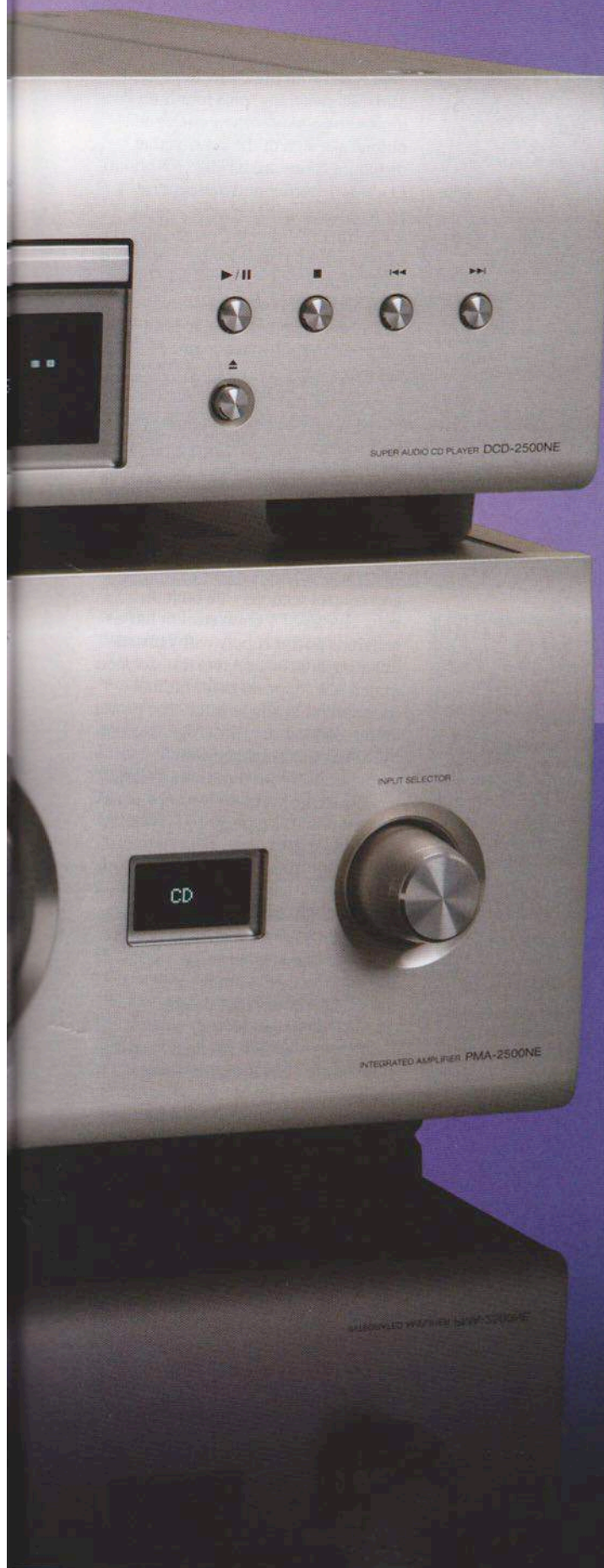


IN-DEPTH **DENON**
DCD-2500NE/PMA-2500NE £1,499/£1,899



Entering a new era

Denon's latest heavyweight player/amp duo has both style and technology on its side. **James Parker** gives it a listen



► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Denon DCD-2500NE

ORIGIN
Japan

TYPE
SACD/CD player

WEIGHT
13.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
434 x 138 x 335mm

FEATURES

- SACD/CD playback
- Can also play files up to DSD5.6 from DVD-R/RW discs
- Pure Direct mode for optimal sound

DISTRIBUTOR
Denon UK

TELEPHONE
02890 279830

WEBSITE
denon.co.uk

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Denon PMA-2500NE

ORIGIN
Japan

TYPE
Integrated amplifier with DAC

WEIGHT
25kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
434 x 182 x 431mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 80W (into 8ohm)
- Asynchronous USB DAC, plus optical & coaxial digital inputs
- Can handle files up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD11.2

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So, you're a company that launched with records and gramophone players, and was responsible for much of the digital technology that's used in studios and CD players, yet you're best known for your AV receivers: what do you do to redress the balance? Well, if you're Denon you kit yourself out with a substantial SACD/CD player and even hefty integrated amplifier, and label them with a new suffix on the model names, indicating that this is the start of a New Era.

That's the story behind the latest Denon arrivals, the £1,499 DCD-2500NE and £1,899 PMA-2500NE, the former able to play not only conventional discs but also hi-res files up to 24-bit/192kHz and DSD5.6, the latter quoting a 2x 160W output and a digital section able to handle files up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD11.2.

While Denon hasn't exactly been out of the core hi-fi arena – think successful models of the not too distant past such as the classic PMA-250 amplifier and 'the tuner they couldn't kill', the value-for-money TU-260L, which just kept on selling even after DAB was launched – it does seem that of late the company has

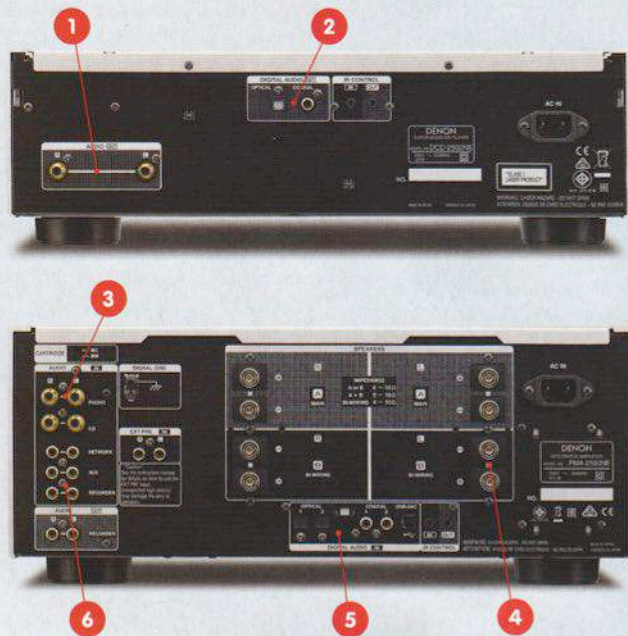
The DCD-2500NE is so good it's hard not to see a bright future for CDs

been putting most of its eggs in other baskets, from AV receivers to the HEOS multi-room system (HFC 395). These new 'NE' models, though, see it re-asserting its claim on a market sector the observer might have thought was being left to stagemate Marantz.

But isn't the conventional disc player and stereo amp a dinosaur concept in this modern computer-driven multi-format age? Denon seems to think not – at least, provided these tried and tested technologies can be adapted to the latest needs while supporting those with extensive 'hard copy' music collections. It's not alone: several companies seem to be launching similar components, in the form of players with digital inputs, or even built-in streaming capability. And you can be sure it's only doing so in informed anticipation of sensible sales, not through nostalgia or "clinging to the wreckage" – as I heard it described not so long ago.

The DCD-2500NE may look conventional, in a heavyweight, solid and beautifully finished kind of way, but this is a player designed with a

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Stereo analogue RCA output
- 2 Optical & coaxial digital output
- 3 MM & MC phono stage
- 4 Bi-wiring speaker binding posts
- 5 Optical, coaxial & USB digital inputs
- 6 Line-level inputs

single purpose in mind: playing discs to a high standard, and outputting the results via its analogue outputs (there are optical and coaxial digital outs, too, but they're really only there for playing CD-quality content, or digital from 44.1kHz-192kHz on CD-R/RW or DVD +/-R/RW discs). As usual, there's no digital output with SACD discs or DSD formats, the former for copyright reasons, the latter due to S/PDIF bandwidth limitations.

Back to basics

Fortunately for the player, it performs its basic task very well, and especially so when the Pure Direct setting is used to turn off the display and the digital outputs, thus removing a slight – but noticeable when it's gone – level of haze from the sound. That ability is in no small part due to tried and tested Denon technology under the hood, allied to sensible, logical design and the kind of solidity and vibration proofing, plus breathing space for the sections of the player, afforded by the size and weight of the chassis.

At the heart of the DCD-2500NE's digital implementation is the latest version of Denon's AL32 processing, here designated Advanced AL32 Processing Plus: this has long been a plank of the company's offering, in very broad terms being designed to interpolate extra data into a digital signal to 'fill in the gaps', thus smoothing the sound. Here it works with 32-bit/192kHz converters and the ultra-stable Advanced SVH transport mechanism derived from even higher-end Denon players, and designed for the most accurate disc

reading possible, with servo control and decoder circuitry newly developed for this model.

The PMA-2500NE amplifier, meanwhile, looks just like a conventional, if generously proportioned, stereo amp – at least until you spot the little display located between the substantial volume and input selector controls, which shows the digital input selected and the sampling rate of the data being received. Denon describes it as an "Integrated Amplifier with DAC-Mode" and, as well as the Source Direct button to bypass the

The PMA-2500NE is capable of incredible impact and musical involvement

tone controls provided, it also has an Analogue Mode selector, allowing the digital input section and display to be switched off for the purest sound with analogue sources.

There are two optical and two coaxial inputs, plus a USB Type-B connection able to handle music all the way up to the amp's 32-bit/384kHz and DSD11.2 maximum, again with digital data handled by Denon's Advanced AL32 Processing Plus upstream of PCM1795 conversion, with Denon's proprietary DAC master clock providing the reference. The USB input is isolated to ensure electrical noise from a computer doesn't find its way through to the audio circuitry.

HOW IT COMPARES

Given the price, the most obvious rivals for the Denon duo are to be found in the form of the Special Edition versions of the Marantz SA-14S1 player and PM-14S1 amplifier (£1,700 each). Marantz concentrates all the digital circuitry in the player, leaving its amp purely analogue, while Denon has digital sections in both.

Beyond the D+M stable, there are plenty of options, though there's nothing much else out there with the DCD-2500NE's wide-ranging DSD playback from disc: Quad's Artera Play probably comes closest, but is a rather different design. In the amplifier arena there are closer rivals, with the new Rotel RA-1592 putting up a strong fight in the 'amp plus DAC' class, and the likes of Arcam's A39 (HFC 394) and Naim's Nait XS 2 from the 'pure analogue' camp.

On the analogue side it has a very good phono section, as I discover on a brief listen with my trusty Rega, and MM/MC switching, plus four line inputs and a single set of analogue outputs – a sign of the times is that the connections are labelled for phono, CD, aux, recorder and network (ie for a network music player). One interesting addition is Denon's take on a home cinema pass-through, enabling the amp to work in concert with the front left/right preouts of an AV amp or processor. Rather than go for a volume control bypass on one of the main line inputs, a separate set of sockets labelled Ext Pre In goes direct to the power amp, avoiding all the input selection and control circuitry. Use with caution!

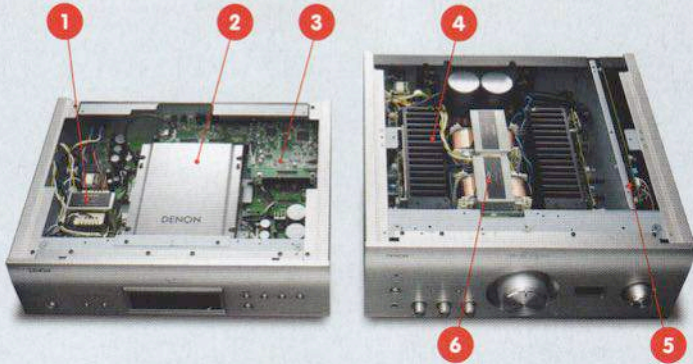
The amp is manufactured using Denon's separate blocks concept, with separate sections for the phono equaliser and input circuitry, volume control, DAC, amplification, power and control sections – all built on a hefty chassis of 1.6mm steel. It has a generous power supply with custom-made capacitors, and two transformers mounted in opposition for mutual cancellation of any leakage. The power amp section, using Ultra High Current MOSFETs in a single push-pull configuration with a constant voltage supply, is capable of delivering a peak current of 210A. The output power is quoted as 160W per channel into 4ohm, or 80W side into 8ohm.

Sound quality

Yes, 'only' 80W from an amp of this size, but you'd never guess it from the effortlessly dynamic, totally unrestrained way that the PMA-2500NE plays music, ably assisted by the DCD-2500NE if playing discs is your thing. Of course, there's the argument that the modern music system really doesn't need a physical media player, but the Denon is so persuasive with CDs – even more so with SACDs – and striking when loaded with DVD-R discs of higher-res DSD, that it's hard not to see a bright future for those that still choose to have their music on little pieces of silvered plastic.

Plugged into my reference system and playing the lovingly recorded jazz of Claire Martin (on Linn Records) from SACD, it is more than capable of revealing the extra detail, ambience and dynamic power this much-maligned format can offer over CD, which is solid testament to the quality of its onboard conversion. There's that total lack of digital edginess that's the hallmark of Denon's AL32 Processing: instead you get a rich,

IN SIGHT



- 1 Separate analogue & digital section transformers
- 2 Aluminium disc-tray mechanism
- 3 Digital circuitry
- 4 Dual-mono layout & large heatsinks
- 5 Preamp circuitry shielding
- 6 Central twin transformers

BUILT FOR PERFORMANCE

The Denon's hefty chassis and cabinet panels help eliminate vibrations, while the size and space allows signal paths to be minimised as the internal space allows components to be placed exactly where they're needed. In the SACD/CD player the SVH mechanism – derived from more upmarket Denon models – is mounted low and central for stability, the low centre of gravity and sheer mass making life easier for the disc-reading system. Stainless steel and copper plating is used in the mech's top panel for rigidity, and there's a cast aluminium loader

and hefty steel mountings. Twin power supplies are to the left, while the analogue and digital sections are physically separated, the DAC circuitry being floated above the main audio board to the rear of the player. The amp is effectively a pre/power in one box: it uses dual-mono, mirror-image power amp sections running down the middle of the chassis, and straddling two massive toroidal transformers, one for each channel. Meanwhile, delicate preamp-level signals are protected by a full-length metal shield to the right of the chassis.

Q&A

Shinichi Yamauchi
Denon sound manager



AP: Will there be more 'NE' models, extending further down the range?
SY: Yes, other 'NE' models will be available in the future and will be midrange to high-end rather than entry-level. However, each country has a choice about which ranges and models are appropriate for their market.

So are there plans for a network music player in the 2500NE range?
A 2500NE network player is available in Japan, but is mostly bought by users of older Denon amplifiers to use purely as a DAC. Due to the limited availability of cloud services in Japan, there's a strong demand for good quality DACs for hi-res music: for formats such as DSD11.2MHz the huge files need a high-speed infrastructure for streaming, so the DAC route is preferred. But I can say that Denon is looking for the best timing to enter the high or mid-class network player market in the UK.

You've included extended DSD capability: do you see this becoming a significant format in audiophile music?
DSD downloads are widely available for classical music (eg Channel Classics, Native DSD) and usually just require DSD 2.8MHz support. However, some people like to convert on the fly from PCM to DSD with one of the various playback software packages, so we support 5.6 and 11.2. DSD, 5.6MHz is on its way to popularity among audio enthusiasts (especially in Japan) and some recordings have already been made in DSD11.2, so it's important to make our products futureproof.

Denon has talked about extending HEOS: are there plans for stereo amplifiers with HEOS connectivity, as well as AV products?
It's a very good question: using the HEOS Link and the PMA-2500NE's digital input, a user can already enjoy HEOS multi-room system and streaming services. But yes, we will expand the inclusion of HEOS in hi-fi products, though I can't tell you a specific timeline. We have a plan...

warm, liquid sound, yet one that doesn't stint on all the audio niceties that set fine hi-fi apart from the merely humdrum. Voices are close focused, soundstages have realistic width and depth to them, with excellent front-to-back layering and despite the powerful yet tightly controlled bass here, there's no shortage of insight into everything from the touch of finger on string to the shimmer of cymbal. Even the big, lush sound of ABC's *Lexicon Of Love II*, swathed though it is in Anne Dudley's strings, is opened up for inspection and Martin Fry's voice shines through as strong and characterful as ever.

However, the big PMA-2500NE is definitely the star turn in this partnership, from the way it handles multi-DSD formats via its computer interface to that very good phono stage, which is far from simply there to keep the amplifier on trend. Whether delivering large-scale orchestral music with its characteristic sense of 'plenty

in reserve' or delineating every touch of finger on key in Christian Budu's recent set of Beethoven solo piano works (on the Claves label), the Denon amp is both firmly in its comfort zone and capable of eye-opening impact and musical involvement.

Change genre and age to some vintage Faces, with their *Nod Is As Good As A Wink... To A Blind Horse* album in 24-bit/96kHz, and the way it slams out the driving good-time rock is exceptionally toothsome, while at the same time it revels in the rather shambolic studio ambience of *Too Bad* and the straight down the line attack of *Stay With Me*.

Conclusion

With this new duo there may be the sense that Denon could be treading on Marantz's toes, but the fast, bright and hard-hitting sound here, underpinned as it with finesse and substance, suggests D+M's 'other brand' still has something to bring to the hi-fi party ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT DCD-2500NE

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★★★
- LIKE:** Fit and finish; smooth, generous sound; wide format compatibility
- DISLIKE:** Lack of digital inputs
- WESAY:** A mighty impressive disc player, which also has some less obvious tricks up its sleeve

OVERALL



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT PMA-2500NE

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★★★
- LIKE:** A flexible mix of digital ability and analogue purity; looks and feels really special
- DISLIKE:** It's a bit on the large side
- WESAY:** Fully loaded, this amp combines all the inputs most will want with a controlled, unflappable sound

OVERALL

