

Red Dragon Audio Leviathan Signature

Chris Martens

Red Dragon Audio's Leviathan Signature monoblocks are based on what designer Ryan Tews terms "highly modified" Bang & Olufsen ICEpower Class D amplifier modules, where modifications aim to eliminate EMI problems and to minimize microphonically-induced distortions. The stunning Leviathans come trimmed in thick slabs of exotic hardwoods, feature glowing red dragon logos on top, put out a whopping 500Wpc, are built like tanks, and sell for \$5995. Better still, the Leviathans offer an immediately likeable sound whose defining characteristics include effortless dynamics, rock-solid 3-D imaging, and smooth, mellifluous voicing.

Joseph Stalin once famously observed that "quantity has a quality all its own." Stalin's comment comes to mind because the Red Dragons produce such copious quantities of power that they reproduce music—especially loud and complex passages—with a disarmingly graceful yet muscular dynamic ease. I put on the Solti/Chicago LP of Mahler's Symphony No. 8 [London] and was delighted to hear the Leviathans sail through the dramatic conclusion of the symphony without any signs of stress (or distress). While the same observation perhaps applies to other good high-powered amplifiers, the Red Dragons bring extra measures of expansiveness and—where the music warrants—explosive immediacy to the table. Though the Leviathans cannot match the razor-sharp transient attack of the Audio Research 300.2 or the dynamic scope and sweep of the MBL 9011s, their vigorous, full-bodied sound always puts listeners at ease.

The Leviathans also produce vivid, three-dimensional images of almost sculptural solidity—a quality that became strikingly apparent on "Songbird" from the late Eva Cassidy's *Eva by Heart* [Blix Street]. I never had the privilege of hearing Ms. Cassidy in concert during her too-brief lifetime, but those who have report being struck by hearing a huge, ethereal voice emanating from a comparatively petite person, and that is precisely the image Dragons conveyed on "Songbird." I attribute the amplifiers' imaging prowess to their unusually round, full, and articulate midrange sound.

The Dragons' soundstaging is also good, though not quite on a par with their imaging. The Leviathans are held back by a tendency to downplay elusive, low-level, high-frequency details that, when present, can help define the boundaries of acoustic spaces. Where ultra-transparent amplifiers such as the ASR Emitter II describe

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soundstages with blueprint-like precision, the Dragons leave listeners with a generally accurate, yet partially incomplete, picture of recording spaces.

The Leviathans' tonal balance falls slightly on the warm side of neutral—a quality that, for many listeners, might be the perfect working definition of “musicality.” Midrange is clear and articulate with a hint of almost tube-like lushness. On “You Don’t Know Me” from Patricia Barber’s *Nightclub* [Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab, SACD], the Dragons’ caught the dark, seductive timbre of the singer’s voice while suggesting, through delicately rendered vocal inflections, her pensive, wistful mood. But sometimes the Leviathans’ midrange can sound too smooth, meaning the Dragons give a polished, burnished presentation, while competing amplifiers such as the ARC 300.2 sound more vivid and alive.

Up high, the Red Dragons are never the treble “fire breathers” their names suggest. On they contrary, they sound coherent and smooth in the critical upper midrange-to-treble transition region. But that said, I would observe that when the Leviathans err, they do so by very slightly rounding off treble transients and textures. Nevertheless, I suspect some listeners might prefer the Dragons’ smoothness to the essentially accurate but hyper-revealing treble response some amplifiers provide.

Finally, the Leviathan’s bass is appropriately weighted and sumptuously textured. Some amps, such as the NuForce monoblocks, offer greater bass transient snap, extension, or grip, but few can match the Dragon’s midbass pitch-definition. I thoroughly enjoyed Ron Carter’s *Blues Firm* [CTI, LP] through the Leviathans because they revealed the variety of voices Carter pulled from his acoustic bass, and were energetic enough to capture his exuberant playing.

The Red Dragon Leviathan Signature monoblocks represent a praiseworthy first effort from Ryan Tews. The Leviathans offer enormous power and solid value for money, though they face stiff competition from better-established players such as the \$3995, 300Wpc, Audio Research 300.2. Nevertheless, the Red Dragons command respect, not just because they’re powerful, but also because their smoothness, warmth, and dynamic ease give listeners the priceless gift of relaxation.

SPECS/PRICE

Power: 500Wpc into 8 ohms, 1000Wpc into 4 ohms
Inputs: Balanced (XLR—RCA adapters included as standard)
Dimensions: 10" x 5.5" x 14.5"
Weight: Approx. 20 lbs. (varies with hardwood selection)
Price: \$5995

DISTRIBUTOR

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WJG comments on the Red Dragon Leviathan Signature

Chris and I are in somewhat more agreement when it comes to the sound of the sexy-looking Red Dragon. This is a warm, euphonic design. It restores the breath and feeling to Kremer’s Bach, the ambience and humanity to Nina Simone, and most but not all of the depth to the Adés, albeit not with the transparency of the Kharma. Though it is powerful, the Leviathan does not bring to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs disc the cannon-shot-like bass of the NuForce or Cary designs, but it sounds much more like a real drum kit, and the acoustic guitar has more warmth, body, and texture. On the downside I found the bass and treble sounded as if cut from a different sonic cloth than the midrange—a little fat and leaden down bottom, and, like so many Class Ds, both rolled and a bit strange and unpleasant-sounding up top.