



# BLADELIUS

## EMBLA

*A new breed of flash memory-based source*

**PRICE** £4,850 **CONTACT** Metropolis Music ■ 01435 867438 ■ www.bladelius.com

The Bladelius Embla is the first of its kind. Flash memory has the potential to be the best storage format for digital audio yet created: with no moving parts, it operates silently and doesn't have to deal with error-correction on the fly as a disc drive does. Embla can be used as a straightforward CD player or as a music server playing material from discs you have loaded onto it, from an attached drive or streamed from a computer. Combine this with an onboard preamplifier and you have one of the most forward-looking products on the market today.

Bladelius is a Swedish company founded by designer Mike Bladelius, a man who spent time working for Threshold in the US and has been a consultant for Classé in Canada – good high-end credentials by any standard. Up until now, his company has concentrated on amplifiers and CD players, but the Embla is the sort of product that should put Bladelius well and truly on the map.

Mike is keen to point out that Embla is not a redesigned computer, but when you look at the features it offers and admire the touch-screen that fronts the unit, there can be no doubt that it contains some serious processing power. Loading a disc onto the flash drive is easy: just push it into the slot-loader and press the red 'record' button. Several minutes and much whirring later, you get a read out of how many errors it has

corrected, which produces a surprisingly high figure of 70,000 plus on most discs.

Playback is less obvious, but with the aid of the stylish Mjölner remote or your finger on the screen, it's possible to find the list of uploaded albums and pick out the one you want. Embla is said to have an internal database which should provide album titling information, but it only had information for about half the discs we loaded. This will be where the Ethernet connection comes in.

There are numerous set up parameters, including optional resampling filter, three digital filters, phase inversion and separate listen and record-style digital outputs. In audio settings you can choose to convert an analogue input to digital at 96 or 192kHz, or you can adjust sensitivity of that input and just pass it through without conversion. There are two RCA line inputs and a balanced input alongside digital in- and outputs of the usual varieties. Analogue outputs mirror the inputs and can be fixed or variable. Embla is essentially a digital and analogue preamplifier with a flash drive and a CD player all in one. It also has USBs for data and audio and makes a big deal about being able to transfer material from the flash drive onto an external USB device. Calling the Embla fully featured is an understatement.

Inevitably, with such an ambitious project, updates are ongoing and there are a few minor glitches. Although it will playback hi-res WAV files, it can't load them onto the flash drive at present. There doesn't seem to be a way of loading only selected tracks, but you can delete them afterwards, achieving the same result. Also, the touch-screen is not always terribly responsive, but its sensitivity can be changed.

A number of drive sizes can be purchased. The unit tested had 64GB – enough for about 120 albums – but drives up to 2TB are available for larger music collections. The point to remember is that while this can be used as a music server, its appeal lies in the ability to play your music with a non-mechanical source. In this regard, it's impressive indeed with a bold, dynamic sound that projects the music into the room in no uncertain terms.

### SOUND QUALITY

Pick the right filter (C with 'optimised' resampling) and it also times with aplomb. This is the first time we've heard the Yerba Buena *Jump* HRx disc really swing in true Hot Club style. You can summon up the vast expanses of space that other players reveal with filter A but, while this 'looks' impressive, it doesn't get you to the nub of what the material's about, which is old-school groove. It's

not just an acoustic thing either: Radiohead's *In Rainbows* reveals all the distortions and effects that make it up, while the underlying tempo is as strong as it can be.

We expected this to be a quiet player and it doesn't disappoint. Only the big money Boulder 1021 upstages it in this respect and that's the best we've heard. This gives the Embla wide dynamic range and the ability to pull out low-level detail with ease: Lambchop sounds positively ethereal and quite entrancing as a result. Using the onboard volume

control requires some caution; output is pretty high and even our 'deafest' power amp wouldn't let the numbers past the 30 mark. But this volume route bettered a Classé CP-700 preamp, if not the Leema Pyxis, which has the advantage of LIPS2 operation.

While its user interface could do with some refinement, this is a very exciting machine with great sound and huge potential. Future software upgrades will hopefully see it being able to take onboard WAV files that you have downloaded. Combine this with great timing and low noise and you have the most potent source component we've encountered for a long time. ■■■



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