

## AVM CS 8.3 Black Edition one box high end

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## AVM Ovation CS 8.3 Black Edition

AVM Ovation CS 8.3 Black Edition is a long name for any piece of kit but this particular piece is both multifunctional and sits at the top of the tree in AVM's streaming amplifier tree, so it has earned the moniker. AVM make more streaming amplifiers than most, it seems that having everything in one box appeals to audiophiles as much as it does to the average music lover; less is very much more in the modern living environment. AVM makes a lot of separates at its facility in Malsch near Karlsruhe in south west Germany, with most varieties of electronics as well as turntables in the range. Most share the plain almost protestant styling of the CS 8.3, flamboyance is not what AVM's customers are looking for it seems.

The 8.3 part of the Ovation CS 8.3 Black Edition name indicates that it is a flagship product while the CS tells you that it's a streaming amplifier with an onboard CD player, the Black Edition suffix says that this is the king of its particular hill and incorporates elements not found in the regular Ovation CS 8.3. Luxuries that add €1,500 to the price albeit the black anodised finish isn't one of them, you can get both models in black but the Black Edition is available in any colour you like as long as it's black.

### Tried and trusted

The feature list is long and colourful but the key elements are AVM's X-Stream engine which offers UPnP, Tidal Connect, Qobuz, Airplay, Spotify Connect and web radio from Airable, thus it can stream most anything you could hope for including from USB and NAS drives. The CS 8.3 Black Edition has a balanced quad DAC using Sabre 9018 converters from ESS and for the Black Edition they select the best two per cent of the chips that are supplied, which should ensure the closest match possible. The advantage of balanced systems is that they reject noise, the drawback is that if the elements are not precisely matched you get timing problems that can be more problematic than the noise.

The DAC can process double DSD (DSD128) and PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz, both of which are pretty standard numbers that don't push the envelope and which like most numbers in the

audio game do not indicate quality. If anything they indicate that AVM are sticking with proven tech that is more than adequate to the task and gives trouble free service. I suspect that given AVM's made in Germany ethos and the price of their creations that customers would be quick to let them know if anything proved to be less than reliable in the long term.

The presence of a CD drive is unusual among modern all-in-one products, most manufacturers have abandoned this format because CD drives are not very fashionable and good ones are not inexpensive, they are also not the most reliable of devices so if you buy one make sure it's from



a company that can help out in the future. AVM have chosen a dedicated CD drive made by TEAC, this will only play regular CDs and not SACD, if you want high res then streaming is obvious way to go. AVM go to some length to ensure that the drive is insulated so that you can't hear its spinning, some might remember the whirr of a silver disc when the music is quiet, you won't hear it here.

### Class D muscle

The power amplifier side of the CS 8.3 Black Edition consists of Class D modules from Pascal, these are specified to offer two channels of 500 Watts (4 Ohms), you read that right, this is a monster amp disguised as a one box solution. That of course is the Class D advantage, you don't need huge transformers or phalanxes of heat sinking to produce real power with this tech, it is intrinsically more efficient and cooler running. The preamplifier side incorporates a double triode tube or valve that can be seen through a glass window in the top of the case, this is described as being a Black Edition tube by which they probably mean that like the DAC chips it has been selected for having the tightest tolerances.

The CS 8.3 Black Edition has a good range of inputs given that most sources are already onboard, these extend to analogue line inputs and independent preamp outputs on RCA and XLR connectors alongside digital via USB, optical and coaxial inputs plus the latter two as outputs. The only options that would be nice are some form of phono input for a turntable and an HDMI ARC connection for better integration with video sources. You can run TV or Blu-ray via the optical inputs of course, record player enthusiasts will need to budget for a separate phono stage however. Network connection is wired or wireless as you might expect. Control of the CS 8.3 Black Edition is primarily via the AVM app, but they supply a remote handset for access to basic functions which is often quicker than using an app. The app is pretty solid as you might expect and has a volume control slider that allows for small changes





without too much dexterity. This is not always the case with app based volume and makes a handset less of a necessity. I used the AVM with Vivid Kaya S12 speakers to begin with and got some pretty engaging results, the distorted rumble of bass on Skylab's #1 coming across in substantial fashion, the subterranean beats remaining in time despite the crazy deep nature of the notes.

### Tube technology

Class D amps can have a hollow character that while appealing on some levels doesn't seem right if you are used to more conventional technologies. Possibly as a result of the tube in the preamp stage the CS 8.3 Black Edition manages to avoid this, which may well be the source of a certain fluidity and naturalness to the sound. It certainly doesn't thicken the result but gives it a humanity that helps to deliver the emotional impact of whatever is being played, that was certainly the case with Ryan Adams' Dear John which provoked a constriction of the throat in the best possible way.

With the more demanding load of Bowers & Wilkins' 802 D3 loudspeakers on the end of the speaker cables the CS 8.3 Black Edition swung big dynamics for Laurie Anderson's Gravity's Angel, the muscle that 500 Watts provide giving this piece more power and weight than most amps manage. It's subtle and fast with it, the bass stops and starts as precisely as it should. This AVM doesn't have the grippy character of a big Class AB amp but it has total control over the loudspeakers, the presence of huge power reserves is not stamped onto the music it's just there when its needed. It is nimble enough to respond to the lyricism of a saxophone and swings beautifully when asked, timing is clear and precise with no undue emphasis.

Contrasting the onboard streamer with an Auralic Aries G1.1 using a USB link to the DAC in the AVM revealed that the external streamer produced a larger but less well focused image that lacked the transparency of the AVM streaming engine. The Auralic has the disadvantage of needing a USB connection but external, dedicated streamers usually outperform those found in all-one-units, so this is a win for AVM. The CD spinner in the CS 8.3 Black Edition is a little sharper and flatter than its streamer but brings nice weight to the bass, clear leading edges and a slightly more forward balance that favours pianos over vocals on Herbie Hancock's The Man I Love. CD does however time better than material streamed from Qobuz (which is generally the better sounding lossless service) and makes the latter sound stilted if tonally a little sweeter.

The last speakers to take the stage with the CS 8.3 Black Edition in charge were PMC twenty5.26i floorstanders, here the strong sense of huge headroom continued, it

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felt as if you could go on winding up the volume way past 11 without the system losing composure. This is partly because the AVM has such a low noise floor, this gives excellent low level resolution and a wide perceived dynamic range which many modern recordings are quiet enough to take advantage of. The other key quality that became apparent is that this streaming amp is not fazed by complex material. Dense jazz can often be difficult to fully appreciate with digital sources because brass instruments produce so much energy at such high speed. But the AVM delivered the musical message without losing the power of the performance, it is fast



enough to respond to the most intense of noodling and reproduces saxophones and trumpets without any added grain.

### **AVM CS 8.3 Black Edition verdict**

Regardless of what you play the Ovation CS 8.3 Black Edition is very easy to enjoy, perceived distortion is vanishingly low and it always manage to put the music first. There is a hint of the Class D in its clean, open and sprightly sound but none of those are bad things in my book, quite the opposite. Put on Fleetwood Mac's Gold Dust Woman and you don't think about the equipment, you are blown away by the performance. This single box sensation does everything you need without taking over the sitting room, just add speakers to taste and you have a recipe for musical delight.

### **Specifications**

*Type: Integrated amplifier, CD player, network streamer*

*Analogue inputs: RCA, XLR*

*Analogue outputs: pre out RCA, XLR*

*Digital inputs: coax, 2 optical, USB, ethernet*

*Digital outputs: coax, optical*

*Power: 275W/8 Ohms, 500W/4 Ohms*

*Max sample rate: 384kHz/32 bit, DSD128*

*Music services: Qobuz, Spotify Connect, Tidal Connect, Airable internet radio*

*Wireless inputs: Bluetooth aptX, Airplay 2*

*Control options: AVM app, remote control, Roon ready*

*User interface: LCD display*

*Headphone output: 6.3mm (1/4 inch) jack*

*Dimensions (HxWxD): 130 x 430 x 355mm*

*Weight: 14kg*



The ear is all about great music and great sound. It is written by hard bitten audio enthusiasts who strive to find the most engaging, entertaining and great value components and music of the highest calibre. This really is what living is all about.