



# BLADELIUS ASK

**Reviewer** Steve Holding

## INTEGRATED STREAMING AMPLIFIER

**I**t's unlikely you will have heard of Michael (Mike) Bladelius, despite him being one of the most famous audio designers in the world. For most of the time he has been in the business of audio component design, he's been designing equipment sold under other brand names — names such as Threshold, Classé Audio and Mark Levinson.

His name only came into the spotlight in 1997 when he and his son Alexander established the Bladelius Design Group in Sweden and registered the brand names Bladelius and AB-Tech (the latter incorporating the son's initials into the name). Although Bladelius is most famous for its audio amplifiers, in particular the Grendel and Ymer power amplifiers and Beowulf monoblocs, the company also won plaudits for its Gondul multi-format player and its Embla, which has been aptly described as "a preamplifier with USB inputs, a built-in DAC, a built-in ADC, a built-in CD

transport and a built-in bit-perfect ripper".

That description of the Embla could well apply to the Bladelius Ask, except that you'd have to add that it's even more sophisticated in its offering. The Ask is not just a pre-amplifier but a fully fledged integrated amplifier with all of those features, plus it also adds into that all-encompassing mix a music streamer, meaning it can access and play music from anywhere on your network or indeed the Internet.

The names 'Embla' and 'Ask' are actually intertwined; in Scandinavian mythology, the Norse God Odin created the first man of Middle Earth (Ask) and also the first woman (Embla).

### THE EQUIPMENT

In common with many of the most newly designed high-end audio components, the Bladelius Ask is designed to be controlled by an app loaded onto your phone or tablet. Bladelius recommends you use the third-party app developed by

Italian company Volumio — the same app that is used by Pro-Ject, Musical Fidelity, Bryston and others — but you can also use the remote control supplied with the Ask, so long as you connect the amplifier to your network using an Ethernet cable as opposed to via Wi-Fi.

You can also use the three manual controls fitted to the front panel of the Ask. These have been designed to allow you to access all of the Ask's functions with minimum effort.

Our review Ask sample came with the full suite of inputs available for this design, which is otherwise available in several different versions. You can order the Ask simply as an integrated amplifier with only line-level inputs (\$16,500), or as a streamer/DAC (\$20,900). You can optionally add an MC phono stage to either version, too, which adds an additional \$2,590 to the cost. The fully optioned version retails for \$23,490, then.

The Bladelius Ask supplied to us was fitted with four line-level analogue

inputs — three unbalanced (accessed via gold-plated RCA terminals), one balanced (gold-plated XLR terminals) and one phono input (unbalanced, via RCA). It was also fitted with five wired digital inputs — two opticals (using standard Toslink connectors) and three wired, two being SPDIFs (RCA) and the other being an AES/EBU (XLR). Our sample also had two USB inputs (one Type-A and Type-B apiece) and a standard Ethernet socket. It also had Wi-Fi functionality, for which an external antenna fitment was supplied.

The USB input can accommodate PCM up to 32-bit/768kHz and DSD up to DSD1024. All signals are processed by an XMOS XU216-512- DSP IC, programmed with Bladelius' own in-house algorithms and digital filters.

The Bladelius Ask uses a Raspberry Pi microcomputer to provide its streaming options, which include the ability to play music files from NAS drives and USB devices and access streaming services such as Tidal, Qobuz and Spotify. In addition to Wi-Fi, it also has both Bluetooth and AirPlay capabilities. It's also Roon Ready certified.

The speaker terminals are high-quality WBT nextGen multi-way types that are labelled with (+) and (-) identifiers, but according to the Bladelius website the (-) terminal is not at ground potential, as is the case with the great majority of audio amplifiers, so be sure to connect only fully passive loudspeakers to these terminals.

## BUILD

Open up the Ask and the most obvious feature is the massive 2kVA toroidal power transformer. Alongside it are six 10,000uF 63V 'Kemet' electrolytic capacitors, which according to Bladelius' website are what comprise a "massive capacitor bank". Presumably, however, this capacity is augmented by additional smoothing capacitors located on the multiple printed circuit boards used to provide the various circuit options. The MOSFET output devices (four pairs per channel) are said to be capable of delivering '220 watts at 8 ohms' and 'as much as 400 watts at 4 ohms' when both channels are driven, but there's no indication of whether the power output that is able to be delivered

is indeed at a single frequency or the bandwidth over.

The chassis of the Ask is made out of CNC-routed non-magnetic alloy, which Bladelius says 'improves the sound quality'. The company further claims that the design and layout of all the components used are optimized to "minimize the impact from vibrations".

One thing the circuitry is not optimized for is its standby power consumption because, according to our meter, it draws nearly 40 watts of power in standby mode. We would, therefore, most definitely recommend switching it off at the mains power switch whenever you're not using it.

## REMOTE CONTROL

While we admire the fact that Bladelius has included a remote control with the Ask, despite the company obviously intending you to use other, more modern and sophisticated methods to operate it, we have to say that the remote is nowhere near the same build quality of the Ask itself, being somewhat plasticky. And the button labelled 'Mute Amp' did not mute the Ask's output for us. It seems that it's possible to purchase a far higher-quality remote control, made from solid metal, so this is a discussion you could have with your hi-fi dealer.

The remote control's battery compartment is poorly designed too. You need to push down very hard on the dotted arrow and then simultaneously slide it downwards. Yes, we know

this is the usual way to open a slider compartment, but in this case the amount of pressure we needed to exert had us worried about breaking the plastic lid and/or the catch. Maybe once it has been opened and closed a few times, it would be easier to do. (The AA batteries required to power the remote are not supplied, so ask your hi-fi dealer to give you a couple of high-quality Lithiums as part of the deal.)

We were somewhat baffled when Google Translate informed us that the word 'Brokk' that is printed on the remote control was Norwegian, and not Swedish, and somewhat concerned when Google further advised that the English meaning of the word 'Brokk' was 'hernia!' Then again, even Google says its translations are only 94% accurate!

## IN USE AND LISTENING

We have to say that we were frustrated by the turn-on process for the Ask — not by the length of time it takes, which is around twenty seconds, but by the fact that while the Ask is turning itself on there is absolutely no visual indication on the front panel that anything is happening at all. The only tell-tale that you've actually initiated the turn-on sequence is a few faint clicking sounds from inside the chassis. There's also no visual indication that the Ask is in its standby mode.

Once the amplifier is powered up, all functions can be controlled using one small push-button on the front panel in combination with the domed rotary



▷ THE BLADELIUS ASK'S MASSIVE 2KVA TOROIDAL POWER TRANSFORMER IS A CUSTOM-MADE BEAST

## ABOUT THE DESIGNER

Michael Bladelius says he was only thirteen years old when he designed and built his first working amplifier, and it was this that put him on the path to his career as an audio equipment designer.

Like all amplifier designers, Bladelius was aware of one of the world's pre-eminent amplifier designers, Nelson Pass, and so it was that, whilst on a gap year before starting his university degree in Sweden, Bladelius happened to be in California, where Pass was at the time working for Threshold Corporation. Bladelius decided to seize the opportunity of a lifetime and contact Pass, who invited him to interview for a position at Threshold — a position he subsequently won, resulting in Mike Bladelius moving to the US.

Following a change in Threshold's ownership, Pass left the company and, in 1991, Bladelius was appointed Head of Design at Threshold, during which time he was responsible for the T2 preamp and T-200 amplifier, components that for many years were listed in the 'Class-A' section of *Stereophile* magazine's listings of recommended audio equipment.

Bladelius left Threshold in 1994 and returned to Sweden, at which time he established Bladelius Design Group Aktiebolag as an audio design and engineering consultancy. Under its auspices, Bladelius worked on designs for Classé Audio as well as for a company called Ultra Analog, which provided design services for a number of high-end US-based audio companies. Bladelius also went into partnership with a German distributor of several high-end brands, seeing him design equipment that was sold under the 'Advantage' brand name. It was only after the cessation of that partnership that Bladelius started to design and build audio products to be sold under his own name, a venture that commenced in 1977. Originally based in Herrljunga in Sweden, Bladelius Design Group is now headquartered 35km closer to Gothenburg, in Alingsås.

control also on the front panel. The choice of a domed dial makes control difficult for those with limited use of their fingers, but we guess you can always use the app or the remote control.

Despite the expanse of black acrylic on the Ask's front panel, the actual area of the blue LCD display is very small, so you'll be hard-pressed to see it from a distance, even if the display brightness is switched to its highest level, which is labelled as a 'Normal' level. The two other levels are identified as 'Low' and 'Medium' respectively. You can also switch the display off entirely. These aspects of the display's design are further evidence that Bladelius expects most people to use the Volumio app for control.

At this point, we also have to say that we were disappointed with the supplied owner's manual, which was rudimentary in the extreme, just five pages long and with the bare minimum of information. This was particularly troubling for us because according to Bladelius' website, the circuitry inside the Ask "provides a truly balanced design without ground as reference for highest possible performance", meaning that the negative speaker terminals are not referenced to ground, and so if you did connect them to ground (potentially by connecting a powered subwoofer via its high-level inputs), the amplifier could be damaged.

When we searched the company's website for a more detailed version of the manual, we discovered there are no downloadable manuals at all for any of Bladelius' products. The manual we had recommends you use Volumio's website for information on how to operate the Ask, but we didn't find Volumio's site very easy to navigate. Again, we recommend you obtain help from your hi-fi dealer. Luckily, operation is fairly intuitive (though we have to say, this is likely to be the case only if you're already familiar with how to operate a music streaming device).

The first note we made after commencing our listening sessions was that you won't have to be concerned about needing any more power than is available from the Bladelius Ask, no matter what loudspeakers you're using. We discovered very quickly that the Ask could drive our relatively inefficient reference loudspeakers to deafeningly loud listening levels in even the largest

of the listening rooms we use, and it did this without any audible change in tonal quality across the various volume levels used during our evaluations. We didn't for even an instant doubt the manufacturer's power output claim.

For many years, one of our regular albums for auditioning has been Fleetwood Mac's famous 'Rumours' album, so we were rather chuffed when a few years ago one of the best tracks on it, *Dreams*, made it onto Billboard's 'Hot 100' list for the first time since 1977. Paradoxically, it wasn't due to anything Mick Fleetwood had done; a US skateboarder named Nathan Apodaca who had filmed himself skateboarding to the song posted his clip to TikTok, where it promptly went viral.

Playing *Dreams* through the Ask, we were first impressed by the perfect rhythm and pace of the immaculately delivered bass line and drums. It's such a simple intro that if it isn't done perfectly it is a little boring, but the Ask's delivery of it immediately piques the interest. Then, when we heard how the Ask introduced Stevie Nicks' voice to the mix, with that slight echo effect, we were smitten all over again. Also perfectly timed is Fleetwood's stick on his high-hat. We also loved the way the Ask contrasted the sound of Christine McVie's backing vocal against Nick's lead. The purity with which the Ask delivers this track is notable. With lesser amplification, it can sound sonically crowded as if there's too much going on, but when it's played through the Ask we found the sound to be wide-open and totally uncongested.

One of the many reasons 'Rumours' is a favourite tester for us is the sound of John McVie's fretless bass on *The Chain*, but also, in particular, the riff he delivers around three minutes in — totally distinctive and often claimed as one of the most famous in rock. Listening with the Ask, we could actually hear the engineer wind back the volume of McVie's bass to accommodate Lindsey Buckingham's lead guitar soaring in on top. The sizzle of the cymbals in the background is super-realistic as well.

When it comes to evaluating midrange, we're rather fond of the highly underrated Judee Sill and were very pleased to discover whilst reading Bernie Taupin's latest book, 'Scattershot: Life,

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Music, Elton and Me' that he is also a fan. The first track on her sophomore self-titled album has that glorious close-miked sound quality that was popular with recording engineers back in the 70s, but at the same time, those same engineers didn't fuss around with the lead vocal, so when Sill sings 'Crayon angel songs are slightly out of tune, but I'm sure I'm not to blame', we can hear her perfect pitching, her beautiful enunciation and the total lack of sibilances when singing words involving the letter 's'. The crisp guitar picking is also in clear evidence, with no smearing at all.

Sill's talents as a lyricist and composer are no better evidenced than on track three, *The Lamb Ran Away With The Crown*: the rhyming, the rhythms, the key changes and the different time signatures she employs are masterful. These all-important elements of songcraft have been gradually eroded over the years. According to YouTube's most-loved music analyst, Rick Beato, chart music has declined in complexity since Sill's time. "Of the No 1 hits between 1965 and 2009, 25% had a modulation — a key change," he says. "Sergio Mendes's 1983 hit *Never Gonna Let You Go* has 22 modulations, but since 2009, no [US No 1] songs have had a key change."

Similarly, listen to the syncopation

on *Jesus Was A Crossmaker* and to the deliciously analogue multi-tracking, not to mention the sound of the drum kit, from kick-drum to cymbals — again, all delivered to perfection by the Ask.

Incidentally, Taupin's new book is a real page-turner, and he introduced us to many musicians who previously had not been on our radar, as well as a few controversies that had slipped through to the keeper, such as the backstory behind the lyrics to Dory Previn's *Beware Of Young Girls* song.

We have most (but not all!) of the digitally stored music we use for auditioning in several formats, so we were able to compare the sound of the line-level inputs against that of the digital inputs and of the streaming inputs. We have to say that there was so little audible difference between them that you can be confident in using whatever playback method is most convenient for you. That being said, we would not recommend Bluetooth or AirPlay if you're after the ultimate in fidelity.

The Bladelius' phono stage sounded fine, but if you're truly serious about vinyl you will, of course, be using your own external phono stage, so we didn't examine its phono stage's performance too closely.

### CONCLUSION

The Bladelius Ask certainly has a few design quirks in terms of its operation, but it's easy to fall in love with the power on tap, the revealing sound quality and the Swiss Army knife of tools that are available to get your music into — and out of — its undeniably gorgeous livery.

Indeed, it isn't surprising that a product carrying the Bladelius name performs to such high quality. £

### SPECIFICATIONS

#### Bladelius Ask

**Power Output (8Ω):** 220 watts per channel

**Power Output (4Ω):** 400 watts per channel

**Distortion:** <0.01%

**Signal-to-Noise Ratio:** >125dB

**Frequency Response:** 1Hz–100kHz +0/–3dB

**Dimensions (HWD):** 12 x 43 x 47cm

**Price:** \$23,490

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