

# Goldmund Telos 590 integrated amplifier/digital audio hub

by Roy Gregory

**O**n paper, the notion of combining a DAC, analogue input circuitry, source switching, and amplification to create a single, do-it-all box looks like a no-brainer, yet in practice it's remarkable how often the collision of theory and reality results in a debris field of unfulfilled promises. The history of digital-integrated amplifiers is littered with examples that haven't just fallen short: in musical terms they've totally failed to launch, their digital circuitry upsetting their analogue side or vice versa, resulting in the bleached,

disjointed, fractured, and a-musical results we've all been exposed to. But things are finally starting to change, with first the Levinson 585 stepping up to the plate and then the CH Precision I1 hitting it out of the park. But if anybody should be able to untangle the digital-integrated Gordian knot, then it's Goldmund, a company that has been not just combining DACs and amplifiers for longer than most, but building them into loudspeaker cabinets to boot.

Goldmund's electronics have always been both attractive and instantly identifiable. If the volume control can make or ▶



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► break the performance of any preamp then, when it comes to aesthetics, the knob attached to it is just as important and, along with a select few others, Goldmund has the best looking knobs in the business. The proportions, the knurled surface, and the bevelled shoulders all combine to perfect visual effect, lifting the otherwise bland fascia of the Telos 590 to an unexpected level of understated elegance. Of course, it's really about look AND feel, at which point the easy spinning volume control, linked to relays and a resistor ladder, comes as something of a disappointment. I so wanted to meet the smooth, sumptuous, damped resistance of a traditional pot, but in these remotely controlled days, I'm afraid that's a thing of the past. Still, I take solace in the fact that at least it looks the part...

The rest of the fascia tells its own story, the simple display giving you a basic numerical indication of input (USB, Toslink, S/PDIF digital, or one of five analogue connections) and volume level. That's your lot: so no oversized alpha-numeric display with programmable source names and switchable colour options; no choice of digital filters or up-sampling; no balanced connections or any outputs (digital or analogue) and no control app – Apple or otherwise. In fact, no frills of any kind – which is kind of refreshing in this day and age, where designers seem to have forgotten that just because you can it doesn't mean you should. The Telos 590 is about as straightforward as a digital integrated can get, which given its £24K price-tag definitely sets it apart from the herd. The minimalist styling is matched by the performance-orientated design so make no mistake, the Telos 590 is all business – and nothing but business.

If there is a single overarching principle that defines Goldmund's approach it can be summed up as low-loss design. In turn that is embodied in wide-bandwidth topology, headroom, and mechanically grounded chassis designs, approaches that Goldmund adopted early and made central pillars of everything they do. It helps explain their preference for digital signal transfer, the high power ratings of their amplification, and the incredibly rigid casework they use on their products. In the Telos 590 that is reflected in the substantial aluminium panels and heat sinks that make up the visible surfaces, but more so in the thick steel base plate to which the output devices and transformers (one for

each channel) are bolted, and which sits on four adjustable, cone feet. Getting those feet rigidly coupled to the supporting surface matters, as does the surface itself. The Goldmund grounding strategy demands a solid, dispersive support and using an HRS M3X platform reaped significant musical dividends in terms of focus, colour, and an even greater sense of purpose to the playing. This amp is rigidly coupled in a way that few others are, while the obsession with eliminating spurious energy while maximising bandwidth and headroom ensures that the traditional Goldmund attributes of detail, transparency, and lightning-fast dynamic response are all present and correct. So much so that the Telos 590 sounds significantly more capable and powerful than its 215Wpc rated output might lead you to expect. It's the speed that makes that difference, giving music a surprising sense of impact and momentum, but there's more to this amp than that.

Having said that, on first switch on, that speed is hard to miss. The sound of a stone-cold Telos 590 is as fast as it is lean, as stark as it is immediate. Cool, verging on clinical it's incredibly impressive but less than inviting. Fortunately that changes as the amp warms up and runs in, putting flesh on the bones and colour in its cheeks. But the neat trick is that whilst it loses that etched, spot-lit quality, it loses none of its speed or transparency. Instead, the extra weight and colour bring even greater impact and an almost physical presence. The more it beds in the more the Telos 590's performance attributes allow it to hide behind the musical performance itself, performances it imbues with impressive immediacy, directness of communication, and a real sense of purpose. There's no missing which direction the music is pointing in – or why...

A small baroque ensemble might not seem like the obvious material to demonstrate the Goldmund's qualities, but then Amandine Beyer and Gili Incogniti's disc of Vivaldi's violin concertos [Zig Zag Territoires] is hardly a study in cool restraint. Instead, it is full of life, colour, attack, explosive dynamic contrasts, and vivid musical vitality – aspects of the performance that the Telos 590 seizes on with gusto to match the playing. This is a presentation full of clarity and presence, the space around and between the players are as clearly defined as the musicians themselves; the seated band in an arc around their standing soloist, the harpsichord in the back. ► But this is no simple exercise in precise stereo placement. ►

► The opening to RV297 ('Winter' from the ubiquitous 'Four Seasons') is incredibly taut and directed, its rising dynamic graduations giving it pace and momentum and making the most of the band's impressive verve and attitude, the perfect foil to the quicksilver precision of Beyer's lightning bow work. Likewise, the rounded notes of the *pizzicato* elements in the second movement are softer and clearly shaped, in stark contrast to the texture and attack of the bowed passages, the character and identity of the Theorbo bringing its own colour and body to the music. Playing even a baroque string concerto with half a dozen musicians and harpsichord continuo might seem like a stretch, until you experience the sheer energy and intensity that Gli Incogniti bring to the party – energy that the Goldmund amp fastens on and delivers direct to your speakers.

This combination of speed, clarity, and presence is clearly displayed in small, vivid, and intricate settings, but how about increasing the scale? The *passacaglia* from the Shostakovich violin concerto [Lisa Batiashvili, *Echoes Of Time*, DG] takes the solo intensity of the Vivaldi but ramps up the difficulty and drama, the extended violin sections contrasted against deft yet powerful orchestral backing. It opens with massive, doom-laden percussion beats – yet the Goldmund manages to deliver not just the weight, pitch, and power of the timps and bass drum, it separates them in texture too, giving their contribution its correct shape, motion, and musical impact. These are subtleties lost on many systems, but are niceties essential to building the prevailing mood of

this deeply emotional piece. In many ways it's the perfect musical microcosm to encapsulate what sets the Telos 590 apart from the crowd. While this is an amp that excels in revealing the acoustic space around recorded instruments, its temporal accuracy and dynamic discrimination mean that it goes further than that, capturing the feel and atmosphere in the performance too, whether that's Gli Incogniti's sheer *joie de vivre* or the draining intensity of Lisa Batiashvili.

That grasp on the musical landscape is just as relevant and obvious when it comes to other genres too, unearthing the angst and sadness to be found in songs by Janis Ian or Eleanor McEvoy, the barely-suppressed anger in Elvis Costello, or the sardonic humour in Joe Jackson. It bridges across the digital and analogue inputs too, although I have to say that there's something special in the musical integrity, communication, and engagement to be found in the Telos 590's internal DAC. This is digital disc replay (from the CEC TL-2 transport) with grace, fluidity, and sense of forward motion, a world away from the stuttering, hesitant, gutless, or sterile presentation of so much high-res digital these days. The USB input is similarly impressive, although the musical shape, colour, and substance of physical disc replay still wins out.

The end result is that rare thing indeed, an audio component that's as impressive as it is entertaining. Whether it's searing guitar, the deep bass detonations on some OTT movie soundtrack (or classical head-banger), the fragile intensity of solo violin or female vocal, or the convoluted horn meanderings of John Coltrane at his most obtuse, this is an ►



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## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Integrated amplifier with internal DAC

**Inputs:** 1x S/PDIF (RCA)

1x USB 2.0 (32bit/384 or DSD128)

1x TosLink

5x line-level analogue (RCA)

**Rated Output:** 215W per channel into 8 Ohms

**Output Connections:** 1pr 5-way binding posts/channel

**Weight:** 20kg

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 440 x 163 x 410mm

**Price:** £24,000 (exchange rate dependent)

**Manufacturer:** Goldmund

**URL:** [goldmund.com](http://goldmund.com)

**UK Distributor:** Sonata Hi-Fi

**Tel:** +44 (0) 330 111 5653

**URL:** [sonatahifi.com](http://sonatahifi.com)

► amp that will never, ever leave you wondering. Despite its rated output, it's more at home with speakers that let it stretch its legs, but I never reached its dynamic limits with models as diverse as the Wilson-Benesch Resolution, Raidho XT5, and Focal Maestro Utopia Evo, failing even to explore the outer limits of its comfort zone. Instead, the Telos 590 simply delivered whatever I demanded, without fuss or fanfare. It never lost control, but then it never lost its unflustered sense of musical enthusiasm either, always putting the performance front and centre. There are integrated amps that are bigger, heavier, and a lot more obvious, ones that offer far more facilities, balanced connection, network capabilities, and a host of configuration options. There are certainly amps that might seem equivalent on paper and that are available at far lower prices. But in the face of all that noisy competition, the Telos 590 simply does the things that matter and does them really well, more 8" Zwilling Henckels cook's knife than Gerber multi-tool. Everything you actually need and only a TosLink input that you don't, this Goldmund might just be the musical benchmark when it comes to high-end digital integrated amps. +

## High-prices and high-times in the high-end... A brief history of Goldmund

When it comes to the highest of high-end, solid-state electronics, it seems like few companies have been around as long, or aimed as high as Goldmund. In reality, Mark Levinson Audio Systems (founded in 1972) predated the French-Swiss company by six-years, while Goldmund's first electronics, the Mimesis 2 and 3 pre-power amplifier, didn't appear until 1987, previous efforts having been devoted to tonearms and turntables (including the legendary Reference record player, the product that along with the Apologue loudspeaker, has arguably come to define the brand). And therein lies a tale, for Goldmund products have never lacked extravagance or ambition, cutting-edge technology, or attention-grabbing price-tags. From the computer controlled, linear tracking T3 tonearm to digital inter-active loudspeakers, sophisticated room correction software to the feed-forward digital error corrected crossovers of Project Leonardo, Goldmund has ever been so cutting edge that occasionally it has cut itself! Based in Geneva, Goldmund's proximity to Cerne is no coincidence, practically or philosophically. As iconoclastic in style and design as they are technologically aggressive, Goldmund products have an immediately identifiable look and sound. It is an identity that certainly polarises opinion, while the willingness to flirt with bleeding-edge technology has, over the years caused its own fair-share of reliability issues, a legacy that has left the company with its own Greek chorus of detractors, critics who accuse it of playing as fast and loose with its partners and customers as its products sound fast and tight. Yet amidst all of the pros and cons, hype and debate, one thing is undeniable: Goldmund the company is as resilient as its products are impressive – it keeps coming back and they keep getting better!