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FROM ZERO TO REFERENCE

CANOR CRIUS H5S



Headphone amplifier, digital-to-analogue converter and preamplifier: with the Crius H5S from its new Essential Line, Canor demonstrates just how much audiophile expertise can be accommodated in a surprisingly small space.

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The connections provided by the Canor Crius H5S meet almost every requirement: analogue sources connect via RCA or XLR, while digital signals reach the integrated converter via USB-C, coaxial or optical inputs. Balanced and unbalanced preamplifier outputs, together with a separate XLR bypass, make integration into high-end hi-fi systems straightforward.

There are technological developments whose significance only truly becomes apparent when their possibilities are experienced first-hand. Listening to music through headphones is one such example. For a long time, it was regarded as a practical alternative to loudspeakers, a private option for late-night listening or a solution where space was limited. It has since developed into an audiophile discipline in its own right. High-quality headphones are now capable of revealing musical relationships with a precision and intimacy that challenge even excellent loudspeakers.

The result, however, depends decisively on what happens before the signal reaches the headphones. That is precisely where Canor's Crius H5S comes in. The Slovak manufacturer has developed a component that does more than supply ample amplification power: it combines analogue and digital signal processing with an unusually versatile range of functions. Of particular interest is the question of just how much difference a balanced connection makes to the sound of a high-quality pair of headphones. We can give away one thing already: the Crius H5S provides an astonishingly clear answer.

Anyone seeing the Canor for the first time is unlikely to guess what it can actually do. The front panel displays a restraint that provides a welcome contrast to the technical complexity within. Four headphone connections and a generously proportioned central rotary control with an integrated display define its appearance. Canor consistently avoids conspicuous additional controls. The result looks uncluttered, high-quality and thoroughly contemporary. At 21 centimetres wide, 7.5 centimetres high and 30 centimetres deep, the Crius H5S occupies little space. Yet its four-kilogram weight conveys the impression of a substantially built hi-fi component. The carefully executed casework reinforces that impression, with well-balanced proportions, immaculate surfaces and a design concentrated on the essentials.



The Canor Crius H5S display here shows a sampling rate of 705.6 kHz. Via the USB-C input, the integrated digital-to-analogue converter processes PCM signals up to 32-bit/768 kHz.

The central rotary control performs two functions. It adjusts the volume and navigates the menus, while also housing a circular touch-sensitive display. This solution is elegant in its design and sophisticated in its operation. Where other manufacturers need additional buttons to accommodate so many settings, Canor integrates almost the entire interface into this one element. Initially, however, the concept requires a little attention. Anyone exploring the various menu levels for the first time must learn the logic of the swiping gestures and selection options. After a period of familiarisation, operation becomes assured. Moreover, settings such as gain, digital filters and display configuration normally need to be made only once.



Proven in listening tests: the Cardas Parsec connecting cable shown here has a balanced connector. It impressed throughout the listening comparisons.

The display can be operated with two different colour themes. The Canor logo can also appear as a screensaver. This allows users to adapt the visual presence of the device to their personal preferences.

Switching it on reveals another special feature: rather than starting abruptly, the Crius H5S runs through a controlled start-up sequence. A light touch of the display is enough to wake the amplifier from standby, indicated by a red LED. The display then shows the start-up progress. After a good half-hour of operation, the carefully finished top cover feels pleasantly warm. Accordingly, Canor recommends allowing generous ventilation clearance when positioning the unit.

What's behind the name?

The name itself is also worth a brief look. In Greek mythology, Crius was one of the Titans, descendants of Uranus and Gaia. His specific role in the surviving stories is less prominent than that of better-known Titans. The occasional association with the starry sky and the zodiac is more a later interpretation than an unequivocally established mythological function. One possible translation of his name, however, is 'the powerful one'. There is much to suggest that this is exactly what the Slovak development team had in mind when choosing the name.



The brightness of the central touchscreen can be adjusted individually using the dimming function. At its lowest level, the display switches off completely after three seconds, lighting up briefly again when a control is operated. Nothing need distract the listener from the music.



The Canor Crius H5S is available in three attractive finishes. On the left of the front panel are the two balanced headphone outputs (XLR and 4.4 mm jack), notable for their exceptional sound quality. On the right, the two unbalanced jack sockets (6.3 and 3.5 mm) also provide reproduction at a very high level.

Four headphone outputs are provided on the front. Balanced connections can be made via a four-pin XLR socket or a 4.4 mm jack. For unbalanced headphones, there are conventional 6.3 mm and 3.5 mm jack sockets. The range of connections continues at the rear. Analogue sources can be connected through one balanced XLR stereo pair and one unbalanced RCA stereo pair. The preamplifier outputs are also available in both formats. In addition, there is a separate balanced XLR bypass output for the corresponding XLR input signal. A 12-volt trigger socket allows other components to be integrated. Particularly pleasing is how easily the unit switches between headphone and preamplifier operation. Simply touch the headphone symbol on the display; the headphone outputs are then deactivated and the analogue line outputs activated. In this way, the Crius H5S can drive a power amplifier or a pair of active loudspeakers, for example. Touching the symbol again restores headphone operation.



A displayed sampling rate of 192 kHz does not in itself guarantee better reproduction. Where a recording genuinely offers a sonic improvement, the Canor Crius H5S makes it audible with impressive precision and transparency.

For digital sources, Canor provides USB-C, optical and coaxial inputs. Via USB, the integrated converter processes PCM signals up to 32-bit/768 kHz and native DSD up to DSD512. DSD256 is supported through DoP. Both S/PDIF inputs accept PCM signals up to 24-bit/192 kHz. Inside are two ESS ES9039Q2M converter chips operating in a dual-mono configuration, giving each stereo channel its own digital-to-analogue converter. This architecture provides the basis for consistently separate signal processing for each channel. A special feature is the choice of nine digital filters. In addition to the various characteristics provided by the ESS converters, Canor offers 'Optimal Transient', a further filter programmed in-house. It is intended to offer another way to influence the timing behaviour of digital signal processing. The filters can be selected for all digital inputs.

Levels under control

Level adjustment has also been carefully thought through. Volume can be regulated in one hundred steps from minus 99 to zero decibels, in one-decibel increments. For the analogue inputs, gain in headphone and line modes can be selected between plus six and plus eleven decibels. The corresponding setting for digital inputs is plus eleven decibels. It is also possible to select different output-level adjustments for the preamplifier outputs. The balance between the headphone channels can be corrected by up to nine decibels in fine 0.5-decibel steps. A function called 'Precision Timing' is designed to achieve the most accurate possible timing of incoming digital signals. Should sources with unstable timing cause problems, this function can be disabled to make the connection more tolerant.

Protection against overload, short circuits and DC voltage at the output contributes to operational safety. Another notable feature is an automatic cleaning routine for the relay contacts, activated on every twentieth switch-off. The developers have even considered such details. The supplied remote control enables the most important adjustments from the listening position: input selection, volume, muting, display brightness and digital filters. The Crius H5S thus combines its extensive configuration options with gratifying everyday convenience.



The supplied remote control does more than make the Crius H5S convenient to use every day. Its filter-selection button is particularly useful: it makes it easy to move between the nine digital filters during playback and compare subtle sonic differences directly without interrupting the music.



How convincingly the technical design of the Crius H5S works in practice becomes evident from the first bars of Keith Jarrett's 'Spheres'. In the fourth movement, the pianist draws sounds from the organ whose character goes far beyond what is commonly associated with the instrument. Some notes seem almost disembodied, while others have a peculiar, floating intensity. Harmonic structures emerge that are as fascinating as they are fragile and, presented in this way, surpass the results obtained from most loudspeakers. Here we come closer to the music – much closer.



Hifiman HE1000 Unveiled: at Hifiman, 'Unveiled' denotes headphones designed without compromise for the best possible sound quality. Their magnetostatic drivers, completely open to the outside, favour maximum airiness and spatial reproduction. An exceptional listening experience of this kind calls for an amplifier of the Canor Crius H5S's calibre.

With the Hifiman HE1000 Unveiled, the Canor unfolds the tonal picture with remarkable naturalness. The individual layers of sound are finely separated without compromising musical coherence. The stability of timbre is particularly impressive. Even when the organ ventures into complex harmonic territory, every change remains comprehensible. At the same time, reproduction conveys a convincing sense of the surrounding space. We then switch from the unbalanced 6.3 mm jack connection to the balanced Cardas Parsec cable. The first thing we notice is the higher level: the difference is around three to four decibels, so careful level matching is necessary for a fair comparison. Only then can we assess what is actually happening.



What is the sonic difference between balanced and unbalanced headphone connections? To examine this under identical conditions, Cardas's German distributor Sieveking Sound provided us with the high-end Parsec headphone cable in several connector versions. The result of the comparison was as clear as it was impressive.

And it really is astonishing. The balanced connection gives reproduction an additional, almost unexpected sense of ease that cannot be reduced to individual frequency ranges. Sound events are more clearly separated in space, delicate harmonic structures acquire greater definition, and the entire presentation seems more stable in energy and more expansive. It is as if the view of a familiar landscape suddenly becomes clearer. Nothing fundamentally new appears, yet the relationships between individual elements become far more distinct, and previously grey acoustic details begin to shine.

The advantage of a balanced connection

The longer one listens in this way, the harder it becomes to switch back to an unbalanced connection. The Crius H5S already performs at a very high level through its jack outputs, of course. The balanced option simply reveals how much additional potential lies in the combination of amplifier and headphones. A particularly illuminating example comes from Iniko's album 'The Awakening'. The New York artist combines elements of alternative pop, R&B and rap in a musical language all her own. Her characteristic features include intense vocals, atmospheric arrangements and production that employs electronic textures just as naturally as traditional musical elements. The first two tracks already demonstrate how confidently the Canor handles spatial information. Reverberation is not merely reproduced as a note lasting longer: it conveys the dimensions of a virtual space. The voice occupies a clearly defined position, while electronic sounds are grouped around it with remarkable precision.

On 'The King's Affirmation', a mighty bass foundation is added. Through the balanced connection, the presentation takes on an almost physical presence. This is by no means simply about bass extension or volume. What matters is the pinpoint energy with which the low frequencies support the entire musical performance. The bass forms a pitch-black foundation above which the voice and choir unfold with impressive clarity. The combination thereby reaches a level of quality we have never previously experienced through headphones.



The Crius H5S's balance adjustment goes far beyond simply shifting the sound left or right. In very fine 0.5 dB increments, it can correct a level difference of up to nine decibels between the two headphone channels. This allows precise volume matching without unnecessarily compromising sound quality.



To be certain, we switch back to the unbalanced connection, which noticeably changes our perception of the music. The voice loses some substance and sounds leaner. At the same time, the bass loses authority. It is not so much individual notes that are missing as the inner tension that gives the piece its particular intensity. Descriptions such as 'more anaemic' and 'less emotional' come to mind. So we hurriedly return to the balanced connection: immediately the choir sounds complete again. Its individual voices are easier to follow without losing the ensemble's cohesive character. Is this simply down to the outstanding sound of the Hifiman HE1000 Unveiled?

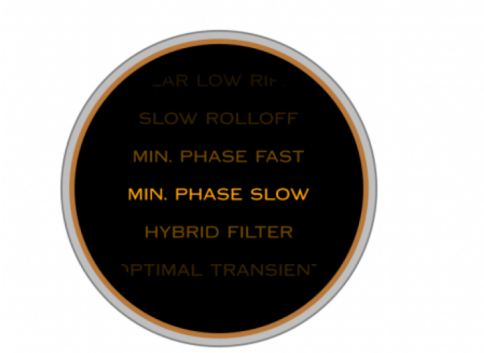
At this point we bring in the more affordable Sennheiser HD 480 PRO. What the Crius H5S gets out of these headphones is equally astonishing. After all, the Sennheiser is currently the editorial team's workhorse. The Slovak amplifier's exceptional control allows these headphones, too, to play with great precision and remarkable dynamic discipline. Nevertheless, the difference compared with the Hifiman HE1000 Unveiled remains clear. The latter's superior resolution and ability to distinguish spatial information take reproduction to another level altogether. The Canor makes those differences audible without exposing the less expensive headphones to embarrassment.



With gain settings of +6 and +11 dB, the Crius H5S can be adapted to different headphones and analogue input levels. Even demanding headphones have sufficient reserves without unnecessarily restricting the available volume-control range.

The finer details: level and filters

Another remarkable benefit of the balanced connection becomes evident at reduced volume. Whereas many playback systems lose expressiveness at low levels, the Crius H5S preserves musical tension. Bass, voice and spatial information retain a convincing relationship with one another. You can listen more quietly without feeling that you are sacrificing essential aspects of the music. This is a considerable advantage during longer listening sessions.



Eight digital filters are already built into the ESS converter; the ninth, 'Optimal Transient', was programmed by Canor's engineers. The sonic differences are subtle and more or less audible depending on the music. There is no wrong choice: personal preferences and the recording used remain decisive.

The differences between the nine digital filters are less clear-cut. Often the selected musical passage determines whether a change can be heard at all. Occasionally, minute shifts can be perceived in the precision of transients or the presentation of fine outlines. The differences are subtle, but they can certainly be traced through high-resolution headphones. It is useful that the filters can be switched via the remote control during playback. The first press displays the current setting; subsequent presses cycle through the different options. Music is not interrupted because switching is extremely fast. After extended comparisons, 'Optimal Transient' remains our preferred setting. That it is precisely the additional filter characteristic developed by Canor that wins us over speaks for the care the development team has devoted to this aspect.

Just how much information a high-quality digital source can provide is demonstrated by 'Down On The Bottom' by The New Basement Tapes in a 96 kHz version played from a hard drive. The slowly moving bass, charismatic voice and relaxed drumming combine into a musical performance whose harmonic layers the Crius H5S reveals with great clarity. Particularly appealing is the way the headphones make individual details accessible without artificially pushing them into the foreground. Small rhythmic shifts, the decay of instruments and subtle gradations in the voice can all be followed effortlessly. The result is a relaxed yet exceptionally informative performance.

Streaming versus hard drive

In direct comparison, the 44.1 kHz version streamed through Qobuz sounds less differentiated. However, this comparison alone cannot establish any general quality advantage for the higher sampling rate, since differences in mastering may also play a part. The specific listening experience is what matters here: with the high-resolution file from the hard drive, reproduction offers greater fine detail and musical tension. By the following track, 'Kansas City', that rare feeling sets in that technology, as the intermediary, has faded completely into the background. The groove develops effortlessly, the instruments interlock and we sit back comfortably as the music works its magic. The conclusion: there is still scope for sonic improvement in streaming.

Billy Idol's 'To Be A Lover' proves that the Crius H5S is by no means suited only to delicate audiophile fare. The song has a direct, sometimes rough character. Through the combination of Canor and Hifiman HE1000 Unveiled, however, it loses every trace of unpleasant harshness without sacrificing its energy. The rhythmic structure becomes clearer, the piano runs gain precision, and the production sounds remarkably differentiated. Once again, switching to the unbalanced connection demonstrates what the balanced output offers in addition. The previously expansive, finely drawn presentation becomes more compact. Musical coherence remains, but spaciousness and dynamic authority are diminished. A comparison with a Lehmannaudio headphone amplifier also yields interesting insights. In that configuration, reproduction initially seems a little more matter-of-fact. The bass is more restrained while the piano runs retain comparable precision. Yet the Canor combines this fine definition with greater physical presence and more pronounced dynamic tension.



'With the Canor Crius H5S, we can offer our specialist retail partners a product combining a headphone amplifier, high-quality digital-to-analogue converter and fully fledged preamplifier in one unit. It is therefore far more than a headphone specialist: it can become the heart of an ambitious hi-fi system. At €1,899, its sound quality, features and finish are outstanding. The differences can be experienced immediately in a listening comparison at a specialist dealer. That is precisely the strength of specialist hi-fi retail: not merely explaining the technology, but making it possible to experience it,' says IDC managing director Martin Klaassen.

FEATURES AND TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Manufacturer
Canor, Prešov, Slovakia

Distributor
IDC Klaassen, Lünen

Model
Crius H5S

Category
Transistor headphone amplifier with D/A converter and preamplifier

Price
€1,899

Warranty
2 years

D/A converter
2 × ESS ES9039Q2M, dual mono

Digital filters
9 selectable characteristics

Digital inputs
USB-C
optical
coaxial

USB resolution
PCM up to 32-bit/768 kHz
native DSD up to DSD512
DoP up to DSD256

Analogue inputs
1 × RCA stereo pair
1 × XLR stereo pair

Headphone outputs
1 × four-pin XLR
1 × balanced 4.4 mm jack
1 × 6.3 mm jack
1 × 3.5 mm jack

Preamplifier outputs
1 × XLR stereo pair
1 × RCA stereo pair
1 × XLR bypass stereo pair

Balanced output power
4 W/30 ohms, 500 mW/300 ohms

Unbalanced output power
1 W/30 ohms, 130 mW/300 ohms

Trigger output
12 V

Power consumption
40 VA

Supplied accessories
remote control, mains cable, user manual

Dimensions (W × H × D)
21 × 7.5 × 30 cm

Weight
4 kg



Behind the connection panel of the Canor Crius H5S is a carefully selected switched-mode power supply that meets the stringent requirements of a standard originally developed for medical equipment. Compared with conventional industrial power supplies, it stands out for its particularly low leakage current of less than 100 microamperes and enhanced galvanic isolation between the primary and secondary sides. This sophisticated isolation also reduces the parasitic capacitance between the transformer windings, thereby limiting the propagation of high-frequency switching interference. Canor thus tackles potential interference at its source, before downstream filters have to intervene – a design measure intended to preserve the cleanest possible signal processing and interference-free musical reproduction.



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REVIEW VERDICT / CANOR CRIUS H5S

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It would be too easy to describe the Canor Crius H5S simply as an excellent headphone amplifier. Its range of capabilities is too broad and its sound too overwhelming for that. With its integrated digital-to-analogue converter, preamplifier function and extensive adjustment options, it forms the basis of a hi-fi system that is as compact as it is ambitious. Its true strength, however, lies in its balanced headphone outputs: here it combines fascinating clarity with a powerful foundation and outstanding dynamic ability, all of which are preserved even at low listening levels. The Crius H5S earns our unreserved recommendation and is awarded i-fidelity.net Reference status. Olaf Sturm



It combines fascinating clarity with a powerful foundation and outstanding dynamic ability.

OFFICIAL TEST AWARDS (ORIGINAL LOGOS)





Complete original review by Olaf Sturm, published 3 November 2026

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