

PRODUCT REVIEWS



This Month On PDN Gear Guide

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Profoto Pro-8a Air

With a recycling time of 0.9 seconds at full power, this 2400 watt-second flash generator will keep pace with even your fastest cameras.

One of the best things about new ultra-high-resolution digital SLRs, like the 24.5-megapixel Nikon D3X reviewed in last month's PDN, is the speed they offer in the studio compared to medium-format digital cameras. Capable of firing up to five frames per second, the Nikon D3X fared well in our studio tests where we photographed a pair of fast moving actresses as they worked through several comedic scenes.

In fact, the Nikon D3X was so swift that our strobes often couldn't keep pace with the camera, resulting in more than a few misfires. It's worth noting that this rarely, if ever, occurs with medium-format cameras we test, since even the fastest models chug along at just over 1 frame per second.

Swedish company Profoto, which has been a leader in professional studio lighting since the late 1960s, has a great new companion to all these new, speedy, DSLRs that are starting to infiltrate photo studios—a digital flash generator that is so fast your camera might not be able to keep up.

With a recycle time of just .9-second at a full power of 2400 watt-seconds, the Profoto Pro-8a Air is twice as fast as its predecessor the Pro 7. At lower power settings, the Pro-8a Air is demonically quick, capable of firing at up to 20 frames per second which is twice the rate of even the speediest digital SLR (Canon 1D Mark III, 10fps) on the market right now.

Seriously, when we achieved 20fps strobe firing in our studio tests of the Pro-8a Air flash generator, I felt like I was back in the haunted house from my childhood summers on the boardwalk in Ocean City, Maryland. Scary.

Arguably what's even more important than recycle time is the quality of the light a strobe pack puts out. Anybody can be fast but can you be fast *and* good? With the Pro-8a, we found the output to be extremely accurate with consistent color throughout our studio shots of a model, even when firing quick bursts with a DSLR.

But as with the costly Nikon D3X (\$8,000), this quality comes at a price. For the Profoto Pro-8a Air, it's a \$10,999 street price for the generator

alone. Let's take a look to see if it's worth it.

NICE PACKAGE

It's amazing that a power pack this powerful could come in such a slim and trim package. While testing the Pro-8a Air 8 with Jason Group <www.jasongphoto.com> in his studio, we dragged Jason's bulky old Profoto Pro-5 pack out of the closet and the comparison with the sleek new model was laughable.

Though it's certainly far closer in size and weight to the more recent Pro-7, the 27-pound Pro-8a has some nice new design touches with slightly curved corners, two ergonomic grips on each side rather than just one in the middle, and a cleaner overall look with a logical layout of switches and dials. Hard to think of a flash generator as being "elegant," but the stylish, black Pro-8a Air comes pretty close to that description.

Though Profoto touts the redesigned Pro-8a having a "new completely digital interface," that's overstating it a bit. It does look a lot like Profoto's smaller D4 series of power packs which offer the same control as the Pro-8a but with a slower recycling time (2.2 seconds at 2400 watt seconds) and longer flash duration. (The D4 is considerably cheaper than the Pro-8a but with the slower speed it's aimed more at tabletop photographers.)

INDEPENDENT CONTROL

Each of the two lamp head sockets on the Pro-8a is controlled independently with the settings viewable in green on LED screens. The first thing you'll notice with the power settings for the heads is that they default to "F/Stops" rather than traditional watt seconds. F/Stop numbers on the pack are actually a relative scale and not meant to correspond directly to f/stops on your camera.

So, for example, if you set one of the sockets to 9.0 on the pack and you get a reading of f/8 on the meter, when you adjust the pack to 8.0 (one stop lower) the meter will read f/5.6. If you're not familiar with this nomenclature already it takes a little getting used to but it's actually a lot more accurate than adjusting based on watt seconds.

However, if you're more comfortable with watt seconds, press the w/s button on the pack and you'll see the comparable setting, i.e. 10 equals 2400 watt seconds; 9 equals 1200 watt seconds, etc.



The powerful Pro-8a has a redesigned "digital" interface that resembles Profoto's D4 series of packs.

We stumbled a little on how to lock the pack so it would only show the watt seconds, not the f/stops. To do that, you need to press and hold the w/s button for eight seconds and it switches over. Not exactly intuitive.

There's a lot of control in the dials on the Pro-8a though. Lindsey, Jason's assistant, really liked that though pressing down the power knobs while turning them will change the settings in full stop increments, just turning them will increase power in 1/10th of stop increments. That's very handy when you're looking for just the right flash of light.

When a second head is plugged into the pack, the generator automatically picks the lowest power setting as the default. That doesn't affect the first head, however, since they both operate independently; you can keep the first head at 9 and the second at 1, for example.

Though it's a powerful pack, you can't run both heads at full power; the A head has a maximum setting of 10 while the B head has a max of 9. (OK, no *Spinal Tap* jokes about how *your* flash generators "go to 11.")

CONTROL, CONSISTENCY, AND SPEED

As with everything on the Pro-8a, control and consistency are the big selling points and with accuracy of up to 1/50th of an f/stop plus or minus, this pack delivers. Time and again in our studio tests while trying a variety of power setting combos and shooting quick burst semi-candid and more posed shots, we found the Profoto Pro heads got it right.

In fact it was very hard to trip the pack up at all. We even captured a series of shots of a model spinning around on a swivel-headed stool and the light and color accuracy was remarkable. Though there was no way for us to precisely test Profoto's claim of color accuracy of "up to 40 degrees Kelvin from flash to flash" with the Pro-8a, light and color in our images was spot-on nearly every time. "Nice," "soft," and "even" were some of the comments on the lighting from our testers.

The fact that the strobes kept up with the bursts we were shooting with a Canon 5D Mark II was also impressive. The strobes were so speedy, in fact, they were faster than the camera could focus at times. "Almost like shooting in natural light," Jason remarked.

The recharging time was blazing—we clocked it at right about the advertised rate of .9 seconds at full power—so we even turned off the ready indicator which lets you select between DIM, BEEP, or BEEP-DIM, to alert the photographer and model that the strobes are ready to fire again. Pretty much whenever we wanted to shoot, the Profoto pack was ready to go and the model quickly picked up on that. This led to a natural and spontaneous relationship with our subject which, in turn, led to some beautiful, natural looking photos. Hard to argue with that.

Power management was also excellent and though we shot with both heads at their full power, never once did we blow a fuse. (Jason has had less success in that department with other power packs he's used.) If you're taking the Pro-8a on the road in situations where you might not know the amperage of the breakers, there's a knob for dialing down the power.

For total control freaks, the USB socket on the Pro-8 lets you connect the pack to your computer and adjust it via the Profoto Studio Software. For photographers who want to play god, you can hardwire up to 127 Pro-8 generators to your computer via USB and control them with the software.

If you think that's extreme, try it with the Air Studio USB accessory and you can do the same thing remotely without any cables. Talk about divine control!

AIR APPARENT

We tested the Pro-8a Air with the Profoto Air Remote and were able to maintain those fast speeds without using a sync cord. Though it's an extra \$321, the Remote's an essential add-on that we would have hard time living without.

The Air Remote lets you control the packs from as far as 1000 feet away, while operating on the 2.4 GHz band via eight different channels in up to 6 groups within each channel. Along with controlling the flash power, the Air Remote wirelessly controls the modeling light, and allows up to 1/000th of second sync speeds.

If there's any negative to this pack it's that photographers might find some

of the features, like the aforementioned control over up to 127 generators, to be overkill.

For instance, flash duration with the Pro-8a goes to an astounding 1/12,000th of a second. But unless you're shooting science experiment shots of water balloons exploding, we don't know how often you're going to want your flash duration to be that speedy.

Also, in our testing while photographing a model, we seldom needed to go to full power with the Pro-8a and, in fact, often kept both heads turned down to mid-power or lower to prevent our shots from looking too hot.

Speaking of what to do with all that power, why not provide space for a third lamp socket on the pack? Though that might destroy the impressive recycling time, it'd be nice to have it as an option for when you want to do a three-light set-up.

THE BOTTOM LINE

If you just got a new high-resolution digital SLR and want to take full advantage of the camera's fast frame rate in the studio, there are few power packs out there that will give you the incredible speed of the new Profoto Pro-8a. In fact, in our testing of the Pro-8a we found that it was actually our camera's autofocus that occasionally lagged behind the strobes, which says a lot about the pack's .09-second recycling time. Even more importantly than all that speed, the Pro-8a

pulsed out accurate, consistent, and oftentimes beautiful bursts of light that lit our subject evenly and naturally. One of our testers, Jason Group, perhaps put it best when he described using the Pro-8a as "almost like shooting in natural light." If the \$10,999 price tag of this pack gives you some, understandable, sticker shock, consider renting the Pro-8a for your next big shoot. It's worth the investment.

Profoto Pro-8a Air www.profoto-usa.com

Pros: Incredibly fast recycling time which makes the need for a ready indicator almost unnecessary; impressive color temperature accuracy which produces consistent and beautiful bursts of light; easily comprehensible pack interface offering lots of control; stylish, ergonomic design.

Cons: Very expensive; some of the features such as 1/12,000th of a second flash duration and maximum 20fps speed seem like overkill; would have been nice if the pack offered a third lamp socket.

Pricing: \$10,999 (pack only)

Wacom Intuous4

Improved digitizer from Wacom will please pen tablet lovers.

Wacom graphics tablets are something photographers either love or hate. On the one hand, they offer incredible precision and control during photo editing, letting you closely retouch your images with Wacom's distinctive pen and tablet interface until you can get your shot just the way you want it.

On the other hand, using a Wacom tablet takes some getting used to and since it allows you to dive deep into programs such as Adobe Photoshop or Illustrator, it could add to your overall photo editing time instead of speeding it up. Plus, who has room for another space-hogging peripheral on your desktop anyway?

The new completely redesigned Intuous4 from Wacom—which replaces the Intuous3—just might begin to blur the line between the "lovers" and the "haters" of pen tablets. There are a slew of design changes to the Intuous4, making it more attractive, ergonomic and intuitive than the previous model, while increasing the tablet's performance and, theoretically, the user's productivity.

Having said that, there are other unavoidable things about the Intuous4—including its intrusive footprint—that might continue to turn off non-