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audio research

The VS115's four 6550C pentode output valves produce 120 watts per channel

AUDIO RESEARCH

LS17 & VS115

Audio Research just keeps on getting better and better

PRICE LS17: £3,199; VS115: £4,988 **CONTACT** Absolute Sounds ■ 020 8971 3909 ■ www.audioresearch.com

If truth be told, a few years back Audio Research (ARC) lost its way. There would always be a 'good', 'better' and 'best' product in the range, but that had little bearing on the price or sophistication of the product. Sometimes the 'good' product in terms of price and specification was the 'best' performing.

That was then. This is now; there is a distinct improvement in performance as you go up the range and the sound is consistent. In other words, if you like the sound of entry-level Audio Research, you will like the bigger, better equipment even more.

The pairing of LS17 and VS115 represents the middle point of ARC amplifiers. The line-only preamp is better and more expensive than the SP17, and not as much or as good as the LS26, and certainly nowhere near as good as the Reference 3. Likewise, the VS115 stereo valve power amp is better, more expensive and more powerful than the VS55, but a long way from the price and performance available from the Reference products.

ARC has not drastically changed its panel design in a generation, so the two knob, four push-button layout on the black and silver front panel of the LS17 is instantly recognisable. This is understated, with LEDs displaying volume level and source selected. The knobs control source selection and 104-step volume, stretched over 20 LED indicators, while the squishy buttons are for power, tape monitoring, a processor by-pass and mute. To adjust the balance, you need the remote.

Inside the preamp is a pair of 6H30 dual triodes and, effectively, the preamp is a hybrid JFET/valve design, with a fully solid-state power supply stage. It accepts two balanced and five single-ended inputs, delivers two balanced and one single-ended output with monitor input and record output for full monitoring.

ACCURATE PERFORMERS

The VS115 looks almost identical to its VS110 predecessor. An almost square footprint, with three massive transformers at the rear and two flanking channels of valves along either side of the chassis, this power amp returns to a simplistic elegance with just a power switch and green LED to show operation. The VS115 uses a FET input with two 6H30 triodes in each channel for gain and a cathode follower-driver for the four-per-channel 6550C-equipped output stage. This allows both balanced and single-ended connections in a true differential circuit.

Power output from the four matched pairs of 6650C output tubes is a healthy 120 watts per channel. All of which means that, although there are external similarities

between this and its predecessor, the two amps are very different – new transformers, for example. There is even a nod to custom-install with a 12-volt trigger for remote power up.

The LS17 and VS115 return a very accurate performance; not intrinsically 'valvey', just good sounds throughout. Certain words keep reappearing on the notebook: 'defined', 'taut', 'musical', 'honest' and 'precise'. There is no need to waft 'limpid pools of pellucidity' nonsensical statements to justify this duo's performance, this is belt and braces good solid hi-fi. Bass, in particular, is exceptionally good; if it went any deeper it would be a coal miner. It's also extremely rhythmic, something we were led to believe – falsely – was impossible to achieve with valve power.

Normally, belt and braces implies good, but unexciting. Not so in this case, where the accuracy and musical integrity win you over. There is also a sense of authority that makes music seem 'right'. Yes, it is exceptionally detailed and able to serve up microdynamic inner detail on a recording. Yes, it has that clearly defined soundstage and sense

of coherence that makes you think of a Reference series duo, only smaller. But at no time does this lose sight of the energy and excitement in music. It inspires confidence in your music replay. It has powerful drive, but again not with the wild-eyed energy of some of the more 'exciting' but ultimately uneven components.

What they do is produce a sound that doesn't need an apology. This combination is demonstrably better than more affordable ARC and offers a lot more than a flavour of the high end, with only the tiniest sacrifices and a saving of an Audi or two.

It is our duty as reviewers to find out which of the two products is the outstanding one, but that is a struggle. Both deliver excellent performance and match one another perfectly. Between them they tease out a sound quality from their musical charges that would be difficult to improve on without spending up. There is no magical synergy, but you would be hard pressed to find a better match. Yes, if we were putting a cheaper preamp with the power amp and vice versa, the LS17 would be the happier. It has that Reference 3 'non-sound' that boosts the performance of all it touches, but removing the VS115 would mean taking a hit in the solidity and dynamic range stakes that few would countenance.

Those with romantic views of classic ARC products should face up to a simple fact; the new stuff is better. There are only a

handful of products that better the LS17 and VS115; they are all in the current catalogue and all cost a lot more. It's trade-in time. ■

Alan Sircom

“At no time does this pairing lose sight of the energy and excitement in music”

