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FERGUSON HILL HORNS
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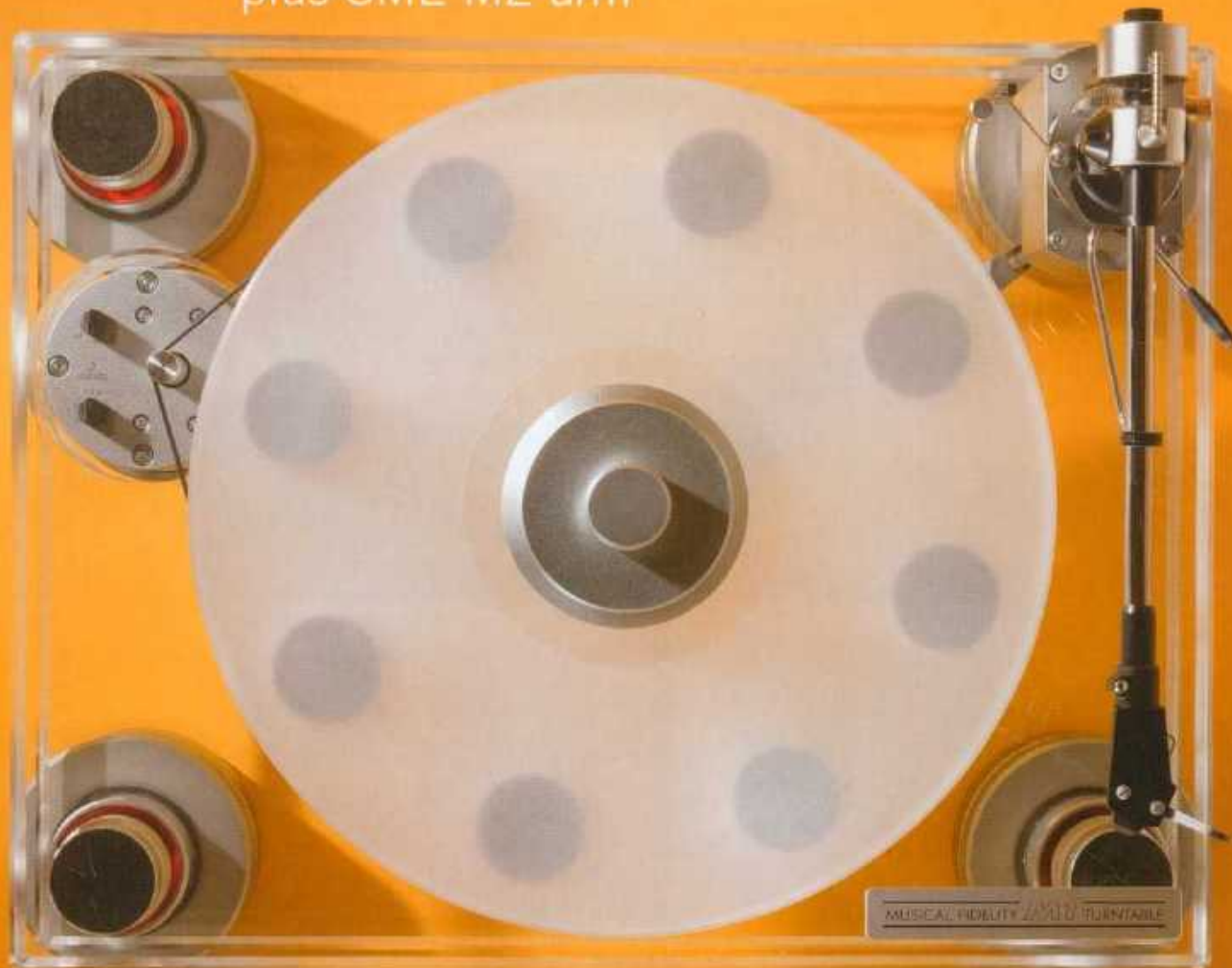
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Audio Research VSi55



Audio Research VSi55

PRICE	£2895
SUPPLIER	Absolute Sounds
CONTACT	020 8971 3909
WEBSITE	www.audioresearch.com

Whatever possessed the guys at Audio Research Corporation to dump the look of the CA50 integrated when they came up with its replacement, I'll never know. That now-departed product screamed 'Audio Research!' from 30 paces, endowed as it was with a proper ARC front panel, with design cues that go back over 30 years. Instead, with the VSi55, we get hair shirt.

One might suppose, correctly, that Audio Research is simply gracing impoverished valve newbies with a taste of the products from which the VSi55 is derived. The lip-smackingly-good VS55 and VS110 power amplifiers are responsible for a rebirth, transforming the company from fusty to funky. But they reverted not to early ARC styling but to a wholly utilitarian, generic-1950s look of exposed tubes, exposed transformers – function over form.

All of which is very nice with power amps, because you don't have to look at them. Integrations are another matter entirely, as you need to access the controls, so a touch of style

Function beats form. It may not be pretty, but the VSi55 integrated amp has a great personality...

wouldn't hurt. But then there's the price...

With a rated output of 50W/ch and a retail price of only £2895 including remote control, the VSi55 certainly undercuts any separates combination the company can offer. More interestingly, the VSi55 betters the early CA50 integrated amp it (sort of) replaces by £500. That's a helluva saving just to forego a pretty fascia. What you get here is a near-ringer for the VS55 power amplifier, but with the addition of a pre-amp section, its presence restricted to the shallow front edge of the chassis.

All control functions are closely grouped together as small, square buttons, with no rotary for volume: instead, you get buttons for up and down. Six 'soft touch' buttons cover power, mute, mono, input select and volume up/down, in SP16 pre-amplifier fashion.

All the controls are mirrored on the remote and you'll find the remote gets used more often than hand-to-amp contact. Green LEDs indicate volume level in 20 steps, mute, mono, and input selection. (The inputs are CD, tuner, video and two marked SE1 and SE2, denoting single-ended line sources. Balanced operation is not part of the

recipe.) Switch-on is followed by a 30-second warm-up period in full mute; conveniently, the volume control resets to zero to avoid unwanted thumps or bangs.

On the flat, horizontal surface is a metal plate cut out for the valves; behind it the transformers and the tops of the capacitors. Here's where things get ugly: I love retro as much as the next guy, but the finish on these made me flash back (as did the VS55) to Dynakits of 40 years back, where finish was an afterthought not allowed to compromise the sticker price.

Fortunately, there's an optional tube cage for £250, which when in place will at least partly obscure the transformers. I was disappointed to see that the metalwork of the review sample was actually sagging in the middle. (Then again, a retailer had the review sample before it reached me. And the cheap bastard took the batteries out of the remote.)

At the back of the 355 x 203 x 406mm (whd) chassis are five pairs of single-ended inputs, a full-range mono subwoofer output, voltmeter test points for setting bias, 0-4-8 ohm five-way gold-plated binding posts, a fuse holder and an IEC



Volume setting is displayed by a 20-LED array [left] while further LEDs indicate mute and stereo/mono status, as well as the chosen input. Control buttons [above], including volume up/down, are duplicated on the remote handset

mains inlet. Curiously, there's no tape output, but then Audio Research might just be tipping the hat to the 21st century: nowadays, pirates record via computer straight on to their CD burners.

It's like this: you approach the VS155 the way you would any stripped-down equivalent of a luxury item. You get the most important part of the package – its inherent performance – at a price you can afford. The VS155 is simply too good to be dismissed because it's so dumpy.

Fed with signals from the Marantz CD-12/DA-12 CD player and the SME 30 Mk II turntable/SME Series V arm/Koetsu Urushi cartridge through the EAR phono stage, wired entirely with Transparent cables, into the aforementioned speakers, the baby ARC took all

retrieval and sheer clarity that makes this amplifier appealing not just to tube converts who are short of cash. I can see it being used as a means of weaning listeners away from transistors.

Probably the most impressive element, if the above strikes you as an amusing way to position an amp, is the bass. No way will you mistake the lower registers for the sphincter-clenching bottom octaves recreated by big transistor powerhouses. Never would you consider even showing let alone playing this to a double-digit-IQ'd, backwards-baseball-cap-wearing hip-hop casualty. It does not move mountains, nor cause plaster to crack. It will not make you think that a 16-wheeler just drove by your house. But it will do justice to any recording you can feed it, from snap-bass funk to

It will not move mountains nor cause plaster to crack. It will not make you feel a 16-wheeler has driven past your house. But it will do justice to any recording

of 20 seconds to convince me that it was a thoroughbred. My current tingle-up-the-spine disc, Joss Stone's debut, *The Soul Sessions*, provided ample evidence that this amplifier could handle the all-important midband and vocal textures with the sort of verisimilitude that we crave from a 'high fidelity' system.

OK, OK, so we're talking push-pull tube circuitry from big, fat classic glassware (rather than sentiment-drenched 300Bs). It was almost a given that there would be warmth galore, with sound that's easy on the ears. But there's more than a hint of modernity in the form of detail

acoustic jazz to explosive soundtracks. The sound had a foundation, a mass that suggested a much larger amp with far greater power reserves and wider dynamic capabilities than one would associate with a 2x50W tube job. And for those of you who think laterally, no, I'm not suggesting that the marriage with Quads works so well because they are less revealing than the Wilson WATT Puppies. It will please you to know that even the Puppies couldn't expose any particular shortcomings.

But there's one other area where the VS155 denies its role as the entry level fixture in the



ARC catalogue: it creates a vast, genuinely three-dimensional soundstage. I've heard bigger – the McIntosh C2200/MC2102 combination reveals another 'few feet' of depth and width – but one cannot fault the sense of proportion within the VS155's ample playground. Add to this enviable transparency and a sweet, fast and precise upper register, and you have a little honey that reminds me (and not just because of the naff finish) of the truly classic Dynaco PAS3/Stereo 70 combination.

If 'utilitarian' is a four-letter word in your dictionary, another grand will pay for the shockingly good T+A V-10. If you need a tape loop, or balanced operation, or even a 483mm front panel, the market's full of alternatives. But if you want honesty – both in terms of sound and value – and can live with the basics, the lure of the VS155 could prove overpowering. ■

Ken Kessler

Technology

You will do a double-take when you see this if you're familiar with its amp-only sibling. The VS155 may be 25mm taller and 50mm deeper than the VS55, and the milled, anodised top plate is 38mm deeper, with larger inset Audio Research logo as used on the VT series of the power amps, yet the resemblance is almost clone-like. The VS155 has a passive pre-amp stage and microprocessor control, but the active circuitry is essentially that of the power amplifier, with 7dB more gain for greater sensitivity (0.38V), accounting for the passive pre-amp. It features the VS55's Class A input with regulated DC heater supply and driver stages consisting of three 6N1P valves. The partial cathode-coupled Class AB output stages use two pairs of Russian 6550EH output tubes.

Features

- Great value compared with separates
- High-quality relay-operated control section
- Impressive bass performance

High-grade rear socketry includes well spaced binding posts for speaker connection

