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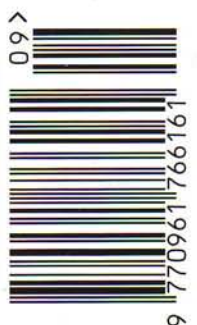
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# Deja View

**Audio Research Corporation's new VSi60 integrated valve amplifier is highly reminiscent of the classic VSi55 it replaces. That's no bad thing, opines David Price...**

It was back in 2003 that I reviewed Audio Research's VSi55 integrated 'tube' amplifier, concluding that it was a superb product that would appeal to a completely new sort of valve amplifier enthusiast. My reasoning went that the '55 was about as close the classic Naim solid-state sound as you could get, but done with valves. As such, you kept many of the beguiling benefits of the latter, whilst offering up the energetic, seat-of-the-pants performance of the former.

As American and British tanks rolled dramatically into Iraq in the early summer of '03, I didn't so much as reach for my television 'on' button, such was my interest in this amplifier. I ended up running the VSi55 for several months, taking great care to make sure their UK importer Absolute Sounds contacted me to ask for it back, rather than me foreshortening its tenure in my listening room by calling them to let them know I'd finished with it.

After a good time spent with Perigee Acoustics FK-1F, it found itself driving Quad ESL57s modified by One Thing Audio, and this combination sang like a bird. I remember the Audio Research taking the Quads up to very high levels (yes really), with oodles of bass, space and depth, allied to an utterly transfixing musicality. True, it didn't quite have the subtlety of the best parallel single ended tube amps, running full Class A rather than the VSi55's mix of A and B, but gosh it was fun. Nigh on

unforgettable, in fact...

So now, exactly six years later, its replacement (this, the VSi60) is back in my listening room, bashing the Beryllium of my Yamaha NS1000Ms, assaulting the aluminium of the Vivid B1s and poking the plastic panels of my Quad 989s. As I play, 'I'm Mandy, Fly Me', from an old 10cc LP, I'm beginning to remember why I made all the fuss. I love valve amplifiers, but I've had mixed experiences with them in my room driving my speakers. But the ballsy nature of the Audio Research is such that it's not scared of anything I've got here to try them with. And moreover, it's just as 'up for it' as I remember its predecessor was.

This 10cc track can sound a little laconic via many amplifiers; even ones as good as my reference Sugden IA4 (about the same price as the AR) can make a meal of it. Not the VSi60 though, whose rendition is as intense an experience as listening to 'Anarchy In The UK' through a PA stack. It has an eerie way of elevating the listening experience, making the listener 'feel' it almost as they would if they'd had one more Jack Daniels than was good for them. But then you look down at the bottle in your hand and realise it's only Evian you're swigging!

The company claims 50W RMS per side for this amplifier, a fraction more than its predecessor if I remember rightly, and that's a lot for a valve amplifier. Physically it's almost practically indistinguishable from the model it replaced, being quite a large device at 356x203x406mm and weighing in at 15.8kg. The centrally mounted milled anodised aluminium top plate is available in black or silver finishes, with a matching front plate. The review sample was in 'retro' silver, but personally I prefer the more purposeful black. The powder coated steel casework is to a decent standard, but not exactly lavish.

The gently recessed front panel features the same long LED volume display as its predecessor, which also shows source selected and whether muting is engaged or not. To the right is the bank of control buttons, including power, mute,

source (which toggles through the five inputs, and volume up and down. All these controls are duplicated on the supplied remote. I do like the fact that this is labelled in English (i.e. 'Up', 'Down') like the warning light cluster on Triumph 2000 dashboards, rather than in universal international gobbledegook symbols. Round the back, there are five pairs of phono inputs labelled CD, Tuner, Video, SE1 and SE2, plus a full-range mono subwoofer output, voltmeter test points for setting bias, reasonably sized loudspeaker terminals with both four and eight ohm taps and an IEC mains socket.

The preamp section of the VSi60 is passive, but with microprocessor switched relays. On switch on, there's a thirty second warm up phase when the speakers are automatically muted. Audio Research say short paths are used, and there's a new J-FET input stage for low noise, with 6H30 driver tubes. The Svetlana 6550C output tube is used, as per other Audio Research valve amps, here running 7dB of negative feedback. These are mounted on very sturdy valve bases (considerably more rugged than some, I might add) and are said to be soldered to heavy plated-through circuit boards, with "the finest audiophile-grade parts" being used, along with proprietary Litz internal wiring. The amplifier is completely hand soldered and assembled, and one look under the hood testifies to this; the wiring isn't messy as such, but let's say it's laid out with the accent on ruggedness rather than aesthetic beauty!

## SOUND QUALITY

Given that I wasn't expecting the last word in sophistication from this new Audio Research, I momentarily put aside my prized pressing of Debussy's Preludes. The 'Submerged Cathedral' would have to wait its turn in the queue, until I'd exhausted my supply of nineteen seventies classic rock LPs for which I knew this amplifier was built. Sure enough, Sniff 'n' the Tears' 'Drivers Seat', a slice of pre-punk 1977 power pop went on the Sony transcription turntable first, and the







VS160 duly delivered the goods I'd been waiting for.

Yes, this is a *spirited* amplifier, so much so that I almost felt I should be testing it for psychopharmacological drugs. What it does to music is more than just make it exciting; you could say it has psychoactive properties. From the first bar, the ARC puts its cards plainly on the table. Bass is going to be big, like it or not, and fast too, and tuneful to an extent that it's almost distracting if you're the sort who likes valves to supply beautiful background music. If you were comparing valve amplifiers to musicians, most would be Barbara Streisand, whereas this is more like Lemmy. Even the Vivid B1s, which behaved meticulously with the Sugden, sounding impartial in the finest monitor tradition, seemed to be letting their hair down a bit all of a sudden now. I just couldn't get this infectiously catchy Sniff'n the Tears classic out of my head.

If the bass is vast and elastic, like an enormous bouncy castle, the midband fairly closely follows suit. It's clean alright, even if there is the *slightest* sensation of a tube-like

sepia tint here, and it spans a wide physical space. I wouldn't say the '60 is peerless in the amount of low level detail it can throw out, but it does the high level stuff so well, you really don't care. Like the Vivid speakers, it loves to throw sunlight on dynamic accents, subtle or otherwise, and the result is a riot of toe-tapping on this or any other track. Treble is not the ARC's strong suit; nice as it is, there's always a hint of splash to hi hats and a slightly curtailed feeling

to atmospheric music. The cymbal work on this vinyl pressing sounded ever so slightly 'shut in', whereas the Sugden was a tad more delicate and atmospheric.

Next on the deck just had to be some more classic rock. ZZ Top's 'Gimme All Your Loving' is a touch on the AOR side of the genre granted, but the VS160 managed to make lead singer Billy Gibbons' vocals sound more like Slayer than the Doobie

Brothers. Yes, just as you'd expect, that kick drum got the ball rolling with aplomb, signalling a declaration of intent from this amplifier that, as the great Spinal Tap would say, "tonight I'm gonna rock you". Bass on this song isn't quite as powerful, instead the focus falling to the superb guitar work (lead and rhythm), and the Audio Research loved this. Whereas the Sugden was terribly British and matter of fact about this, the Yank

"it's not a valve aficionado's valve amp, but rather a music lover's..."

amp was cooking on gas. I found it so much more rhythmically engaging; whereas I'd listened with interest to the recording details via the Sugden, I just got lost in the music via the Audio Research.

The same thing happened with Bob Marley's 'Jamming'. The '60 was pure pleasure from beginning to end, imparting that supernatural rhythmic swing that this track has embedded deep within. But via the



**PLYMOUTH SOUND**

Audio Research Corporation is one of the oldest continually operating manufacturers in American audio. The company was founded in 1970 in Minneapolis, and has grown steadily over the last quarter-century. It occupies a large production plant and administrative headquarters in Plymouth, Minnesota. A research-only facility has also been established in Palm Desert, California. Its founder and president William Z. Johnson began designing custom audio electronics in the early 1950s, and also operated a specialist audio shop until the mid-1960s. He was a big name behind the renaissance of 'tube' audio in the US. The company is particularly famous for its after sales service; Audio Research technicians can still repair, refurbish and restore any product ever manufactured during the company's thirty year history.

IA4, it was suddenly as if a group of highly proficient Japanese classical musicians had suddenly taken over the instruments, sounding meticulously perfect but somehow not quite as good as the real thing. Bass was a joy; via vinyl this song has copious quantities of low frequencies (good for moving stale air around the room, the morning after the night before, I find), and the Audio Research was like a dog with a bone - eager to show me what it had just found. Once again, it was deliciously tuneful, and even at high levels through my tube terrorising NS1000Ms showed no sign of strain. Again, midband was wonderfully expansive and infectiously rhythmical, while I sat there aghast as snare drum rim shots jumped right out at me, whereas with the Sugden they might as well have been recorded in the library down the road.

Highly revealing speakers do show the VSi60 to be a flawed gem all the same. There's a certain colour to its sound; an orangey-brown tint that makes different recordings, with their own acoustic signatures, seem just a little bit less distinct. The dry 'tautness' of Compass Point (Nassau)

where Grace Jones recorded 'Private Life' seems just a little closer to the colourful warmth of at Stax's South Memphis studio where the 'Shaft' soundtrack was recorded, for example. Good solid-state Class A amplifiers like the Sugden have an icy clarity that throws these differences into sharp relief, but the Audio Research does not. Also, I was never completely convinced by the VSi60's treble performance. Although not quite as 'clangy' as your average solid-state amplifier, so much more is possible than its rather perfunctory rendering of the sound of a cymbal being struck. To my ears, the VSi60's treble is just a little too crisp and sharply etched to be completely invisible, although at least it's never harsh like some solid-staters.

All of this made listening to classical music an interesting experience, if not an accurate one. Yes, this Yank tank is riotously musical even with a sober DG digital recording of Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons', making the violins positively sing for me and serving up a satisfyingly capacious soundstage in which to place them. But no, somehow I didn't quite appreciate the instruments' natural timbre as well as I should have - or could have via the similarly priced solid-state Sugden. Still, switching back to jazz

of the most 'solid-state' sounding tube integrateds around, it allows transistor amp owners to go thermionic without leaving their comfort zone. It also lets people like me, who know exactly what music they listen to and ancillaries they use, to parachute in a valve amplifier when normally only a solid-stater is powerful enough. But what it won't do is please the fully paid up valve brigade, who love to be cosseted, wrapped in silk and serenaded by their glowing glass bottles. It's not a valve *aficionado's* valve amp, but rather a music lover's - or more precisely, a rock, pop or jazz music lover's. Not having the Audio Research VSi55 to hand any more, I can't comment authoritatively on the relative changes, but I'd wager that the new VSi60 is a fraction more powerful and just a touch more open and svelte sounding - all of which are steps in the right direction. This is a great product then, a truly charismatic, distinctive amplifier aimed at audiophiles who know precisely what they want.

**REFERENCE SYSTEM**

Sony TT-S8000/OL Silver/Ortofon Windfeld t/t  
A.N.T. Audio Kora 3T Ltd. phono stage  
Sugden IM4 integrated amplifier  
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers  
Vivid B1 loudspeakers  
Quad 989 loudspeakers

**CONCLUSION**

Personally I love this amplifier, but will concede that it's not all things to all men. Probably one

**VERDICT**

Broad shouldered, barrel-chested bruiser of a valve amplifier with a compellingly musical character.

**AUDIO RESEARCH**

VSi60 £3,298  
Absolute Sounds  
+44 (0)20 89 71 39 09  
www.absolutesounds.com

**FOR**

- exuberant nature
- visceral power
- supple, fluid rhythms
- convenience, accessibility

**AGAINST**

- restricted tonal palette
- unatmospheric treble

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

The VSi60 uses single push-pull output pairs of 6550s working with fixed bias to deliver 40 Watts per channel (1% thd) into either 8 Ohms or 4 Ohms. Power levels from each were almost identical so secondary coupling efficiency is good. 'Fixed bias' is a misnomer by the way: it means the bias has to be adjusted regularly, unlike Auto bias which needs no adjustment but gives less power.

Distortion levels were very low, hovering around Harold Leak's ideal 0.1% figure in the midband, except close to full output (0.6%) and comprising innocuous sounding second harmonic. The output transformers, as small as they look, worked very well at low frequencies, with just 0.2% distortion at 1 Watt, 40Hz, rising to 1% near full output. At 10 Watts, 0.35% of second harmonic distortion at 40Hz suggests clean sounding bass compared to many valve amps. However, damping factor is low at 1.7, suggesting little feedback (a feedback valve amp usually manages 3-8) and soft bass with under-damped (bass heavy) loudspeakers.

Input sensitivity was low at 400mV

and bandwidth also restricted to just 23kHz (-1dB) again suggesting low feedback. Lowering feedback produces a more dynamically expansive sound.

The VSi60 measures well all round. It should give a tidy yet impressive sound, much like its predecessor. NK

Power	40 Watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	3Hz-23kHz
Separation	98dB
Noise	-96dB
Distortion	0.2%
Sensitivity	400mV
Damping factor	1.7

**DISTORTION**

