

hi-finews

THE HOME OF REAL HI-FI

& Record Review

130+
REVIEWS
SEPARATES,
VINTAGE
& MUSIC

ULTIMATE HI-FI 2012

We reveal the year's finest products
and essential music

164 pages

Equipment

Over 50 standout
separates tested

Vintage

The audio heroes
of yesteryear

Music

Your guide to the
best LPs, CDs and
hi-res downloads

Opinion

Our columnists'
hi-fi high points

• **TURNTABLES, TONEARMS & CARTRIDGES** Air Tight to Thorens • **OUTBOARD DACS** Arcam to T+A
• **DIGITAL DISC & MEDIA PLAYERS** Burmester to TAD • **TRANSISTOR & TUBE AMPS** Anthem to VTL
• **LOUDSPEAKERS** Cabasse to Wilson Audio • **VINTAGE** B&O, Electrocompaniet, KEF, Sony and more

UK £4.50 US \$10.99 Aus \$10.50



AUDIO
FILE

Valve power amplifier. Rated at 150W/8ohm
 Made by: Audio Research Corp, Minnesota, USA
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.audioresearch.com; www.absolutesounds.com




Audio Research REF150 (£12,495)

Despite a tendency for one to assume that a company's flagship model has to be its best effort by default, there are always flukes. When it comes to hi-fi components, there's often something alluring about the 'middle models' – and they usually represent better value for money, because of the Law of Diminishing Returns.

In devising a replacement for one of its most beloved models, the REF110, Audio Research chose to

'The sheen of brass and ringing to the piano was truly scintillating'

do more than merely *refine*. It starts with the cosmetics – the REF150 has identical dimensions but there's less empty space under the lid.

The looks have been updated to reflect the refinements of the past few years; and remember, the company allows its customers to mix silver and black elements to match older units, *eg*, black handles on silver faceplates.

As is REF Series practice, the REF150 is fully balanced. AC enters via a 'flat pin' 20-amp IEC connector, and custom-made terminals provide connection for 4, 8 or 16ohm speakers. 12V triggers are fitted, and the back has low-turbulence intakes for the whisper fans, with three selectable speeds. The fascia just has an on/off switch with a green power-on indicator.

Power-supply energy storage has been doubled, the coupling capacitors are beneficiaries of the work done on the Anniversary Edition preamplifier and the power transformers are larger. But the biggest change is the fitting of eight KT120 output

tubes, driven by 6H30 twin triodes. With multistage solid-state regulation, an output stage that combines ultralinear practice and Audio Research's patented 'partially cathode-coupled' topology, the REF150 spearheads the company's latest philosophical evolution: gaining power by replacing the stalwart 6550/KT88/KT90 with a more robust, modern valve. Its

health is monitored by an internal display indicating tube life in hours.

CARESSING PUNCH

Listening to the new Winton Marsalis/Eric Clapton live collaboration, the two of them playing the blues in the manner of a 1920s New Orleans jazz band, we were struck by a sheen to the brass and a ringing to the piano that elicited one term only: 'scintillating'.

The soundstage too had expanded by 20-30%. How did we arrive at this figure? On the leaner tracks on Keb' Mo's *Peace... Back By Popular Demand* we compared the distances both with other amplifiers, and then played on a completely different system. Sitting eight to ten feet from the line of the speakers, it sounded like the wall had suddenly moved a metre away. *That's* what the REF150 can do.

Certainly this amp punches above the promise of its wattage, sounding as dynamic and controlled as the D'Agostino Momentum, but with a different presentation – the REF150's more lush and caressing.

With Doris Day singing a perfect 'Cheek To Cheek' – brass on the right, woodwinds on the left, the blend of her crystalline vocals and the silky sounds of those sleek CBS studio musicians – the REF150 consistently delivered everything in proportion, the music creating almost a halo effect around the centrally-positioned Ms Day.

VERDICT

That the REF150 costs 'only' £12,495 renders it a bargain. Gains over the REF110 are immense. Those with REF110s still own superb amps, but the REF150 is a Porsche Turbo to the REF110's Carrera. ☺

ABOVE: Family resemblance harks back to 1970, but one must place the REF150 next to a REF110 to appreciate its subtle refinements. To the rear, balanced XLR inputs are joined by 4, 8 and 16ohm speaker connections. Twin fans cool the amp

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	155W / 155W
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	175W / 177W / 178W / 148W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.65–1.15ohm (8ohm tap)
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	+0.1dB to –2.2dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/150W)	176mV / 2250mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/150W)	91.0dB / 112.8dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.025–0.19%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	430W/750W
Dimensions (WHD)	483x222x495mm