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HOW TO DIGITISE
YOUR VINYL

Jadis JA120 Mono Power Amplifiers

By Roy Gregory. Photos by Adrian Lyon

In these days of Global Warming, environmental sensitivity and the rapid evolution of highly efficient Class D amplifiers of diminutive dimensions and seemingly improbable rated outputs, one's forced to wonder whether there's really a place for amps like the Jadis JA120? In fact, if you wanted to define the audio equivalent of an electrical dinosaur, you could do worse than start with one of these French mono-blocs: over two feet long, a foot wide and another foot high, and weighing in at a far from cool 100 lbs, it would qualify on grounds of physical dimensions alone. Add to that no fewer than six output tubes a side, with a constant current draw of around 250 Watts, all required to produce a comparatively modest 100 Watt output – as well as a lot of heat – and high efficiency and environmental concerns are clearly not top of the product design agenda.

The JA120 uses the new KT120 tube. But Jadis have done more than just look at more powerful output tubes. There is an additional front-end tube, adding more gain to the driver circuit at the expense of increased complexity, while fuseable resistors now protect the audio circuits should an output tube fail. These look just like a 20mm fuse – and are just as easy to replace. In addition to these steps, the power pendulum has swung the other way, meaning that the JA120 only claims 100 Watts from its six output tubes, running them well inside the comfort zone.

So, what about the output transformer? Many years ago, I interviewed Andre Calnette, the founder of Jadis, and he suggested that 90% of the sound of any valve amp is down to its output transformer. Which probably explains why the company takes the unusual step of winding all its transformers in-house. Indeed, they are very much a house speciality and the hand-wound designs have been steadily refined over the years. Combine that with the revised driver arrangements and the JA120 sits at the pinnacle of the company's current thinking; if there was ever an argument for oodles of glass driven Class A power then this should be it...

Just as the output tubes are used conservatively, that rated output should also be considered conservative. In use, the JA120s deliver just the sort of power I've always lusted after from the marque. If to these ears the 80s sounded sluggish and the 100s lack the immediacy of the 30, neither complaint can be leveled at the 120. This amp is big, bold, dynamic and when necessary, dictatorial – in the best Jadis tradition. What's even better is that getting it to play ball is simplicity itself, as long as you follow a few simple rules. The first and most important is that you will probably want to lift the earth connection on one of the power cords to avoid a ground loop. Secondly, in my experience the Jadis amps work best on short interconnect driving long speaker cables and this latest model is no exception. If you must run long cables there is a balanced input option and I'd certainly consider it. Running single-ended, shorter interconnects bring a welcome immediacy and clarity to the sound which recedes as the leads get longer.

Eagle eyed readers will have noticed the twin sets of output terminals. That's exactly what they are; not alternative impedance taps from the transformer. To match the amplifiers' impedance to the speaker, you need to remove the bottom of the chassis and rearrange a set of metal jumpers. This might seem like a chore, but it's generally a one off operation and when it comes to transformers, if that's the way Jadis want it done, I'm not going to argue. But don't overlook this adjustment just because it isn't external. The other thing the amplifiers benefit from is proper support; adding mechanical coupling to bypass the rubber feet provided a welcome boost in focus, transparency and low-level resolution.

Power is a deceptive quality. There are plenty of amplifiers out there, boasting prodigious power outputs on paper, yet in practice, they never seem to deliver. Conversely, there are other amplifiers that belie their modest paper specifications and produce performances with real musical impact and presence. One of the reasons that I always loved the JA30 was their ability to punch above their weight. It was a quality that seemed to diminish as the Jadis amps got more powerful, but the JA120s have

“Power is a deceptive quality. There are plenty of amplifiers out there, boasting prodigious power outputs on paper.”

Ladis

TUBE POWER AMPLIFIER

MONOBLOCK PURE CLASS A

MODEL JA 120

HANDCRAFTED IN FRANCE

Ladis

Ladis



▶ sorted that failing once and for all. Real musical power isn't just about Watts – although they certainly help. It's about how many of them get where they need to be, and just how quickly they can do it. It's about presence, weight and the ability to jump when the music demands it, and together they add up to drama and impact. The trick is to deliver that, but to master subtlety and delicacy too – and that's where the 120s really score.

Play large-scale orchestral music and they won't disappoint, even on the loudest crescendos. They can't match the spatial definition of an amp like VTL's 450 Series III, or that amplifier's ability to hold things stable and separate but they make up for it with sheer enthusiasm. When the music demands drive and momentum, the JA120s simply ask, "How Much?" They have an unburstable quality that's backed up by their sheer physicality and muscular delivery – but those qualities translate to the quieter, more-subtle passages too. So the opening of Vasily Petrenko's masterly reading of Shostakovich's 11th Symphony might lack the defined acoustic space of the 450s, the sense of location locks the early, muted timpani rolls in place, but its sense of occasion, of pathos and atmosphere is undeniable, its ability to draw the listener into the mood, the narrative and history that underpin the composition. What makes it so compelling is the tension in the measured tempo, the lurking sense of impending catastrophe. It depends totally on the system allowing Petrenko's pacing and direction to survive intact – so much more difficult with such a glacial tempo, yet the music never becomes ponderous, instead taking on a living, breathing presence in the listening room. As the work slowly builds, the amps simply let it swell, slowly by stages into the first, shattering impact of the opening crescendo. This is music of massive expressive power and range, yet the Jadis encompass that power effortlessly – from that quietest, most muted of openings to the monstrous explosion of that first climax, from the first staccato rattle of the side drums on the left, so suggestive of musketry, to the answering swell of panic from the basses on the right, quick, shuffling feet

in the snow, through layer on layer of intensity as the movement builds into the prolonged, militaristic finale: followed instantly by the quiet stillness of aftermath and devastation as the troops recede. I've heard this disc on tens of system and I've heard Petrenko perform the piece live, but I'm not sure it has ever been quite so vividly pictorial in nature.

If the Petrenko performance demonstrates the JA 120s' ability to change scale and pace, precisely and without hesitation, then a performer like Ahmad Jamal shows just how far it can stretch that envelope. Listen to Jamal play live and his dynamic range, his shifts from soft to seriously loud can only be described as sudden, reminding you in no uncertain terms that the piano is a percussion instrument. Playing Ahmad Jamal's *Alhambra*, the changes in pace and attack in his playing, the way he switches mood and melody have never sounded so explosively present, while his command of rhythm, the placing of notes and the precision of their weighting is at once clearly defined but also fluidly unconstructed; ▶





▶ there's no hint of mechanical agency here, just beautiful, liquid lines and phrases, heightened by contrast and stark punctuation. There's a characteristic sweetness, a slight rounding to the extreme highs that removes any vestige of recorded edge, but the harmonic development is still astonishingly natural; just listen to the subtle decay on the cymbal work and the way it survives behind Jamal's explosive right hand forays.

Bind all those things together and the JA120s' forte should be human voice; they don't disappoint. Too many amps make a mess of Ella, smoothing everything down to a caramel gloss or removing the body and weight that underpins her flawless phrasing. The Jadis monos place her in the room, all effortless grace and vocal dexterity, perfect pitch and tonality but leaving you only too aware of just what a wondrous instrument you are witnessing, and just how well she plays it... In fact, voices as disparate as Zinka Milanov and Michelle Shocked (The Texas Campfire Tapes) come up glorious in their own individuality. Warm and weighty, the JA120s stay just the right side of overly kind or romantic, never robbing a lip of its curl or a snarl of its spit and attitude.

As I've already suggested, the JA120s lack the absolute transparency, extension (at both ends of the spectrum) the spatial definition and low-level resolution of some other amps out there – in part down to a higher than average residual noise level, a fact of life with every Jadis amp I've ever lived with. But against those failings you need to balance their extraordinary musical and temporal coherence, their unfailingly natural expressive breadth. They are that most unusual of hi-fi components, one that can show you the beauty in a recording without emasculating its emotional impact or trivialising it. If you have a collection of recordings and you've reached that point on the hi-fi journey where all you want to do is enjoy them, then you'll find no better or more tractable tool than the JA120. Big, heavy and pricey it may be, as well as unfashionably inefficient, but it has power to spare and musical authority to burn – as well as knowing when a touch of delicacy is really what matters.

In Len Deighton's *Goodbye, Mickey Mouse*, General Bohnen describes the P47 Thunderbolt: "it weighs too much, costs too much and drinks too much..." To which Colonel Dan Badger responds, "General, you just described my wife, but I still love her dearly." Listening to the JA120s, basking in the warmth they churn out and picking my way around the real estate they occupy (while recalling their crates, lurking in the store room) I know exactly how he felt. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Class A tube mono-bloc
Valve Complement: 2x ECC82, 1x ECC83, 6x KT120
Input Sensitivity: 560mV
Input Impedance: >100 kOhms
Rated output Power: 100 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD): 30x29x68cm ea.
Weight: 45kg ea.
Price: £9,900 ea.
Manufactured by: Jadis S.A.R.L.
URL: www.jadis-electronics.com
Distributed by: Absolute Sounds
URL: www.absolutesounds.com
Tel: +44(0)208 917 3909