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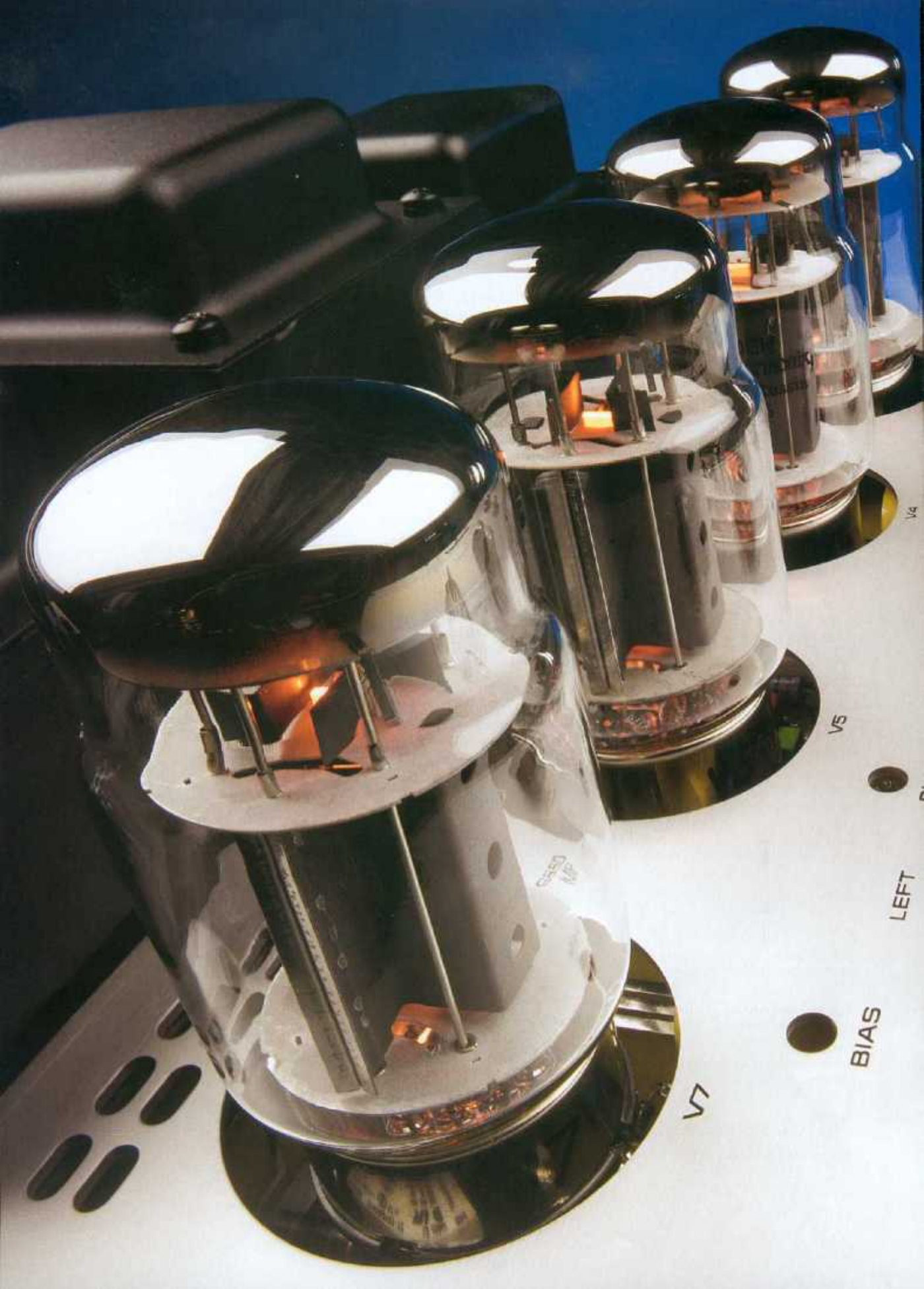
AWARDS
ISSUE

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS



*The **Blue Pearl Turntable** was supported by **Reimyo**, **Audio Research** and **Vitus Audio** electronics. Not forgetting the **Alon**, **Ferguson Hill** and **JMLab** speakers, or the new **Naim** budget components. Just right for **Talking Heads!***





V4

V5

V7

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Audio Research VSi55 Integrated Amplifier

by Jimmy Hughes

I hate prejudices. Always try to approach things with an open mind, free from pre-conceived ideas; that's my motto. That said, I had an inkling of what the VSi55 might sound like. And sure enough, as soon as I'd got it plugged in and nicely warmed-up, I heard a distinctive tonality that said 'Audio Research'. Never mind that it's been a good few years since I had any Audio Research equipment at home. If there is such a thing as a distinct Audio Research 'house sound', Lo and Behold there it was...

So much for avoiding prejudice! As the first notes emanated from the speakers, there was a rich silky warmth and smoothness. Now valves are supposed to be warm and euphonic; transistors cold and analytical. In practice most amplifiers (whether tube or transistor) offer a mixture of both qualities. But the VSi55 is most definitely a tube amp. It's not lacking in brilliance or bite, but just the same there's a deliciously rich toffee-treacle tonality no tranny amp could approach.

Those all-important first impressions were of a warm honeyed sound with a full ripe bottom end and smooth open top. The mid-band was very sweet, with an alluring liquid quality that managed to be delicate and detailed at the same time. The VSi55 is deceptive though; there's definitely an element of iron fist in this amplifier's velvet glove. For all its warmth and richness, the actual sound is quite lucid and forceful, albeit in a smooth refined manner.

Orchestral climaxes had impressive weight and sonority, with an attractive tonal bloom to strings and brass. Somehow the VSi55 creates a very

integrated impression. It offers excellent separation of parts, but overall the impression is one of seamless homogeneity. Bass is very full-bodied - not as solid and tight as the best transistor amps, but rich and voluminous. This creates a warm nicely-rounded bottom end, worlds apart from the tight/dry bass one gets with many solid-state amps.

With an output of 50W per channel the VSi55 is reasonably (but not massively) powerful. More to the point, it sounds surprisingly big. It creates a convincing impression of scale and weight, giving climaxes plenty of presence. Played at lowish volume levels it displays lots of muscle, as though it had plenty of power in reserve and was just ticking over. Most amplifiers lose presence when played quietly. Not this one; it sounds surprisingly punchy and dynamic even played at a whisper.

In some ways the VSi55 is an amalgam of opposites. On the one hand it has a rich creamy tonality that's warm and beguiling. At the same time it sounds lucid and definite. Playing one of the Beethoven *violin sonatas* with Maria-Joao Pires and Agustin Dumay (from the complete set on DG) I was struck by the sheer beauty of the sound - piano and violin placed in a warm spacious acoustic. The fiddle sounded sweet and mellow, while the piano was spacious but cleanly focussed.

A little later, playing the recent Gergiev recording of Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique* on Philips, it was the power and sonority of the orchestral sound that impressed. Climaxes had real presence, even when playing at lowish volume levels. Most amplifiers need to be played at a certain volume level before the music snaps into focus. The VSi55 is no exception. However, it creates a convincing sense of scale even when played quietly. Remarkable!

All this makes the VSi55 a very engaging amplifier to listen to. It doesn't sit on the fence, but projects the music strongly toward you. Stereo imaging is vivid and impressively holographic - if not quite in the Jadis class! Playing Ferenc Fricsay's vintage 1957 DG recording of Beethoven's *Fidelio* I was impressed by the way the voices separated out from the orchestra, and projected out from the speakers into the room - and this despite being played at a moderate volume level.

Not having to play things loudly in order to achieve a sense of room-filling presence and immediacy means that old recordings like Fricsay's *Fidelio* do not sound excessively thin or hissy. Indeed, I'd never have realised the recording was so old, so clear and vivid was the sound. The VSi55's combination of brilliance and warmth created a result that was vivid and ▶



▶ detailed, yet forgiving and flattering - playing to the strengths of the recording, not its weaknesses.

Although the VSi55 is a tad spartan when it comes to facilities, it does offer that rarity - a stereo/mono button. So few amplifiers include this simple yet effective feature. You'd mainly use it when playing mono LPs with a stereo pickup cartridge.

of minimum/maximum loudness. The usual drawback with this type of volume control is that increments are stepped rather than continuously variable - which means you can't adjust levels quite so finely. However, I can't say this turned out to be a problem in practice; level gradations seem quite fine, allowing you to set the volume precisely.



Switching to mono effectively cancels the cartridge's vertical component, greatly reducing pressing rumble and surface noise. For those with sizeable mono LP collections it's a facility worth its weight in gold.

It's also useful for checking the mono compatibility of stereo recordings, or dealing with early stereo recordings that offer excessive separation. If 'ping-pong' stereo effects annoy, simply press the mono button. You can also employ it when setting up your speakers - switching to mono in order to find the correct toe-in angle for the speakers to give a solid central image.

The remote volume control works very well, and there's an LED display so you can tell where you are in terms

There's no balance control.

Only those using very efficient speakers (Lowthers) might have cause to grumble at the gap between level increments at the bottom-end of the volume control. The steps between led 1 and 2 are quite large. However, there is an intermediate setting between these two points - albeit not marked. Suppose you've got the amplifier at minimum volume (led 1 lit) and lightly press the Volume Up button. There's an audible increase in loudness. It's about +2dB to +3dB, even though the first LED stays lit and indicates no change. Although it would seem that the VSi55 only offers

20 discrete level changes, the in-between points make it more like thirty. Using fairly efficient Impulse HIs and the Chord DAC-64 (which gives a couple of dB extra output compared to most CD players and DACs) I tended to play the VSi55 at a setting of between 6 and 8.

Connections for speakers are via large gold-plated binding posts with outputs to match 4 Ohm and 8 Ohm speakers, and whichever of these gives the loudest volume with the speakers you use is 'correct'. However, sonically you should find that the 4 Ohm setting gives slightly better control and tightness, albeit with a slight restriction on maximum loudness. Incidentally, the speaker binding posts are almost impossible to use with 4mm plugs.

There are five line inputs with a sensitivity of 0.5V for full output, and no phono stage. Usefully, there's a single line-level mono output for a sub-woofer. AR claim a remarkably wide frequency response, ranging from 1Hz to 100kHz at 1W and -3dB. Build quality and finish are up to the expected standards, but the styling is rather brutal. The electronics, including valve bases, are mounted on a large motherboard, keeping internal wiring to a minimum.

There are no rotary knobs on the VSi55; just a selection of press buttons for volume up/down; input selection; mute; stereo/mono; and power on/off. All functions can be accessed via a supplied remote control. Mine had the Input and Mono functions reversed - hopefully a one-off fault! Helpfully, for those of us who have a habit of 'losing' remote handsets, all functions can be addressed from the amplifier front panel. Hum and noise are very, very low - more than 100dB below rated output.

The amplifier is very simple to use, and having all functions remotely controllable makes operation quick and user-friendly. A comprehensive owner's manual is provided, and ▶

► this contains some useful details on use and operation. Apparently the amplifier takes between five and ten minutes to fully settle and stabilise after switch on, though the mute switches out after about thirty seconds. Although the amp is fully usable after a minute or so, it doesn't reach optimum performance until properly warmed-up.

The VSi55 puts out a reasonable amount of heat.

incidentally. That's probably a conservative estimate; you'll almost certainly find the valves last much longer than that, though after 2000 hours or so there may be some deterioration in absolute terms. You can re-bias the amp when fitting new tubes using an external voltmeter.

to play their music as loudly as they'd like, to listen to it. If your experience matches mine, you'll find it possible to play the VSi55 at moderate volume levels without losing presence or immediacy. It sounds like an Audio Research, it looks like an Audio Research and listening to it you can appreciate why the company's reputation rides so high in audiophile circles. Definitely a chip, albeit a small one, off the old block. ➤



Obviously, the valves get fairly warm, but less predictably so too does the mains transformer and (to a much lesser degree) the two output transformers. With the latter, the rise in temperature is almost certainly down to heat conduction from the four output tubes and mains transformer. Certainly, after the amp's been on a couple of hours or more, the whole case warms up.

Wisely, AR recommend you NOT to leave the amp switched on all the time. Doing so would serve little or no purpose sonically, and drastically shorten valve life. The makers suggest a valve life of about 2000 hours,

There are five tubes altogether. Matched pairs of 6550EH output tubes (four in all) and three 6N1PAs for the input and driver. The amplifier weighs approximately 15.5kg but feels heavier - perhaps because most of the weight is concentrated at the rear where the three transformers are situated. Mechanically, the VSi55 is very quiet - just a barely audible mains transformer buzz with the ear pressed close by, and little or no valve noise - even while warming up.

A very good amplifier then: One that combines refinement and creamy-rich tonality with commanding presence and immediacy. It's a small amp with a big heart; one that produces warm involving music. I'd especially commend those unable

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Vacuum-tube line integrated amplifier
Inputs:	5x Line level
Input Sensitivity:	0.5V
Input Impedance:	50 KOhms
Rated Output:	50 Watts/channel into 4 or 8 Ohms
Valve Complement:	3x 6N1PA, 4x 6550EH
Dimensions (WxHxD):	356x203x406mm
Weight:	15.5kg
Price:	£2895

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