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In-depth report p16

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VALVE AMPS

FEATURING...

- > Audio Note Oto Line SE
- > Audio Research VS155
- > BAT VK-300x
- > EAR 864/534
- > GRAFF Venticinque
- > Graves Audio Merlin
- > Icon Audio Stereo 40i
- > Quad QC-24/II-40





£2,895 ☎ 020 8971 3909 @ www.audioresearch.com

AUDIO RESEARCH VSi55

Combines valve performance with microprocessor convenience

US valve amp protagonist Audio Research was founded in 1970 – just around the time that the rest of the industry had completed the changeover to solid-state technology. For most of that decade it ploughed an extremely lonely furrow in promoting thermionic (analogue) technology to a transistorised world, while building a powerful reputation for sound quality. Thirty years of its faith and persistence look to be fully justified, and the organisation has built up more experience in valve technology than any other operating today.

A relatively recent addition to the comprehensive Audio Research range, this VSi55 is not the prettiest or slickest looking amplifier to come our way. However, at £2,895 it's rather more affordable than most of the company's offerings, and looks to have a very practical and sensible all-round feature list and specification to boot.

It's an integrated amplifier, equipped with five inputs on pairs of singled-ended (unbalanced) phono sockets, and rated at 50 watts per channel. Surprisingly perhaps, there are no stereo line-level outputs, fixed or variable, so there's no feed for tape recorders or additional power amplifiers; unusually, a single mono output for subwoofer connection is provided. The usual speaker binding posts have four or eight-ohm taps, but access to 4mm banana plugs appeared to be irrevocably blocked.

A simple, well laid out handset controls all functions remotely, including power, mute, stereo/mono, input selection and volume up/down. Sensibly the amplifier powers up with the mute on, releasing this with the volume initially set to zero. The control section here is passive, using microprocessor-controlled relays, while the driver stages have three 6N1P tubes, and the output stages use two pairs of 6550EH valves. Presets are available for adjusting valve bias settings with the aid of a voltmeter. Normally supplied with



its valves exposed as here, an optional perforated cage-type cover is available.

SOUND QUALITY

The VSi55 is an excellent all-rounder in sonic terms, attracting only minor criticisms. One panellist, however, said it was too controlled and lacked excitement, while others liked its open transparency, praising the plentiful detail and all-round musicality.

The sound does lack a little in terms of overall scale, and the bottom end might be a bit fuller and more robust, so the attention tends to focus on the upper registers, which are well defined, delivering plenty of detail with fine coherence. The overall tonality does tilt towards the bright and shiny, so there's a good case for partnering the VSi55 with loudspeakers that are naturally warm and rich.

There was praise for its fine vocal articulation, and the way the musical interpretation came through on a solo piano track. But above all perhaps this is an amp that's very even-handed and easy to listen to. Nothing seems to faze it, yet it remains fundamentally transparent to the musical qualities of the source it's reproducing.

A minor practical point, encountered in the hands-on work, is that when used with high-sensitivity speakers like the Tannoys, and listening at very low levels, the available volume steps are coarse at the very bottom of the operating range.

A superb all-rounder and an obvious Best Buy, the VSi55 shows that it's possible to enjoy the delights of valve amplification without having to make sacrifices in terms of convenience and practicality. **HFC**

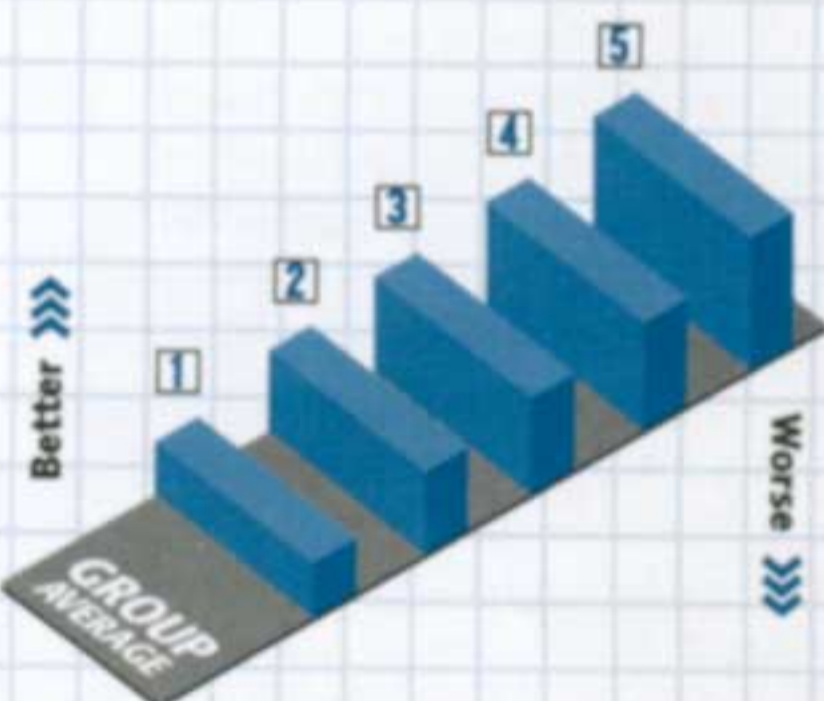


LAB REPORT

This long-established US brand is expected to produce a sensible product with a good specification and performance and that's basically the case here.

It just met its rated spec at 1kHz, but fell a little short at the frequency extremes. Using the 4 ohm tap, power output held up well into a 4 ohm load. The relatively low output impedance, which is relatively consistent across the audio band at 0.4 ohms, means that loudspeakers with impedance which varies with frequencies should not suffer as much coloration as with some of the other amps tested here. The frequency response was extended in the bass to well below 10Hz with a slight 0.15dB down at 20kHz. Channel separation held up well with 70dB at 1kHz and 58dB at 20kHz. Signal to noise ratio measured a respectable -85dB (ref 1W 'A' weighted) and the volume control had exceptional channel balance throughout its range.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic output >> 20%
- 2] Speaker tolerance >> 30%
- 3] Distortion >> 35%
- 4] Noise >> 40%
- 5] Compatibility >> 50%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Continuous power output (8 ohm)	50W	50W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohm)	0.05%	0.045%
Input sensitivity (CD/aux)	0.5V	400mv

VERDICT

SOUND >> 89%

FEATURES >> 84%

BUILD >> 81%

VALUE >> 89%

OVERALL SCORE >> 89%

A superb all-rounder, if a little lacking in looks, the VSi55 demonstrates that it's possible to enjoy the delights of valve amplification without having to make substantial sacrifices in terms of convenience and practicality.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE >> **89%**