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Audio Research VSi75 integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom



One of the best-sounding power amplifiers I've heard in years was the Audio Research Reference 75. I'm not alone in that; it's one of those 'sweet spot' amplifiers about which nobody has a bad word, including other amp-making rivals. However, the world is changing and people are downshifting; hefty pre-power combinations are giving way to smaller integrated designs, and the VSi75 perfectly reflects this.

The VSi75 could be thought of the result of what happens if you leave something like the LS17 preamp and the Reference 75 power amp in the same room, feed them a nice dinner, dim the lights, and put on a Barry White album. It's an integrated with all the convenience of the latest generation ARC preamps (such as the green fluoro display panel, five line inputs, and row of touch buttons on the front panel) with the power and circuit design of one of the best power amps out there. The only things that are missing from the line up is a phono stage, balanced input, and a balance control.

Operation is fairly straightforward; insert the two 6H30 input drivers and four KT120 power valves (if you are using the tubes supplied, they are numbered

and the 6H30s are double damped with tube dampers), putting them in the appropriate valve bases as described in the manual. Turn it on (it has a 30 second mute before playing), wait 20 minutes or so for things to thermally settle down and press the bias button. Then adjust the two pairs of KT120s in turn until they all read a bias of 65mA. This should stay stable for the rest of the 2,000 hour expected lifespan of the tubes. As ARC rightly points out, if you keep the amp powered on constantly, that's about 83 days between retubing and such action would kick you fairly and squarely in the electricity bill. You just need to give it about half an hour of warming up from cold before it's on song. And, you can tell just how many hours your ►

▶ tubes have been running, because there is a display option you access from the remote. You have the option of four or eight-ohm speaker connectors, depending on your loudspeakers, but in most cases, experiment (I went for the eight ohm taps irrespective of loudspeaker used, but you may disagree). Audio Research suggests the VSi75 keeps on getting better and better over its first 600 hours of operational use; it sounds pretty damn spiffy out of the box, but it does settle in over time, too. It is supplied open chassis, with no valve cage option; remember this if your domestic life is filled with hyperactive children using your listening room as a combined race-track and judo dojo.

Essentially shedding a preamp box, replacing the preamp with a well-engineered logic circuit, and building everything into what could be thought of as a scaled down Reference 75 is an exercise in user-convenience. As I described earlier, there is a move to downshifting and downsizing. That array of additional boxes and miscellaneous gizmos are beginning to look a touch passé, now. However, there's a thin line between 'convenient' and 'compromised', and if you get it wrong, instead of buying a nice little does-it-all box that sings, you get something that sullies the good name of the brand, both to newcomers and downshifters. Clearly this is something Audio Research took great pains to avoid in the VSi75.

As the name suggests, the VSi75 delivers 75 watts per channel thanks to the KT120s that are slowly sweeping through the Audio Research range.

I used the VSi75 with several loudspeakers, from the KEF LS50 right up to Wilson Audio Duette Series 2. In terms of source, I mostly used a Townshend Audio Glastonbury player and in terms of cable, there was a whole lot of Nordost Valhalla 2 going on. Cross-check comparison amplifiers included the BMC CS2 and the Devialet 250 on the solid-state side. This list of devices is actually important to the tale, and the reason for the importance is the Devialet.

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I've long said that the Devialet can take care of many traditional audio amplifiers, but it doesn't challenge the authority of an Audio Research. What I didn't really take on board, until I did some direct chopping and changing, was just how important those words are. In fact, the two are not really comparable in obvious terms, but the difference is between head and heart. The Devialet is all about precision, the cerebral interplays of a string quartet, where the Audio Research is about the emotion, and Roberta Flack singing 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face'. There's no implied insult in this, we listen out for different things through our audio systems, but if you find yourself reaching for words like 'anodyne' as a pejorative in a lot of systems, the VSi75 is waiting for you.

Sircom's law of heat output suggests that the warmer the product up for review, the hotter the ambient air temperature, and sure enough the VSi75 came out of the box in high summer, but it was worth a spot of sweltering. This owes more to the Reference 75 than you might expect, sonically. It's exceptionally articulate and revealing in a way not normally associated with valve amps, but completely at home with the Audio Research ethos. And it's also extremely dynamic, in a manner very much at home with Audio Research and tubes in general.

The usual dismissal of valve amps in today's market is they are just second-order harmonic makers. This is demonstrably far from the truth here. If you put on something rich and warm, like 'No Love Dying' from the excellent Gregory Porter album *Liquid Spirit* [Blue Note], it's portrayed without any of the saccharine softness and sickly sweetness that would be present if even the slightest even-order harmonic enrichment was taking place. Similarly, something more hard-edged and angular, such as Acoustic Ladyland's *Skinny Grin* album [V2], is portrayed warts 'n' all. It gives enough insight into this mid-2000s slice of British punk-jazz fusion to allow more than one track at a single sitting (just), but this is not an amp for blurring your musical transients, or softening your musical edge. This is good, solid listening at work. ▶

▶ Imagery has great depth over width, although it does both very well. What it does supremely well, and in line with many of the Reference products in the ARC line is musical texture. You feel a very real connection between you and musician, in the way you normally do in live events. And when that musician is Paul Galbraith playing his own transcriptions of Bach Sonatas on an eight-string guitar [Delos CD], that feeling is both felt in head and heart. This is the kind of thing that marks out the Reference models from the rest of the range, and shows the VSi75 has its feet firmly under the top table.

Part of this comes down to excellent solidity. This is perhaps less well heard on classical guitar (even a big, eight string one), but is clear on 'The Moon Song' from *Beyond The Missouri Sky* [Verve], the late 1990s duet with Pat Metheny and the late, great Charlie Haden on bass. Metheny's guitar and synth sounds are forward in the mix and it's easy for Haden's bass to float around the mix a little. Instead, it's a rock-solid underpinning. And it's not just slow jazz where this rootedness benefits; when the band kicks in on 'She Talks To Angels' from The Black Crowes *Shake Your Money Maker* album [Def American] yet again the band is rooted in place, and not just a Stones tribute act.

Let's put this into perspective. I could improve on the sound of the VSi75 within the Audio Research range, but I would struggle to improve significantly upon its performance from two boxes anywhere near the same price. No, that's too sanitised. If this were real life, I'd be leaning in and I'd be whispering this; don't let anyone know, but every fibre says this is Audio Research Reference amplifier combination-grade sonic performance, but with £10,000-£15,000 lopped off the price.

This downshifting lark demands a lot and frequently fails to deliver. It's 2014; we should be able to take preamp, power supply, power amp, and all

the trimmings, put it all in one box and get a performance at least as good as what we previously had (if not better) for less money. And, when you actually sit down and listen to what the Audio Research VSi75 does, it does just that. Yes, of course a Reference 5SE preamplifier with a Reference 75 power amplifier is better, but this isn't just in the same league, it's playing in the same game, and it's not outclassed. Excellent. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Valve-based, 2-channel integrated.

Valve complement: 2-Matched pair KT120-Power Output; 2 -6H30 driver.

Analogue inputs: Five single-ended line-level inputs (via RCA jacks).

Analogue outputs: One tape output (via RCA jacks), four and eight ohm loudspeaker terminals.

Power Output: 75Wpc @ 8 Ohms

Frequency Response: (-3dB points at 1 watt) 1.0Hz to 70 kHz

Bandwidth: (-3dB points) 12Hz to 70kHz

Distortion: THD </+ 0.05% at 1W, 1kHz

Input sensitivity: 0.55V RMS Single-ended for rated output. (32.5dB gain into 8 ohms.)

Input impedance: 52.5K ohms Single-ended

Output Regulation: Approximately 2dB 8 ohm load to open circuit (Damping factor approximately 4).

Maximum Input: 10V RMS (any input).

Overall Negative Feedback: 4dB.

Dimensions (HxWxD): 235 x 368 x 413mm

Weight: 16.5kg

Price: £7,498

Manufactured by: Audio Research
URL: www.audioresearch.com

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

Tel: +44(0) 20 8971 3903

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

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