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MARCH 2012

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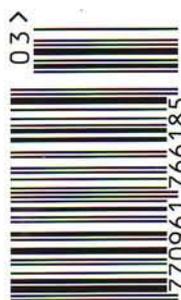


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7 PAGES OF LETTERS - THE BEST WINS A PAIR OF KEF Q100 LOUDSPEAKERS! (UK ONLY)



If you want a massive resource of power the Audio Research VS115 power amplifier is for you, says Rafael Todes.

Research Resource

In the thermionic dark-ages, (1970-1985?) when only a handful of manufacturers continued to produce valve gear, Audio Research stood out as one of the major players to keep the glass tubes burning. Founded by William Z. Johnson in 1970 and based in Minnesota USA, Audio Research was recently taken over by an Italian Investment Management Company, Quadrivio, backed by the Bank of Italy.

The Audio Research VS115 at a glance bears striking resemblance to the VS110, with open architecture and a natural anodised top plate (a childproof cover, is available as an extra to protect prying fingers

from burns). At closer inspection, the rear panel now sports balanced as well as single-ended operation, and the power transformer has increased in size. The bandwidth has been extended to 100kHz from 40kHz, and the power has been ratcheted up by 20W/channel to 120W/channel into 8 ohms. There are bias test points on the rear panel, which can be tweaked with a screwdriver, with the assistance of a voltmeter. Being a 'fixed bias' amplifier means, confusingly, bias has to be occasionally adjusted – every few months approximately, according to usage – as the valves age. Fixed bias gives more power than auto bias where no adjustment is needed.

There is also a 12v trigger which allows remote switch-on. The power cable is included in the package, a heavy 20 Amp IEC which has non-standard fittings. The amplifier weighs in at a massive 28.2kg, with dimensions of 44.5cm width by 48.3cm deep and 20.1cm high. Aesthetically, it looks more like a cooking hob than an object of sex-appeal, but this is in keeping with Audio Research's utilitarian style that places function over form.

My conversion to valve amps started with a three year relationship with an Audio Research VS55, a 55 Watt amp which had an enticingly

"an extremely attractive proposition for those who want a velvety smooth sound"

sweet sound, but ultimately lacked the power to drive my B&W 802s. The VS115 is a more forceful version of the VS55, with eight 6550 output valves, instead of four for the VS55. The four driver valves are 6H30s.

SOUND QUALITY

Listening to the tempestuous last movement of Mahler's 1st Symphony, conducted by Bernard Haitink on Philips, the Audio Research has an obvious thump and wallop to it. It has power and plenty of grip below, and produces an airily sweet sound. My reference amplifier is not a million miles away; it's made by VAC, a small U.S. company based in Florida, and it uses two KT88s per mono block. I use the Shuguang Treasure Series valves, as compared to the Russian 'Winged Cs' on the Audio Research.

Whilst my lesser powered reference doesn't have the bark of the Audio Research, it is more spatially precise, and seems to separate the orchestral sections

more accurately. There seems to be more complexity to the sound. The Audio Research produces a big, all-encompassing wave of sound, that impresses with its sheer bluster and wumpf, but underneath the shock and awe, there seems to be less tonal detail than I hear with the more modest VAC amps.

There is an incredible smoothness to the texture, a far cry from your classic £5,000 transistor affair. Absolutely no hint of any steely metallic grain that I so often hear, and revile. A silky sound,

which is inherently beautiful, lush and ripe. It makes every orchestral string section sound like the Vienna Philharmonic on a good day! It's also blisteringly fast and dynamic, much more so than I remember my VS55 to have been. In the closing moments of the Mahler, you really hear the percussion and bass section driving the music to its climax, not reacting to it a split second later. This gives the climax a sense of 'rightness' without the compromise of an amplifier that doesn't time so well.

I am always amazed at how good Frank Sinatra can sound on the right system. "That Old Black Magic", a 1961 Capitol recording, is beautifully orchestrated and performed by the backing band. Sinatra's voice sounds frighteningly real, the amp captures the timbre of that million dollar voice perfectly. It's a big, generous and warm sound. The Audio Research's extra padding and fullness makes his voice as sweet as honey.

The accompanying preamplifier

sent for review was the Audio Research SP17, and most of my listening was done with this and a Music First passive preamp. The two preamps proved to be highly contrasting. The Audio Research SP17 is a warm-hearted addition to the line-up, you can really see what it's doing, good and bad when you listen to a fine passive preamp. The Music First is definitely leaner and meaner, better spatially, the orchestra sounds smaller, but more accurate. Whilst I can see the merits and musicality of the Audio Research preamp I personally think that the combination of valve preamp with valve power amp is a bit like chocolate cake with chocolate sauce, a bit too rich. In my books, a good passive preamp allows the power amp to enrich without excess, chocolate cake with raspberry coulis to stretch the cooking metaphor!

Listening to a BBC Radio 3 recording and broadcast of Gergiev and the Mariinsky Orchestra from the Proms of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake, the power amp is in its element. A huge image of the massive Albert Hall space, sumptuously reproduced,



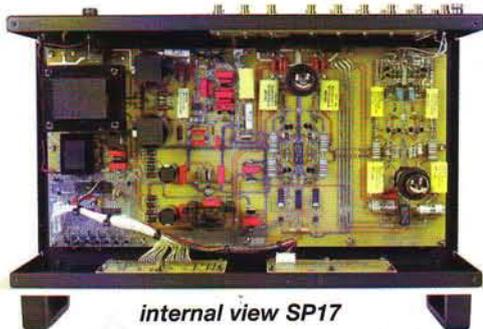
rear view VS115



rear view SP17



internal view VS115



internal view SP17

fluid and musically convincing, perhaps the leanness of my reference Naim NAT02 tuner with a passive preamp, enriched by the ARC power amp is a match made in heaven.

Moving on to vinyl, Mozart's 'Gran Partita', a Philips recording with winds from the Concertgebouw Orchestra: Although the overall sound is big and fruity, I can't help feeling that the combination of the Icon Audio PS3 phono-stage with the VS115 yields just too bloated an image. It is not unpleasant, just too much of a loss of spacial and timbral information. It is still a sound I prefer to a hard-edged, grainy transistor amplifier, but perhaps a good transistor phono-stage would be better suited.

This amplifier is big, sweet and rich, but doesn't seem to be bothered too much with the timbral subtleties that I've heard in the best valve amps. It's just a different emphasis

and I am afraid that I see this trait with the Audio Research VS115. It is sometimes necessary to produce ugly sounds to be faithful to the intentions of composers, and the VS115 stops short of this. Sonorous and even romantic it may be, powerful enough for Rock certainly, but critically revealing – perhaps not.

This amplifier needs careful partnering. While it has a tendency to 'sugar the pill', it produces some exquisite noises and is an extremely attractive proposition for those who want a velvety smooth sound and who place aesthetic enjoyment above the referential/analytical. For my taste, the suggested partnership

with the Audio Research SP17 is a step too far calorifically, as I think this amplifier performs best with leanness further up the chain – in the guise of a good passive preamp. But if you want oodles of power and enormous punch, the like of which you just will not find elsewhere, even in valve – tube? – amplifiers

then this combo has no rivals. Immaculately engineered and finely finished, I know from experience that Audio Research amplifiers stand apart and impress, a tradition the VS115 and SP17 continue.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

- VAC Auricle Musicblocs
- B&W 802ds
- Chord Speaker Signature Speaker Cable
- Music First Audio Copper Classic V2 Preamp
- Bel Canto CD2
- Weiss DAC202
- Icon Audio PS3
- Timestep Technics 1210
- Ortufon Cadenza Bronze
- Naim NAT02

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The VS115 produced 112 Watts under test, into both 8 Ohm and 4 Ohm loads, so coupling efficiency of the secondary is good. It delivered 120W at 40Hz too, showing the output transformers do not saturate at low frequencies and there is plenty of bass power. Damping factor was peculiarly low, measuring just 3.2. This suggests little feedback is used and will give the VS115 full sounding bass with most loudspeakers. It needs over damped loudspeakers, not ones lightly damped to emphasise bass when working with transistor amplifiers. Bass quality then will depend upon a loudspeaker's acoustic and magnetic damping.

Treble output started to fall away above 10kHz, measuring -1dB down at 15kHz, a low value. Most valve amplifiers reach 20kHz at least and again this suggests feedback is limited. Input sensitivity was low, 1.6V being needed for full output. This demands a preamp with a high x8 gain to achieve an input sensitivity of 200mV, eliminating passive and transformer preamps.

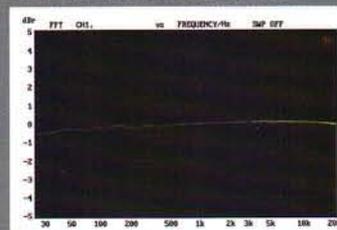
The SP17 preamplifier has a modest gain of x4, so input sensitivity with the VS115 is 400mV, not very high. However, there is a MM phono stage on-board, so an external one is not needed, for MM at least. It has a high gain of x900 overall, through to the preamp output, enough for all MMs, if barely enough for MCs which need more gain than this with an insensitive power amp like the VS115. Equalisation was accurate, with some slight emphasis toward high frequencies. Equivalent input noise was normal enough at 0.3µV, IEC A weighted, meaning inaudible hiss in use. Input overload occurred at an acceptable 40mV, and output overload at a high 15V.

The SP17 and VS115 measured

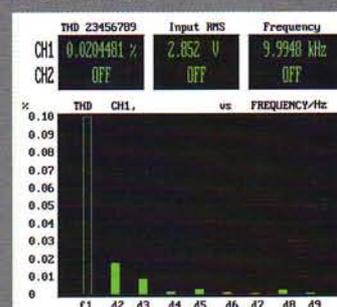
well in all areas. However, the power amplifier will sound warm in balance and it has very low output impedance / damping factor so loudspeaker matching must be done with care. The preamp measures well all round. NK

Power	112watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	4Hz-14kHz
Separation	82dB
Noise	-88dB
Distortion	0.02%
Sensitivity	1.6V
Damping factor	3.2
Disc	
Frequency response	12Hz-38kHz
Separation	68dB
Noise	dB
Distortion	0.12%
Gain	x222
Overload	40mV

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



VERDICT

Big sounding, sweet and rich, with oodles of power, the VS115 power amplifier is superb. The SP17 offers more of the same.

AUDIO RESEARCH

VS115 & SP17
 +44 (0)208 971 3909
 www.absolutesounds.co.uk

- FOR
- plentiful power
 - large, thunderous sound
 - build and finish

- AGAINST
- bias adjustment needed
 - not analytical
 - unlovely appearance

– whether right or wrong. Another example of this particular U.S. approach is the way great American String Quartets approach the music of the celebrated Russian composer Dimitri Shostakovich. His music is about a hundred shades of misery, ranging from despair to depression. There is a tendency for American groups to 'Hollywood-ise' his music, to make it sound beautifully rich and sonorous, rather than capture the shades of misery within it. It is Shostakovich through rose-tinted spectacles,