

# Audio Research VS110 valve amplifier

Classic valve sounds from one the US's foremost amplifier makers

PRICE	£4000
SUPPLIER	Absolute Sounds
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**One of the classic** names in audio, Audio Research Corporation has been in business for no less than 32 years. Over this time this US company has learned enough about valves to have produced some of the finest valve power and pre-amps ever available and, incidentally, Audio Research has enough parts in stock to support every model it has ever made. The VS110 power amplifier is one of the latest in that long line of products. Costing a considerable four grand in the UK, the VS110 (along with the lower-powered VS55, reviewed by KK in July 2002) is actually one of the company's more affordable products.

However you view it, ARC knows how to present a very nice package, beautifully-built inside and out and with the exposed valves nestling in a smart natural anodised aluminium top-plate on the matt black painted chassis. This amp certainly looks the high-end part. With its bulky transformers, chassis valves, and so on, the weight totals a smidgin under a back-taxing 28kg, requiring substantial support it. There is an optional perforated cage

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type cover, ideal when there are children or pets who might touch the hot valves, but this wasn't fitted to the review item.

Like all valve amplifiers, the amp does get very hot — hardly surprising given the dissipation (400 watts at idle). It might be tempting, but the VS110 should not be placed directly on to carpet because the feet sink into the pile and the essential influx of cool air from underneath could be restricted. I placed it on the floor, but with a short length of MDF shelving between carpet and feet, providing a nicely-damped support. The rear panel has two

sets of outputs, with connections to four-ohm and eight-ohm taps on the output transformers. You should connect to whichever of these is the most appropriate for your loudspeakers. There is also a 12V DC remote-switching input and corresponding 12V output for daisy-chaining to other equipment, and for control by home cinema processors, multi-room controllers and the like.

As a total package the Audio Research VS110 offers classic status and longevity. ARC provides a three-year warranty for the VS110, with 90 days for the valves, which are burned in for 24–48 hours and selected before use.

## SOUND QUALITY

Sound quality of the VS110 is certainly classic valve. Bass delivery is deep, deft and generous, mid-range is mellow and detailed, while treble demonstrates a unique combination of smoothness and subtle sparkle. The wide deep soundstage is certainly an ear opener and the subterranean bass just has to be heard to be believed. But all this talk of lows and highs does not really give a true measure of this amplifier. Indeed, if it were down to mere tonal balance, stereo image, and so on, one might miss the point of this amplifier entirely. After all, one could judge analytically that, compared to the best of today's

transistor amplifiers, the VS110's bass, while generous, might not perhaps be quite so 'tight', the midrange might be slightly recessed and the highs not quite as crisp and tidy. The head might conclude valves to be an anachronism; but no, the *raison d'être* of the VS110 is something less tangible and it comes down to the heart of the music. It's something that the best valve amplifiers have consistently delivered, despite being bettered by transistor amplifiers in some other areas. This is the reason why valves are still preferred by many — particularly lovers of vinyl.

The review listening was carried out largely partnered with the Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista CD player and AC3CR pre-amp. When trawling through many recordings old and new it came as a shock that some of the best with this equipment were some of the very oldest — transfers to CD from master tapes (analogue of course) made in the late 1950s. It was these old recordings — on CD mind you, not the latest super formats — which really wowed, having a natural immediacy that eluded most modern recordings.

A striking example was a compilation of original Buddy Holly recordings made between 1957 and 1958, some in stereo and some in mono. The performance was so refreshingly direct and clear right through from the expressive vocals to the simple drumming and guitars. These basic recordings, played all these years later were vividly brought to life, right down to those darned Crickets

## TECHNOLOGY

The VS110 shares its circuit topology with the established 50W/ch VS55, with extra output and driver valves and now drive speakers to higher levels. Forming the VS110's output stage are four selected 6550C valves connected in push-pull, working in the partial cathode-coupled mode. Bias adjustment for these is simple but effective. Adjustment to the recommended 650mV can be hot work, but is done using the long, insulated tool supplied, which is inserted through holes in the top casing adjacent to each valve, while monitoring the voltage at the rear-mounted sockets using a suitable digital voltmeter. The bias current chosen sets the operating conditions in 'enriched Class AB1', with each output valve dissipating around 48 watts. Negative feedback around the whole amplifier is modest — in the order of 12.7dB.

## KEY FEATURES

- Superb build quality and aesthetics
- Gets right to the heart of the music
- Muscular power delivery

chirping in the background. Even the 'popping' noises from the microphone, as Buddy stood just a little too close, were heard as never before and the air seemed to move in a deep and imperceptibly realistic way, with real low-frequencies seemingly almost subsonic. I have rarely, if ever, noticed it so clearly before but, literally, hearing the sound and Buddy's breathing I felt I was really experiencing a long since dead artist at work. The sum of the parts is something special — difficult to put one's finger on or quantifiably express — but the believability of the overall whole performance was certainly a memorable one.

Another two striking examples were two Miles Davis CDs, *Porgy And Bess* [Columbia Legacy CK65141] and *Kind of Blue* [Columbia Legacy CK 64935]. Both were 20-bit remastered from the original tapes. Now, I am a bit sceptical about remasters with more than 16-bits, because, let's face it, there are only 16 on the CD whatever is done to it. However, we are often also reminded that suitable dithering can transmit more than 16-bit resolution across this apparent barrier [see Keith Howard's feature, *HFN*, Nov '02]. Whatever the true case, these discs, played in the Tri-Vista with the VS110 seem to transcend reality, time and space. In the *Porgy And Bess*, Miles's horn was wonderfully rich and clear, incisive but not harsh. The brushed drums and cymbals were naturally swishy and the band swung, with a broad and natural sound. The richness of tone, harmonic

detail and colour were palpable. Likewise, in *Kind Of Blue*, the performance was atmospheric, believable, captivating, and that is how good hi-fi should be.

It's not often things come together like this, when the flaws don't seem to matter. The Tri-Vista extracted something extra from these special CDs and the VS110 delivered it to the speakers. This magic factor made even many much-vaunted SACDs and more recent CDs sound pedestrian.

The only negative to the overall sound was a tiny amount of background hum. Most of the time this wasn't noticeable, but it was just audible during quiet passages. Experimentation with the VS110's inputs revealed it to be affected slightly by the simultaneous connection of the left and right signal screens to the pre-amp via the input cables, thus forming an earth loop. Its annoyance factor is therefore likely to vary between pre-amps and customers, and might trouble users of high sensitivity loudspeakers.

With the Shostakovich 11 from our LSO Live sampler CD, bass delivery had real presence and power, as did the pizzicato strings, which were projected in a genuinely muscular fashion. As this work builds to a frenzy of rhythmic percussion and staccato brass, the dense wall of sound is kept totally under control, uncluttered and unstrained, with absolutely no harshness or audible distortion. While the pounding drums were clearly astonishingly deep and powerful, the overall

impact was not quite as menacingly 'evil' and driven as I have heard it. Returning to golden oldies such as The Who's 'Won't Get Fooled Again' and Blondie's 24-bit remastered *Parallel Lines* [Chrysalis 72435 335992-9], the VS110 proved it can rock with the best of them.

Finally, I spun Pink Floyd's *Pulse* album (which was of course recorded on analogue tape on Tim De Paravicini's modified valve Revox tape recorder) kicking off with 'Shine On You Crazy Diamond'. The sense of occasion and actually 'being there' were truly satisfying. There was not only the warmth of sound, the all-enveloping size of the sound stage and audience participation, but also the clarity of Gilmore's vocals and guitar, the rich texture of Jon Carin's organ and deep acoustic waft of Nick Mason's drums. The VS110 certainly delivers one helluva helping of sound and music.

Summing up, the VS110 provides the big sound of classic valves in spades. The amplifier plays equally well quietly and loudly, and it always stays clean and in control. There's warmth, texture, muscularity and deep bass aplenty, coupled with the kind of restrained yet subtly realistic detail across the board that you'd expect from a high-end valve power amp. So, if you yearn for that intangible 'something' that many modern amps miss, then you must hear the VS110. It combines brawn, brain and heart in one glowing package.

**WORDS: DAVE BERRIMAN**

Exposed valves, transformers and aluminium top-plate enhance the classic image of the VS110

