

Audio Research I/50

A new dawn? Audio Research's first fresh integrated amp in seven years shows a change of direction while still maintaining a grip on the brand's sonic virtues. Enter the I/50...

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Few companies have been as resistant to styling changes as Audio Research. Even after a decade-plus under the ownership of fashion-conscious Italians, ARC products still suggest they belong in studios or government laboratories. Can you imagine the shock, then, when news releases arrived showing a swoopy integrated amplifier available in six colourways?

With a price of £5198, the 50W-rated I/50 means the return of an entry-level model. Colour options or not, an I/50 can be purchased in all-black or all-silver for those who prefer a semblance of the old ARC. These may even prove to be the most popular, as people tend to err on the conservative when buying hi-fi. Alternatives to the black version's black top plate include white, red, yellow or blue slabs – but this section is fixed, so choose a colour wisely, as it cannot be changed.

MINI ADVENTURE

Still, the Italian touch lingers, and even small details assert ARC's desire to reach beyond hi-fi enthusiasts. It's evident even with the no-nonsense owner's manual, which owes its cover design to Mondrian's primary coloured squares and rectangles, made famous in 1965 by Yves Saint Laurent with his Courrèges-inspired mini-dress. This colourful intro to the I/50 is so uncharacteristic I thought I was reviewing something from SMEG or DeLonghi.

While ARC remains secure in its pursuit of the ultimate sonic statements – the REF320 power amp has just been announced – the I/50 targets new buyers with enough care so as not to alienate those already predisposed toward the brand, who have long awaited the return of something accessible. Along with the trendy attire comes full remote control and

RIGHT: High quality WIMA and Electrocube foil capacitors [red and yellow] feature in the circuit as does logic for the volume and LexieTubes [top]. AC mains and output transformers lie above but note the HT PSU wiring feeding through to the base of the 6550s [centre]

minimal set-up hassle. Aside from fitting the valves – 6922 triodes and a push-pull pair of 6550WEs – this is fear-free. Two screws free the lid, pop the tubes into their respective sockets and replace the cover (or not if you want to savour the glow).

There's not even the chance of biasing the tubes, the manual stating that this is a job for a technician. This also precludes hobbyists from replacing the 6550s with other octal valves, so if you want an amp that can handle all flavours of KT-tubes, better look elsewhere.

At the back, it's so clear that audio veterans can set up an I/50 without glancing at the manual. Multi-way binding posts accommodate 4ohm and 8ohm taps, to suit different speaker impedances, and it will accept three line-level sources via RCAs, plus one balanced source with XLRs. There are also two blanking plates for the forthcoming phono and DAC modules, tentatively priced at £700 and £1200-

£1500 respectively. The phono module replaces single-ended input S1, and the I/50 will immediately recognise either module, altering the display.

FLEXY LEXIE

Where the I/50 departs most from its predecessors is the lack of a fascia, *per se*. As every function can be accessed from the

slick, all-metal remote [see p45], controls are limited to one button and two rotaries on the top plate. Left-to-right, they are the source select rotary, power-on button, a headphone socket mirroring the circle of the on/off button for symmetry,

and the volume control, which serves as a mute on/off when pressed. In between are two LexieTubes, which provide the displays for all the amplifier's functions.

Switch on, and the LexieTubes perform a 50-second countdown until mute can be switched off and the amp is operational.

'It conveys delicacy like a 300B triode amplifier'



They display level as two digits up to 45, and the sources read as S1, S2, S3 and BL for the balanced input. S1 will change to PH when the phono module is installed, while the DAC – which does not take over one of the existing inputs – will also be recognised automatically.

Switch-off has its own tricks, too. The display scrolls to the right to indicate powering down, and the two LexieTubes show only a single dot of light when the I/50 is in standby. ARC suggests not turning the amp off and on again without a rest period – good advice for all electronics – and the I/50 will not allow switch-on again until three minutes or so have passed.

SIMPLY IRRESISTIBLE

From the outset, I was deceived by the I/50's actual grunt because – as I found out later – ARC designed it with Wilson's

Sasha DAW [HFN Mar '19] and SabrinaX [HFN Dec '20] loudspeakers in mind. I'd forgotten how sensitive are the latest Wilsons. PM cautioned me, however, that this isn't some beast of a 50-watter [see Lab Report, p45], and it couldn't drive the hungry, ornery sub-£1000 Magnepan LRS to satisfactory levels. And yet it dispatched the £40k Sasha DAWs with ease. So do not even think about buying an I/50 without hearing it through the speakers with which it will be matched. Same for the headphone socket. It can drive most cans, but not, for example, top Audeze models.

Confession time: so enchanting, so sublime, so irresistible is the I/50 that I actually spent one session of 15 hours with it, unable to stop pulling out disc after disc. Few components do this to me, and that is not a

ABOVE: One pair of Sovtek 6550 tubes per channel are protected within the I/50's cage leaving the LexieTubes on view and volume/selector rotaries accessible via its plinth. The decorative surround is available in six colours

criticism of the rest. It's just that when something like this comes along, I want to enjoy it as much as I can before the manufacturer or importer retrieves it.

Into the balanced input was fed the Marantz CD12/DA12 KI – which for me remains the best-sounding CD player ever. Fittingly, I took out a contemporary CD which tells me more about a component than anything else: Lou Rawls' *At Last* [Blue Note CDP 7 91937 2] from 1989.

What happened, though, was not the siren call of the sound, as lifelike as I have ever heard Dianne Reeves' and Lou's voices on the title track, but the space.

Long ago, thanks to the mentorship of Dave Wilson and Infinity's

Arnie Nudell, I became a disciple of soundstage. Both had (individually) explained to me that, with stereo recordings, if the soundstage is right, the rest should be, as it is dependent on subtle, convincing aural clues.

INTO THE DEEP

Now I have no idea how many hours I've spent in front of my Sasha DAWs (or LS3/5As, more of which below), but never have I heard so successfully the magical disappearing trick that all speakers should aspire to in an ideal world. The stage extended beyond the speakers' edges, ➔



ARC'S INTEGRATEDS

Audio Research resisted releasing an integrated amp until 1996 when the CA50 arrived, styled like a lab-look ARC preamp. The response to customer demand, it was the first of a sequence that would include the VSi55 [HFN Mar '04], the VSi60 (2008), the solid-state DSi200 [HFN Mar '10], the VSi75 (2013), and the GSi75 [HFN Jan '16]. That's a mere half-dozen during its first 50 years versus the many tens of ARC pre- and power amps launched during the same period. Clearly, this was a brand wedded to separates.

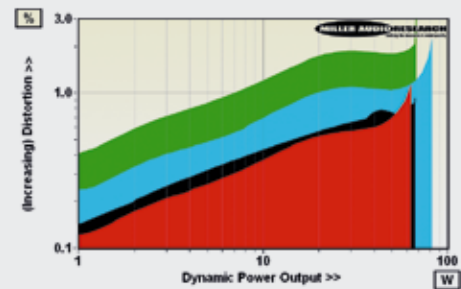
By the 2020s, the company needed to revive a less expensive series. Having for some years abandoned relatively affordable gear, the I/50 project was initiated by the design centre in Italy, while ARC was still part of the McIntosh family. After the return to self-ownership [see HFN May '21], the I/50 was completely revised back in the USA, retaining the overall look and a choice of colours [see inset picture] – itself a bold move declaring ARC's intention to reach beyond purist audiophiles. With no lack of features, cool styling and ideal ergonomics, the I/50 kicks off a new series below the Reference and Foundation models. Further models are planned using the I/50's chassis, including a pre and stereo power amp. Monoblocks, too? I can dream, can't I?

LAB REPORT

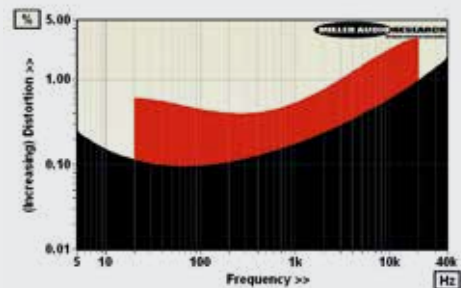
AUDIO RESEARCH I/50

This is not only a high performance tube amp, but one very shrewdly designed for the 'modern era' where 2V line outputs are the norm. It's perfectly typical for integrated amps to have anywhere from 35dB to 45dB overall gain – an excessive value where the volume knob hardly gets off its rest position before the amp is slammed into clipping. Not so here, for the I/50's gain is just +19.5dB (balanced in) at the maximum '45' volume setting. This is perfectly adequate, albeit more typical of a power amp than integrated amp, requiring 2150mV input for the rated 50W/8ohm output. Hand-in-hand with this are extremely low levels of noise – just -78dBV (0.13mV) – and a very wide 92.8dB A-wtd S/N ratio. There are plenty of well-respected transistor amps that cannot match this!

But this is a 6550-based tube amp, not a solid-state bruiser, and the other performance figures reflect this (6550 beam tetrodes are often swapped out for KT88s, but I wouldn't recommend it here). Power meets ARC's 50W specification at 2x58W and 2x55W into 8 and 4ohm loads via 8 and 4ohm taps, respectively. There's a hint of headroom under dynamic conditions where 68W, 63W, 66W and 66W is achievable into 8ohm/8ohm tap, 4ohm/4ohm tap, 2ohm/4ohm tap and 1ohm/4ohm tap [see Graph 1]. The I/50's output impedance increases markedly from <1ohm at bass/midrange freqs to 6ohm/20kHz so there's a progressive treble roll-off with speakers that exhibit a declining HF load (-2.9dB/20kHz into 8ohm and 4ohm but -4.8dB/20kHz into 2ohm). Distortion, too, increases modestly with level from 0.15%/1W to 0.5%/10W and 0.9%/50W, and with frequency to 3.2%/20kHz/10W [see Graph 2, below]. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Maximum current is 8.1A



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency at 1W/8ohm (black, 5Hz-40kHz) and 10W (red, 20Hz-20kHz)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	58W / 55W
Dynamic power (2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	68W / 63W / 66W / 66W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.85-6.0ohm (8.6ohm/38kHz)
Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.5dB to -2.9dB / -20.1dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/50W)	300mV / 2150mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/50W)	92.8dB / 109.8dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W)	0.39-3.2%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	160W / 290W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	420x225x350mm / 18.1kg



ABOVE: Three single-ended line ins on RCAs (one pass through) and a balanced set on XLRs are joined by 8 and 4ohm speaker taps on gold-plated 4mm binding posts. Note spaces that will accommodate the phono [left] and DAC [right] modules

wall to wall, while the front-to-back depth was the deepest I have ever experienced in my room. What's more, this three-dimensionality was maintained far off-axis, the vocalists not shifting a millimetre. And, oh, those voices! Every gravelly nuance of Rawls' peerless *basso profundo*, in the Barry White league, exposed the I/50's openness and transparency. When Reeves' crystal-clear yet powerful pipes chimed in, the sensation caused goosebumps.

HIGH MASS

How on earth could this be happening with a CD I once left on 'repeat' for six hours? Throughout the album, too, David 'Fathead' Newman's sax solos possessed realistic punch and body, and – having lived with my son's sax practising all those years ago – I knew what that instrument's impact should be. As limited as the I/50 might be power-wise in absolute terms, mated to the right speakers it punches above its weight.

With the I/50's diminutive 420x350mm (wxd) footprint not far off that of an equally stylish modern turntable like Pro-Ject's X1 [HFN Aug '19], it's ideal for flat-dwellers. Out came Keb' Mo's *Peace ... Back By Popular Demand* [Okeh/Epic EK92687], along with Falcon Acoustics LS3/5As [HFN Dec '18], Tannoy

LEFT: ARC's new remote handles input, volume and LexieTube brightness, and has provision for the forthcoming digital and phono modules



Autograph Minis, and JBL 4312Ms. OK, ARC CEO Dave Gordon told me that £25k-plus Wilsons were used during the I/50's gestation, but a £5200 amplifier will not be purchased by someone owning speakers at five to ten times its cost.

Listening to 'The Times They Are A-Changin'', the piano revealed that the I/50 can convey delicacy like a 300B-equipped 5W SET amp, while the bass and percussion on 'People Got To Be Free' convinced me that this amp does mass and extension even through small monitors. I had just relinquished the Wilson Lökē subwoofer [HFN Sep '22], and my sessions with the three minispeakers followed the Sasha DAWs with their cavernous bass. Yet there was something so true about the sound that any absence of the lowest registers from these wee systems failed to diminish the sense of satisfaction I was enjoying.

I haven't been this affected by a new product in some time – maybe my first experience of DS Audio cartridges, or TechDAS Air Force turntables. If I had the money and the space, I'd be placing an order for an I/50 right now. It is nothing short of miraculous. The only downside? Choosing the colour. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Nothing had prepared me for what might be just another fine, mid-priced, 6550-powered all-tube integrated. ARC's I/50, though, is so categorically musical, competent and complete that I'm tempted to believe it signifies the 'second coming' of Audio Research, following a change of owners and the passing of its first half-century. This astounding amplifier heralds a golden age. Yes, it's that good.

Sound Quality: 89%

