

Trafomatic Audio Elysian valve power amplifier

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It's amazing what a difference a couple of letters can make. We looked at Saša Čokič's no-quarter-given Trafomatic Audio Elysium mono power amplifiers in Issue 205. The new Elysian mono power amplifiers from the same brand look very different, use different power tubes and cost a lot less in the process. But, they more than deliver the sonic goods in a manner not too dissimilar to the big hitters.

For the record, Elysium and Elysian point to the same thing; the state of heavenly bliss commonly associated with Greek mythology and the afterlife. They differ in that

'Elysian' is the adjectival form of the noun 'Elysium'. Elysium was the place where bliss happens; Elysian referred to that state of bliss. So, it's clear where Trafomatic Audio thinks the performance for both monoblocs lies. Squarely in the heavenly.

Two boxes, alike in name

Aside from a similar name and intention, the two models share being mono power amplifiers and use tubes/valves. They also share a Trafomatic Audio logo. They came out of the same design concepts. That's where it ends. In fairness, »



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» Elysium was more of a skunkworks project that ended up in the real-world... although an 85kg chassis standing some 80cm tall and sporting the ultra-rare Eimac 250TL, a pair of 20b-V4s and a EML 5Z3 as a rectifier stretches the term 'real-world' to breaking point.

Were it not for Elysium acting as a halo product, we would be looking at Elysian as the stuff of wonder. In part because it's sailing close to the Holy Grail of valve/tube amplification. It's a directly-heated, single-ended triode design delivering up to 70W per channel. Let's deconstruct that last sentence a bit because there are a couple of conflicting elements that are rarely mentioned in the same sentence. Namely, the bit that says "directly-heated, single-ended triode" and "70W per channel". That's the combination of the openness, speed and air of a single-ended triode amplifier coupled to real-world power instead of something that would struggle to drive a pair of headphones; it's a bit like talking about a "racing tank". OK, staying with the motoring analogy, this could be like one of those Frankenstein cars that bolt a Rolls-Royce Merlin engine to an old Bentley chassis from the 1930s. It could be either the best - or the worst - of all possible audio worlds. Hint: it's not the worst!

Mailed fist in the velvet glove

As with the Elysium, the choice of tubes determines this 'mailed fist in the velvet glove' combination of single-ended grace and raw power. OK, while 70 watts doesn't sound like 'raw power' in a world used to kilowatt power delivery, in the context of single-ended triode designs that rarely deliver much above about 25 watts, and where three-watt 300B-based amps are commonplace, the Elysian

is a genuine powerhouse. The tube complement starts conventionally with a single 6SN7 in the input stage, then uses what could be considered a dream team of single-ended triode power; a pair of GM70 triodes run in parallel single-ended mode, driven by the AD1 mesh-plate tube and passed through a transformer-coupled interstage.

The GM70 was originally a Russian transmitting tube that is a step up in performance from the 845, while the AD1 started life in pre-war Germany as an amplifier tube for large radios and cinema amplifiers. It never got the same exposure as more popular designs because the war intervened, and in the post-war environment, its roles were largely taken up by the plentiful small pentodes designed for military use. However, it started to appeal to Japanese collectors in the 1980s and has retained niche popularity ever since.

That doesn't mean they are plentiful or easy to use. The 'trafo' part of the Trafomatic name plays a big part here. The way the transformers are selected, built and implemented makes a big difference to the overall performance of the company's products.

Big meters

The aesthetic is more in line with Trafomatic's main product line, although the VU meter on the front of the amplifier is quite large. Everything about the Elysian is 'quite large', except when you compare it to the Elysium (I'm going to stop mentioning the Elysium, as trying to separate the two in print is driving me crazy, or crazier than usual). If you know Trafomatic's product line, think of a big pair of 'Glenn' amps, rather than a scaled-down version of 'the bigger one'. It has a similar colour scheme to the





» Rhapsody integrated amplifier (tested in Issue 228), with a vivid red-and-black outer shell (which makes it sound like an M&M, but the reality looks great in the flesh) and contrasting yellow-illuminated VU meters. The enlarged 'S' in the middle of the name is shared with 'the bigger one', but it looks slightly more arch here; in the 'ElySium', it looks like something from the 1930s and the font is entirely appropriate; here it looks slightly out of place compared to the more restrained graphics of the other products in the line. I admit that's nit-picking.

Of course, this is intended for use in a top-end system where 'the bigger one' is either too large, too rare, or just too 'spendy' (it's about twice the cost of the Elysian). Let's put 'spendy' into relative terms; this is likely going to a system that is costing somewhere north of £500,000, so we aren't in 'penny pinching' territory. And it's that level of product performance that the Trafomatic Elysian deserves and demands.

Less of a facsimile

The Elysian and 'the bigger one' have a lot in common sonically. There's a 'real-world' sound in both; less of a facsimile of a musical performance than most. The sound feels more rooted, more physically 'there' in front of you. This might not be the kind of presentation for those who want to close their eyes and visualise a holographic recreation so detailed that they know what colour socks the musician was wearing in the studio. But it's the one that makes you want to get up out of the chair... and if it's Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, throw that chair at someone in sheer passionate outrage.

This is music 'red in tooth and claw'. While it does extremely well when playing the sort of small-group jazz [Miles Davis' excellent 1958 *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* soundtrack on Fontana], and choral work [Eric Whitacre's *Lux Aurumque*, performed by Eakel Edda Guðmundsdóttir and the Schola Cantorum Rekjavicensis, Hödður Áskelsson

conducting, BIS] we use to show off our systems, it delivers so much more. In fact, these recordings help show the difference between the Elysian and other amps.

Take *Lux Aurumque*, for example. It's a beautiful piece, and in the hands of many amplifiers it's expansive, detailed, articulate... and like a collection of nicely organised vowels. Everything is beautifully laid out, and a little bit musically soulless. The Elysian takes this choral work and gives it 'the feels'. You find the hairs on the back of your neck rising up. The music does the same effect you get when you hear it live; less of musicians singing, more of a shared experience. Some of this is down to the Elysian's excellent harmonic richness and depth, but some is just down to unexpectedly hefty raw power.

It's that sense of 'thereness' that captivates and won't let go. I played a new track that I'd hope gets the attention it deserves in audio: 'Yard Loop' by Craven Faults [*Sidings*, Leaf]. Unlike his more sprawling works, 'Yard Loop' is a short piece that uses the 'drones', 'pads' and 'arps' of classic Kosmische Musik with a distinctly British post-industrial vibe. Unlike much modern electronica, it's made with handmade hardware synths that approximate a 1960s Moog modular (of *Switched-On Bach* fame). So, it feels surprisingly 'organic' for what is a large box of oscillators, filters, envelope generators, sequencers and amplifiers. Sounds are solid and rooted in space; you know they aren't 'real' instruments but that doesn't matter. And on the Elysian, the sense of performance, of a live – if programmed – event makes it seem like he is in the room with you. Even if you don't know who 'he' is (the man behind Craven Faults prefers to remain a mystery, but is likely a former member of one of the many gritty Northern synth-based acts that were popular in the early 1980s).

Extremely wide range

It shares with its bigger brother an ability to work with an extremely wide range of very high-end loudspeakers, but





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» don't take that to mean it lives in the shadow of the Elysium amps. It may share the same designer, similar goals and even a similar name, but the two are very different. What's more, Saša Čokič's bold claim that the AD1 is "the Queen of Triodes" rings true in every bar of music played through the Elysian.

There's an obvious comparison here. Just what do you lose (or, depending on your viewpoint, gain) between Elysian and Elysium? Surprisingly little, in fact. There's an even greater sense of authority, control and presence that 'the bigger one' brings to the party. If the solidity of the Elysian is outstanding, then Elysium is unbelievable. It's the embodiment of music in the room like few other amps can deliver. But, Elysian is one of the few that also do that musical embodiment. In fact, it's only when you roll out the big orchestral guns that the differences begin to become apparent. That's not to say Elysian is incapable of delivering the scale, range and drama of, say, Rachmaninov's 'Symphonic Dances' [Zinman, Telarc... with the composer's name spelt 'Rachmaninoff'], but the Elysium makes that expressiveness all the more energetic and powerful.

Let's ram this home, however; the Elysian is not 'Elysium-lite'. It's an amplifier with its own character and identity. Yes this is informed by 'the bigger one' but, but that information is an outstanding delivery of real-world scale and dynamics, coupled with a kind of liquidity and grace that draws you deeper into the music. My listening notes quickly descended into stream-of-consciousness mode; I kept mentioning its room-filling, direct and rhythmically bouncy sound. And yes, those full-blast outpourings of Wagner sweeping majestically eastward begin to show slight foreshortening of image. Most rival amps would have given up the ghost long before the Trafomatic Audio Elysian begins to break into a sweat.

And just when you think it's all over, you roll out two tracks that highlight perfectly what the Elysian does so well, and they are very definitely not on the 'audiophile-approved' list. The first is 'I Got The...' by Labi Siffre [*Remember My Song*, Pye] and the second 'Bohemian Rhapsody' by Queen. Strangely, and in no way intentionally, I chose two 1970s musical triptychs; the first, perhaps best known for its use as a sample in Dr Dre and Eminem's 'My Name Is' from 1999. The second is 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. Both sounded vibrant and new, vivid and visceral... and extremely powerful. The Queen song is rarely played because everyone wants to sing along (I did, badly, and played air guitar too) but it's a punishing piece to play, at once dynamic and expressive, with clear cuts between sections (more accurately, between

studios). A good system focuses on that detail so you can hear where the abrupt changes happen. A really great system – like one that features the Elysian – also never loses sight of the fact that it is one of the greatest rock singles ever.

Closely named

The downside is simple: the two products are so closely named that even Google falls over itself trying to find one rather than the other. That aside, everything else is an observation. For example, those firmly wedded to the single-ended triode are also often equally impassioned about ultra-efficient loudspeaker systems; in the Elysian, that isn't necessary.

Trafomatic Audio is good at 'knocking them out of the park', and the Elysian is no exception. In lesser hands, the energy it draws from the music and passes through would be overwhelming; it would be more like a Marshall stack than an instrument for precision listening. In other hands, it would be all about the detail, or soundstaging, or dynamics. Why the Elysian hits the spot – just as its bigger brother did – is that it combines all these elements in one big, well-proportioned, beautifully made box. +

Technical specifications

Type: mono valve/tube power amplifier

Class of operation: Parallel Single-Ended (class A), Direct Heated Triode (DHT)

Inputs: 1x XLR, 1x RCA

Tube complement: 2xGM70, 1x AD1 mesh by EML, 1x 6SN

Input impedance: 47K

Input sensitivity: 1.5Vpp

Outputs: 4 and 8 ohm

Output power: 70W

THD: 7% at maximum power and with 1kHz signal

S/N ratio: 82 dB

Frequency bandwidth: 10Hz (-0.6dB) – 60kHz (-3dB)

Size(DxWxH): 56x38x38cm

Weight: 52 kg per unit

Price: £31,998 per channel

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