

Big Style



David Price looks back at one of the most impressive tube power amplifiers ever made, the massive, mighty and monstrous Audio Research D150...

There's an old joke that asks, "Which is the shortest book ever written: the Australian book of culture, the Italian book of war heroes or the American book of self-denial?"

Well, back in the nineteen seventies – if the Audio Research D150 is anything to go by – the great

American hi-fi buying public was certainly not minded to deprive itself of audio excess. US audiophiles were obviously not believers in the credo, "less is more". With the D150, more was more, and more than enough, too...

This is one of the most remarkable tube amplifiers I've ever seen (we'll talk about the

sound later). It is vast; it makes two seriously chunky, stacked Musical Fidelity kW separates (sitting in the office about a metre away from the D150) look like a Denon microsystem. At over 60kg, it requires three men to lift it with any degree of safety.

More impressive still is its context. You see, although Hi-Fi

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World is nowadays full-to-brimming with tasty new tube designs every month, back in 1975 (when Audio Research launched this), valve amplifiers were about as fashionable as a 'short back and sides' in a barber's shop, or drainpipe jeans at a disco. Then again, Audio Research was never a company to follow the fleeting vagaries of fashion...

Indeed, it is one of the oldest continually operating manufacturers in American audio. The company was founded in 1970 in Minneapolis, and has grown steadily over the last quarter-century. It now occupies a 48,000 square-foot production plant and administrative headquarters in Plymouth, Minnesota, where approximately 75 technical, assembly and support staff guide the product line

from concept to finished goods. A research-only facility has also been established in Palm Desert, California. Its founder and president William Z. Johnson began designing custom audio electronics in the early 1950s, and also operated a specialist audio shop until the mid-1960s. He was a big name behind the renaissance of 'tube' audio in the US.

Many industry observers consider Johnson one of the true originators of the entire concept of "high-end" audio as it exists today. The company is particularly famous for its after sales service - its technicians can still repair, refurbish and restore any product ever manufactured during the company's quarter-century history.

The D150 was instrumental in the company achieving this reputation; made in a very limited production run of just 200, it cost a whopping \$2,685 (the price of a 'compact' car). Rated power output was 150W RMS per channel, and there are 4, 8, and 16ohm taps. The tube complement comprised four 12AX7, eight 6FQ7, and MP6550 (the latter very much an Audio Research favourite). Internal construction is quite sublime. There's one massive mains transformer, two massive output transformers and huge steel girders running left to right (secured to the side panels by hex bolts), housing racks of glowing valves. Along with the fan cooling, it rather looks like a very early supercomputer...

Externally, this thing is no less arresting. The chunky 61mm brushed aluminium front panel houses three meters; two for power and one for mains voltage. The idea is to use the central voltage knob to select the voltage setting (100, 110, 220, 240) that comes closest to the meter reading (in our central London office, the volt meter read 231v). The group of three knobs either side are used for cathode current bias adjustment.

SOUND QUALITY

That the Audio Research sounds as it does today is surprising, but to have heard it back in 1975 must have been remarkable. This is absolutely nothing like the British breed of valve amplifiers of that time whatsoever.

Where a Quad II was soft enough to be the audio equivalent of an eiderdown, and the Leak Stereo 20 was at least rose-tinted and woolly around the edges, the D150 is sharp as a knife and hard as steel.

Of course, absolute comparisons aren't fair, as this massive 'Yank tank' was almost ten times the price, but it's still a fascinating counterpoint to Brit valve amps of yore. The speed, power, attack and insight of this classic has to be heard to be believed. It makes an original Naim NAP250 (yes, the hard sounding one!) seem slow and ponderous, with massive transient swings of power and incredible midband insight. It's quite unlike anything you'd traditionally associate with valves in this respect.

Kate Bush's 'Moving' was breathtaking; tremendous bite and wallop from the superb seventies rock drumming, allied to a glass-clear midband that seemed to scythe through the fairly warm 'analogue' mix of her first album like a hot knife through butter. The bass guitar grip was vice-like, the cymbals sparkling and spacious, Kate's vocals dreamy and chilly and haunting. Going to an all-digital recording of Stravinsky's 'Right of Spring' showed the recording's brittle quality in a way that even the Quad II-forties can't manage. This amplifier is relentless in the way it dissects a recorded acoustic, warts'n'all. Indeed, to some ears it might be a just a tad on the bright side, but that's very much down to personal taste. What few will object to, however, is the dizzying speed and sheer motive force of this behemoth. This gives it a tremendous physicality - in a barrel-chested way, it blasts music out with incredible self-assurance. It is not afraid of any loudspeakers, and it shows.

CONCLUSION

The Audio Research D150 is an amazing product for its day, offering truly top line fidelity with no down sides, about from its imposing presence in your listening room and the frightening prospect of ever having to move it again. I can't help but feel that, if the UK hi-fi press of 1975 had been just a little more receptive (ideologically) to products such as this, then we would never have seen valves fall out of favour in the eighties (and the ensuing valve revival of the nineties, for that matter). It is a resolute two fingers aloft to those who think valves are nothing more than an audiophile's 'comfort zone', and testament to the fact that if something is done properly, it never dates.

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