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July 2005

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Audio Research

VM220



Audio Research VM220

PRICE £4500

When Audio Research first started selling valve amplifiers some 35 years ago, the genre was already obsolete – having been ousted by technically superior transistorised amplifiers. To some observers it must have seemed about as logical as re-introducing the steam car or the Zeppelin airship, but to founder William Z Johnson, it would have been entirely logical.

Transistor amplifiers were both lighter and cheaper watt-for-watt than valve-based designs, but there were dark mutterings from a hard-core of audiophiles and music lovers who opined that valves offered a certain sonic something that the

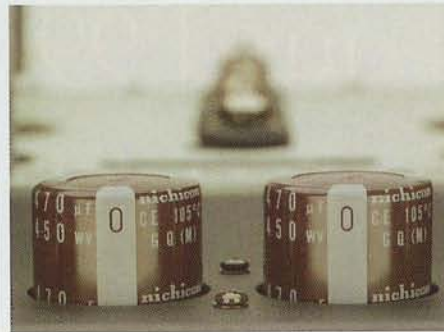
upstart transistors didn't and, 35 years later, the debate still goes on. In the meantime, the brand has gone from strength to strength and is one of the few North American audiophile manufacturers still in business making the same kind of high-quality, or high-end equipment – and all without pandering to shifting fashion. Indeed, Audio Research Corporation has adhered firmly to a winning formula – build quality to die for and sound quality to match. It still builds the stuff like it used to, with casework featuring chunky panels of finely-finished anodised aluminium and thick black paint. The appearance of its products is more akin to laboratory instrumentation than domestic sound reproducing equipment, but this is the much-loved classic Audio Research look. As

is usual in life, quality does not come cheap and the price of these two monoblocks, at £4500 each in the UK, would pay for a perfectly good new family car. Add the price of the reference pre-amp I used with it, at a pound under £10k, and that could buy a good luxury car.

It's certainly a lot of money, but each monoblock is a sizeable piece of well-put together audiophile real estate. Indeed, viewed against some of the competition out there, these amps start to look like good value for money. Each monoblock, incidentally measures 445mm wide, 200mm high and 480mm deep and weighs in at a gnat's whist under 25kg. Just look at the build quality and you'll see what I mean. Just as with any aspirational luxury product, the price may seem

These monoblocks will set you back the price of a car, but you'll own an amp that will make you love your music

6550s [right] take on output duties; the 6N1Ps [below] have damping rings; reservoir capacitors are by Nichicon



basic circuit as the less powerful stereo VMS55 and VS110, Audio Research claims this is the first time fully-differential operation has been applied in the V series.

The VM220 uses the same number of output valves as the VS110. These are matched 6550C beam power tetrodes, which are paralleled to give extra power. Like the VS110, it uses 6N1P twin triode valves as output-stage driver/followers. In the VM220 there are four 6N1P valves in total. These are used for the driver stage, and provide balanced differential and unbalanced inputs (switchable), allowing it to match any Audio Research pre-amplifier – including those in the company's Reference series such as the Ref II Mark II, used for auditioning in this review.

Audio Research is very cagey about exactly how it has improved sound quality in the VM220, but

and the improved power supply, are claimed to provide greater bass extension, clarity, air and dynamics. I'm going on long-term memory but, having reviewed the VS110 in these pages a couple of years back, I reckon that the sound is improved – as indeed it should be. The level of negative feedback applied in the VM220 is quite modest at just 14dB, yet even so the overall bandwidth is a surprising 10Hz to 100kHz, which suggests a wide open-loop bandwidth (before NFB is applied). Rated power, for 0.5% distortion is 200W, but Audio Research claims that some 230W is available before 'clipping' sets in.

SOUND QUALITY

On firing up the VM220s in the system I was half expecting to react by thinking, 'Yes, I know it's very nice, but what about the price?' But after a

This amplifier wants to kick your butt and stroke the sensibilities at the very same time

crazy or entirely justifiable, depending on one's particular viewpoint.

But, whatever anyone thinks, price is always an issue. To gain market share the company has been introducing more powerful and affordable designs, such as the VS55 and VS110, with improved sound quality to woo new buyers. The 200-watt VM220 was designed in response to customer requests for a monoblock more powerful than the VS110 – and at a reasonable price – although of course two are required for stereo.

TECHNOLOGY

The VM220's circuit is billed as fully differential push-pull, which I take to mean from input right through to the output. While based on the same

the methods used include careful selection of passive components, and choice of internal wiring and solder formulation. Design tricks up its collective sleeve include a solid-state regulated power supply with low ESR (Effective Series Resistance) Nichicon reservoir (smoothing) capacitors, providing a claimed total of 332 kilojoules of energy storage.

There's also the new extra-wide-bandwidth output transformer (custom-made, as with all Audio Research amplifiers). The new transformer,

few bars I was secretly nodding to myself in that knowing way that says 'Yes, I see: I understand the essence of Audio Research.' The VM220 is one of those products that takes very little time to weave its magic. From the first bars its qualities became apparent (initially with a Musical Fidelity A306 CR pre-amp). Here was a deep, broad soundstage with warmth and richness, sparkling treble and a wide-open clarity, transparency and texture. Bass was surprisingly deep and powerful for a valve amplifier, while treble was smooth and

clean, avoiding that rolled-off dulled and frankly over-soft sound which can so often afflict valve amplifiers. This is no rose-tinted tonal balance. Later, I brought an Audio Research Reference pre-amp into the system, with Crystal Connect Reference balanced XLR interconnects, and this simply reinforced my view of the VM220, giving yet more of that depth and warmth, further enhanced by a Musical Fidelity kW SACD player using the valve-amplified outputs.

From memory, the VM220 certainly had better bass grip and treble clarity than the stereo Audio Research VS110. The upper midrange and treble seem to have been opened out nicely. Whereas the VS110 had more of a typical warm, cuddly, rounded valve sound, the VM220 was having none of this. This amp wants to kick your butt and stroke the sensibilities at the same time. Audio Research claims it has the bass grip and bandwidth of a transistor amplifier with the air transparency of valves. That is something of an over-simplification, but I kind of understand what they mean. If you really want the grip a transistor amp gives then, ultimately, silicon land is where you'll find it, but I certainly didn't feel short-changed by the VM220. Perhaps this was because the bass was so finely formed and richly textured.

Though generalisations are always dangerous there is no doubt in my mind that valves present sound and music differently to transistors. Yet with the VM220 I was less conscious of a valve-versus-transistor schism, than simply of great sound and great music. The best way I can put it was that, with the VS110, I felt there was a choice

Real world Research

On a purely practical level, the VM220 has a hot-start circuit, which prevents the amplifier being re-started too soon after being turned off. The aim here is to prevent an in-rush of current to the valves before they have cooled down.

Full bias adjustability is offered by means of slotted potentiometers and voltage-measuring sockets on the rear panel of the amp. For use with as wide a range of speakers as possible,

there are also output-transformer taps for both 4 and 8-ohm loudspeakers. I used the 8 ohm terminals for my listening tests.

For remote or multi-room installations, in which the amplifiers may be hidden in a (large) cupboard away from the actual listening room(s) there's a 12 volt control input with daisy-chained output which allows the amps to be linked and turned on and off by wire.



Voltage measuring sockets, remote control inputs, output transformer taps... the ARC is flexible

Galanta [Scottish SO/Mackerras, Linn Records CKD 234], it was the lovely deep spacious acoustics, the well-articulated clarinet and rounded, sonorous horns which told their story. In

Transformer. Again, this is not the cleanest and smoothest CD, but in the hands of the VM220 the essence of the music comes through. On 'Vicious', the guitar cut through like a blade from the back, Reed's vocals stayed clear while the bass lines pounded. In truth, though, this was one of the rare times I felt that the bass could have benefited from transistor drive and thrust, but it is so well controlled and nicely textured it didn't matter. On 'Perfect Day' the main vocal stayed forward, the piano was crisp and the sound cavernously wide. On 'Walk on the Wild' side every detail was audible – bass strings slapping in all their glorious harmonic richness.

On 'Vicious', the guitar cut through like a blade from the back, Lou's vocals stayed clear while the bass pounded

of heart over head. The VS110 won the heart if not the head, but for me the VM220 wins on both counts. The 'problem' was that with a sound as good as this there's a distinct tendency to forget writing notes and simply play music (now, there's a novel thought). So I've had to go back and make notes with specific tracks, but these are by no means the only ones played.

With Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor [Bergan PO/Rudd/Noriko Ogawa, BIS-SACD-1191] the strings had appropriate clarity and crispness yet were smoothly textured at the same time. Meanwhile, the piano, a difficult instrument to handle at the best of times, was very well reproduced, sounding both dynamic and powerful and yet having plenty of weight and attack, along with clarity and brilliance.

Noriko's playing style in this piece, was at one moment, light in touch and delightfully playful, and the next, firm, powerful, and assertive yet delicate. Indeed, this could be a metaphor for the VM220's sound – light, shade, power, delicacy, weight, inner clarity and measured brilliance – all covered in one example. In Kodaly's *Dances of*

these pieces – even in the forte passages – the strings stayed clean and clear, as though the VM220 could literally handle anything.

My old Pentatone recording of Beethoven's Symphony 2 [Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra/Masur, PTC 5186 143], was similarly smooth and yet incisive in the strings and here it was the confidence and assertiveness of the orchestral sound that was telling. The rich homogeneity and texture of massed instruments combined with a 'big' soundstage gave this replay a realistic oneness and feeling of scale.

Shifting genres, Marianne Faithfull's voice in *Broken English* [Island CID 8023 524 036-2] is handed to the listener carefully – like razor-sharp fragments of a once fine piece of china. You can hear the heartache, angst and longing – it's all there in intimate detail with this CD.

With some starker, amplifiers one hears mainly the brittleness in her voice and then she can sound simply thin, flat and harsh. The VM220, by comparison, delivers her fragility, strength and passion – and every layer of the dense studio production. Finally, that old favourite Lou Reed's

SUMMING UP

It's both difficult and easy to sum up this amp. It wants you to love music, and if you didn't love it with your old amplifier, well, it's going to damned well make you love it now. In a system that will do it justice, it's both delicate and assertive, powerful and restrained, brilliant and soft. It's as enigmatic as a flower-arranging Sumo wrestler but somewhat easier on the eyes and ears. Just don't expect to hear it and not to alter your audio perceptions. ■

David Berriman

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Hi-FiNews verdict

Warm, wide-open, rich and yet with sparkling treble, the VM220 is sure to woo yet more buyers to the ARC cause. Detailed yet never brittle, it's one for the heart and the head. Classic tube looks, to boot.