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REFERENCE 110  
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# AUDIO RESEARCH LS26 & REF 110

*A serious preamp and power amp combination from the acknowledged kings of valve amplification*

PRICE £13,790 (LS26: £5,300; Reference 110: £8,490) CONTACT Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0TW ☎ 020 8971 3909 www.audioresearch.com

**B**ack in the early 1970s, valves seemed to have been firmly consigned to the amplification history books. Audio Research was the only amplifier brand – to the best of my knowledge – still making what it called ‘tube’ amps, and its products weren’t even available in Britain back then. Valves have been in and out of fashion several times since then, but Audio Research has stuck to its principles throughout – give or take the odd hybrid – and is also widely regarded as a founding member of the High End club.

This review is examining the £5,300 LS26 preamplifier and the £8,490 Reference 110 power amplifier, both of which are all-valve devices. Although the Reference 110 might more usually be partnered with the Reference 3 preamplifier, the LS26 is a ‘trickle down’ variation on the Reference 3 theme, at a saving of nearly £4,000. The measured performance specification is very similar, but the unit is smaller and not much more than half the weight – presumably evidence of a smaller power supply. Audio Research says: “The LR26 sounds like a REF 3 on a slightly smaller scale.”

Valve amps often lack the convenience and flexibility of solid state components, but that’s not the case here. A full panoply of useful features are all under microprocessor – and hence remote – control. The styling is classic Audio Research: a thick, silver-coloured alloy fascia, ahead of ventilated, pressed-metal casework. The front panel is attractively and symmetrically laid out. A generous and informative green-illuminated central display has status information large enough to be read at a distance. A row of pushbuttons select power, mono, mute, monitor, processor bypass and balanced/single-ended selection. Two large rocker knobs select volume and input.

In practice, of course, most of the control functions will be handled by the remote control, a delightful little device that’s an object lesson in handset design. Compact, lightweight and unpretentious, it duplicates the fascia controls and adds balance and phase inversion – both of which are better adjusted from the listening position.

Comprehensive socketry includes six ‘normal’ inputs, plus monitor and processor; each is duplicated in single-ended phono pairs and balanced XLR pairs. Record output and two main output single-ended and balanced sockets sets complete the line-up. Each regular input has three alternative gain

options, effectively extending the range of the 104-step volume control. The latter’s operation is delightfully smooth and silent, but it would have been helpful to have had still lower gain settings available for late night listening, while the upper end of the range seems somewhat superfluous.

The smallest of three Reference power amps, the Reference 110 is still a massive beast, in both bulk and weight. Power output is rated at 110 watts per channel through output transformer taps matched to 4, 8 or 16 ohms, and terminals intended for spade connectors only. Mains comes through an oversized 20A connector lead, and inputs are exclusively balanced XLRs.

**“This is one of the finest, sweetest, most musically literate and downright satisfying amplifier combos around”**

Both the power amp and preamp have clever systems that count the elapsed hours of use, to help work out when the valves ought to be changed to maintain optimum performance. In order to help extend valve life, the Reference 110 also has two-speed cooling fans that are permanently active. These might be a little too intrusive for some people, as they are just audible in a quiet room even at the low setting.

Listening tests involved a variety of sources, both balanced and single-ended, and it quickly became clear that this Audio Research combo is very sensitive to the interconnect cables that were used, and comfortably gives its best performance when fed in balanced mode. The difference isn’t huge, but it sounds just that bit more confident and solid. At the power amp end, the Reference 110 is clearly happier working into a relatively straightforward loudspeaker load: it was significantly more comfortable driving Bowers & Wilkins’ two-way Signature Diamond speakers than the same company’s more demanding, three-way 800Ds.

There’s ample power available for all normal purposes, and the pre/power combo has a warm overall sound, with lovely vocal clarity and intelligibility, along with great midband sweetness, delicacy and transparency, though the bottom end could have a bit more authority, grip and punch.

The review period involved a number of changeovers between the Audio Research

valve duo and my regular, and much more costly, Naim NAC552/NAP500 solid-state amplifier combo. The comparison is fascinating, as the two have quite distinct ‘flavours’, and each is utterly engrossing in its own particular way.

Spend some time with the Naims, and you miss something of their grunt and authority when going over to the Audio Research. Spend some time with the Audio Research and you miss the fluidity and liquidity of its midrange, the delicate natural tonality and sweetness, and the vivid realism of its dynamic and micro-dynamic contrasts when returning to the Naim. Ultimately one would like to combine the best characteristics of each, though such

audio nirvana seems destined to remain out of reach, and it’s unrealistic to state that one is necessarily superior to the other.

This exceptional Audio Research combo’s natural tonality is particularly appreciated when reproducing acoustic instruments and human voices. However, there’s no shortage of pace and drive when it comes to handling rock or hip-hop, and the dynamic range is exceptionally wide, revealing even the finest detail deep down in the mix.

Best used with balanced connections and relatively simple loudspeaker loads, this is one of the finest, sweetest, most musically literate and downright satisfying amplifier combos around, though at no time does one suspect that it is over-sugaring the repeat. In short, the LS26/Reference 110 combo represents truly excellent value at this highly realistic price. ■

*Paul Messenger*

