

Valve Pre-Amplifier Valvet P2c

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The non-linear pre-amplifier

A short story about price and value

Oh Knut, what have you done now? And nobody knew anything about it. Of course, you don't shout from the rooftops. Sure, you are the quiet type. Someone who sits and thinks. Someone who fabricates his equipment in person, meticulously. In a way you represent the archetype of the one-man high-end manufactory. The wizard with the soldering iron. That must be what your customers like about you. And they must have formed a secret society, because one hears absolutely nothing from them. No hype about the sound, no raving in the internet fora, no letters to Hifi magazines demanding that they should have a look at VALVET. And it is they who seem to want your gear to look so 'plain' – labelling? Zilch! Just the green backlit 'V' on the front panels. After all, we are quite capable to remember what each knob is for. And that's all right Knut, even I managed to do this after just a short time, and I had your P2c pre-amplifier with optional balance control for review. That's why I am not going to take you to task for the missing lettering, nor for the power switch that sits on the back of the power supply unit. I just couldn't.

So what happened? Maybe I shouldn't say this publically, but after I had gently warmed up your pre-amplifier all morning (I remember it was a Sunday) all I could think of after the first track was "damn!" and similar expressions which cannot be repeated here. For the remainder of that memorable Sunday I just sat there, possibly with mouth wide open, until my stomach reminded me that I hadn't eaten. You know, Knut, that's something quite extraordinary, for normally I stand by the stove, punctually, with conviction and passion. If anything trumps my interest in Hifi, it is eating, or, to be more precise, cooking. I always prefer this ritual over any amp and deep contemplations about lovely valves, always switch off the lights and switch on the cooker. Until now, that is...

So the diagnosis must be that I have succumbed to a Hifi disease. *I want one!* I can't believe that this happened to me. I am an experienced reviewer who has seen everything in his three decades in the business, who simply doesn't get seduced anymore. Someone who has lived with and tested the flashest, most expensive, weirdest and coolest gear, someone who, while listening to the latest 10000-Euro amplifier, got bored and dangerously close to spice up his copy with overt cynicism.

Well, Knut, what am I going to do with you? With your pre-amplifier P2c and its onboard phono-amp that grins at me across the room from the rack with its green V, whispering: "I told you! You had it coming. And now you are stuck. Don't know what to write, eh?" Ok, I admit, I really don't know what to write. Perhaps I should try something along the usual lines: "... listening to the Valvet has been immensely pleasurable, wherefore the entire team awards the P2c 98/100 points in its category." After that, I quietly purchase the thing and keep my mouth shut. If somebody asks me what pre-amplifier I use, I simply say: "Oh, one of these valve-jobs, not bad really, with silver wiring and so on, you know." Or: "No idea – it doesn't say on the box. Probably one of these things that somebody has thrown together sometime." Maybe I should really do that. How could one write a story like that? Perhaps like this...

Knut Cornils, MEng, builds amplifiers in his manufactory. The company, based in north-German Bargetheide, isn't prejudiced and offers transistor- and valve-amplifiers in its two product lines: "Bricks"

and “Blocks”. The power-amplifiers appear to favour Classe A whilst the pre-amplifiers, five different models, stick with the good old valve. The pre-amplifier P2 represents a complete package and includes a MM phono stage. Add to this pure silver MC transformers and the remote-controlled P2 becomes the P2c. You can order an optional balance control, and, should you so desire, different valves (an additional charge applies). Our review sample came out of the box with a tasty 12AX7-PSVANE input valve, normally you get a selected JJ in that socket. (Apparently the PSVANE valves sourced in China are very nice indeed - the makers in Shuguang went for a much higher quality; meanwhile the PSVANE brand has gone solo and claims to have set up its own production.)

The Valvet pre-amplifier, which also features ECC81 and 6SN7 valves, is fed by an external power-supply and also features the green back-lit V. A previous power-supply which had shipped with valve or semi-conductor diodes was recently given the boot by Knut. He and his customers felt that the new transistor version simply sounds better.

The P2c in its low casing (only 8 centimetres high) and its entirely free wiring (using 4N pure silver wire in the signal path) is meticulously fabricated by hand. In the power supply Knut uses PTFE-insulated, silver-copper wire. As mentioned above, the optional MC transformer comes with pure silver windings. The switch that allows you to choose between MM and MC input is sensibly located between the seriously heavy-duty RCA connectors. This is a nice touch, as you don't have to pull out cables when using both sources.

This brings us to the phono-stage, which ‘sits’ between a 12AX7 and an ECC81 and contains a passive RIAA equalisation. The valves are all mounted horizontally in the P2c, the angled bracket also holds the encapsulated input selector that is connected to the front panel. Incidentally, the heavy and sumptuously chromed remote control only communicates with the motorised volume pot (which is very quiet in operation). Knut Cornils adds with a grin that the remote and its receiver circuit board are built ‘old school’ using an analogue IC without quartz, which must surely enhance the sound quality...

The well-known and powerful Octal-double triode in the form of a 6SN7 performs its duty in the line stage and adds another 20 decibels of gain, in addition to the 65 decibels that transformer and phono stage bring to the party. As for the external power supply, things are bit more relaxed. A battery of capacitors looks after the heating and anode voltage, while the high-voltage rectifiers have small foil-capacitors set in parallel in order to eliminate minute switching ‘spikes’. In the amplifier itself smaller electrolytic capacitors further buffer the power supply. If you are looking for complicated electronic control circuits, look elsewhere. Indeed, in view of the sound quality on offer here, this just confirms my experience that fully regulated power supplies do not represent the last word as far as dynamics go.

Looking under the lid at the way the amplifier is assembled, one must concede that, in spite of the meticulous and delicate construction, a few compromises and a hint of DIY can be discerned as far as beauty is concerned. But that is the nature of the beast with all such designs, so no criticism intended. At the same time, the amplifier works fabulously as far as the measurements are concerned. Bean counters will ask for a bit more as far as signal to noise ratio is concerned; however in everyday use the remaining noise is negligible.

As far as the components are concerned, specially selected foil capacitors stand out, otherwise the principle is common sense, not overkill. In this case a clear proof that the latter does not guarantee a better sound, rather, that a well thought-out, cleanly executed and optimised circuit remains the decisive factor.

The question whether the conscious decision to do without apparently tidier circuit boards and the wide use of pure silver in the signal path have an ultimate consequence for the musicality of the amplifier leads us into the minefield of audio philosophy. As far as the result is concerned, Knut wins, audibly. No surprise really, given that a few but highly esteemed manufacturers swear by silver and employ specially built components with silver connectors. The debate in this field isn't new either: Back in the 1990s the US magazine *Sound Practices* (then edited by Joe Roberts) printed an article by Hi-royasu Kondo, the founder of Audio Note who died in 2006. Kondo did extensive research on the materials used as transmission medium and came to the conclusion that only the most consistent use of silver led to the best results, or, to put briefly: don't 'mix'. As far as I am concerned, the Valvet pre-amplifier confirms this conclusion and it proved to be considerably more 'choosy' than I am used to when it came to matching it to power amps. The Leben CS250 which I highly rate has an admittedly somewhat brighter, 'lighter' sound, pretty much the characteristics that set the Valvet apart (i.e. stupendous dynamics, extreme transparency and outstanding imaging). Together they created a tonality that seemed too analytical, as if the most outstanding characteristics of the P2c had become distilled in an almost unhealthy concentration.

Linked up to a 'normally' wired SE-300B however the sound clicked right in the middle. This combination produced a sound that I hadn't ever heard before. The inherent weaknesses of the triode (even these highly lauded amps cannot do everything) were pulled aside as if by magic. Further experimentation however lead me to the conclusion that this can be taken too far, in that under certain circumstances the sound becomes too ethereal, with some records even bloodless and 'bony'. This is an experience that I had made previously with the Silbatone-combination as tested in Issue 5/2011: this thoroughbred 100000 Dollar 'super sports car' does not reach its potential with every partner either. On the other hand, if everything is just right, the door to heaven is wide open.

Mentioning the Silbatone in this context has a different, good reason: your preamplifier (sorry, Knut, I never asked whether I can call you Knut), well, your P2c, Knut, does not behave in a linear way because it plays in heaven, it poaches in a league in which, given the price, it actually has no business to be in. In this league proper five-figure sums (in Euros!) are not only the norm, they usually are law and represent the entry gate to exalted sound pleasures. To secretly sneak into this league and upset the established pecking order is actually quite cheeky. But to keep this a secret amongst the circle of your 'initiated' customers is simply mean. Well, bad luck there, Knut. I am going to sing it from the mountains – without going crazy with further descriptions of the beautiful sound – and simply declare: for this kind of money, this is sensational, no ifs or buts! And further evidence for what I have been saying for ages: tubes rule!