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Valvet P2c & A3.5 (Hi-Fi+ 76)

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October 20th, 2010 -- by Jason Kennedy
Source: HiFi+



shows a rather more attractive version with the ally fascia in a natural finish, the all black version delivered is pretty basic looking by comparison. But it's usefully slim thanks to horizontally arrayed valves and a separate power supply, even the input sockets are aligned horizontally which is unusual. With nothing going for it in the male jewellery stakes his has got to be a great sounding product to warrant distribution.

Valvet is a German company that makes a horn loaded loudspeaker and two ranges of amplification dubbed Bricks and Blocks, the latter being the more ambitious models. Distributor Artisan Audio supplied some examples from the Blocks range, which has just been augmented with a more expensive preamp than the P2c called Soulshine, and whose A3.5 monoblocks are the finest the company makes. These solid state, class A power amps are rather more traditionally cased devices with heavy heatsinking down each flank and a chunky V shape cut into the front panel, subtle perhaps but they look the money. They are compact enough to fit a pair on one conventionally sized equipment shelf but dish out enough heat to convince you of their operating class. They are specced as delivering 50 watts into eight ohms and take both balanced and single ended connections. Their feet are oak cones which is not something I've encountered outside of the Russ Andrews accessories catalogue, this makes them easy to slide onto a shelf but as there are only three per fet stability is not 100%. The P2c likewise has three oak cones beneath it and as this is a wide lightweight unit one is forever tipping it when making connections – eventually you remember where to put your weight.

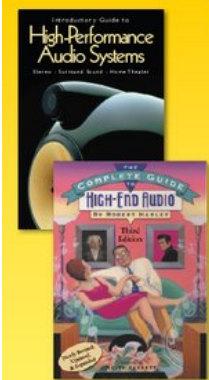


Valvet A3.5 Front

Under its perforated lid the P2c has an ECC83 and an ECC81 for each channel of the phono stage and a pair of 6SN7s in the line stage. Everything is hardwired with silver which suddenly makes complaints about the appearance seem churlish, silver wired preamplifiers are pretty rare beasts at any price. Valvet's site suggests that it has remote volume control but the UK distributor eschewed this presumably on the grounds of cost, or could it be that it makes the p2c seem less hairshirt! The phono stage has transformers (which you can also have in silver for a premium) for the MC input and passive RIAA EQ. Inputs are selected 'blind' using the left hand rotary which isn't exactly helpful but does keep the fascia clean and you eventually remember where each input is. Gain is pretty high as is often the case with tube preamps but the Valvet power amps have suitably low sensitivity so that you have some range on the volume pot, but using my active ATCs I had about three

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Valvet A3.5 Rear Panel

degrees to play with when a line source was in use!

The power supply box comes from the Croft school of industrial design and contains a compact transformer and a regulator valve, the umbilical that sends power is hardwired to the preamplifier with a DIN connector on the PSU, the lead is 90cm (3 foot) long. This separation was done to keep hum at bay but it was possible to put the preamp on a shelf above or below the PSU without this being an issue, what it didn't like was being too near the power amps.

The A3.5 power amp Blocks are push-pull class A devices with a single pair of transistors in the output stage. This approach is also found in Gamut power amplifiers and one that is claimed to avoid issues arising from the small differences between individual transistors that can accumulate with multiple devices. Each monoblock has a 300 VA toroidal transformer with 100,000 microfarads of filtering (a Bryston 7B 600 watt monoblock has 30,000 microfarads by way of comparison) and the signal takes a very short path through the silver wired circuit without encountering a single capacitor on its way.

Valvet's approach pays off handsomely in the listening room, the pairing producing a rich and detailed soundstage that is palpably real with a great recording. Schubert's Winterreise D911 leider (Schäfer/Schneider) brings singer, pianist and studio acoustic into the room in a vital and convincing fashion thanks to superb dynamics and the lack of any edginess or grain from the power amps.

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The monoblocks sound more relaxed, richer and more open than my Gamut D200 MkIII but don't image with the same degree of precision and ultimately lack the bottom end power of what is a rather more expensive 200 watt amplifier. However the organic nature of the sound, its sheer musicality, distracts you rather effectively and it's all too easy to sit back and be transported. As is often the case with valves acoustic music is the main beneficiary, however the Valvets do wonders even with relatively compressed mainstream albums where their ability to open up the sound of instruments and voices is extremely effective.

Putting Keb Mo's *Give Peace A Chance* under a van den Hul Colibri cartridge onboard an SME Model 20A turntable rewards with absolutely gorgeous tone, this is a great recording and the Valvet's phono stage lets you know all about it. From the juicy bass line to the strangely damped snare drum on the opening track it draws you in to the music. This is also because the amps are transparent to timing, seemingly neither emphasising nor restraining transients but delivering dynamics in full effect. If the preamp has a shortcoming its in image scale, it doesn't manage to project height very well even with PMC Fact 8s which are strong in this department. This became pretty obvious when substituting an MSB DAC V with onboard volume control which showed that the A3.5s are easily up to the job of pushing the soundstage to the ceiling.



Valvet P2c

Out of interest I tried the P2c alone with my ATC SCM150 SL actives as these give a different perspective on things, in this instance a pretty positive one. Bass is particularly good for a tube powered device, it's deep and quick with excellent timbre. With Genesis' remixed *Watcher*

of the Skies you really feel the bass pedals and are swept up by the drama of the piece, I've not noticed how much reverb there is on the drums before either. My regular tube preamp, a Border Patrol Control Unit has a more open balance that makes voices seem more real but it could do with some of the power that the Valvet delivers. With a van den Hul Condor MC on the Rock 7 it had me revelling in Lindsey Buckingham's picking behind Stevie Nicks' voice on the Fleetwood Mac track *Landslide*, there are clearly two acoustic guitars plus reverb then an electric comes in later on, the whole effect was pretty spellbinding.

The Valvet is usefully quiet, presumably this is down to the separation of the power supply from the signal electronics in the preamp but it certainly makes it easier to hear into recordings. And even with a not particularly sensitive speaker like the Fact 8 (89dB) you can achieve decent level thanks to the vitality of the sound. Despite the presence of transistors there is no sense of the controlling in the music, so you don't get bone crunching bass you get timbrally rich bass in the context of music that flows with ease and draws you into the experience. Clearly the class A factor is dominant, it gives rather more even power than most tube amps but avoids the tonal greyness and occasional edginess of class A/B designs. The lack of image height could be down to the preamp not adding an edge to high frequencies and thus providing a more natural balance but it's hard to say whether either approach is correct. The question is which one makes you listen the longest?

Despite its utilitarian appearance the P2c is a well built preamplifier that offers an awful lot of sound quality for the money, you will be hard pressed to equal it sonically with a better looking product. The A3.5 is by contrast very nicely cased and extremely engaging with enough grip to keep you rocking in the context of a relaxed and revealing demeanour. And I thought I didn't like the sound of silver!

SPECS & PRICING

P2c

Phono stage: MM, MC (optional pure silver transformers)

Line inputs: 4

input impedance line 47KOhm, phono, 100KOhm

Amplification: line 45dB, Phono 65dB

Maximum output: > 10 Volts

Dimensions (W x H x D): Preamp 445 x 50 x 300mm, power supply 222 x 90 x 230mm

Case: black powder coated aluminium with steel base

Front: 4mm, black or silver anodised (optional deep chrome)

Optional remote

Price: £3790

A3.5

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Power output: 50 watts into 8 ohms
Dimensions W x H x D: 230 x 80 x 300mm

Case: 2-40 mm thick aluminum

Front: 10mm black or silver anodised (optional chrome)

Price: £3750 pair

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