

Valvet E3 – Listening into the Black

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They say there are people who can perceive music in colours. Others can even taste notes. This ability – called synaesthesia – is attained effortlessly by the listener when they encounter the Valvet E3 which conjures music out of the deepest black – the deep void before the Big Bang. You literally can hear right through to the source of its origins.

Caption p.32

Can you think of a less adorned power amp? Apart from the on/off switch (underneath the unit), the Valvet E3 does not feature any controls. And why should it? What it does offer, the manufacturer has designed without compromise to produce stellar sound. The result: a power amp with soul and emotion.

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To take the listener with you, to sit within music and not in front of it. No time for diversions. The listener not just a consuming object but a participant who actively engages with the music.

All that is what good HiFi should deliver. But how to achieve it? Is such an ideal only achievable by means of excessively deployed technical trickery or the use of vast amounts of material? Does it need Eastern esoterica, a secret knowledge, acquired over countless listening sessions, about the harmonising of listening rooms and a squeaky-clean power supply? We can soon get lost in the maze of aesthetic mediations where a barrage of information keeps us from the real experience. A competition of parameters increases the expectations of the consumer ad infinitum. But what we really want is just to listen to music, pure and simple.

We can only guess whether these were the thoughts Valvet-founder Knut Cornils had in his head when he developed his amplifiers. The first impression immediately turns into astonishment as to how without compromise and stringently this technology works. Of course, you don't notice the 'technology' at all. And thus, we have taken the first hurdle. Thanks to its discrete and elegant appearance, the Valvet E3 does not betray any of the engineering prowess of its inventor. You can hardly convey more clarity. Low-slung and in shiny silver, every 'corner' gently rounded, elegant feet for a perfect stance, high-spec WBT connectors – and that's it! For these external qualities alone the new E3 could easily cost three times as much. An illuminated 'V' in gentle blue discreetly informs us about the origin of the power amp and whether it is switched on.

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The power switch is located in the middle underneath the chassis so that nothing disrupts the clear lines. Good design can be so simple. But one must have the courage to apply it. Who dares, wins! That's all there is to it. There is no parameter-jostling either. The amp produces 2x 12 Watts into 8 Ohms or 2x 20 Watts into 4 Ohm speakers. Initially this doesn't

sound that much. The internal construction follows the exterior stringency in the smallest detail: double-mono, a large toroidal transformer, discrete single-ended Class-A transistors (just one per channel) – making for a clear configuration so that even a layperson can understand what does what. But that is just the start.

Colours coming out of deep Black

To see a light, one needs a deep black around it. You can best see the stars in complete darkness. This realisation can be transferred to music – no debate. This is not a question of taste and therefore not even an aesthetic issue. It is merely the background onto which music can spread the more energetically. Which brings us straight to the listening experience that initially began with the E3 in my small recording studio. Were one to reduce listening to music to the simplest physics formula, we would encounter a matrix of frequency times amplitude. For this to work well depends on contrasts out of which vibrations can rise as immediately as possible, and then subside again. When producing music, that is pretty much what happens. It is just that the paths and spaces are not more clearly defined. In the recording studio you do not want a chopped-up reproduction, no resistance, no curves and bends for the musical event to navigate. You want the truth.

Caption p.33

Input via XLR and RCA, output via speaker terminals from WBT. We have blacked out the type-identification. During the test, Valvet promoted its power amp from E2 SE to full E3 specification, and thus from a 'special edition' to a new generation of amplifier. The serial number proves it: our sample has the number 'four'.

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And this is the impression the Valvet power amp conveys like hardly any other product that I have tested in this context so far. The music 'glides' like a bob sleigh through the course, without ever touching the boundaries.

Initially you have this fluent moment in the music that is always there, coming out of the speakers without breaks or any audible constrictions. The brain switches to standby, as the listener does not need to reconstruct the musical events in the network of its synapses.

Instead, it receives them without delay, and all the way to the solar plexus.

I do not know whether this is merely 'fun' or arousing. Initially I am completely dumbfounded - wondering what technical tricks Knut Cornils may have hidden in his power amp to endow it with such abilities: first and foremost, it is the deep-black background mentioned above on which the music begins to glow more than ever.

Everything but loud?

The amount of power on tap should not be underestimated: of course, in comparison to many other power amps that have come for review, 12 Watts may appear a bit meagre. But when you listen, you are confronted with a very different experience. The sheer drive and

the dynamic abilities of the Valvet E3 are so immediate, direct, and fast that the proverbial shock makes its appearance with the music even at the lowest volume levels.

What is noticeable here is that the space and the fundamentally firm bass do not collapse at low volumes but remain present and correct even at whisper-level. Once you turn up the volume, the sound does not become fatiguing or aggressive but simply envelops the listener with greater power.

The levels that you can reach without distortion are impressive. Instruments and voices do not become flabby but remain sharply delineated and in the same ratio of contrast as at normal volume. That is how it should be.

Even if the E3 is not particularly choosy when it comes to speaker-pairing, Audioplan's Kontrapunkt IV were my favourites.

Caption p.34

What is hinted at on the outside is continued inside. Valvet eschews any unnecessary components in the signal path and prefers to use the space gained to keep a minimum distance between components – despite short signal paths.

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These relatively small 'monitors' actually need a good amount of power and current. Up to now, 12 Watts were simply not enough for these speakers. But with the Valvet it suddenly produced such powerful and firm bass notes as never before. The mids, unexpectedly, show real body and are yet transparent. The treble attains real sheen and becomes even more beguiling than a valve power amp. For me as a valve fan that was something fundamental. Not to mention the fact that all the time I could have sworn I was listening to vinyl and not digital DAW-fare in 16-bit quality.

Complete perfection is achieved when you add the Valvet preamp Soulshine 2 Mark II with external power supply. Here you have, as usual with Valvet, valves doing the honours.

This small chain now becomes even more powerful and mighty in terms of dynamics and bass foundation and dissolves the treble even better.

Now you begin to enjoy the old – and often quickly recorded – Blues- and Rock albums. To conclude, I put on the Beatles' classic Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band and listen to it from beginning to end. I swear that I have never experienced that album so lively and electrifying.

For me, the components are not just a major surprise in terms of life-like music reproduction, but in future a reference. What else can possibly come after this?

Caption p.35

Good isolation feet provide a solid base: the E3 ships with absorbent feet from Alto Extremo which provide exceptional support. Of course, it will still appreciate a firm HiFi rack. The amp is available in black as well as in the chrome version reviewed here. In that version, the feet are silver.

Summary

The completely revamped Valvet E3 is powerful – despite apparent low output – and musical beyond compare. One of the best power amps that we ever had for review.

Details

Power Amplifier | valvet E3

Concept:

Power Amp with Transistor Single-Ended Class A technology.

Output: 8 Ohms 2x 12 Watts; 4 Ohms 2x 20 Watts

Measurements: 45/5/30 cm

Weight 9.7 kg

Guarantee: 2 years

Price: 3,900 Euros (chrome version 4,050 Euros)

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