

HIGHLIGHT 03/2024

FIDELITY

VALVET A4.5

VALVET A4.5 Classe-A mono power amplifiers - FOCUS ON THE ESSENTIALS

When mono power amplifiers were offered to me as test objects, the thought of a package that probably weighed 50 or more kilograms and the resulting back pain went through my head. However, I was relieved to find that they were manageable, albeit extremely massive, power amplifiers that “only” weighed 13 kilos each. Even during installation, the VALVET mono blocks made an excellent impression. The perfectly crafted housing of the A4.5 exudes solidity. The black anodized, 15 millimeter thick aluminum front and the massive cooling fins are particularly impressive. The latter form the flanks of the compact amplifiers. The silky, shiny, brick-red anodized cooling fins gives them a smart, elegant touch. I'm not a fan of colorful hi-fi equipment per se, but I find the design irresistible, especially with the "V" (for VALVET) milled into the front and backlit in red during operation. A look at the back and underneath will also satisfy the high-end gourmet. WBT NextGen speaker terminals and cinch sockets, Neutrik XLR inputs, Furutech rhodium mains input (with marked mains phase) and absorber feet from Alto Extremo demonstrate high quality standards down to the last detail. I really like the fact that the mono blocks stand on three feet, as this is the safest way to ensure a tilt-free stand.

Dipl.-Ing. Knut Cornils is the owner, managing director and developer of the audio manufacturer “VALVET High-End Amplification”. He manufactures every single device in his portfolio himself, which includes a preamplifier and three power amplifiers. In this way, he is able to respond to special customer requests.

When developing his amplifiers, he follows a clear strategy: simple circuits that are implemented with a few but high-quality components. A philosophy that I like. A bit like the really great art of cooking, which brings the taste to the point without any fashionable accessories through perfect cooking times and a few, finely balanced spices.

Cornils uses valves and semiconductors in their best application area in a completely non-dogmatic manner. Therefore, only transistors in Class A operation are used in the output stages. Another feature of his amps is their sensationally

oversized power supplies. The gigantic toroidal transformers (2 x 270 W) in its preamplifier – yes, you read that correctly, “preamplifier!” – would look good in many a stereo power amplifier.

Back to the test objects. The VALVET's A4.5 mono blocks are the fifth development stage of the A4 amplifier series, the first version of which celebrated its debut on the HIGH-END stage in Munich in the early 2000s. Unchanged from its predecessor, the A4 MKII only uses one pair of power transistors in push-pull Class A operation. According to Cornils, this increases performance, while the inevitable parallel connection of several power transistors results in sound disadvantages.

The A4.5 achieve a higher output compared to its predecessor, with 60 watts/channel at 8 ohms or 100 watts/channel at 4 ohms. That sounds pretty unspectacular at first, but I've never even come close to reaching their performance limits. This control can probably be attributed to the generously sized power supply. The transformer output has been increased to 500 watts per block, and the rectifier diodes were replaced by “fast” 60 A types.

The toroidal transformers are manufactured by a North Rhine-Westphalian specialist according to VALVET's specifications. In general, Cornils attaches great importance to ensuring that his suppliers are as close as possible to its production location (the tranquil Bargteheide, northeast of Hamburg). Cornils discovered that the motto “more is better” is not always justified when he discovered the electrolytic capacitors used in the A4.5 for the first time. Although the Guided Current 4TTN electrolytic capacitors provide less capacity, they sound better in his ears. Cornils said that enthusiastic customers had their power amplifiers retrofitted with the new capacitors. He selects the components based on extensive listening comparisons. For this reason, the internal cables are made of pure silver, although no relevant difference compared to copper can be detected, according to the engineer. The impression created by the outer shell is confirmed when you look inside the power amplifiers: everything top notch! Of course, that's no guarantee for highest euphony per se, but it did give rise to a certain level of expectation. The operating instructions say that you have to give the power amplifiers around ten centimetre of space on all sides when placing them. The power amplifiers can get up to 60 degrees due to Class A operation. Accordingly, I placed the amplifiers in the rack with plenty of room for air to circulate. The “hard” power switches are located at the front right underneath the power amplifiers. The optimal solution: If it were placed at the top or even on the front panel, the simple design would be lost and operation on the back would be awkward.

The Alto Extremo feet create a comfortable distance from the surface, making the switches easy to operate. After a satisfying ‘clack’, the A4.5 purred briefly and contentedly and the valve “V” indicated operational readiness in bright red. A blue light shimmered through the vents. What I first thought was a design feature similar to the underbody lighting popular in the car tuning scene has a completely technical purpose: These are LEDs that serve as the base load for powering the input stages. If desired, Cornils can adapt the color of the luminous V on the front panel or dim it completely using the remote control.

My fear that the VALVET mono blocks would not harmonise with my Electrocompaniet preamplifier turned out to be unfounded. After a warm-up phase of about 30 minutes they played as if from one piece.

Every now and then I enjoy wallowing in complete harmony. What is better suited to this than an ACT production like Wolfgang Haffner's Kind Of Spain? Immediately after the first sounds flooded the room, the special abilities of the compact blocks became clear.

The complete clarity of the music as well as the holographic stage presentation make you forget that it is a reproduction.

Speed, resolution, dynamics, impulse resistance – the A4.5 easily fulfils all these requirements. Even in records that were technically unremarkable, the monos brought out a liveliness that had previously remained hidden from me. Solo voices and instruments were not pushed over the edge of the stage into the foreground; they remained in a realistically integrated position on the stage. Attributes such as clarity, tonal purity and smoothness kept coming to mind.

After my usual suspects (well-produced but overused recordings) had done their duty, I set out on a long musical journey through neglected slices. Denez Prigent, an artist hardly known in this country, is considered in his Breton homeland as one of the best interpreters of the traditional song forms Kan ha diskan (dance song) and Gwerz (lament). He mixes traditional sounds with modern elements without fear of contact to create an exciting brew. In “E trouz ar gêr” the Breton singing is accompanied by bombarde and binioù (traditional wind instruments with a sound that penetrates to the core). Deep synth basses and drum beats stand in stark contrast to this and provide a basis reminiscent of Techno. This exotic mixture increases, supplemented by a variety of instruments and sound effects, to a hurricane-like roar. The A4.5 remain completely unaffected by this. They give each sound layer the necessary space, with a clear structure and seemingly limitless dynamics.

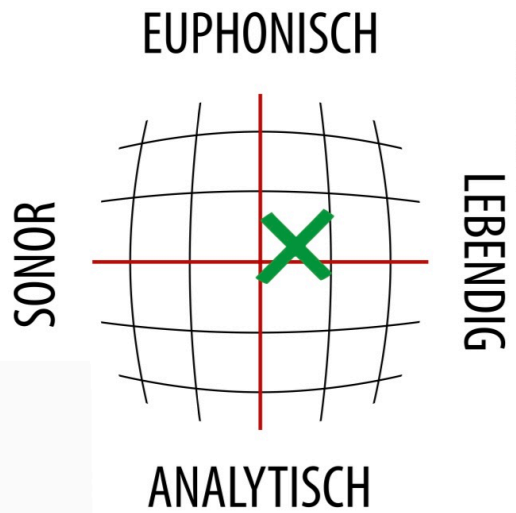
What I heard piqued my curiosity in the VALVET preamplifier. Knut Cornils reacted immediately, and two days later there was another device in the listening room. Just minutes later, the soulshine2 MKII was part of the test setup. Is it any wonder that this combination played together even more coherently? Fine dynamics and transparency benefited particularly. This realisation provoked an excursion into early music. I'm not a big opera lover, but when Roberta Invernizzi sings Vivaldi arias, the sun rises for me.

The Valvet combination managed to reproduce the crystal clear yet warm voice extremely naturally. The accompanying baroque orchestra La Risonanza is presented perfectly in all proportions, both tonally and spatially. Molto bellissimo! Cornils reduced formal language, in combination with the stringently designed circuitry is reflected in the performance of the A4.5 mono blocks. I have rarely experienced such confident and natural playback, and when I did, it was only with setups that cost many times more.

The VALVET A4.5 are “final” amplifiers in a double sense: They are not only at the end of the amplification chain, but they can also represent the end of the search for audiophile nirvana.

VALVET's A4.5 is pure perfection: stylish, compact, perfectly crafted, outstanding in every respect - the definitive amplifier!

Valvets A4.5 ist die reinste Vollendung: Schick, handlich perfekt verarbeitet, klanglich in jeder Hinsicht überragend – der endgültige Verstärker!



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