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Audio Research

VS115 Valve Power Amplifier

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Some like it Hot

AUDIO RESEARCH VS115 (£4988)

Classic looks, balanced outputs and more power than the amp it replaces, the VS115 will not disappoint...

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HIGHLY
COMMENDED

'Business as usual' marks life at Audio Research under Quadriovio, its new, Italian owners. The American-as-root-beer virtues that exemplify the products remain; banish any notions that we'll see ARC amps made with staves of curvy walnut. The new 120W/ch VS115 is pure Yankee ARC all the way, though one now needs to turn to Russia for 6550s.

Advancing from the VS110 by adding balanced inputs, the VS115 retains the layout of its predecessor: open architecture and an anodized top plate with every aperture clearly labelled for each of the eight matched 6550 output tubes and the quartet of 6H30 gain and cathode follower valves. Optimal ventilation is a given, the structure preventing all but the most majestically stupid of users from putting anything on top of it.

As is ARC practise, the VS115 benefits from the development of the Reference models, in particular the REF110's FET input stage design. It means that we now have a medium-size stereo amp from Audio Research with both balanced and single-ended operation in a true differential topology. The balanced-vs-single-ended debate will never end, but I am one who categorically prefers the former. It's no coincidence that my favourite preamps, eg McIntosh's C2200, work best in that mode.

Changes over the VS110 include much wider power bandwidth (100kHz in contrast to 40kHz) and output up by 20W/ch on its predecessor, though still residing in what is arguably the 'middle power' category in today's market. Used with Sonus faber's (now Audio Research's sister brand) Cremona Auditor Elipsa loudspeakers, power was not an issue.

Bias test points for each valve are located on the rear panel, with adjustment through apertures near each valve base. The back also contains 12V triggers for system switch-on, binding posts for 4 and 8ohm speaker loads, a socket for the heavier blade-style detachable



mains cable, and the input sockets, with small jumpers to prevent access to the XLRs if you use really must use this in single-ended mode.

Audio Research promises 'more speed, top-end air, improved mid-band resolution and more articulate, impactful bass' over the VS110. 'Textures and timbres are finely rendered and silky-smooth, with the grainless resolution that only our reference series amps have previously been capable of.' All of which had me anticipating a baby version of the REF110, one of my all-time favourite ARC amps. Although, if I had a Lotto win, I'd spring for a REF210 and hide the display...



GRIP AND FLUIDITY

Once I'd manoeuvred the rear-biased 28.2kg, 445x201x483mm (whd) bulk onto a GM Accessori table, I wired it with Yter cables, to the rest of the system: C2200, SME 30/3 Series V turntable with Transfiguration Orpheus MC, Audio Research's PH5 phono stage. Fresh from sessions with the Feickert turntable [see p56], I

ABOVE: Balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) inputs are joined by (balanced) 8 and 4ohm speaker binding posts. The series of yellow and black terminals visible either side of the 15A blade-style mains inlet are for monitoring output tube bias adjustment

'Keb' Mo's National Steel shimmers through the VS115, entering the room with the sashay of a 1940s lounge lizard'

continued with Classic Records' live Dylan, mono LPs from Connie Francis and Louis Prima, plus my treasured 7in copy of Mr Big's 'To Be With You'. New to the pile were LPs of Mudcrutch – Tom Petty's return to a pre-Heartbreakers band – and Keb' Mo's eponymous debut.

There's much to be said for avoiding the excess of 200W-plus behemoths, despite exhortations that there's no such thing as too much power: cost, bulk, green issues. Some years ago, one of audio's gurus noted that the sweetest-sounding amps in his experience were all 60-watters; my own litany of favourites, too, consists entirely of what would be deemed power-shy by today's standards. The VS115 seems, then, to be an ideal update for that dictum. After all, we're only talking another 3dB.

If power is one of your obsessions, let me assure you that, in my 'typical' 12x18ft room, the VS115 delivered more than enough level from the baby Elipsas, the Guarneris, LS3/5As, PMC's DB1+ and the hungrier-than-you-think Tannoy Autograph Mini. In every instance, whatever bass the speaker could offer, was exploited to the fullest; consistent from speaker to speaker were grip and fluidity without any traces of artificial snap or hardness, while the matching with the Mk I Guarneris was on a par with the best I'd ever heard: mid-to-late-1990s Krells. If there's anything lacking, it's the sort of



ARC IN THE EU: AN OPEN VS SHUT CASE?

For traditionalists, an Audio Research amplifier means a chassis with enclosed valves and a vertical front panel, like the REF110. The VS115 uses a completely open architecture (à la the 1950s) that dispenses with a front panel – ideal for easy access for messing around with valves. (If this were mine, I'd be itching to try those hand-picked E.A.T. KT88s...) 'Classic' the layout may be, but the EU still has its rules, and naked valves are an absolute no-no in 21st Century Deutsch-, er, Europe. To address this, there's an optional tube cage for £270 inc VAT, to render it child- and Brussels-proof. Given the state of the pound-vs-the-dollar, that's risible: you shouldn't have to ask nor pay for it. The cage should be included for free. Period.

AUDIO FILE

Stereo valve power amplifier. Rated at 120W/8ohm

Price: £4988

Made by: Audio Research Corp

Supplied by: Absolute Sounds 0208 971 3909

www.audioresearch.com



ABOVE: As an option, the alloy top-plate may be replaced by a protective tube cover which is bolted into position

weight that the REF610T brings to the party. But then, I'm not a bass addict.

All of the above speakers excel in soundstage recreation, so it was joyous to find that the VS115 is an absolute champion of three-dimensionality, especially stage depth. Width was OK, nowhere near the best I've heard – those absurdly huge Musical Fidelity kilowatters – but it extended beyond the speakers' edges every time. The depth appeared most vividly with live Dylan, the amp seeming to grace the space with another few metres of depth.

NOT FOR BEGINNERS...

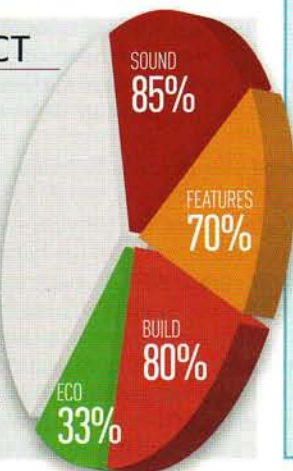
What most revealed the worth of the VS115 relative to my particular set of quirky needs were specific instruments and voices, such as the bottleneck guitar-work of Keb' Mo' and the slightly nasal yet thoroughly distinctive vocal delivery of Tom Petty. As a showcase for his tremulous voice, the VS115 delivered every nuance, useful for a side-by-side contrast with Roger McGuinn – in case you think the two are interchangeable. And on occasion, they are.

Better still was the metallic twang of Keb' Mo's National Steel. It shimmers through the VS115, entering the room with the sashay of a 1940s lounge lizard – this amp could have been custom-made for Slim Gaillard. Underscoring its solidity, a true foundation: the opening notes to 'Am I Wrong', with that not-too-dry kick drum, will excite the hairs on your neck.

Mono: dead centre. Female vocals: liquid. Prima's brass: punch with perfect transients. Overall texture: silky rather than squeaky-clean. In other words, valves for the aficionado. Not the neophyte. ☺

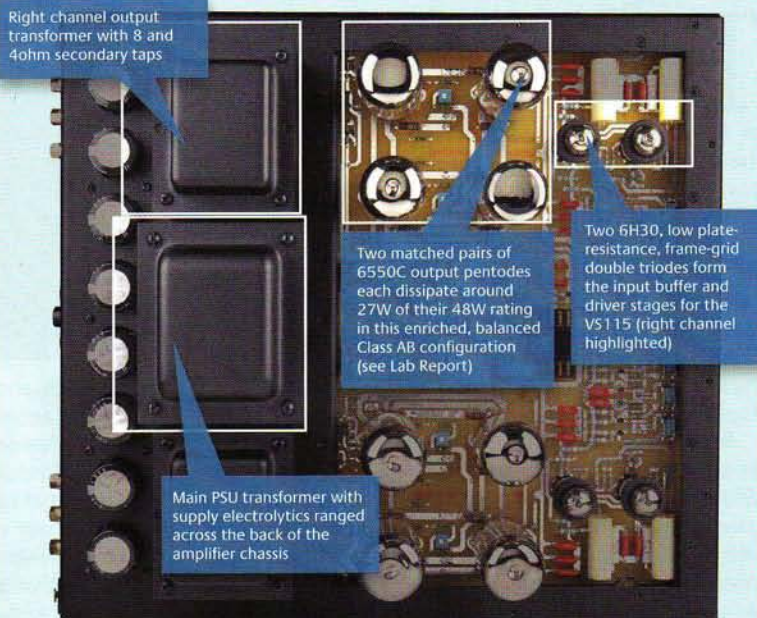
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Because the VS115 competes with stunners from McIntosh, Quad, Air-Tight and so many others, 'choosing' equals 'torment'. But Audio Research engenders brand loyalty. With the VS115, its supporters will not be disappointed: here is classic ARC behaviour in every sense. Solid, fast and robust, yet transparent and delicate: one could want for nothing more.



AUDIO RESEARCH VS115 POWER AMPLIFIER / £4988

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RESULTS



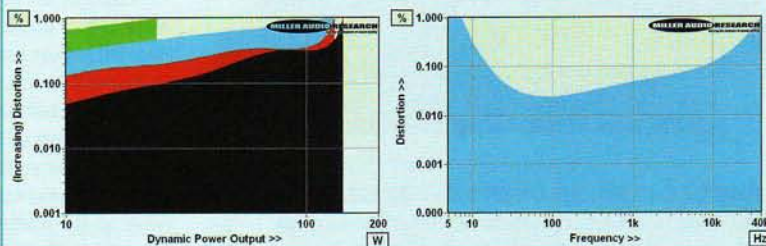
HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Valve amplifiers should never be left permanently powered-up, not only because the average 2000 hours tube life would amount to an operating time of around three months, but also because big amps like the VS115 tend to feed hungrily from the wall socket. This amplifier's idle consumption is around 375W which, thanks to its rich biasing, then increases broadly in line with power output before reaching 655W at its rated 2x120W specification.

You'll squeeze up to 2x135W/8ohm and 2x125W/4ohm at up to 1% distortion through the respective 8/4ohm taps with 145W, 130W and 130W available under dynamic conditions into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads [see graph, below left]. The 4ohm output sags to 23W/1ohm, but the output impedance is a moderate 1.25ohm through bass and midrange, increasing to 1.7ohm at 20kHz and peaking at 4.5ohm/78kHz.

Audio Research has engineered a very flat subsonic response (just -0.05dB at 5Hz) with a gently tailored HF (-0.2dB/20kHz into 8ohm and -0.3dB/20kHz into 4ohm). Distortion is within ARC's specification at ~0.01% through the midrange at 1W/8ohm but then climbs both with increasing output level (~0.05%/10W and ~0.4%/100W) and with frequency [see graph, below right]. Limited overall feedback means distortion creeps up to ~0.5% at 20kHz (1W/8ohm) while transformer core saturation inevitably causes it to rise at very low frequencies, giving ~0.15% at 20Hz and ~5% at 5Hz (all 1W/8ohm). This effect is delayed to far lower frequencies than is typical, however.

Readers are invited to download a comprehensive QC Suite test report for the Audio Research VS115 by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking onto the red 'Download' button. PM



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output, 8/4ohm (<1% THD)	135W / 125W
Dynamic power, 8/4/2/1ohm (<1% THD)	145W / 130W / 130W / 23W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	1.235-1.715ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.0dB to -2.48dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/120W)	155mV / 1695mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/120W)	72.2dB / 92.3dB
Distortion (10W/8ohm, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.03-0.46%