



Ray Of Light

Pretty things in windows aren't the sole province of Amsterdam's more 'colourful' districts, as Vincent's new SV-236 integrated amplifier features a brightly lit tube bang in the middle of its fascia. Tube aficionado Noel Keywood tunes in...

Sitting a valve in a window to show off its assets is one of hi-fi's more extraordinary ideas. I first came across it in a venerable Japanese amplifier, a Lux I believe. Okay, valves have visual appeal, but putting them in windows is a practice with no parallel, except possibly in Amsterdam. And, with both I suspect, the promise is more appealing than the reality...

The Vincent SV-236 amplifier is in truth a transistor amplifier with three inexpensive Chinese manufactured triode valves acting as preamplifiers, two mounted internally - and that one in the window. As such it's a hybrid amplifier, priced at £999. So can the promise of valve sound quality match the reality in this case? Its not too high a price to pay after all, for what superficially at least looks attractive.

Behind the Vincent name are Thorens of Switzerland and their German distributor, Sintron. Product

development and engineering takes place in Germany they say, but assembly is in China, hence the presence of Chinese manufactured Raytheon 6N4 triodes in this product.

Inside the SV-236, circuitboard and component quality looks good. In normal German tradition a huge toroidal mains transformer is used, whilst the active devices are bolted to side heatsinks that get merely warm. The amplifier runs in Class A up to 10W. It is substantially built and finely finished.

German companies are often big on specifications and technology claims, but not Vincent. In both their lavish manual and contrastingly skimpy product handbook little is said of underlying technologies, such as they are. The presence of bass and treble tone controls, plus a Loudness button on the fascia hint at a target buyer that's not an audiophile in the way *Hi-Fi World* readers would perceive one, yet still wants what

is perceived to be an audiophile experience, hence the valve in a window.

At 430mm wide, 142mm high and 450mm deep the SV-236 is large, although it will fit a 19in rack comfortably enough. Weighing 20kg (44lbs) it can be a struggle to get it in, however. The weight isn't all for nothing though. The mains transformer doubtless counts for a lot, but it allows the amplifier to deliver 136W into 8ohms our measurements showed, increasing to 225W into 4ohms, significantly above Vincent's specification of 100W and 200W. It's a healthy output by any standard, enough to cope with insensitive loudspeakers, large rooms and any need for high volume, providing it isn't insane.

As loudspeakers become steadily more sensitive though, high power is unnecessary and, sometimes, unhelpful. Vastly powerful amplifiers rarely sound good at low levels, a drawback sensitive loudspeakers tend



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to reveal. Pure Class B amplifiers are worst here - and there are many around. The SV-236 runs in Class A up to 10W, which helps smooth crossover discontinuities and gives a more amenable presentation, usually lacking the almost dry, grainy sound of typical transistor Class Bs. With a pair of reasonably sensitive floorstanding loudspeakers 10W is plenty enough to go very loud in small to medium sized rooms. As useful as Class A working is, it isn't a universal panacea ensuring good sound, and valve amplifiers are not by their nature Class A either, as some mistakenly think, unless they're single-ended that is. But all the same, organising 10W of it is a sensible design decision I feel. Our time and frequency domain distortion analysers clearly showed this helps keep performance looking tidy at low power levels.

The SV-236 is sturdily built, a steel chassis carrying an 8mm thick machined alloy fascia, into which alloy knobs are recessed. Big heatsinks either side dissipate the heat generated by Class A working. The rear panel carries two pairs of gold plated loudspeaker terminals for bi-wire connection. These are not switched. Pressing the large central power button causes a red LED inset into the volume control to flash whilst the valves warm up, and before the output protection relays click in. This introduces a lengthy start up delay of thirty seconds. In addition to

the protection circuits there are two internal power line fuses, by the way, and a rear IEC socket mains fuse. Once the red led lights continuously the SV-236 is ready to go. The valve in the window illuminates red/orange immediately the power button is pressed and the remote control unit gives five brightness settings from zero to maximum. At zero the glow of the 6N4 filament can barely be seen, hence the need for a visual boost to remind onlookers that this amplifier uses valves.

In addition to the tone controls and Loudness (bass and treble boost) button I mentioned earlier, the input selector knob spins round freely to select from six inputs, marked simply S1-S6. There's no phono input for LP and no tape monitor input. There are tape outputs and preamp outputs, but no way of either accessing or disconnecting the power amp stage alone. All controls have a firm feel about them and this is a nice amplifier to use. In its own way it's attractive to look at and if you like it then Vincent have a Design Line 3 with matching hybrid products, including a pre/power amp combo, a CD player and a tuner.

Anyone who has swapped preamps around a bit will know that they can, in a subtle yet hugely influential manner, make or break the overall sound of an amplifier. A poor one places a blanket over the

sound, something I've encountered in the past with budget preamps stuffed with low cost, low quality components. They look like good value, but turn out to be the opposite. You get lots of inputs, a nice big volume knob in front (if a weedy pot. behind it) and plenty of gain, but they destroy the hi-fi bit of the sound; you end up with something that's flat, coloured and boring, no matter how good the power amp. may be. Using valves to provide gain is, potentially, a good idea, as one or two double triodes will normally do. They are small, run cool, have plenty of gain, a long life (10,000 hours) and cost little, in this case just a few pounds sterling. You should get an easier going, more spacious sound as a result, and this is what I expected from the SV-236 as justification for its existence. Of course, with a hybrid like this the other benefit is the ability to drive loudspeakers effectively. In effect then, you seemingly get the best of both worlds, although a flavour of both might be more apt...

SOUND QUALITY

This amplifier is nothing other than strongly structured in its sound. It paints a big, solid picture with both definition and body, an amalgam of valve dimensionality and solid-state control, for that's how this particular joining of forces pans out

in subjective terms. In outline at least, Spinning the Scissor Sisters' 'Laura' had drums sounding solid, hard-hitting and taut. The bass line was explicit and well timed; all this was made very obvious by the Vincent. This is a bold and expressive amplifier - certainly no wilting rose. It's quite a few steps up the ladder from more conventional solid-state rivals and is worth hearing for this aspect of character alone. If you've ever felt that the hi-fi amplifier you are auditioning is too laid back, refined to the point of boredom and lacking get up and go then the SV-236 is an antidote. Here's an amplifier with all structural impact of downtown New York; it has stature.

Thinking of the many limitations that readers struggle with according to our letters pages, I suspect the Vincent is as good a £1,000 adrenaline injection as you'd get. But the other side of the coin is that it's so forceful as to be almost overwhelming, hard hitting cymbals being too hard for me through Tannoy Yorkminsters. I wheeled in a pair of Spondor S8es and this combination worked well, but whilst I thought the Spondors may tame the exuberant top end, they did not. Heavens, even the S8es sounded bright - and that's saying something...

Yorkminsters well portray the extra bandwidth and dynamics of DVD-A, but partnered with the SV-236 starkly vivid recordings like Clapton and 'Kings Riding with the King' were an impact too far. Cymbal strikes rang around the room and steel guitar strings twanged viciously. Whether this is too much or just what the doctor ordered is a matter of taste I'm sure, but I gravitate and am used to a little less 'sparkle'. Phil Collins' 'That's the Way It Is' was similarly over-lit across the treble regions and here the SV-236's solid-state output stage imposed its character on the sound.

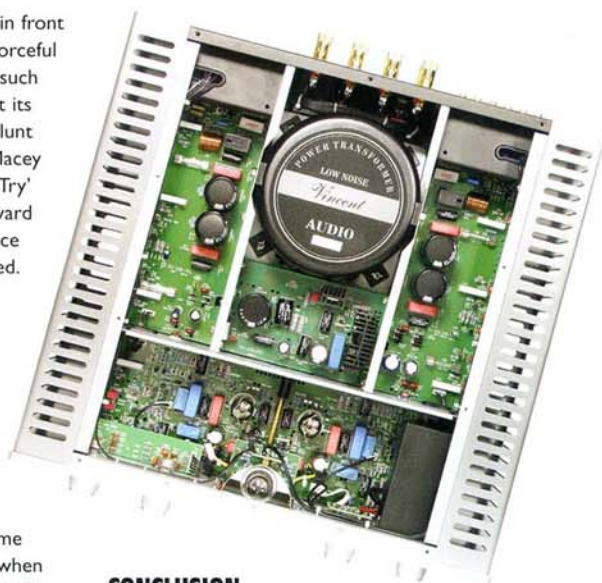
I use Yorkminsters to glean the best from the many valve amplifiers I use and review, including my own, but I decided long ago that they're none too kind to solid-state amplifiers, except the most svelte. So Spondors it was. All of which is to say that Vincent's SV-236 is forceful and projective, fast and powerful, but not for the faint hearted! This is an amplifier for those who want to boogie, not those who want to luxuriate in smoothness and subtlety. It strong-arms loudspeakers into action and seemingly has supreme grip. In the best valve traditions it also has a beautifully clear and deep sounding midrange that fell away behind vocals, leaving singers like

James Blunt sharply outlined in front of me. It was the amplifier's forceful treble delivery that imposed such strong image definition, whilst its see through midrange kept Blunt free from his surroundings. Macey Gray's smoky rich tones in 'I Try' were similarly projected forward with deep insight, every nuance and insinuation nicely captured. Background instrumentation was as clearly outlined as I have ever heard it. I can't help feeling anyone would be impressed by this performance, as its vivid and obvious - almost Technicolor.

The sheer resolution of this amplifier's top end came across as a torrent of detail when spinning LP; the Scissor Sisters LP is a little ill defined generally against the CD I find, but in conjunction with an Ortofon Kontrapunkt b the SV-236 showed that the LP is rich in high frequency detail not available from the CD, highlighting its ability to reveal detail, if by a method of brutal exposure! Not in an especially delicate way, I must say. From the very outset I was aware of a full-bodied, intense treble quality full of activity, one that trumpets its presence for all to hear.

Happily, although the amplifier has strong bass that runs deep, it wasn't over inflated. I liked its solid hitting nature but articulate progression. The extra body that valves bring to the table, allied to solid-state levels of grip and control worked nicely together in this package.

Whilst the SV-236 has a valve-like midrange that displays almost glaring clarity, it is more solid-state at spectrum extremes, as you'd expect. Whilst the valve complement carried on-board this hybrid fleshes out the sound, it doesn't construct the stage depth of a valve amplifier. Nor does it provide the sense of smoothness or liquidity of sound where the whole flows effortlessly. I think treble quality and forwardness likely appeals more to a German ear than a British one, but its rich and detailed nature wasn't anathema to me - in truth, I was intrigued by it.



CONCLUSION

Vincent's SV-236 is a hybrid amplifier that mixes what you see in the window with plenty that you don't, to come up with an intriguingly unusual experience. I feel this is an amplifier for those that want more from solid-state rather than those looking for a full valve experience. Its vivid sound and hassle-free operation have plenty of appeal and there's not so much around to challenge it, as hybrid amps are few and far between. I liked it - the sound that is - especially at the price. This amplifier isn't all window dressing.

VERDICT

Its rich, vivid and powerful sound has plenty of allure, but brightly lit treble can overwhelm some systems.

VINCENT SV-236 £999

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MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The solid-state output section of this amplifier has plenty of power, producing no less than 136W into 8ohms and 225W into 4ohms - enough to drive any loudspeaker to high levels even in a big room. Regulation was good from the massive internal mains transformer, so bass should sound well controlled.

The amplifier runs in Class A up to 10W (and Class B thereafter). At all power levels third harmonic distortion dominates the distortion spectrum, but as output increases higher order products appear. This suggests a shiny or glassy clear basic presentation that will coarsen at high volume. However, overall distortion levels were low, hovering below 0.1% even at high frequencies, except into low 4ohm loads. Then distortion rises to a significant 0.25% at 10kHz, a condition that isn't uncommon with real life loudspeakers. So the SV 236 works well as a solid-state amp but isn't beyond criticism.

Valves have plenty of gain and Vincent exploit this, using three inexpensive 6N4 triodes to yield a sensitivity of 160mV, sufficient for any source. Noise levels were low, considering this, with negligible hum.

With tone controls out frequency response was flat and wide 6Hz-73kHz.

Pressing the Tone button introduces +4dB of broad bass boost even with the Bass and Treble controls set to zero. Each introduce 10dB lift or cut above and below 1kHz, in classic fashion. A Loud button also introduces low and high frequency lift.

The Vincent is solidly engineered and measures well. It should give a good account of itself. NK

Power	136watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	6Hz-73kHz
Separation	78dB
Noise	-86dB
Distortion	0.03%
Sensitivity	160mV

