

AudioValve Eklipse Line-stage

by Alan Sircom

The £2,000 AudioValve Eklipse preamplifier is a German line-level Pure Class A valve pre-amplifier with seven line inputs, one line output and a tape loop. There is also a pseudo-balanced XLR output, though the dual-mono preamp itself doesn't run along balanced lines.

Aaaa! German build quality – you just can't fault it. Here is a valve line-level preamplifier, made with swathes of clear Perspex and it's built to survive a 9.5 on the Richter Scale. It weighs 20kg, that's more than three stone in old money and that makes it weigh more than most integrated amplifiers. At least the ones without valves.

Part of that massive build comes from the 5mm thick laser-cut chassis that the double-sided, extremely solid mil-spec circuit board rests on. That motherboard is way out of the ordinary for a hi-fi company. Called FR4, it's a 2oz pure copper panel developed using CAD/CAM software to produce a circuit board completely free from point-to-point wiring or solder bridges. All the signal and power tracks are entirely separated by grounding tracks, minimising cross-talk and noise.

It's not just the solidity of build that makes the pre-amplifier. The components that populate that board are of the highest quality, too. The resistors are all 1% metal film or rare-as-hen's-teeth Draloric NOS carbon designs. The electrolytic capacitors are all bypassed by polypropylene ones and the motorised volume potentiometer is made by Alps. There is no sign of a surface-mounted component at all. The juice is fed via a custom-made

160VA toroidal transformer, so overspec'd it's more like the sort found in a good, healthy-sounding integrated amplifier.

The Eklipse uses four identical tubes from the ECC82 family. As standard, the amplifier uses a quartet of 6189 tubes, the leftmost ones being the input triodes and the right-hand valves are in the output stage. Of course, as the manual rightly points out, the input triodes have the greatest effect over the sound of the Eklipse pre-amplifier and these should be given the lion's share of the re-valve budget (you can use ECC82, ECC802S or 6189 valves – and you should pick the best ones you can).

There is a wonderful line in the manual which should be written in stone for anyone attempting to use a piece of consumer electronics. It reads "Anyone, unable to comprehend the instructions stated in the owner's manual should not operate the device." However, the instruction that "Children and minors are not to use the device and should be kept at a safe distance from the device while it is running" pushes the envelope a notch. This is a valve pre-amplifier, not a thermonuclear warhead. On the other hand, there are two dirty great holes in the top Perspex panel, presumably for ventilation. A kid could easily end up putting a hand inside and grasp a valve or two and burns or even electrocution could occur. Maybe that warning is valid after all.

AudioValve should consider including some kind of grille over those almost-exposed valves; it might not be pretty but it would be practical.

The whole Perspex top-plate comes off by undoing the four knurled top screws. This gives you better access to the quartet



of tubes, as well as the four main fuses and – as long as you know what you are doing – the ability to adjust the phase of the mains voltage. You can also experiment with the sound quality a bit; by removing the lid, the sound becomes very slightly more open at the top end at the expense of some of the bolted-down solidity. It's not a big difference, though.

I am not entirely convinced by the looks of the Eklipse; depending on your viewpoint, it either looks like good Art Deco, or it looks like bad 1980s tack. All that black and gold looks terribly nouveau riche in the slick silver 21st Century. Still, it does drip luxury from every pore, even if it does so in a slightly garish manner. The four big gold knobs on the front panel include a function/output selection knob, which allows you to put the pre-amp into standby and can switch between outputs, although why anyone other than a reviewer would ►

► choose to switch from balanced to single-ended and back again during normal operation escapes me. The other three are source, volume and balance respectively, and under the output and input selectors are a row of LEDs to show what source has been selected. With big gold lettering throughout, this does add to the garishness of the product.

It comes with a chunky RCA remote control (it still has RCA written on the body of the remote – a bit of a giveaway), which can adjust volume and switch sources, but not much else. The remote eye on the front panel also seems to be less receptive than most and the remote seems to work through a pair of AA batteries in a surprisingly short time. But as remotes and valve pre-amplifiers are seen together about as often as Pamela Anderson sees her own feet, any form of remote control should be applauded.

How do you tell a great valve pre-amplifier from one built almost at random from a parts bin? Simple, turn it on, wick it up to the max and listen to the noises the preamp makes. You expect some hiss, natch, but most pre-amplifiers have their own distinctive hum and often make sounds that remind you of surfing instead of Stravinsky. The Eklipse is whisper quiet, so much so that it makes you wonder just how much of the hiss we associate with valves really is a function of the circuit design. Effectively, for day to day use, this pre-amplifier is free from background noise; only a really good solid-state pre-amplifier is going to have

a lower noise floor.

One of the great things about the AudioValve preamp is that there is practically no running in required. It's all done in the 48 hour soak test back home in Germany. All it needs is about half an hour or so for the pre-amp to hit its optimum thermal working conditions. That said, the Eklipse does bed down in a new setting and sounds distinctly better after 10 days or more of sitting comfortably in the same place.



If you do have very itchy feet, though, AudioValve usefully supplies a two-year transferable warranty, so if you decide you don't like the Eklipse, the next owner need not worry about losing a guarantee when you sell it on.

There won't be many warranties transferred, though. This is a fine piece of kit that will stay at the heart of a decent stereo system for years and years. It's got characteristics that warm (pun intended) listeners to valve sounds allied to the sort of strengths that are more commonly found in solid-state technology.

You get that wonderful smooth sheen of a smooth sounding valve pre-amplifier, which brings the good qualities out of anything you play through it. Whether it's Insane Clown Posse scaring next door's cat or Jessye

Norman singing Strauss' Four Last Songs, the tone is mellifluous and enticing. Yet it never becomes too rose-tinted; the Strauss piece, backed by Kurt Masur and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, can all too easily drift into a sort of opium-like dream state, but the Eklipse keeps things in check beautifully.

This smoothness also never once gets in the way of the detailing. This is a very detailed pre-amplifier, with only the slightest accent on the bottom end, as if to give a bit of an edge to the bass definition and keep the rhythm section bouncy. There is a bit of an LP12-like mid-bass bloom that is extremely attractive, but often hides a lack of deep bass substance,

but this is hard to test unless you have the sort of genuinely full-range speakers that are unlikely to be partnered with a two grand pre-amp. Otherwise, it is extremely transparent and digs deep into the information on disc.

So it's warm, slightly bass-oriented and very detailed – well, so far, so triode! Where does the solid-state sound part kick in? Put simply, this has the sort of hob-nail solidity few valve pre-amplifiers achieve (and the few that are more solid sounding have a price tag that wouldn't look out of place on a year-old Toyota). Put on something audiophillic, like the *Dead Man Walking* soundtrack, and you get to hear Tom Waits standing right in front of you, in a real physical space, resolutely refusing to move throughout the song. It's so palpable, you feel that the only way he'll move is by opening a bottle of Jim Beam in the next room. Even images to the far extremes of the soundstage are bolted down; the guitar in this passage often drifts around ►

► the left speaker, but here it was precisely nailed in place.

The soundstaging is extremely good too, although not in the image depth manner normally associated with hollow-state technology. Instead, the AudioValve Eklipse throws out a wide, big and rich soundstage, far broader than your speakers normally reproduce. It even has some image height, but image depth is slightly foreshortened. It has good image depth, but not the sort of cavernous, walk-in

may be no bad thing for many listeners.

All this talk of nailed-down solidity and fidelity to the tonal balance and soundstage placement of instruments, one might be forgiven for thinking the Eklipse is somehow boring. Or at the very least "worthy, yet dull". Wrong! While the pre-amplifier isn't the Evel Knievel of the audio world, it is exciting and dynamic and makes you jump when the music does. The almost glottal stops in 'Kill You' from Eminem's *The Marshall Mathers LP* strike out like being hit by a baseball bat and the funny-offensive lyrics leave you half smiling.



soundstage you would expect when playing the Solti/Mahler *8th Symphony*. Instead, the imagery is confined to the limits of the room and only seems to reach a bit behind the speakers.

It's shoddy journalism to describe one product by comparing it to the characteristics of another, better known product. So let me be dressed in the finest shoddy for a moment – this product is so EAR-like it's impossible to let the similarity pass unnoticed. Everything about it; from the bullet-proof build, through the absence of hiss or noise, right on to the total solidity and integrity of the soundstage, is reminiscent of the sort of pre-amplifier Tim de Paravicini excels at. Ultimately, it's warmer than EAR designs, but that

half hiding and half confused (Yes, that's three halves, but as I always say, there are only three kinds of people in the world; those who understand mathematics, and those who don't).

Let's be entirely honest about the Eklipse. It is a very fine, warm yet solid sounding line-level pre-amplifier, perfectly priced to challenge the sort of valve and transistor pre-amplifiers costing anywhere between £1,000 and about £3,000. Upping the pre-amp ante gets you a considerably less colored sound and even more detail and dynamic range, without sacrificing the solidity and enjoyable sound of the

Eklipse. But to criticise a £2,000 product for not being a £10,000 product is stupid. For the price, this is a real honey!

The AudioValve Eklipse should be the sort of electronics musicians use to listen to music. But, experience has taught anyone in the hi-fi business that most musicians listen to music on the worst, cheapest and often nastiest hi-fi around and would never consider shelling out good money for something as musically excellent as the Eklipse. Shame really, this pre-amp runs silent, runs deep and digs up all the musical detail you could wish for, without presenting it like something so cold and dead and wet that you can never be sure whether to listen to it or fillet, batter and fry it. This really does tread the right path between solid-state and valve sound. If you like the characteristics of both, AudioValve's pre-amp is a hard product to eclipse.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Dual mono valve line-stage
Inputs:	7x Single-ended line in 1x Single-ended line out (+XLR pseudo-balanced) 1x tape loop
Output Impedance:	3000ohms
Output Level:	15V max.
Noise:	0.05mV (Volume noise limiter)
Valve Line-up:	4x 6189
Additional Functions:	Standby, mute, remote control
Dimensions (WxHxD):	420x130x320 mm
Weight:	20 kg
Price:	£2,000

UK Distributor:

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Manufacturer:

AudioValve
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