

audiovalve

Eclipse preamplifier

as reviewed by Art Shapiro

I had been told that the Audio Valve Eclipse preamp was drop dead gorgeous, and upon uncrating it, I had to admit that this was not an exaggeration. It made my CAT look like a prototype whipped up in someone's garage. The rather stocky chassis sports good-sized cooling slots on both sides and, in perhaps the most interesting departure from the norm, the top is clear plastic, allowing a clear view of the circuitry. The cover has two slots, directly over the tubes, doubtlessly to aid in heat dissipation, although the openings might not be ideal considering the inevitable dust buildup. Its controls are silky smooth, and there is a plethora of obviously high-quality input and output RCA jacks on the back. This being a line stage, I wasn't able to use my phono gear. As usual, I received no owner's manual or other documentation, though it might have proven useful. For example, one position on the input selector switch caused a rapid oscillation of some internal relay or relays. Assuming the unit was correctly functional, I can't begin to guess the intent of this.

Amidst all that beauty, however, I had to raise my eyebrows. As I gazed through the transparent cover at the guts, I couldn't fail to notice that all the components were evenly spaced, and either parallel or perpendicular to each other, with typical German precision. However, isn't the whole idea behind printed circuit boards to minimize the signal path and optimize component location? It seemed to me that the device's potential performance was taking a back seat to its visual appeal. More significant was an alarming and decidedly nontrivial flare-up of the tubes whenever the Eclipse was turned on. This had to be brutal on the tubes. Considering that there is a fairly long muted delay before the Eclipse is available for use, I would say that this is a significant deficiency in the implementation. Tubes can be rare and an expensive resource, and anything that can be done to improve their life-span is an asset. I did no experimentation with tubes while I had the unit, but noticed how convenient it would be to remove the top cover, which is held down by knurled knobs. No power cord came with the review sample, so I tried it with both a Marigo and a standard heavy Belden, without finding any significant difference between the two. As is my usual practice with units not having a separate power supply, I plugged the unit into a free outlet in my power conditioner, initially the Power Wedge 116 and later a BrickWall that I had just purchased.

One can't help but have expectations when trying a new piece of equipment. Given the solidness and precision of the construction, and the curiously perfectionist physical layout, I was almost certain that this unit would conform to the stereotypical German/Swiss sound: extremely detailed, but too sterile, dry, and revealing for my taste. I've heard systems, sometimes considerably more expensive than my own, in which every last nuance of the music is reproduced with utterly devastating clarity. Such systems reproduce sound, not music, and send me figuratively screaming from the room. I hoisted my turntable from the top of the rack and replaced it with the Eclipse, this being a spot that would allow use of the existing one-meter Monster Sigma 2K interconnects. I powered it up, gave it an hour or so to warm up, and gave a listen. Within a minute or two, it was obvious that my expectations were utterly wrong! I was listening to a delightfully warm, rich preamp. Whatever adjectives might be used to describe the Eclipse, "sterile" and "dry" were not among them. What a surprise!

At first I simply left it in the system, and for over a week used it to enjoy music without attempting to be analytical. It was thoroughly enjoyable. I was vaguely aware that the music was missing some of the subtlety and nuances to which I was accustomed, but the Audio Valve was no slouch. When it comes to sins of omission vs. those of commission, I'll take the former every time. Eventually it became necessary to get down to business and start comparing the Eclipse with the CAT, and it wasn't until the AB-ing began that the degree to which the Audio Valve was sacrificing detail became apparent. Both units were first rate in various areas—even tonal balance, good dynamics, and quietness—but with piece after piece I auditioned on the two preamps, the CAT gave me more of the music without straying into excessive detail. The CAT conformed to its reputation as a relatively neutral unit, whereas the Audio Valve preamp lay reasonably far up on the warm end of the scale. The sound of the Eclipse brought back memories of an extremely warm but seductively enjoyable Conrad-Johnson PV-9 that I borrowed and used in my system a few years ago. The German unit didn't have the utterly mesmerizing musicality of the C-J, but in fairness my system was completely different at that time. The warmth of the Eclipse might be an asset in taming an extremely revealing system, but in my case it was just a bit over the line.

Although such things are usually not important to me, with the Eclipse I was sometimes conscious that the

soundstage was slightly compressed between the speakers when compared to the same recordings through the CAT, especially at lower volume levels. This did not strike me as extreme, but it was noticeable. As always, I spent a fair amount of my listening hours with solo piano recordings, and the two gave completely different renderings of the instrument. With the CAT you might say that the piano was a powerful instrument, with the Eklipse you'd say it was rich, and both assessments would be correct. This was quite apparent on a remarkably close-miked and clattery recital by Russian virtuoso Sergei Tarasov on the Melodia label. The Eklipse had an obvious smoothing effect on this recording, lessening its aggressiveness and consequently permitting more of the music's melodic aspects to be heard. This was in marked contrast to the presentation through the CAT, with which I cannot help but picture Mr. Tarasov as the captain of a huge and mighty grand piano with almost limitless dynamics and power. Having heard this recording on literally scores of audio systems, I'd postulate that the CAT is closer to the truth, but this doesn't mean that the sonic portrayal of the Eklipse is wrong. Music is art, and the difference between two units is a matter of aesthetics, not mathematics.

I selected another CDs that I've heard on over a hundred different systems, a Dorian recording of Bach secular cantatas. I listened to several bands from the *Coffee Cantata*. The richness and warmth of the Eklipse were particularly enjoyable on the male voices, although the effect served to reduce some of the subtle nuances of the female soprano. Similarly, the delicate flute melodies, which waft through the listening room with the best systems, were slightly constrained through the Eklipse. This is a spectacular, well-balanced recording, but the Audio Valve unit brought it down to earth just a little. I had a very similar impression on another of my favorites, an EMI recording of the Sibelius Violin Concerto with Nigel Kennedy as soloist. The Eklipse reduced the orchestra's power compared to the CAT, while on the solo violin there was the same slight blurring of detail and loss of nuance that I had observed on the Bach CD. While a valid sonic presentation, I nevertheless continued to feel that the CAT was the product of choice.

Observing how the units differed at the low end of the frequency spectrum caused me to pull out two more of my standard auditioning vehicles. On an AudioQuest jazz sampler, I listened to the Bruce Katz Band's "Crescent Crawl", which features some relatively low electric bass guitar passages. The CAT may have had a slight advantage here, although it was not significant. The percussiveness of the piano, the snap of the drums, and the aggression of the saxophone were all well portrayed by the CAT, and slightly smoothed over by the Eklipse. I continued to prefer the CAT. For extremes of low bass, I pulled out the Reference Recordings CD of the *John Rutter Requiem*, selecting the "Piu Jesu" track with its extraordinarily low organ pedal stops. Here the Eklipse started to lose it—at 20Hz. and lower, an area in which my REL subwoofer earns its keep, there was noticeably less bass energy through the Eklipse. This might be a complete non-issue in most audio systems, especially since the glorious warmth of the Eklipse was otherwise a benefit, giving an enjoyable richness to the choral singing.

I could go on mentioning other recordings, but the reader should have a pretty good sense of the Audio Valve by now. It is a physically appealing unit, with obviously top-notch guts, wonderful controls, and excellent jacks. It is quite expensive, but still a lot less costly than many other audiophile units (such as the CAT). Regarding the sound, I crated up the Eklipse and said goodbye with a trace of sadness. While it might have not been the definitive preamp for my system, my weeks with it had been enjoyable. It is an interesting component whose sonic characteristics are fairly apparent, and it might be perfect for a different system, perhaps one with a solid state amplifier. **Art Shapiro**

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