

Audio Valve, which is a company based in Germany, was kind enough to loan three of their products for a dedicated review ... two sets of monobloc (one channel) amplifiers and a dual-mono pre-amplifier; The Challenger 150's Baldur's and the Eklipse.

All three of the components are put together with the same (or better) precision of a Mercedes Benz automobile ... bulletproof construction, an eye kept on the smallest details and an overall solidity of feel and execution which are at the top of anybody's league. Others may do things differently but that doesn't mean that they're necessarily "better" or "worse" ... simply different.

For simplicity sake I'll begin with the Eklipse pre-amplifier. Two reasons for that, the first being that is where the audio signal is routed and shaped and the second, that both amplifiers will also be getting their chance at other worthy contenders during the power amplifier roundup.

Where to begin? ... as a preamplifier, the Eklipse's main function is to act as sort of a "traffic cop" for signals and also allow for L/R and volume manipulation. Some other pre-amplifiers also permit some alteration of the signal as it passes through, adding to or subtracting bass/treble information to achieve a desired sound. Mainly these controls are seen on pre-amps of lesser quality. It is generally regarded as an axiom that the less artificial manipulation done to a signal, the better. However this is not always the case, as I will make clear in my "Audio Visions" column.

Now here comes the hard part! ... For all of my time as a music lover, an audiophile and a writer, I have been a fan of vacuum-tube components. They haven't always been the most reliable or easiest to use and they can be finicky about soooo many things. However, when called upon to present music, they have, to me, been more flowing ... like listening to real music versus listening to equipment. I must now confess to a few years of being firmly in two camps ... vacuum tube with one foot and solid state (transistors, MOS-fet and even {gasp!!!!!!} digital amplifiers!!! ) with the other foot. Why solid state now? I truly don't know other than that they seem to have caught up with tubes (or valves, as some call them) musically. There is also a question of ease of use and reliability. Solid State is usually more reliable. However, within the past few years, some valve components have made dramatic leaps forward in terms of reliability and ease of use, easily challenging the best solid state equipment. [ components are also often called "kit" ]

AudioValve is one of the companies which fall into this category. They are easy to use, reliable and not at all finicky. In fact, were it not for the lush glow of the tubes visible through their plexiglass tops, you might not even realize that you're listening through valves! All Audio Valve products are meticulously assembled by hand to ensure the utmost in quality and reliability from day one. Additionally, they are all subjected to rigorous testing and burn-in procedures before leaving the factory. These are seriously well built components. You are definitely getting your money's worth!

As mentioned, since the company sent me one pre-amp and two power amps I will divide my commentary into those two camps. The Eklipse pre-amp is a beautifully made and depending on your taste, a visually beautiful component. [ in addition to the black and gold photos shown, all Audio Valve kit is available in a brushed silver finish with chrome accents and black lettering ] The knobs and switches all have the silky and solid feel one only associates with the best. Sonically, it is a very warm and inviting pre-amp, even though it doesn't deliver as much of some of the finer detail as the very best available. It is however, very close and at a fraction of the price. Where there are shortcomings they are subtractive rather than additive. Generally speaking, subtle yet subtractive shortcoming are much less noticeable and egregious than additive ones. The pre-amp allowed a very broad and deep soundstage with instrumentals and vocals locked into place and quite stable throughout the three dimensionality of the re-created space. Musical imagery is of the right size and proportion to the styles of music being played, being neither overblown or seeming so "small" that I never had the feeling that I had to turn the volume up to get the entire spectrum of music heard. The Eklipse has the full complement of inputs and outputs needed for today's stereo reproduction as well as future multi-channel music and audio/video combinations. One unique and welcome feature is a setting whereby the preamplifier "self-cleans" the pins of it's own tubes! It is a feature which I've not run across before, but when performed after a couple of hundred hours of listening did make a very subtle difference.

All in all, this is a pre-amp I would be very happy to live with over the long haul. At it's US dollar price it also represents a tremendous value. As I've said before, my primary function with these reviews and comparative roundups is to show the wide range of possible choices that are available, NOT to make absolute judgments as to their merits in terms of "ranking" them. For the most part I select the components I bring to your attention after I've already heard them and decide that I like them enough to warrant attention in this magazine. That's the reason you will rarely read a negative review unless it is on a comparative basis of a product which is still near the head of it's class, perhaps not just the "magna cum laude" of that class ... which will vary depending on many variables. If a product isn't worth learning about, you won't see it written about in That's Life!

Now ... on to the two amplifiers; the 'Challenger 150' and the 'Baldur's. Both of these tube amps were quite illuminating ... not just the darkened room either!! They both employ some Audio Valve exclusive features

and both are auto-biasing. This means that the amount of voltage applied to the plates of the output tubes is held in check automatically as opposed to you needing to check and adjust it periodically. Valve amplifiers which have this feature are even easier to use than their brethren, no matter how stable the others may be. The Challenger 150 also allows for the use of differing output tube types, each of which will have a unique sonic character. ( I used the EL-34 for this comparison) In fact, the Challenger 150 is unique in that it will auto adjust the bias for you when it detects which tubes you are using! The Challenger 150 is a classic “push-pull” type of amplifier. This is by far the most typical type of amplifier ... tube or otherwise. The Baldur is a rarity these days. It is a “pure class A” triode amplifier which is not often seen in tube designs of this size and power due to the complexity and cost. The Baldur also uses the fabulous sounding 6AS7 output tube which is not often seen.

The difference between the two is not simply looks and features however. The Challenger 150 was closer to a solid state sound than was the Baldur. This came as somewhat of a shock to me because the paper specs led me to expect the reverse, since the two have almost identical power but the Baldur has a significantly higher damping factor than the Challenger 150. { which further reinforces the concept of synergistically matching components ... papers specs will NEVER tell the whole story!}

The Baldur is almost twice the size and weight of the Challenger 150, despite having almost identical power output. In fact, I chose the 150 from the Challenger line because it IS the closest ‘paper match’ in terms of power output. To me in my reference system (described below) the Baldur was the significantly more liquid and musical of the two. Please don’t get me wrong ... the Challenger 150 is a wonderful sounding amplifier with extraordinary sound in all areas but the Baldur was considerably better in every area. That being said, I could happily live with either of these two amplifiers. In fact the importer and at least one dealer I know of, slightly prefer the Challenger 150’s larger sibling (the Challenger 400 ) over the Baldur . Once again, musical preferences and synergy rear their heads, showing just how important it is to get the right match in your system, NOT on paper!

Both these amplification systems are real champs in every department. Imaging, transparency, depth and width of the soundstage, dynamics at both volume extremes, and musical flow ( pace and timing ) are spot on. The Baldur does sound different though, there is no denying that. It shows that there are many subliminal characteristics at work which provide or deny us true musical enjoyment. Even with two amplifiers rated the same and from the same company there is a distinctly noticeable difference. In the end it will be your listening in your system, which will determine which is right for you. In very broad terms, you couldn’t go “wrong” with either of these amplifiers, since they are both so good ... sonically and in build-quality

The following is a listing of the components used in conjunction with these amplifiers. Where I have already spoken about a particular component at any length previously I will only mention it here. Regardless, I will try to keep my comments brief yet salient, until it is time for a roundup of that particular category of kit.

CD source: Electrocompaniet EMC 1UP – a fabulous player already mentioned which is a striking bargain in the world of high-end CD players. Superb in every category and mentioned already in a prior article, this is still a world-class player. Used in conjunction with Electrocompaniet’s “Spyder Clamp”.

Speakers: Talon Audio Firebird with their diamond tweeter. Another component previously mentioned. Simply the best “cone and dome” speaker I have ever heard at any price. Far superior to any of it’s type at several times the price.

AC power conditioning : Balanced Power Technologies makes the best power conditioning devices I have yet heard. I used their 3.5 Signature on the front end components [ CD & pre-amp ] and their Clean Power Centers on the amplifiers. Nobody can touch them in price/performance.

AC power cords : David Elrods Signature Series EPS-3 (amps) and EPS-2 (front-ends). So far the best I have heard. They are large and clunky but much more flexible than they look. Also used were the Cardas Golden Reference which are much more affordable and flexible. They don’t have quite the resolution of the Elrods but if price and/or aesthetics are considerations, they are one of my favorites. Audience Power Chords were also a stunning improvement. They are relatively new so I have yet to take their full measure but they seem to offer as much as the Cardas, even though the Audience is subtly different.

Component interconnects: The Cardas Neutral Reference were the most used. I have said it before and will reiterate: “they let everything through” without calling any attention to themselves with a broad range of differing components. Also used (but again, not often enough/too new to take their full measure) were the Audience Au-24. These seemed to offer a bit more warmth and extension at the frequency extremes, however the full comparison will be forthcoming and will most likely be system dependant. Towards the end I had the chance to use the freshly broken-in Stealth Audio50/50 interconnects. My initial impression was of fabulous transparency and extension without any obvious coloration. As with the other interconnects, they will have to wait their turn for the full comparisons.

Speaker cables: perhaps the most critical piece of wire in ANY amplifier test, the Cardas Golden Cross were

used for most of the listening tests. Their sonic beauty has been spoken of before so I won't repeat it here. As above, the Audience Au-24's were used near the end. Not enough to form a truly fair comparison but they show tremendous promise. It will be interesting to see how they react with the other amplifiers in the amplifier roundup. One of the characteristics that the Audience Au-24 shares as a familial trait with the other Audience Au-24 wires is their flexibility and thin stature. Unfortunately the Stealth Audio speaker cables came through the mail with two spades broken, so they were not auditioned yet.

The room treatments remain Echo Busters [ anyone who has not yet bought their ceiling corner busters is missing a screaming buy! ] Of course the use of Stillpoints under every component is considered mandatory by me for all listening.

As always, please feel free to e-mail me at either: [shanaphy@optonline.net](mailto:shanaphy@optonline.net) or [joe@thatlifemag.com](mailto:joe@thatlifemag.com). I will do my best to answer your Audio/Video questions. US Life - Style magazin "That`s Life"