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Printed in the UK by
Premier Print, London

HIFICRITIC is a printed publication available by subscription only.

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As a general rule *HIFICRITIC* favours carrying out full technical measurements as well as listening tests on the products we review. There's good reason, not so much because the measurements we carry out necessarily correlate with our sound quality judgement – but sometimes quite the reverse, as in our review of the Triode Corporation's headphone amp on p45 of this issue.

Although they're invaluable for testing transducers like loudspeakers, measurements rarely provide useful clues to the sound quality of electronic components. However, much of their value lies in the fact that they are objective and repeatable, and establish a norm against which comparisons can be made. They can help prevent the faulty or the fundamentally weird from slipping in under the radar, and provide essential tools for a major investigation like this issue's examination of RFI interference in cables (page 27).

But they are also all too often accorded undue respect. One down side of electronics measurements is that those that *are* made are often simply those that *can* be made. And because these are the measurements that get taken, they're the ones that attract the attention, dominating reviews, advertising and consumer perceptions.

Take amplifier power outputs. This is the most commonly quoted performance parameter, and I daresay all readers will have some sort of amplification, and some idea of what amplifier power is all about. I thought I did too, until a few months back that is.

The power amp I normally use is a Naim *NAP500*, a powerful and very reliable solid state model rated at 140W/8ohms and with the low output impedance that's typical of the breed. While not perfect (no amplifier is), it's very well suited to both listening for pleasure and for driving the wide variety of speakers I get delivered for review.

Though the *NAP500* is a fine solid state power amp, there's no denying that a decent valve power amp will deliver a sweeter, more delicate and realistic sound through the vital midband. Thirty something years ago I acquired an old Leak Stereo 20, and a technically capable friend restored this for me a few years back. Although 10W/channel and a significant output impedance render it unsuitable for speaker reviewing, this venerable amplifier does sound remarkably good, and seems to have ample power for most circumstances.

So how much power does one need? My latest acquisition is a prototype pair of ultra-simple single-ended triode monoblocks. The PX-4 output tubes (originally introduced in 1929!) deliver a maximum power of 3.5W, and I daresay probably do so with a fair amount of distortion too. Yet they sound absolutely glorious musically, with excellent speed and dynamic expression, and hardly ever seem to run out of 'puff'.

They're proof positive of the old adage that the First Watt is the one that really matters most, and incidentally lend support to the heretical view that sound quality is inversely proportional to power output.

I'm not saying that these low power monoblocks are actually superior to the big Naim overall – they're actually very different from each other, and I like different aspects of each. But the experience proves unequivocally that listening to an amplifier is much more important than checking out the test results and specification.

Paul Messenger

Editor