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## Manley Laboratories "Stingray" Integrated Amplifier

by Aaron M. Shatzman



Fifteen years have passed since my first encounter with Manley-designed audio components, two industrial-looking 100-watt monoblock amplifiers that David Manley (then owner-designer of Vacuum Tube Logic — VTL) delivered to my home. His visit, he said, was prompted by his distrust of the commercial carriers and a suspicion that the amplifier might fall into the hands of a reviewer who lacked ability, hearing acuity, taste, judgment, or common sense. I suppose I passed whatever screening tests he used, since he left the Compact Mono 100s with me. And longtime readers might recall that I wrote a positive review — the first good criticism Manley's efforts received (in the US, anyway).

Time and again as I looked at and listened to the Stingray, I found myself thinking about that first review, and musing about how much has changed since then. The Compact 100s may well have been prototypes (Manley swore they were "standard production," but that phrase leaves a bit to the imagination), since they were stuffed into cases that had been designed to hold something else, padded with an odd assortment of foam. He had to hand-deliver them — it was clear that no cartons had been made specifically for them. Yet those amps took control of my Magnepan MG IIIs in a way I will never forget, and provided a no-nonsense level of performance (I called it "slam") that was revelatory and a sound that was stunning, if not always nuanced or complex.

It has been a pleasure to follow the evolution of Manley's products, to review his "Ultimate" preamplifier, and to use for quite some time his VTL 150 amplifiers (among the best I have heard). If those Compact Mono 100s struck me as having been cobbled together in Manley's garage, later products took on all the trappings of a real business — marketed by professionals, packaged and sold like stuff from RCA and Sony. So when Scot Markwell phoned to say a Manley amplifier was on its way to me, I fully expected it to arrive via UPS or FedEx or Airborne in an appropriate carton, and to look like a contemporary factory-assembled component.

I was, in fact, surprised to find that the Stingray was packed for the Beyond. Not only in a custom-designed carton, but the level of protection afforded the chassis and the tubes (installed) went further than anything I'd seen. The 12 tubes (8 EL 64s, 2 6414s, 2c 12AT7s) travel surrounded by a single foam insert with recesses for each. And instead of the several hand-written pages of "instructions/specs," that David Manley sent to serve as an "owner's manual" for those Mono 100s, the Stingray arrives with a spiral-bound, 16-page booklet that is the best such publication I've read. It is straightforward and comprehensive, offering a host of audio hints/advice/wisdom (ranging from speaker placement to room acoustics to checking/setting bias on tubes) that applies not only to the Stingray and its environment, but to all audio components in any listening room. The ultimate example of "how things have changed" is the appearance — the cosmetics combined with the functional/structural design — of the amplifier. The Stingray is a real looker.

I am told that David Manley did not design the Stingray. Rather EveAnna Manley, who now owns and runs

Manley Laboratories (itself not to be confused with the old VTL, which Luke Manley took over some years ago), seems to have conceived the layout and distinctive shape, with others contributing to the overall design. The amplifier circuits, according to the manual, are derived from David Manley's 50-watt Monos, a great component. The name "Stingray" is attributed to J. Gordon Holt, who said that EveAnna's napkin drawing of a planned integrated amplifier reminded him of that oceanic denizen. The chassis is highly polished chrome, fronted in gold, with clearly divided channels whose inputs are labeled on the top so users can readily see what connects where. Beautifully machined cone feet (three) support the chassis. Sturdy binding posts beg for a tight connection to speaker wires. Controls are first quality. (All the inputs are identical line-level connections, so even though one is labeled "phono," users seeking to listen to LPs will have to insert a phono preamp between the turntable and the Stingray.) Nothing strikes me as needless. The design is a classic example of form following function: Things are where they are because that is where they logically fit. Add a lush, polished finish and smooth-as-silk controls, and you get the Stingray.

If the appearance of Manley amplifiers has changed over 15 years, so has the sonic character. The Mono 100s were all domination, control, hard. The Stingray is easy, open, less imposing. I think that more of the source comes through with the Stingray than with the old Monos, despite the possibility of kinship. On the wonderful Hogwood/AAM Beet-hoven Fifth [L'Oiseau Lyre 417605-2], I found a near-perfect demonstration: The sound was dry, clear, tight, and lean compared to "classic" tube amps, with incredible detail — clean, etched, "ripped" — a touch of edge but, after all, this is the signature sound quality of the AAM and their "original instruments." At the same time, the images were three-dimensional and solid, with a convincing stage and focus. The horns were glorious. I heard lines doubled that I did not recall knowing were doubled, inner voices that had never been so starkly evident. The stage was open and "light." At the same time, the bass was full, rich, reverberant, plump. The Manley provided a perspective on the players that placed me just below the orchestra, which spread above my seat.

Time and again I found that my "view" on the players was that indeed of a concertgoer in the orchestra section of a hall, below the performers. With Kleiber and the VPO [DG 447-400-2] in Beethoven, with Slatkin and the St. Louis [RCA 60174 2-RC] in Schubert, with Goodman and the Hanover Band [Conifer CLASS 70] in Schubert, with Previn/Ax and the RPO [RCA 74321 40418-2] in Beethoven, with Fleisher/Szell and the Cleveland in Beethoven [Sony SBK 60499], and with Belafonte and his back-up band at Carnegie Hall [RCA 6006-2-R], I was keenly aware of this phenomenon. I am not prepared to say that the Stingray mercilessly imposes such a perspective on every source it amplifies through every speaker it drives. But using the splendid Acarian Lotus speakers, I consistently experienced myself as below the stage.

The Stingray is tonally about as neutral as one could hope, neither dark nor light, and capable of capturing the signature of instrumentalists and vocalists. Once, as I was listening to the AAM in Beethoven, my four-year-old son, playing quietly on the carpet near me, made a sound, and I could not tell (until I looked at him) if the noise was real (a product of a human being in my room) or reproduced (a stage noise picked up by the microphones during the recording session). During that same session I noted that the Stingray seemed not to "favor" or glorify one instrument or orchestral choir at the expense of others. All sounded just as it should. Once or twice (e.g., with Belafonte at Carnegie Hall), I found the sound a touch dry, lacking the full richness it has with other amps. But such responses were counter-balanced by an overwhelming experience of smooth, rich, creamy, plush sound. The Manley got the analog character of the recording just right — easy, lush, rich, blended — whole milk as opposed to skim. The way the Stingray distinguished between two selections on the same CD [RCA Victrola 77533-2-RV — two Mozart symphonies recorded five years apart] was, while not extraordinary for High End equipment, remarkable for a small integrated amplifier. Final example: the Boult/New Symphony Chesky disc, Concert Favorites [CD 53] sounded full, with smooth searing highs and cataclysmic brass — I could not believe that a hackneyed warhorse like "Pomp and Circumstance" actually engaged me. It was not the music or the interpretation/performance that riveted attention. It was the sound. This was genuine High End sound, with no obvious compromises or shortcomings. Gigantic, room-sized stage — still eye-level perspective, but wall-to-wall. Dynamics. Imaging. Space. Stage. Coherence. Clean. Clear. Lucid. Spectacular.

Equally impressive, the little Manley, despite its wholly tube circuitry, does nothing to sugar-coat a source. Never in the several months I used it did I sense that the Stingray was euphonic, softening what was hard, mellowing what was harsh, darkening what was bright. Though I found the Kleiber/VPO Beethoven soft-edged and plush, I also noted that the sound was bright and that you would not think you were hearing a live

performance. The DG engineers and their equipment, I thought, were not up to the VPO, as the JVC (CD player), Manley, and Lotuses revealed. Nor will the Manley create a soundstage where none exists. Imagine my disappointment when my much-anticipated audition of the Feltsman/ Rostropovich/NSO Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1 [SONY SM 4575] utterly failed to yield a credible soundspace. The horns were stuck on the top front of the right speaker, the piano was smeared from center to right and was bigger than the pathetic orchestra, the supporting strings were a goopy mass. The winds seemed to be sitting inside the piano.

Via the Manley, Mravinsky's great Tchaikovsky Fifth with the Leningrad [Russian Disc RDCD 10-908], sounded just as harsh as it has when amplified by far more expensive separate amplifier/preamplifier combinations. The Stingray did nothing to soften the painful glare encoded on this disc. Nor did it ameliorate the "harsh, bright, edgy" sound that the engineers provided for Maxim Shostakovich and the BBC orchestra in a horrible, stilted performance of Berlioz' Harold in Italy [Carlton 15656 91532], an interpretation I found utterly lacking in lyricism, filled with jarring fits and starts.

The speakers I used throughout my evaluation of the Manley Stingray were the Lotus units from Acarian, whose high-impedance drivers present amplifiers, especially low-power tube amplifiers, with a "friendly" load. They have, in two dedicated listening rooms in two houses, performed magnificently when connected to amplifiers rated as low as 13 watts a side. Hence my surprise when, more than once at high volume levels, the Stingray's 50 watts a side, produced sound that seemed strained. As Slatkin and the St. Louis opened up in climactic passages in Schubert's Great C Major, the Manley seemed pushed to, maybe even beyond, its limit. When the orchestra let go, the amp tended to lump all the players together into a mass. And at big climaxes, the sound "went hard." Yet even so, the Manley still had enough stuffing to punctuate a line. I could hear the bass drum pronouncements clearly even when the amp was really working hard. The Goodman/Hanover Band traversal of the same score revealed a related trait: At high volumes I felt I was in the laps of the players. But as the decibel level decreased I seemed to move away — a weird sensation because the soundspace itself did not shift with volume swings. Rather I seemed to move. Later in that session with the amp I noted that as the volume increased the stage seemed to compress — not that it moved forward at high levels or away as the sound pressure decreased, but that under maximum load in my quite large room the amp struggled to maintain a stage as wide and deep as that which it presented at lower levels. The classic Horenstein/LSO Mahler First [Unicorn UKCD 2012] concludes with a cataclysm of sound. Faced with this challenge, the Stingray seemed a bit overmatched. It just did not seem to have the reserves to separate strands of sound under such circumstances.

Do not conclude that the Stingray cannot perform brilliantly at high levels, for it can, and often does. The same ensemble and engineers that stressed the Manley in Schubert [Hanover Band/Nimbus], allowed it to show off in an equally challenging Beethoven [Nimbus NI7002]. Here, under heavy load, the sound was brilliant, crystalline, solid, resonant. At fff and beyond, the Manley seemed as if it could go on pumping out volume forever — smooth, seamless increases in decibel level, no sense that it was ratcheting the volume up in incremental segments or steps — plump rich sound even at deafening levels.

At ppp the Manley is beyond reproach. Few pianists can match Emanuel Ax for beautiful, nuanced playing, and he shines in Beethoven's Emperor with Previn and the RPO [RCA 74321 40418-2]. The Manley gave this disc a sound quality that was complex, harmonically rich; it took on what I can only describe as a "particulate" quality that has the feel of the real thing. The microdynamics in the pp-ppp range were delightful, and Ax's delicate fingering was captured by the RCA engineers and clearly displayed by the amplifier. Every subtle change of pressure on the keys seems audible.

The Manley Stingray is a delightful product, both visually and sonically. It operated beautifully from its first unpacking, and has surprised me time and again with performance that belies its size and moderate price. While its size will lead some automatically to select it for second systems or small listening venues (mated to "bookshelf" speakers), it can more than hold its own in far more "serious" environments, mated to other components that purport to push the very limits of design. Its striking appearance will tempt many to place it, and perhaps their primary audio system, in public locations where spouses and appreciative visitors can share the pleasure of looking and listening. Do not be fooled into concluding from its design and finish that it is more for show than for performance. This is a serious amplifier that merits your attention.

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