

HI-FI CHOICE

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Manley Labs Stingray valve amp



Now I must confess, I've never been a very big fan of valve amps. Whenever you see them at hi-fi shows they're invariably surrounded by earnest men with beards whose taste in tunes consists entirely of The Eagles and church organ recitals.

So I approached Manley Laboratories' Stingray integrated valve amp with some trepidation. Would I, by listening to it, suddenly sprout hair from places where none existed before? Would I go through each book in the house, tearing out every other page in case it made my speakers deliver unacceptable 'standing waves'? Thankfully not. And my excess nasal hair was already there.

What is the Stingray then? Apparently dreamed up on a table napkin by Eve Anna Manley at a US hi-fi show, this chrome, brass and valve-strewn, diamond-shaped amp has been designed to make your CDs sound the way old vinyl did: richer, sweeter, smoother and more musical than ever before. It also boasts inputs for a radio tuner and video source, plus one other. Shame there's no dedicated phono stage for a turntable, though.

Setting up is easy, but rather unusual. Instead of grouping the inputs together as is the case with normal 'solid state' amps, the Stingray has left-channel inputs on the left and right-channel ones on the right. Each set is also switchable, so you could have the left channel blasting out a CD and the right one belting out Radio One, if you wanted to. Also, on each side are gold-plated speaker terminals designed to accept even the porkiest of speaker cables.

On the illuminated front panel you'll find two dials - one is a balance control, the other a graduated volume dial that enables you to up the amp's output one step at a time. There are no bass or treble dials, no DSP modes, no virtual surround sound modes, not even a remote control. The manual is dead helpful, though, and written in a simple, slightly patronising way. It even offers useful tips on how to set up your speakers and modify the acoustics to your room. This is high-falutin' hi-fi indeed.

One of the pleasing things about this amp, apart from the orange glowing valves that remind you of granny's log fire, is the fact that it's so easy to get decent volume. Despite the fact that it only has five watt monobloc amps on each channel, this thing goes as loud as solid state amps, delivering twice the power thanks to all those valves. The preamplifier (enabling you to select the various sources) is also a passive design with signal paths kept as short and separate as possible, so the sound from your speakers is a near perfect rendition of what's actually been recorded on a disc, tape or whatever.

In spite of my prejudices, the Stingray really does manage to sound rather good. The soundstage is big, with each instrument placed exactly as it should be. The whole thing's remarkably convincing: vocals are eerily realistic, you can pick out nuances in individual instruments and you get a real sense of atmosphere and involvement from the lush sound the Stingray creates.

What's rather shocking is how it delivers huge wedges of bass. There's no need for one of those upstart active subwoofers here - this thing plumbs depths you didn't even know were there, and manages to sound wonderfully thrilling, punchy and clear with it. You haven't really heard Fatboy Slim until it's belted it out on this little beauty, I can tell you.

If there's anything I can criticise the Stingray for, it's that the sound is so revealing it shows up some CDs for exactly what they are - recorded, engineered and mastered by people with gorilla mitts for hands and ears stuffed full of bananas. But hell, even that doesn't really matter. The Stingray sounds rich, sharp and warm, it's incredibly easy to listen to and, for a valve amp, it doesn't even cost that much. I'm converted. Where's my Eagles CD...?

Rob Mead

FEATURES

Valve Amplifier. Passive preamplifier. 50W per channel monoblocs. RCA (phono) inputs for CD, tuner, video and one other. Frequency response of 15Hz-40kHz. Output optimised for both four and eight-ohm speakers.

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