

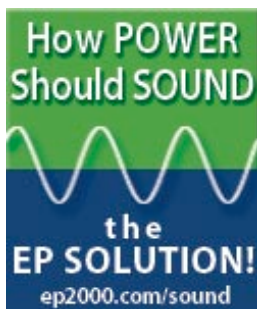
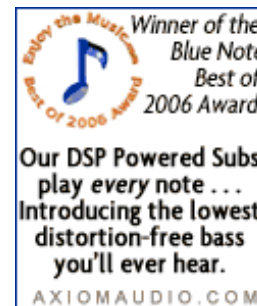
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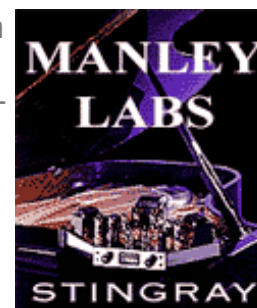
Manley Neo-Classic 250 Monoblock Amplifiers Power and Passion

Review by Rick Jensen

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The Manley Neo-Classic 250 monoblock amplifier is a great amplifier, but more than that, it is a work of passion. That might or might not seem a compliment, depending on what one thinks of the design and manufacturing process. To say that passion is manifest in a product conjures images of the guy working in his garage, and of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Manley Labs is a well-established high-end hi-fi and pro audio manufacturer. You can take a tour of their factory [by clicking here](#) and see that it is much more than a garage.



Still, something more comes through this product, and the something more is light years from the cool, scientific, killer competence communicated by the likes of Krell or Mark Levinson. Yes, maybe it is tempting to romanticize the 250 because (a) it's a tube product, (b) it is retro looking, and (c) as we shall see, there is richness to the sound. However, the amp is at the same time an "industrial-quality" unit, built like a battleship, and anything but a likeness of the modest



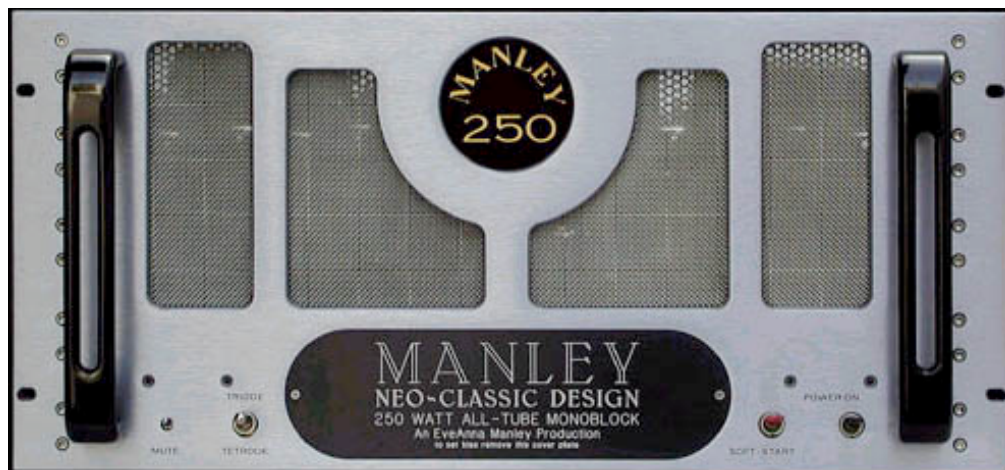
tube amps of yore (and the cute little passion-inspiring SET's of today). The pair of Manleys takes up a good amount of space in the room, they are quite heavy (about 70 lbs. apiece), and the name "Manley" is pretty prominent on the fascia - not cute and very solid. But passion there is, both in the music that comes through the amps, and in the reactions they inspire in the listener.



Tube DNA

As has been well-documented elsewhere in reviews of Manley products, the company is led by EveAnna Manley, one of the most enjoyable and exuberant people in the business of audio. EveAnna apparently didn't have any choice in the tube/solid state debate, being the daughter of the owner of Ampeg. Equally apparent is that it was preordained that she would go into pro audio, and Manley is one of the handful of high-end audio companies with a real presence in the pro market. (About 85% of Manley's business in the pro segment, though the home segment is gaining, and while that is not always the guarantor of success in the high end, it does mean that the equipment has to work, day after day and night after night.)

For some more background on EveAnna and the company, go to [her bio](#). I would recommend anyone who is interested to visit the Manley Labs web site and browse around - it is both enjoyable and informative, and it offers a bit of the flavor of the personality of the CEO.



The Neo-Classical 250's arrived well packed and were a breeze to set up. The manual is informative and to the point. There is little to do -- one has only to insert a few tubes and follow the turn-on procedure, which consists of two switches rather than one. An on/off switch does the obvious, and there is a switch for the "Ever-warm", or standby,

mode that allows the amplifiers to remain on most all the time. If one goes away to tour the vineyards of France, it is probably good to shut the amplifier off. Short of that, if you use it regularly, you can pretty much use the standby switch to keep the amp ready for use at all times. The power consumption in the "Ever-warm" mode is just 30 watts, so electricity usage and costs should not be a major problem.

As noted earlier, construction quality is very high, as one would expect with an amplifier in this price range. The WBT binding posts present no problems and make a great connection, the capacitors and transformers are humongous, and the tube sockets (one thing that always concerns me) are as tight and solid as I have seen. Connections to the rear are facilitated by an angled panel that is well marked for those whose eyes are not quite what they once were.

The Manley 250's use EL-34 tubes sourced from Russia. Other tubes are possible, and Manley will give instructions as to how to re-bias. Two years ago the updated 250 design was revised in order to improve the sound. A major factor in the revision was the development of a new output transformer with an eye toward getting a firmer bottom end. Use of the new transformer drove other smaller changes. I should underline here that the guiding light at Manley in any design change is in the listening. Granted, everyone in the high end says that, and it is likely true in just about all cases. But in EveAnna Manley's words, the technical changes that are made are measured against the highest standard: by "balancing measured response against what really makes your foot go tap tap tap, head go bob bob bob, and what makes those goosebumps appear and what makes you want to get emotionally involved". That may be a highly technical explanation, but it hews close to the truth.

Listening Impressions

I started my listening in tetrode mode - mainly because I wanted to save triode for later. From the first moments, the 250's essential character shone through, although there were to be some differences between triode and tetrode. On the *Franck Sonata in A "Allegro"* (Coup d'Archet 001), Johanna Martzy's violin was sweet but well-defined through the mid and upper ranges; I noted the resinous quality of the bow with a fundamental sweetness that differed from my Music Reference RM-9II, as well as from the amplifiers I had had for review of late, such as the Blue Circle BC-8's. Immediately suspicious that the sweetness was some tube trickery designed to ensnare me, I listened hard (with furrowed brow) for evidence of any lack of rigor or detail. No such luck - the piano accompaniment had authority and force, along with a convincing amount of weight, even in the quiet sections. Even more, it was evident from the groove noise of this superb recording that nothing much was being covered up.

A similar sweetness is the hallmark of Alison Krauss' voice on *New Favorite* (Diverse/Rounder 001), one of the finest LP's I have heard in years. On "Let Me Touch You For a While" and "The Lucky One", her voice is nuanced and delicate, light and fast. Her use of very subtle changes in loudness to convey the message of the songs became very clear, as the 250's made one aware of the tiniest changes in amplitude. At the same time, banjos were light, metallic and properly twangy - most definitely un-"tubey". On "The Boy Who Couldn't Hoe Corn", Dan Tyminski's tenor had a reedy thin character familiar to those who had the good fortune to see and hear the Foggy Bottom Boys in "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" Also worth noting was the rhythmic drive of Union Station that the 250's let through - the band has razor-sharp timing and play at warp speed; again, the Manleys stayed out of the way and let the music shine.

Too intrigued by how all this might sound in triode, I shut the amplifier off and changed mode. And as good as tetrode was (I would have thought it close to perfect had I not made the change), I had little incentive to go back.

In triode mode, one could hear the chest and throat in Krauss' voice as though she were in the room. Again, these are fairly quiet, sometimes even breathy, vocals. Similarly, the body of the guitar was present in every note; same as well for the banjos. I suspected that the bass guitar might have been a touch too heavy - a little extra in the mid-to-upper bass, but it was hard to tell. The overriding impression of the same music in triode mode was of beauty. There was a sort of glow on the guitars being strummed at once - I asked myself "is it right?" and "do I care?"

Switching to CD for a reality check on the triode siren - maybe too much beauty is a bad thing - I put on Mark Knopfler's *Sailing to Philadelphia* (WB-CD 9 47763-2). From the get-go, you knew that the 250's could rock. "What It Is" burst out at full speed, resonant and very dynamic. I noticed a complete lack of the usual chestiness in Knopfler's voice - which is gravelly enough as it is - without any sacrifice of the earthy, rich foundation. Most important, the near-perfect pitch in Knopfler's guitar punctuated the melody as I had never heard before. Even at low volume, the almost-tangible feel of each note from the guitar filled the room. Like a great dessert, you only needed a small amount to be filled with flavor.

On *Sailing to Philadelphia*, the 250's in triode mode underscored the sweetness of James Taylor's voice, which emerges in the second verse relaxed, gentle, and heavenly. The interplay of the two - one full of gravel, the other rail-thin but silky - was never more in evidence, and it's what makes the title song so pretty.

One tends to focus on melody when listening to the 250's. A great

record from Terence Martin, a New York area folksinger, called *Waterproof* (available from Good Dog Records, PO Box 364, Montvale, NJ) is a melody-fest full of falsely naïve and wry, ironic lyrics. Martin has a voice a little like John Prine. It might also lend itself to the slight chesty emphasis that most hi-fi would add. Not here: on the title tune and on my favorite, "Cracks in the Sidewalk", Martin's voice is whispery, rough, and warm. Like no amps I have heard, the 250's communicate the bittersweet, romantic-ironic complexity in his music. And it sounds just right, much the way that Martin sounds in person.

With the 250's, I did what all reviewers and most ardent listeners do with new and exciting gear: I trotted out all the touchstones in my record and CD collection, whether great sounding or not, just to hear how they sounded. I was not disappointed at all. It would be superfluous, not to mention boring, to list disc after disc and how great they sounded, but it is worth citing a few that highlighted more of the strengths of the 250's.

Coherency through the bass shone on "Rock You Gently" from Jennifer Warnes' *The Hunter* (Private Music 01005-02089-2). This CD is a great test of deep bass, but the midbass is equally important and well represented. Here, instead of thin or antiseptic midbass, I noted a "bloom" on each note, an essential communication of tonality in the lower register that is too often missing. You do not notice that it is not there until you hear it done right, and then.... Though the bass overall is a bit artificial sounding (as is generally the case on CD's for me), it is still tight and melodic at once and more satisfying than usual. Was there a light emphasis in the midbass? It may be that the richness of the Manley midbass made up for some essential dryness in the CD; however, it is not as though other recordings (notably LP's) betrayed any extra fat in that region.

Somewhat more dramatically, the Bach "Passacaglia" from *Fennell Favorites* (Reference RR-43) demonstrated great fluidity in the quiet opening, where the oboes are delicate and full. Imaging in this live recording is natural, not laser-accurate, and the Manley amplifiers render the image with a feeling of depth and decent width. The hall perspective seemed a bit back relative to the norm. While I do not know the details of the recording - just where the mikes were placed - since the 250 amplifiers were not reserved in general, it seems to be a characteristic of the recording. The later cuts on the record, by the way, are properly dynamic and forceful, still with a mid-hall perspective, but seemingly dropping any barrier between the listener and the recording. On this record, I did sense a very small softening in the highs. Some of that may be attributable to the live recording and the concert-hall perspective, but even the brassier sections might have been reproduced with a laid-back softening.

Finally and briefly, I pulled out the MFSL Sinatra boxed set for some big band sound. On "Come Fly With Me" and others, the perspective and the sound were forward, albeit less so than with other amplifiers (except the Blue Circle BC-8's, which also did a fine job here). My own RM-9II, the Linn Klimax, and the Mark Levinson 336 all gave a sharper, more etched rendering of the Sinatra. While it is difficult to say which is the most "correct" because the MFSL records are often bright, I have to say that the 250's yielded by far the best music.

Conclusions

That's what it comes back to, again - music. Amid all the subjective observations and objective measurements that one can muster, the ineffable, emotional feel of the music is what many of us are seeking. The Manley 250's never miss giving the listener something of the music and everything that goes into making it. If there is no passion there (think of typical commercial pop, designed to appeal to a broad audience and sell zillions), well, that's what you will hear - lots of nice notes with no substance. But if there is an emotional charge in the playing or the writing or better yet, both, the Manley 250's reward you in spades. Whether it is the power and sadness in Martzy's violin, or the exuberant rollicking of The Band on their second LP, or a quiet bittersweet country song, the 250's take you there. They're great in tetrode mode, but even better in triode. To be sure, I constantly asked myself if I was being hoodwinked, if that triode sorceress was casting the spell that has captured so many. I don't think so, but once more, I don't care. These are great amplifiers that make music in the home a joy.

Tonality	96
Sub-bass (10 Hz - 60 Hz)	94
Mid-bass (80 Hz - 200 Hz)	94
Midrange (200 Hz - 3,000 Hz)	96
High-frequencies (3,000 Hz on up)	92
Attack	92
Decay	94
Inner Resolution	92
Soundscape width front	90
Soundscape width rear	88
Soundscape depth behind speakers	90
Soundscape extension into the room	85
Imaging	90

Fit and Finish	96
Self Noise	95
Value for the Money	94

Specifications

Frequency Response: 10Hz to 30kHz

Tube Compliment: ten EL34EH for output, 12BH7A for driver stage, 12AT7WA for input

Inputs: Balanced and unbalanced inputs

Input Sensitivity: 1 Volt

Input Impedance: 100 kOhm

S/N Ratio: -80dB

Dimensions: 19 x 13 x 9 (WxDxH in inches)

Shipping Weight: 73 lbs. each

Other Features:

- Mute switch
- Switchable triode/tetrode operation
- Standby mode
- Front panel bias measurement and adjust (hiding under the black insert)

Price: \$9,000 per pair

Company Information

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