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Audio Research Reference 2 MkII and VM220

New monoblocks and a reference-grade preamp from one of the world's finest valve amp specialists

PRICE: Reference 2 MkII: £10,498, VM220: £9,000 (£4,500 each) CONTACT: Absolute Sounds Ltd, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.audioresearch.com

Sometimes, no amount of room on the page is enough to do a product justice. In the case of the Audio Research Reference 2 MkII and the VM220 monoblocks, we could take up the whole damn mag with words and still hardly scratch the surface of just how good this amp system is.

The Reference 2 MkII is a large, complex, remote controllable line-only preamplifier with

the sort of distortion-free specification sheet that most transistor preamps would struggle to match. It features both balanced and single-ended signal handling (and – unusually – it's comfortable with feet in both camps simultaneously) and its circuit board complement is arranged vertically, like plug-in daughter cards on a computer motherboard. Whereas most line-only tube preamps might

have one or two valves in the circuit, the Audio Research has eight – half a dozen high-spec 6H30 tubes, plus a 5AR4 and a 6L6GC in the power supply. Every aspect has been considered for the purposes of maximising sound quality – volume and balance are effectively rotating switches that adjust the volume (or balance) upwards or downwards in single steps, 125 in total, and there are



isn't a great deal of functionality to the VM220 – each monoblock has just a power switch and LED on the front and a balanced/single-ended switch on the back panel. They take up a lot of floor space and run hot, but they do deliver 200 watts.

This combination must hold some kind of record for the largest soundstage in Christendom. Whatever speakers you own, they will be transformed under the influence of the Audio Research rig. Speakers will sound larger and better controlled, with a wider, deeper and – yes – even taller soundstage than you had ever imagined.

Then there's the detail. You better have a seriously good source component and the best cables you can think of in support. Because if you don't, these amps will make mincemeat of the rest of your system, laying bare every flaw and blemish. But, partner this amp combo accordingly (it does cost nigh on £20,000, remember – consider a player of at least the calibre of Audio Research's own CD3 and high-quality wire of a commensurate quality) and the detail off the disc is remarkable.

SOUND QUALITY

There's a term in valve technology that's used all the time in guitar playing circles but hardly ever heard in relation to hi-fi, and that's 'creamy'. This Audio Research partnership is creamy sounding. Not necessarily warm like cheaper valve designs and not steely like some transistor-based kit. Instead it is extremely smooth and, well, creamy.

It also makes bass like a transistor thumper. How deep? From a pair Sonus Faber Cremonas playing the *Gorillaz vs Spacemonkeyz* album it was deep enough to make ripples in my coffee cup, à la *Jurassic Park*, an octave deeper than

justice to the likes of Biber's *Mystery Sonatas* and other early music. Less impassioned, viscerally organic amplifiers turn this into noodling on period instruments – here it sounds like a quintet of players slowly building the *New Testament* in musical form.

Even badly recorded or badly transferred music comes across brilliantly. Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book* may be one of the best records of the 1970s, but the transfer to CD leaves much to be desired. None of that is glossed over via this amp system – the flat drums, the splashy cymbals, the recessed horn section and the bass guitar that sounds like it's being played in a room filled floor to ceiling with old socks – yet the combo manages to keep the sound funky and make the transgressions more forgivable. Besides, it gets through the remaster mush and digs out the most precocious talent of his generation. It's so good, you start to wish Stevie's talent didn't turn out to have a sell-by date.

What this manages to do is drag you into the music like few other amps can. Background music is a tough call on this combo – you sit forward discovering what your music can do, and even at low levels the tonal balance is unchanged and ideal. So, no matter how background the sounds, you will find yourself being drawn into the music. This can be quite disconcerting when trying to define the music within deeply ambient stuff like *Music For Airports* by Brian Eno, for example.

The balance between preamplifier and power amplifier is just about perfect. The preamplifier adds a touch of warmth and the power amps bring zest to the party. Both are consummate detail hounds and their natures perfectly complement one another. Taken individually, both are surprisingly similar in performance

“Controlled and musical bass, with harmonic structure down to where your bowels ache.”

controls for almost everything a preamp might do, all replicated on the remote control.

The brand new VM220s are a departure from existing Audio Research mono power amplifiers and from a design standpoint look more like models such as the VT55. The amplifiers are open-chassis affairs (a valve cage is available as an optional extra, although there is the feeling that the cage must be supplied to maintain compliance with European standards). Running both balanced and single-ended, the large chassis has two massive transformers sited at the back, plus four 6N1P double triodes in the input stage and four 6550 tubes in the output section. At the rear of the chassis, behind the array of large capacitors, are speaker output tapings for four, eight and sixteen ohms, a balanced and single-ended input and biasing controls for all valves. There

usual. But this isn't simply bass boom, it's controlled and musical, with harmonic structure right down to where your bowels ache. This bass, it should be noted, also comes with that walk-in space and the sort of midband that will play anything with delicate aplomb.

Damien Rice's album sounded little short of wonderful on test, with the rim shots and violins taking on a real-world dynamism and weight. There's an almost intangible feedback on the end of the first chorus of *Delicate* as the strings and guitar trail off. It's almost like an error on the recording, but here it's given due weight and attention. Surprisingly, this only enhances the sense of performance and adds to the pathos of the recording.

The amps are also extremely competent at turning music from a series of converted digits into a living, breathing entity – there is a sense of musical flow that is a necessity to do

terms. Perhaps the VM220s would be most ideally suited to the cheaper LS25 preamp (which is a closer physical, sonic and financial match to the monoblocks). But the sheer correctness of the Reference 2 MkII can raise the bar on any power amplifier and here it makes the VM220s sing sweetly.

Just how good ultimately is the Audio Research kit? It's about the best justification for capitalism to have come out of the US of A in many years. Some amp systems make you dream of lottery wins – this one forces you to redefine your economic outlook and draw up ways of being more successful. Think of it as the audio benchmark of success, like being driven to work in your own Bentley or owning a wardrobe of suits from Anderson & Shepherd. You own Audio Research, especially kit at this lofty level... you've arrived. **HFC**

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