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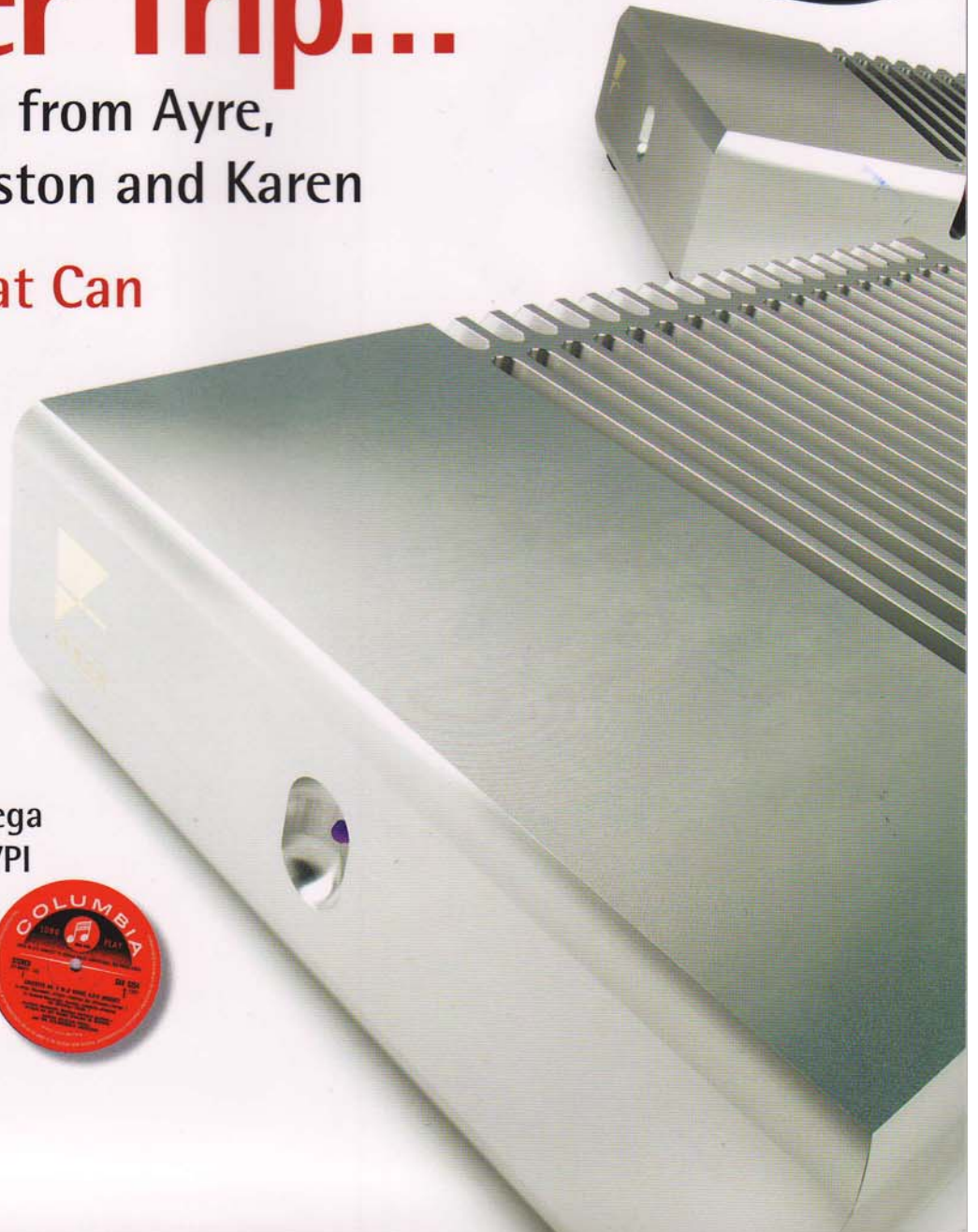
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Audio Research VS110 Vacuum-Tube Power Amp

by Roy Gregory

The sparse soundscape of Nils Petter Molvaer's *Khmer* is haunting and threatening, pulsing with an underlying current of latent violence that threatens to, and just occasionally does, burst forth from the speakers. Of course, a threat carries no weight unless its actual delivery is suitably shocking. Well, roughly three minutes into track two, 'Access/Song Of Sand 1' the huge slabs of heavily flanged bass that crash out of the speakers are genuinely frightening the first time you hear them. A staccato cannonade that explodes across and ricochets around the soundstage it's as impressive for its speed and mobility as it is for its sheer weight and substance. At least it is when it's played on the Audio Research VS110.

Is it my imagination, or do some products really look the way they sound: c-j's Premier 350 – solid, three dimensional and warm; ARC's D115 – bluff, squat, weighty and powerful, just waiting to pounce; Martin Logan's Summit – airy, transparent and architectural with a firm foundation. Now comes the VS110, not as compact or closely coiled as the D115, but weighty nonetheless, with a clean, no-nonsense appearance that's all to do with self confidence and nothing at all to do with the foibles of fashion. This amplifier simply screams "classic" at you, with a strong "no-frills" echo from the back wall – which does indeed sum up the VS110 – sonically and topologically. The almost square, open chassis supports a dual-mono, push-pull circuit using two pairs of Svetlana 6550s a side, each with a 6N1P driver,

a fifth 6N1P playing phase splitter. Power supply is solid-state while reservoir capacitance relies on a single bank of 470 microF Nichicon caps, smaller and quicker than the much larger ones found in older ARC designs. The amp is a fixed bias design, inputs are single-ended only and there are output taps for both four and eight Ohm loads, delivering 100 Watts a side. All in all it's a model of common sense and practicality. There's even an optional valve cage.



But despite its rather prosaic exterior, the VS110 is not short on subtle twists and attention to detail. The nine-pin tubes all come with damping rings installed, while gain is higher than average for a valve amp, making direct connection to source components incorporating their own output level control (an increasingly common scenario with both digital and analogue front-ends) a far more viable proposition – although it can also lead to noise issues with high-gain line-stages. Biasing is straightforward and remained stable right through the review period. Even the soft feet on which the amp stands seem to do a better job than most of their brethren. Yes, I got an improvement

in focus, transparency and leading-edge definition by substituting a set of Symposium RollerBlock Jrs but it wasn't the make or break result you get with some amps.

The VS110 was provided as a suitable partner for the LS26 reviewed in Issue 50, but such was its performance that I quickly decided that it warranted a review of its own. ARC's D115, a design that dates back some 20 years, was always a firm favourite with me, while intervening Audio Research amps have tended to leave me rather cold, especially the extended flirtation with hybrid designs. Could the VS110 possibly signify a similar renaissance to the Ref 3 and LS26, but in the power amp department? Even a brief encounter suggested that

the answer to that question would be a yes, while longer exposure simply reinforced that initial confidence. With a solid 100 watts on tap the 110 should be a capable all rounder, at home in most systems and un-phased by all but the most demanding speaker loads, but what really makes this amp special is not the power on tap but the way in which it delivers it.

The sound of the VS110 is built on the firm foundation of its solid and weighty bass. Rather than the ripped but ultimately soulless low frequencies that are extruded by all too many solid-state behemoths, the ARC is all about a calculated, loose, almost feline grace, more Merce Cunningham than Balanchine if you get my drift. This is muscle that breathes and lets the performance live, rather than pinning it to the artistic board of a musical

▶ killing jar, frozen in time and space. It's what a good amp should do and in turn it's built on a quality that the D115 had in spades – the ability to let musical energy loose safe in the knowledge that it will never get away. The word coined to describe it is "authority" and it's a far more subtle and valuable attribute than mere "control". If it's the latter you want simply load up the output devices, wrap them in global feedback and revel in the low-distortion measurements that result. After all, you can simply ignore the fact that you've crushed the life out of the music along the way.

What the VS110 provides is that innate sense of balance that comes with genuine authority. The power to drive real world speakers without sounding muscle bound, enough feedback to allow the amp to grip the signal, not so much that it crushes it to death. The result is a sound that is vibrant and full of energy, big, bold and a little forward, making the amp sound more powerful than its paper performance would suggest. Of course, the increased gain is a factor here, but so to is the amplifier's sheer enthusiasm. Building on that bass weight and power, the 110 instills voices and instruments with a real sense of presence and substance. The emphasis here is on dimensionality and separation, physicality if you will, as opposed to the last word in detail and resolution. The result is a well-developed soundstage, the space between its occupants taking precedence over the coherence and definition of the overarching acoustic. It's this combination of substance, dynamics and locational spread that makes *Khmer's* staccato bass eruptions so impressive, but voices too have a beguiling solidity to them. Just as the ARC captures the brooding menace of *Khmer*, so the subtly shifting emotional moods of Jim White's 'The Wound That Never Heals' flit across the song like

fast moving cloud shadows on a sunny hillside.

But, if the VS110 isn't without character, it's a shape that dovetails perfectly with the slightly laid-back, relaxed presentation of the LS26, making the combination much greater than the sum of its parts – and a mightily cost effective one too. The separation and detail of the line-stage, its sense of driven momentum,



takes hold of all that energy available from the 110 and gives it a real sense of purpose and direction, equally at home with the easy lobe of 'Handcuffed To A Fence In Mississippi' or the joyous romp of 'God Was Drunk When He Made Me'*. The result is an impressively versatile musical landscape, one that captures the whole of the performance rather than dismantling it or concentrating on parts at the expense of overall impact. It's when you use the 110 in tandem with the 26 that you realize that its real power should be measured in the musical sense.

Concentrating on the wider view rather than the musical intricacies the VS110 thrives on better and better front-ends, equally at home with the Lyra Connoisseur 4-2s as it was with

Intrigued by the song titles? If you haven't heard it the album is called *No Such Place* and it's Mr White's finest work to date, being both more inventive and far less "produced" than the later *Drill A Hole...*

the LS26. The better the signal the more flesh and shape it puts on the bones – but it is the power amp that makes sure those bones are always there, the right shape and the right scale. Ultimately, there is a limit to its resolution, but you'll go a long way up the ladder to reach it, while its rounder, broad brush presentation captures the innate character of musical contours with deceptive ease. If you want to appreciate the beauty of a single flower, its interleaving petals, its delicacy and fragility, there are other amps that will get you closer than the 110 – but few of them will place that flower on the verge, beside the lane, at the foot of the hedge, sheltering beneath the swell of a wooded slope. This Audio Research trades in musical vistas, allowing you to glory in their scale, bathe in their sunlight or be drenched by their squalls. Real authority is general in nature; don't underestimate its rarity. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Push-pull vacuum-tube power amp
Tube Complement:	5x 6N1P 8x 6550
Inputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/ phono
Input Impedance:	100 kOhms
Input Sensitivity:	1.1V
Gain:	28dB into 8 Ohms
Rated Output:	100 Watts continuous into 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	445 x 201 x 483mm
Weight:	27.7kg
Price:	£4000

UK Distributor:
Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:
Audio Research Corporation
Net. www.audioresearch.com