



Fine basic engineering makes Mystere's ia11 integrated amplifier a shining example of valve amplifier design, says Noel Keywood...

Stere Quality

Standards are variable in the valve amplifier world. Some are less well made than they should be, others hopelessly complex and fussy to maintain, but I'm happy to say the Mystere ia11 you see before is neither of these. A fairly conventional design from the Netherlands, it is beautifully detailed in terms of electronic design and casework, and also refreshingly neat and affordable at £1,250. You get 40 watts per channel from a compact chassis, free from arcane ceremony such as bias adjustment. As valve amplifiers go, this is as close to plug and play as it comes...

Mystere is a brand name used by a Netherlands based (Eindhoven I believe) Durob audio group who design locally but get their product built in China they say - hence the low price. I am told, though, that Durob used Melody's Chinese factory to produce the Mystere, hence the similar styling. The novel Adaptive Auto-Bias circuit is Prima Luna's apparently, but the output transformers are Melody's, making the Mystere something of a hybrid in terms of technology, but there's nothing wrong with this, especially as both Prima Luna and Melody between them seem to know a thing or two

about valve amplification! In the ia11 you get a strong, beautifully finished modern valve amplifier.

The ia11 is unusually heavy for its compact dimensions, weighing no less than 20.5kgs. It will fit most shelves, measuring 320mm wide, 350mm deep and 200mm high. There are just four switched line inputs, both eight and four Ohm loudspeaker outlets, plus the usual IEC mains socket. The power switch lies on the right hand side panel, just behind the fascia, so it cannot be seen but is easily accessed. Strengthening its audiophile credentials is a switched stepped attenuator with strong detent springs



that give it a heavy, solid action.

The valves are protected - or should I say humans are protected - by a cover that can be easily removed. With no top vents it traps heat and gets hot, as do the valves. As manufacturers like GEC once used to specify minimum distances between valves like KT88s to minimise mutual warming effects that cause overheating, this isn't the best cover I have seen, but it can be removed without the exposed amplifier becoming electrically dangerous. The valve complement comprises four 6SN7 triodes for amplification and one pair of EL34 output pentodes in push-pull arrangement per channel. All the valves are affordable, EL34s costing around £14 each for example, making replacement every few years (of normal use) relatively inexpensive.

SOUND QUALITY

The EL34 is known for its lucid midband, one that is valued highly in the Far East, where this valve has a strong reputation - and I was reminded of its sound listening to the iall. The amplifier has a delightful midband lucidity that portrays vocalists in a space of their own, seemingly without the hardness of tone and opaqueness that afflicts solid-state. It offers a 'see through' window without the slightest haze, just a sparklingly clear image set out neatly between the loudspeakers, but not forward of them. The iall lays out its stall tidily, with a well ordered stereo stage, if not one that is as expansive as that provided by older valves like the 300B triode. With a musical performance centred on a vocalist like Celine Dion the iall shone as a result, bringing the lady alive in front of me as I kicked off the listening session. It made a convincing case for choosing valves in an amplifier as well put together as this one, I thought to myself.

The EL34 also possesses

refined treble, sweet and intricate, if with a little less substance than that from a KT88. Cymbals rang out with vigour and the smallest strike against a triangle in Steve Earle's 'Waiting For You' was picked out adeptly. Even more captivating was the way violins of the Royal Philharmonic had a liveliness about them that made the first movement of the Brandenburg Concerto seem positively boisterous. The iall has a well lit upper midband and a refreshing portrayal of musical dynamics that makes it an attractive amplifier to sit in front of. Again, the EL34 within the undoubtedly well honed setting of this amplifier comes across as a lovely performer. The iall sounded insightful yet nuanced, both with complex percussion work and classical instruments.

It's more difficult to get EL34s to provide the muscular performance of the KT88 though, and here the iall differed little from what I have come to expect. Its initial partnership with our Spendor S8es was unsuccessful, bass sounding slow and soft. Being underdamped in themselves, the S8es generally work well with grippy amplifiers and this isn't one of the iall's strengths. They were happier with a pair of Usher S-520s, where the amplifier's lovely midband was made obvious, its sweet treble highlighted and bass kept in shape.

Moving the iall into my own listening room to partner them with a pair of valve amplifier-friendly Revolver R45s provided the best results, although my overall

impressions were unchanged from those I reached with the Ushers. The amplifier did a fine job with the up tempo 'Somebody', from the Eagles latest album, maintaining a good sense of pace, delivering sparkling clear vocals and ringingly sweet treble, full of fine detail. Kick drum and bass guitar weren't especially impactful though, even though there was enough weight to them.

Rachmaninov's popular Piano Concerto No2 brought forth a lovely swathe of strings, violins again sounding lively and richly detailed. Piano had both body and tone, sounding rich and engaging. I noticed also with the sensitive Revolvers that input switching or adjusting the volume control brought obvious clanking from the loudspeakers, caused by microphony, a phenomenon new to me in valve amplifiers.

CONCLUSION

Mystere's iall is a delicate performer, distinguished by a super clear midband and sparkling, sweet treble. Partnered with sensitive floorstanders it does a lovely job at the price, although is more convincing with classical and vocals from the likes of James Blunt or Celine Dion than heavy bass lines and kick drums from The Darkness, for example. All the same, the strengths of EL34s in a nicely designed amplifier are there to be heard in all their glory and the asking price isn't great, making the iall a fine, real-world starting point for anyone appreciative of the clarity valves can bring.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Using EL34 output pentodes the Mystere delivered 45W into 8 Ohms and 42W from its 4 Ohms tap, before visual clipping (output overload). It moved into clip smoothly and symmetrically, a testament to its unusually low distortion at high levels. Pushed to 1% thd power reached 50W so the valves are likely run at high voltage and won't have the life of lower power designs, but EL34s are inexpensive to replace.

The transformers behave unusually well, with no sign of core saturation at low frequencies, and low distortion at high frequencies too. Consequently, distortion levels were very low right across the audio band and comprised innocuous second and third harmonics totalling around 0.2%. This amplifier should sound smooth and muddle-free, even at high volume.

Frequency response was wider than usual from a valve amplifier, with an upper limit of 93kHz (-1dB). The lower limit was 5Hz. Damping factor was low though, just 0.46, so underdamped loudspeakers will likely sound boomy.

The Mystere is a highly optimised conventional valve amplifier that should give a lovely sound. NK

Power	45W
Frequency response	5Hz-93kHz
Separation	63dB
Noise	-105dB
Distortion	0.2%
Sensitivity	480mV
Damping factor	0.46

VERDICT

With lovely midband and treble, this slick, well built amp is an easy listen.

MYSTERE IA11 £1,250

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FOR

- smooth and clear midband
- sweet treble
- compact dimensions

AGAINST

- lacks bass punch
- microphonic switches
- poor valve cover

