



Glowing Live!



Adam Smith thinks Vincent's brand new SA-T1/SP-T100 preamplifier/ monobloc power amplifier combination is one of the most neutral he's heard, no less...

The character an amplifier imparts onto a system can in many ways make or break its performance. Be it a gutsy transistor design that takes your loudspeakers by the scruff of the neck and gets your toes tapping, or a single-ended valve design that makes the

hairs stand up on the back of your neck with its emotion and detail, the amplifier you choose is a vital part of the reproduction chain. If your source component is the 'engine' of your system, then the amplifier is the transmission - and all petrolheads know how ineffective gearing or a poorly designed drive system can

ruin a car's performance!

Of course, deciding which area you would like your amplifier to excel in is something of a laborious task, and it certainly isn't unreasonable to expect a modern design to do well across the board. An interesting, and actually quite obvious, way of achieving this is to

go down the hybrid route to meld the drive and efficiency of transistors with the delicacy and insight of valves.

Vincent have already proved to us that they know a thing or two about fusing old and new technologies with the highly capable SV-236 integrated amplifier that we featured on its own in the November 2006 issue, and in our December 2006 classic amplifier technologies group test. Once again, both of the new units under review here continue to fly the hybrid flag and we were keen to find out if they can build on the considerable strengths of their younger brother.

Considering the preamplifier first, the £800 SA-T1 is a sleek and stylish unit with six line level inputs, a pair of recording outputs and two sets of preamplifier outputs. At its heart are 12AX7 (ECC83) valves in the main preamplification chain and a 12AU7 (ECC82) to provide low output impedance. A loudness button and defeatable tone controls are provided but, as with the SV236 amplifier, switching them in-circuit introduces both bass and treble lift, even with the controls themselves set at '0' - slapped wrists Vincent!

The SA-T1 has the same front panel window as the SV236, from which one of the valves cheekily peeks. This has four levels of illumination selectable from the remote control, which also handles input selection and volume regulation. Finally I am pleased to report that not only does the volume control respond to the remote nice and promptly, but the handset itself is firmly in the Bang & Olufsen/Cambridge Audio category, in that it is solid, weighty and well designed.

Whilst on the subject of weight, the SP-T100 monobloc power amplifiers give a pleasing feeling of value for money on a purely mass basis, as they tip the scales at a healthy 15kg each. £1,500 buys you a pair of these beauties, which work up to 10 watts in Class A, before switching to Class AB in order to deliver 100 watts into 8 Ohms at full throttle when required.

The SP-T100s use a 6N6 valve for initial preamplification and a 6Z4 for high voltage rectification. This latter item is again on view in a front window, and features the same levels of selectable illumination as that on the preamplifier, but from a rear panel switch this time. Two pairs of loudspeakers can be driven from each pair of SP-T100s

I set the Vincents up into our current reference system of Pioneer PLC-590/ SME M2-10/ Ortofon Rondo Bronze through Eastern

"one of the first amplifiers that's truly happy with any sort of music..."

Electric Minimax phono stage, Cambridge Azur 840C compact disc player and into Spondor S8e loudspeakers. After a suitable run-in period and, more importantly, with all front panel valve illumination levels duly set to pleasing levels, listening was ready to commence...

SOUND QUALITY

As mentioned before, we are very fond of our Spondor S8e loudspeakers resident in the *Hi-Fi World* listening room, but are always aware that their lack of damping will ruthlessly reveal an amplifier that lacks bass control. On more than one occasion we have heard them rumbling out bass boom with alacrity as a poor helpless amp struggles to keep up.

Consequently it was with some concern that I immediately heard thunderous low frequencies emanating from them when connected up to the Vincents. However, when I listened closely I realised that this wasn't boom or wallow - it was deep, capacious, tuneful, real bass! The Vincent combo is nothing short of astonishing in its low frequency performance. With any sort of bass-heavy music (and I have a fair collection) they were unwavering in their detail and pace. Bass lines were rock-solid and underpinned tracks superbly. From the deep, resonant thrum of a double bass to the melodious intonation of a fretless bass guitar, the SA-T1 and SP-T100s remained composed, taut and amazingly deep throughout.

Bass timing was spot on, as shown by Eric Clapton's 'Hey hey' from his 'Unplugged' album - his tapping foot was solid and precisely in time with the guitar strokes - a feat that surprisingly few systems can manage. Moving to some more heavy dance music, the Vincents had the whole room (and probably half of the building) jumping and proved that if you need party capability then they are more than able.

So, the SA-T1/SP-T100 combo is brawny, powerful and bassy, but that is far from the end of the story. Reluctantly dragging myself away from heavy stuff, it was a delight to hear that this iron fist is more than happy

to become the smoothest of velvet gloves when required. The Vincents have beguiling and open midrange with a positively vast soundstage.

Playing a little classical courtesy of Tchaikovsky's Symphony Number 6 revealed that the orchestra could well have been sat in the next room and instruments were exquisitely laid out in front of me. I was almost afraid of receiving a whack round the head from the conductor's baton on a few occasions, so vivid was the aural picture that was painted. Obviously, as expected, crescendos were capable of rearranging furniture but in between them the Vincent combination was as sweet, composed and detailed as you could wish for.



The thermionic influence in their design was obvious, and it imbued the sound with real emotion and subtlety.

To continue exploring this, I brought on a few of my favourite female vocalists. A poster on one of my favourite hi-fi internet forums recently asked what the fuss was about "female vocals" when it comes to testing hi-fi equipment, but it seems I am not alone in finding that the intonation and presentation of many a female voice really can help to sort a good system from a bad one. Thankfully, Diana Krall's album 'Love Scenes' helped to convince my



increasingly unshakable conviction that this system really is one of the good ones. I have long been of the opinion that Miss Krall has something of an exquisite voice at the best of times and that this will even come across through a cheap transistor radio. However, through amplifiers like the Vincents, it takes on a different dimension and reaches a whole new emotional level.

No less superb was the Webb Sisters' new album, 'Daylight Crossing'. Hattie and Charley Webb have a fine pair of voices that harmonise together beautifully and on tracks like their recent single 'I Still Hear It', the Vincents really made the most of this. A good amplifier should not give the impression that it is adding or taking anything away from the music and, without checking with the girls themselves, I feel they would be more than happy with the Vincent's recreation of them.

For any of you now expecting me to say something more negative regarding the Vincents' treble response, I apologise in advance for disappointing you, as this was yet another area in which I need to reach for my superlatives list. High frequencies were clean, sweet and detailed with a positively sparkling nature. The SA-T1 and SP-T100s missed absolutely nothing in any music, delving into the murkiest depths of songs to extract every last nuance and inflection.

Spinning an old favourite of mine, Donald Fagen's 'Kamakiriad', I was surprised to hear what appeared to be new high frequency backing effects coming through. The Vincents were digging deeper into the background of this track than I have heard any other amplifier do. The track 'Trans Island Skyway' seemed to have gained another percussionist over in the right hand background, such was the increased level of detail.

Spinning a few tracks which can

cause some equipment to become a little confused, showed that the Vincents were completely unfazed by any such material. They consistently sorted out any aural messes and pulled the music out with an almost surgical skill. That is not to say that they painted an inaccurate picture, however. Bad recordings were quite clearly still bad, but the Vincents made it easier to work out why.

CONCLUSION

Over a period I spent listening to the Vincent SA-T1 and SP-T100 I was unable to find any area in which they

were less than utterly competent and enjoyable. As mentioned previously, this did make me wonder if they were telling the whole truth but after repeatedly trying to catch them out, I came to the conclusion that they were. If you put on a bad recording, the Vincents play that bad recording but they have the ability to make it quite clear why it is a bad recording - they have an uncanny ability to let you hear right into the mix and pick out where it has all gone wrong.

This is an absolutely superb amplifier combination. It is one of the first amplifiers I have ever encountered that really is truly happy with any sort of music. All too often apologies have to be made for gutsy, dynamic amplifiers when they fail to extract any emotion from a recording; or for subtle, sweet valve units when they fall apart under a rocking onslaught! The Vincents sail through it all.

Most enthusiasts are quite content to pick out an amplifier that suits their main preference in music and to live with its shortcomings in other, less important areas, but if you've had enough of compromise, and want nothing less than an amplifier that does it all well, then it has finally arrived. Vincent - I salute you!

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

If you just look at the figures, this power amplifier doesn't look so good. Around 0.7% distortion at full output is poor, but it is dominantly second harmonic with some third, neither being aurally fearsome. Better still by far is the fact that there is absolutely no crossover to be seen and that the distortion pattern stays rock steady, being the same at all levels and frequencies. Correlation between distortion and stimulus is remarkably stable in this amplifier, far more so than most others. So whilst absolute distortion levels are nothing to write home about, the amplifier's dynamic distortion pattern is almost unique for solid state - and this is not accident, but good design. With 112W into 8 Ohms and 210W into 4 Ohms each monoblock is powerful and well regulated. Damping factor was a good 28; the output stage is solid-state.

The preamplifier has a usefully high gain of x7.6, and enough headroom at 5V maximum output before overload. It is wideband and low distortion. The tone controls apply lift even at zero when switched in, and work nicely in the lift and cut shapes applied. With the power amp., input sensitivity amounts to 158mV

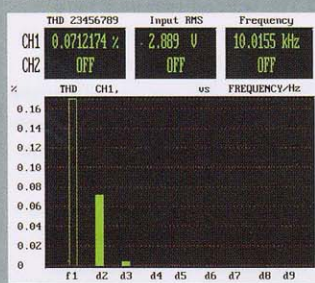
- a high value. The Vincent combo measures well. I would expect a very enticing sound, plus ease of use. NK

Power
112watts

POWER AMP
Frequency response 2Hz-90kHz
Noise -117dB
Distortion 0.1%
Sensitivity 1.2V

PREAMP
Frequency response 2Hz-83kHz
Separation 88dB
Noise -94dB
Distortion 0.02%
Gain x7.6
Overload 0.66V in / 5V out

DISTORTION



VERDICT A superb pre-power amplifier combination that makes the most of any music. Fine styling and build complete the pretty picture.

VINCENT SA-T1/SP-T100 £2300
Distributed by Ruark Acoustics
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www.vincent-audio.com

FOR
- detailed and deep bass
- vast soundstage
- consistent with all music
- styling and finish

AGAINST
- tone control behaviour