

Icon

Stereo 40 amplifier

A powerful and well-made valve integrated amplifier for less than £1000!

Icon Audio Stereo 40	
PRICE	£900
SUPPLIER	Icon Audio
CONTACT	07787 158791
WEBSITE	www.iconaudio.co.uk

Like most teenagers, my earliest forays into the world of audio were handicapped by a lack of finance. Thus a diet of cast-offs from family friends and lucky finds in junk shops resulted in my running various turntables by the likes of Collaro and Goldring, with amplification initially in the form of a mono Pye Mozart, finally supplanted by a Leak Stereo 20, with matching Point One pre-amp. One sad day, a combination of age and someone's clumsiness resulted in a very dead amplifier and the decision to try the solid-state world.

Now, nearly 20 years later I find myself back in the land of the thermionic glow courtesy of Icon Audio's Stereo 40 amplifier. It's an attractively styled unit, which, to my eyes has more than a little flavour of 'art deco' in its looks. The combination of a polished stainless steel chassis, and black crackle finish on the 10mm alloy plate transformer cover, provides a suitable backdrop for the two rows of four valves. The EL34B output valves sit in front of the transformers on the chassis, with the two 12AX7 first stage valves and the two 12AU7 phase splitters sitting in front. These are protected by a removable cover consisting of polished stainless steel slats, with a clear acrylic top.

The simple fascia contains two gold plated knobs, one for source selection of either CD, Tuner, or Aux, the other operating the ALPS Blue potentiometer volume control. To the left of these are two switches, one for selecting the tape loop, the other switching between 'ultralinear' and 'triode' modes of operation.

Mains power is accessed via a switch on the left hand side, and at the back are a selection of gold plated RCA phono input sockets; three stereo pairs of very generously sized speaker terminals (a negative and choice of 4 or 8 ohm positive taps); a switch to select either 4 or 8 ohm impedance matching; and an IEC mains socket. A very comprehensive instruction



manual is supplied that seems to cover just about every question or eventuality that a Stereo 40 purchaser is likely to encounter. There is also a section on adjusting the EL34B grid bias (should it be needed) that anyone who is capable of wiring a plug should be able to understand and work through. A final inspection sheet was enclosed with the unit, as well as a digital multimeter which I used to confirm the bias settings of the EL34B valves.

I first set the amplifier up with the Linn Sondek/Hadcock/Shiraz combo running into an EAR 834P phono stage. At the other end were my Kelly KT3s (designed several years ago by fellow contributor David Berriman) whose 95dB efficiency would hopefully make them suited to moderately powered amplification. Although these speakers dip just below 4 ohm impedance in the deep bass regions, the Stereo 40 boasts the same output wattage at both 4 and 8 ohm taps so should be untroubled by such a load. And so it proved to be; ample, deep, rhythmic, tuneful bass, underpinning a lucid and effortless

midrange and treble. In fact it proved to be such a beguiling combination that I kept putting off trying the amplifier in other rooms and systems until work requirements forced me to.

I was impressed not only by the almost tangible three-dimensionality of performers but by the depth and width of the soundstage. Even full-scale works such as the 'Grand March' from Verdi's *Aida* [VPO/Karajan, Decca SXL 2242] played at high volume did not sound strained or crowded. More intimately-presented music from the Jacques Loussier Trio in *Play Bach No 2* [Decca SKL 5023] sounded as though the listener was in the best seat in the club, right in front of the stage. Some of this was due, I felt, to the textural detail that this amplifier excelled in revealing. Pierre Michelot's double bass wasn't just a moderately tuneful 'thunking' noise at the bottom end, but a vibrant, round sound that seemed to almost have enough physical presence in the room to allow the polish on the instrument itself to be visible. Using the same records in triode mode proved interesting. The

Technology

The unit is quite compact at 320 x 160 x 250mm (whd) but weighs a substantial 14.6kg. All internal wiring is point-to-point using audio grade silver cable. Internal features include high-quality polypropylene capacitors, with only one in each signal path. Electrolytic capacitors are only used in the power supply. Resistors are of the metal film and wirewound 2W variety. The standard valves supplied are made by Shuguang, extra cost options include valves by Golden Dragon and Svetlana and others.

Sensitivity for full output is 250mV, so it should work with the majority of source equipment made within the last twenty years. Frequency response is claimed to be 20Hz to 20kHz (± 1 dB) and the signal-to-noise level as -89 dB. Total harmonic distortion is recorded as 0.5% at full output.

This 'push-pull' design of amplifier is capable of operation in either ultralinear or triode mode. Using the former setting, the EL34B operates as a pentode valve, with screen grid number two connected to a 43% tap on the transformer. This is claimed to give a good compromise of higher output power, whilst maintaining most of the low distortion characteristics of triode operation.

Switching to triode mode means that the EL34Bs run less efficiently and output drops to 17W (without the extra screens, some electrons are repelled from the anode, reducing the current flow) but the electronic characteristics of triodes are more linear, often resulting in what is described as a 'sweeter' sound. The EL34B is an updated and bigger version of the original Mullard design.

Features

- Beautifully lyrical and detailed sound
- Option of 37W ultralinear or 17W triode mode
- Good looking and superbly finished

sound became even smoother and more texturally detailed, but the Verdi piece lacked a little impact and power, whereas the Loussier just felt even more as though the group was standing right in front of me. The perceived volume difference between the 37W of ultralinear setting and the 17W in triode mode was surprisingly small, the latter certainly providing easily enough power to make conversation difficult in a moderate-sized room. The change in power capability only really became noticeable when playing music with wide dynamic range such as large scale classical at reasonably high volume levels, so I found myself tending to favour staying in triode setting for the greater clarity and purity of the sound.

Working with a speaker of average efficiency, like the 89dB Castle Conway 3, proved no problem for the Stereo 40 in either mode setting, more than satisfactory volume levels being achieved with no sign of the harshness that can signal that an amplifier is having to try too hard.

Wanting to see just how hard this device could work, I removed two of the four 250W NHT monoblocks from the active satellites of the NHT T5 Towers (review coming soon), leaving the remaining two to drive the subwoofers, and hooked the satellites up to the Stereo 40. The amp still achieved surprisingly high levels, and

retained the level of finesse which I had begun to really admire in this unit. The inherent warmth of the valve sound combined with half a kilowatt potential of bass slam was enjoyable, if lacking some of the up-close touchability of the sound of the Stereo 40 working on its own.

I also tried using the Stereo 40 purely as a power amplifier, with the level being controlled by the pot on the EAR 834P. I found little difference in sound quality, the ALPS blue pot proving as transparent as its reputation suggests.

Although I have listened to several valve amps over the years since my Leak went out of use, and have lived with some very pleasant ones, this is the first one that has had all the timing, imaging and textural qualities that I used to enjoy so much, along with enough power to make it capable of competing with modern solid-state amplifiers in the range of speakers it is capable of driving. I liked the impeccable finish and feeling of bomb-proof solidity as well as some of the most natural sounding music that I have heard reproduced at home.

Unless you favour really inefficient speakers, or like a particularly lean sound, then I would recommend auditioning the Icon Audio Stereo 40 at the first opportunity. ■ **Tony Bolton**

