

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Valve Audio Genesis Balanced Pre-Amplifier
Valve Audio Black Widow Differential Power Amplifier

VITAL STATS

Genesis pre-amp

Frequency response 15 Hz – 75 kHz (-0,5 dB/-0,3 dB)
Signal-to-noise ratio 102 dB (below 2V RMS)
Inputs 3x balanced XLR stereo, 2x single-ended RCA stereo
Outputs 2x balanced XLR stereo, 2x single-ended RCA / channel
Dimensions 450 x 115 x 500 mm (WxHxD)
Weight 22 kg

Black Widow power amp

Power output (quantified) 250 watts per channel (8 ohms)
Frequency response 15 Hz - 45 kHz (-0,5 dB/-1,2 dB)
Signal-to-noise ratio 101 dB (balanced)
Inputs 1x balanced stereo
Dimensions 450 x 170 x 320 (WxHxD)
Weight 25 kg

VERDICT

Muscular, coherent and engaging performance from this all-SA duo.

PRICE

Genesis pre-amp	R59 250
Black Widow power amplifier	R39 750

SUPPLIED BY

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It's easy to underestimate the role of an amplifier (or, as in this case, a pre-amp and power amp) in the context of an audio system. Yes, the quality of the source signal is paramount. And yes, the loudspeakers move the actual air.

But with the combined agendas of signal gain and control, amplifiers not only play an equally vital role in the audio system chain, but also one that can have a profound impact on the overall performance.

Retaining signal purity through the various control stages is perhaps the greatest challenge, together with the ability to express scale and dynamic intent. And yet, experience tells us that amplification tends to introduce colourations and characteristics that may augment the listening experience, or detract from it.

The so-called smoother, warmer sound often (but not always) associated with valve-based components is lauded as 'real' and 'organic' by its protagonists, but ridiculed by those who

believe that solid state sounds cleaner, quicker and more neutral (which isn't always the case, either).

Under scrutiny here are two latest-generation designs from Valve Audio: the flagship Genesis pre-amplifier, and a new, fully differential execution of the legendary dual-mono, non-inverting Black Widow power amplifier.

I last reviewed a Black Widow more than a decade ago, and remember being hugely impressed by both the muscle and the subtlety of that power amp – a combination always hard to achieve. At that point, it was offered in single-ended execution only, and I pointed out that a balance option would not only benefit performance, but also better suit the high-end customers it was being targeted at.

Clearly, my views were echoed by enough would-be buyers for Schalk to revise the Black Widow. Or, let me rephrase that: at Valve Audio, the designs always remain works in progress, and product improvement is a continuous process. Thus, the Black Widow reviewed here reflects a good 15 years of ongoing development, of which the differential option is the most obvious.

Externally, the execution has also been upgraded, and with its all-metal construction, thick aluminium alloy faceplate, and substantial heat sinking, the Black Widow looks every inch the high-end audio part. In other words, build quality is to international standards (and then some).

This particular unit benefits from a Genesis-style faceplate to match the Genesis pre-amp in this system, but the differences are merely cosmetic, and relate to the faceplate only. Keeping it simple means the fascia is adorned by a round power switch and an LED indicator light only, with the latter flashing during the start-up sequence.

The rear confirms the Black Widow's fully differential status with the presence of XLR input sockets, together with substantial binding posts, and an IEC-style power input socket. The Black Widow can still be ordered as a single-ended design, too.

Under the skin, things get a little more interesting. As already mentioned, the design is now fully balanced, entailing a redesigned input stage employing a differential gain stage featuring two pairs of 6922 Gold triodes, with all the noise-reducing benefits this suggests.

Havenga specifies the 6922 for its combination of low noise, non-microphonic character and reliability, and tube life should be in the region of 15 000 hours.

The gain stage feeds the signal to a plate follower driver stage, which in turn directly drive the output stage, with its six pairs of complimentary MOSFETs. As we've come to expect, premium-grade components are employed throughout, while Havenga says that each component has a generous operating parameter in the interests of reliability and longevity.

In addition, the signal capacitors employed in the Black Widow are now exclusively Hovland MusiCaps, due to their smooth and musical rendering, says Schalk, while all signal and power supply circuitry applications feature resistors sourced from Precision Resistive Products (PRP). The massive toroidal transformers have a capacity of 1000VA.

Considering that every printed circuit board and wire connection is hand-soldered, you can be sure that some very specific, personal quality control is executed during the entire production phase. This is about as close to hand-crafted, bespoke hi-fi as you're likely to encounter in the modern audio idiom.

The Genesis dual-mono pre-amp follows similar design principles, combining classic tube gain stages with operating parameters determined by sophisticated solid state control circuitry, with microprocessor control allowing reliable ease of operation.

The gain stage features differential amplifiers employing eight JJ 6922 Gold triodes together with a constant current source each with PRP plate resistors. The result is a high-bandwidth, fully balanced gain stage.

Volume control is achieved via phase cancellation between the first two stages, in the interests of enhanced bandwidth. Each channel gets separate high and low-voltage transformers to optimise channel separation and ensure low-noise operation. The toroidal power transformers have a combined capacity of 480VA.

The exterior execution is elegant without becoming ornate, starting with a 12 mm scaled to 24 mm solid aluminium faceplate. The switchgear consists of power button, round source selector buttons, and a rotary volume control. The remote control echoes the overall commitment to build quality with a solid aluminium construction that oozes tactile appeal.

The rear panel features three sets of XLR balanced inputs, and two sets of RCA single-ended inputs, while there is a choice of balanced or single-ended outputs.

As it happened, the SA-produced and ultra-musical Sonor Audio Lyra floorstanders (reviewed in our June issue) were still in the AVSA listening studio when the Valve Audio gear arrived, and I thought that it would be the perfect opportunity to evaluate the amplification duo in an all-SA context.

Cambridge Audio's highly rated Azur 840C upsampling CD player provided the source signal, while Van Den Hul The First and The Second balanced interlinks were employed. Speaker cables were Audioquest Comet.

The system had been allowed to run for about 50 hours or so before listening commenced, but it's worth noting that the Valve Audio gear probably only reaches its optimum capabilities after about 300 hours or so.

Starting off with Dave Grusin's 'The Gershwin Connection' (GRP CD), the Valve Audio kit immediately showed off a muscular, powerful and regal character. The recording's rich lower midrange and bass can be challenging, but the delivery here was controlled and authoritative, with no sign of flabbiness.

At the same time, the Genesis/Black Widow gear was able to retain and express a fine web of musical and ambient detail. An open, spacious soundstage with loads of air allowed subtleties and nuances to be brought to the fore to full effect, while the ambience of the recording was faithfully retained.

Grusin's piano sounded just right, with the right hand's melodies and embellishments sounding liquid and articulate, while the left hand's power and rhythm had the perfect timbre and foundation.

I liked the substance and presence of the music as treated by this pre/power: there was a compelling sense of dimension and proportion, with a sense of scale and impact that made the performance come alive.

Tonally, those expecting the warm-and-fuzzy sound some would expect of valve gear will be disappointed. The delivery is smooth, yes, but the tonal treatment is neutral and accurate, rather than overly rich or sweet.

The lower registers sounded deep and majestic, the midrange smooth and creamy with just enough litheness to avoid saturation, while the trebles were clean and accessible, but certainly not rolled off or attenuated. Tonal progression was linear, and resolution across the frequency range impressively fine and detailed.

Moving on to another vintage recording, this time Øystein Sevåg's 'Global House' (Windham Hill CD), it was the air, the space, the dimension of the music that immediately struck me, together with an accuracy that underscored both the precision and musical credibility of the performance.

The Valve Audios were able to create a vast sonic landscape, giving the music the space and the scope to come into its own. Again, there was a lucidity to the overall performance that allowed the listener full access to both melodic and emotional content – from the intricate percussion to the substance and power of the pipe organ.

Of particular note here was the layered dimensionality of the recording, creating an immersive and thoroughly involving listening experience. Fine slivers of detail were precisely placed on the vast soundstage, highlighting both the accuracy of the delivery, and the total absence of noise from the soundstage, allowing those fine details to come to their fullest right.

That the Valve Audio duo isn't scared to rock and roll was proven by a Fleetwood Mac's 'Tango In the Night (Warner CD). They had no trouble making the most of the meaty bass, the thundering drums, the sizzling lead guitar, yet always retained the sense of composure and precision.

The layered vocals so typical of the band were superbly portrayed, allowing individual threads to be clearly identified. The tonal depth was again a particular highlight, with the bass not only reaching down extremely low, but also displaying a sense of texture that added to the overall realism of the listening experience.

That ability to reach into the tactile quality of the instruments was even more clearly illustrated by Yoyo Ma's hugely enjoyable performances on 'Soul Of The Tango (Sony CD). The rich texture of Ma's cello, set against the sexy, strutting tempo of the music was vibrant, exciting and ultimately compelling.

The power amp's muscle, although always in evidence through the control and authority it contributed, was never allowed to inhibit the flow and dynamics of the music. Instead it added to the flow and impetus of the delivery.

Regardless of what else I confronted the pre and power amp with – from the heavy-fisted krautrock of Rammstein to the emotional vocals of Sara K, and the searing blues of Tinsley Ellis – the duo remained steadfast in its ability to project the music with clarity and purpose, with a depth of emotional content, and with an articulate authority.

Whether you play this system at background levels, or turn up the volume high enough to rattle windows, the pre/power duo has an uncanny ability to retain its composure, while allowing full access to every facet of the music.

The Valve Audio Genesis pre-amp and Black Widow power amplifier are world-class components that deserve to be compared to the very best imported gear. Innovatively

conceived, and built with military precision, this is audio equipment of the highest order that every South African should be proud of.

Deon Schoeman

SIDEBAR:

OF NOTE

Valve versus solid state

The apparent disparity between tube and transistor-based designs is at the core of the amplification designed and produced by Schalk Havenga, proprietor of Valve Audio. The company consistently produces some of the best amplification products we've had the pleasure of listening to – despite the fact that it is proudly South African.

I say despite, because in a world saturated with brand perception and prejudice, South Africans tend to consider local as less than lekker.

As the name implies, Valve Audio's amplification products employ tubes, but not exclusively so. Rather, they reflect a hybrid design approach, in which the gain stages are valve driven, while the output stages are solid state.

In theory, therefore, the Valve Audio kit should provide both the lush tonality that tube adherents enjoy, and the speed, accuracy and dynamic intent associated with solid state.