

valve audio
Predator

Valve Audio's **200WPC Powerhouse**

By Jeff Dorgay

A few issues back, Marc Phillips told you about the Exclame from Valve Audio. An understated 100wpc integrated amplifier for \$1995, it's a killer package for audiophiles who want a lot of performance in a small package, but as they say on television: "Wait, there's more..."

A Lot More, As It Turns Out

Don't get me wrong, if you only need a 100wpc amp and your budget stops at \$1995, I won't make fun of you, the Exclame is a great choice. But, if you can stretch to \$3995, you are in for an even bigger treat. The 200-watt per channel Predator adds another big helping of power and control along with a balanced input to the mix. We always like to say, "power is your friend!"



I have been spending a lot of time listening to speakers in the \$2500-4000 range, targeted at the person wanting that amazing combination for under \$10k for a complete system. The Predator is my number one choice so far in that category if you are only concerned with audio performance. This price point is very competitive, and has a lot of excellent players in the game. Valve Audio is a newcomer to the US, distributed by Music Direct and made in South Africa, however they have been making amplifiers down there for quite sometime.

Not A Lot Of Bling, But A Killer Remote

And I mean that literally. Sharing the same massive remote with the Exclame, the remote control for this amplifier is very stout. Should you ever be the victim of a burglar, you could easily do major damage to another person with this remote! Or you can just chill and switch from CD player to your turntable; it's up to you. This is the only remote control that I've ever put a coaster on my Noguchi table for!

All kidding aside, the Predator puts all of the money inside the box. The face plate is a nice thick aluminum panel, but it is so understated that you might mistake it for a lesser piece of gear until you pick it up. This little bugger is really massive!

Opening the top reveals a huge power transformer and some very beefy heatsinks. Build quality is very good and there are a lot of decent parts lurking inside, for those inquiring minds that need to know.

Moving around to the back, we see high quality RCA jacks and speaker binding posts as well as a pair of balanced XLR inputs, and yes this is a fully balanced input. There are four additional single ended inputs, so you should be able to build a pretty big system around the Predator. Being a tape deck guy, I really appreciated the tape output jacks.

There was also a Shunyata power cord in the box, which I felt was a very nice touch.

Break In And Configuration

The Predator will not need a horribly long break in and sounds quite good out of the box. You will notice a bit of an opening up over the first 100 hours. The initial configuration for the review was with the DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Super 8 speakers, but I also moved in my Penaudio Serenades as well as the mini Stratas from AV123 and the newest version of the 805 from B&W. I used the Rega Saturn player on the RCA inputs and the Ayre CX-7e on the XLR inputs with excellent results. *(continued)*



The Predator puts all of the money inside the box...This little bugger is really massive!

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For those of you considering a phono preamp to go along with the Predator, I tried the BAT VK-P5 as well as the new Moon I-5 Phono Stage, both with balanced outputs, to keep noise at a minimum in the phono chain.

Pure Joy To Have Around

Because of space limitations, I need an integrated amplifier in my living room. There just isn't enough space for the big racks of gear I have out in the studio. The problem is one gets spoiled listening to the really good stuff, so a mass-market lump just won't do at the end of the day. After a few months of solid listening, I am as happy with the Predator as the day it got here.

The Predator has enough current drive to use with any speakers.

I have more than one set of speakers here that really need a solid-state amplifier to sing and the Predator did a fantastic job, no matter what I paired it up with.

A confessed lover of the tube preamplifier with a solid state power amplifier concept, the Predator has a sound that really appealed to me; solid, powerful bass with a nice airy midrange and high end. While there are a few disadvantages to everything being on one chassis, when well implemented like the Predator, you get the benefit of needing one less power cord and interconnect, as well as not worrying about amp/preamp synergy! The shortest path between amplifier and preamplifier is none at all! *(continued)*

Music just has more life to me with a lot of clean power on tap and that is one of my favorite things about the Predator.

While this integrated may not have the last hair of detail that a very expensive set of separates might, I dare you to find a separate amplifier and preamplifier (don't forget to add at least the cost of a pair of interconnects to the package) at this price that sounds anywhere near this good. The Predator is a great value and should make quite a few converts to the audiophile world.

Enough Power For Everything

The great thing about 200 watts per channel is that you should be able to listen to whatever you want without giving up dynamic range. This aspect is often overlooked, as volume is an important dimension of musical reproduction. There's just something about going from

a 50 watt per channel amplifier to 200 watts per channel, if everything is implemented equally well. Music just has more life to me with a lot of clean power on tap and that is one of my favorite things about the Predator.

Listening to some solo piano from Keith Jarrett's *The Sun Bear Concerts* took on a lot more realism than I had with my former integrated that only had 50wpc. Again, you can cheat this a bit, going for more efficient speakers, but with the new B&W 805's, they really need that extra drive to sound realistic. Spinning some of my favorite rock CDs also revealed that extra push over the cliff that makes this music more fun if you have the juice. The recent Megadeth Gold CD from MoFi was quite good indeed... *(continued)*

After spending a lot of time with the Conrad Johnson CA200, (also fantastic, but a lot more expensive) I found myself saying, "what if this had just a slight touch of tubey sound?" If your taste in amplification is just slightly to the warm side of solid state, the Predator might just be the answer to your quest. What I enjoyed so much about the Predator was that it was very easy to listen to for very long sessions and struck the perfect balance of having a very three dimensional, organic sound without coming across as dark or rolled off.

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I spent a fair amount of time doing the usual experimenting with cables and the like and found the Predator to be very user friendly as well. The sound is very musical and from the first

song you know there are some tubes in there somewhere; you won't mistake this one for strictly solid state!

The bonus is that the tubed input stage adds that bit of air and space that gives this piece its magic. Listen to a piece of solo vocals or acoustic guitar and you can really feel the texture. This is a major achievement at this price point!

A Realistic Approach To High-End Sound

The longer I listened to the Predator, the more I liked it. It got the thumbs up from all of my usual pals that like to come over and listen to the latest goodies. Our dyed in the wool vintage tube guy, Jerold O'Brien is ready to put half of his vintage Dynaco collection on Ebay to finance one of these, and I NEVER thought I would hear *that* guy wax poetic about solid state anything.



The bottom line is that if you are trying to put a great system together between five and ten thousand dollars and you would like an anchor that you can live with for a very long time, I can't suggest the Predator highly enough. If you want more buttons and flash, you might be better served elsewhere, but if you are dedicated strictly to the music, this one is a winner. Watch for this one in a future edition of Turnkey, on the TONE Audio Web site. We've been having a ton of fun building a few systems around the Predator and I think you will too. ●



MANUFACTURER

The Valve Audio Predator
MSRP: \$3995

**US Importer
MusicDirect**

318 N. Laflin Street
Chicago, IL 60607
800-449-8333
www.musicdirect.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Sources: Ayre CX-7e,
Rega Jupiter

Analog Source: Rega P9/RB1000/
Apheta cartridge

Phono Preamplifiers: BAT
VK-P5, Moon I-5

Speakers: B&W 805S, Penaudio
Serenade, Martin Logan Vantage

Interconnects: Cardas Golden
Reference (RCA and XLR)

Speaker Cable: Cardas Golden
Reference, DH Labs Q-14 Silver Sonic

Power Management: Running
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