



Retro royalty:
Neat Acoustics' Elite
Classic floorstander

Top notch:
Trafomatic Audio's Rhapsody
integrated tube amp



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 511

February 2024

HEADS UP!

GROUP TEST

We try on six of the
best new sub-£500
over-ear cans

**DON'T BUY
THE T-SHIRT!**

The bonkers world of
the avid music fan

**BUYING
GUIDE**
100+ Essential
Components
p107

SENSATIONAL

Wiim's Pro & Pro+
plug-and-play streamers

Classy Class A

Musical Fidelity's A1 integrated amplifier

**NEWS
EXTRA:**
Launches from
Klipsch, Meze,
Ortofon, Bryston,
Elipson, Pro-Ject,
Wharfedale,
& more...

**COMPLETE
PACKAGE**
System Audio's
Silverback 1
active wireless
music setup

**WORLD
CLASS**
Chord
Electronics'
BerTTi 'ULTIMA'
power amp



BEGINNERS' GUIDE
How to clean up the AC
mains powering your hi-fi

MINI MAESTRO



Bowers & Wilkins' 607 S3
two-way standmount

BLUES BROTHER



Jack White: All hail the
analogue empire builder

"NICE AND EASY"



The Cyrus Stream-XR
network audio player



£5.75
02
FEBRUARY 2024
9 770955 111144
PRINTED IN THE UK



DETAILS
PRODUCT
TrafoMatic Audio Rhapsody
ORIGIN
Serbia
TYPE
Integrated tube amplifier
WEIGHT
32kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
470 x 260 x 370mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power: 2x 20W
• Inputs: 3x line-level RCA; 1x balanced XLR
• 4x 300b and 2x 6SN7 tubes
DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds
WEBSITE
trafomaticaudio.com
absolutesounds.com

Beauty and the beats

The latest addition to Absolute Sounds' boutique 'Ten' range, the TrafoMatic Audio Rhapsody from Serbia is a lovely single-ended, 300B-based triode tube amp rated at a mighty 20W

Before we go any further, let's deal with that quite sizable elephant in the room. Yes, 20 grand is a hefty chunk of change to fork out on anything, let alone an amplifier. Get to grips with the TrafoMatic Audio Rhapsody, however, and you may start to think it something of a bargain!

Just its physical presence, a brace of 300Bs per channel, a thought-provoking weight of 32kg, sexy meters, myriad oddly labelled knobs and switches – this is the stuff to make even the hearts of jaded audiophiles skip a beat.

The Rhapsody is part of a massive range which includes six power amps, three preamps and two phono stages, eight integrated models of varying topologies including single-ended and push-pull designs, three headphone

amps and a handful of accessories. The variety shows that Serbia's TrafoMatic Audio isn't locked into a single amplifier type, the Rhapsody being a line-level-only 'Parallel Single-Ended' design. Aside from the need to add a phono section if you play vinyl, it's comprehensive by most standards, even including a remote control for playback levels.

Setup is pretty much a no-brainer aside from one set of toggle switches, which we'll get to in due course. Starting at the back, you'll see why, as everything is instinctive. From left to right, there is an earthing post, three pairs of phono sockets (charmingly labelled RCA 1, 2 and 3) and a pair of XLR inputs for a balanced source. The rather fine multi-way binding posts provide for both 4 and 8ohm loads, while to the far right are an IEC

socket and a voltage selector. Both sides of the beautifully finished, metallic vermilion-coloured chassis are louvred, the left side also containing the on/off rocker.

Seen from the front, the fascia sports a massive, scalloped rotary knob for volume, which is motorised for the remote. Next are two large, illuminated VU meters. Mirroring the volume control is another black rotary dial to choose from the three RCA inputs or the one balanced XLR in.

It's the top view that will tickle those who want more than the minimum. Across the back of the Rhapsody are three massive transformers, which – unlike too many – are housed in superbly anodised cases. Next comes the row of four Electro-Harmonix 300B power triodes, one parallel pair per channel, in front of which are two

6SN7s. In between the 6SN7s is a handy knob to adjust the VU meters' sensitivity, which will be useful if you change loudspeakers from say, super-efficient to substantially hungrier and the VU meter readings are either too low, or are continually smacking the end stops at the far right 'red end' of the scales.

What needs further explanation are the four toggles – one per 300B – marked 'Mesh' and 'Solid'. This refers to the type of 300B you are using. As the Rhapsody features auto-biasing, that's not an issue should you wish to change valves. Mesh versus solid is another matter entirely, referring to the type of anode. Mesh anodes handle less power than solid, so a mesh anode valve will be damaged if the switch is set to solid, as for the Electro-Harmonix 300Bs.

There's another reason why this valve-swapping facility will endear the TrafoMatic to those of a tweaky nature. As you will discover, the Rhapsody does not pray to the 300B SET hymn sheet in every parameter. Yes, it's sweet and warm, but equally it tends toward the more precise and analytical. Look elsewhere for the fat, soft sound used to tame certain horn speakers. Having heard the differences between assorted makes of 300Bs, and as the Rhapsody has no awkward cage to remove, enthusiasts might like to try vintage new-old-stock valves or even splash out on some of the more premium examples currently available.

One more thing. Aside from the usual instructions about warm-up, of which a minimum of 15 minutes is recommended, and the owner's



Well suited to our Exotica feature, the Rhapsody is as exotic as tube amplifiers come! With 300B tubes in their classic SE guise here (albeit with two in parallel to beef up the output) only a transformerless design would be more specialised. Its closest competition comes in the form of Western Electric's £17,000 91E integrated. This features just one 300B a side in a special 'SCS' circuit that offers a very similar power output to the Rhapsody. It has a BT facility too, and a sound that's not short on scale or authority. A little closer to home, and arguably more affordable, is the Stereo 300 MkII 300B integrated from UK brand Icon Audio. Yours for £4,000, this amplifier offers a solid 30W output, driving a wider range of speakers with a rich and robust sound.

manual warning against haste when changing valves, there is another nice touch with safety in mind. Supplied with the unit is a Perspex panel that slots into the front, the two apertures positioned just above each knob on the fascia. This is designed to prevent accidentally bumping into the hot-running tubes. As for space considerations, the footprint is 470 x 370mm (width x depth) and it's 260mm tall, but the latter is incidental: you will not want anything sitting directly above it.

300B triode amps will never be uber-powerful – the Rhapsody is rated at 2x 20W, though testing suggests a much lower real-world figure for mating to speakers. Sensitive speakers like the DeVore O/93 immediately spring to mind, and these are used for most of our listening, but we do also get to enjoy near-miraculous pairings with a legacy Quad ESL57 and the far newer PMC prodigy1, which seems happy enough in our 12x18ft listening room.

Sound quality

For testing we first select a copy of *Hit The Bongo! The Latin Soul Of Tico Records* on Craft Recordings, a double LP set with both mono and stereo tracks. Many of you might never bother with mono, but it proves useful when assessing any component, especially if you don't have a mono cartridge or a mono setting on your amp or preamp. You want a rock-solid central image regardless, which the Rhapsody effortlessly provides. More surprising, however, is the way it handles these incredible, Latin soul and jazz mono tracks, because one very quickly stops

thinking about the single-channel playback. But that isn't the main reason this compilation proves to be so revealing. The percussion which dominates much of the music from Tito Puente, Ray Barretto and others of that calibre has as much character as Kodo drumming, the sound here deep and massive.

Next up we audition an album of a completely different fettle – the soundtrack to the brilliant Jim Jarmusch/Johnny Depp Western *Dead Man*. The movie's score was created by Neil Young playing along to the footage and it's a pretty rough and dissonant recording, so what we want to find out is whether the Rhapsody can make it enticing enough to keep

Our first listening session runs for seven straight and utterly blissful hours

us listening despite all the drawbacks. Thanks to the amp's seamless, seductive presentation we duly sit through all four sides of the vinyl. Here, perhaps, we're transposing onto the designer Saša Čokić a possible leaning toward thrash, grunge or some other rough-and-ready genre, as this was recorded in 1996 when Young was hanging around with Pearl Jam. And yet this droning racket proves involving and hard to resist.

Turning to something less likely to require paracetamol, we call upon the sadly departed Loretta Lynn and a copy of *Hymns* on pristine open-reel tape. Given that there is a level of hell awaiting hi-fi reviewers, we opt to

INSIGHT



- 1 Earthing post
- 2 3x unbalanced RCA line-level inputs
- 3 1x balanced XLR line-level inputs
- 4 4mm speaker terminals connected to 4 and 8ohm output transformer taps
- 5 Left and right channel output transformers, housed in superbly anodised cases
- 6 Power supply transformer



SPEAKER SELECTION

In common with most tube amps – triode or pentode – the Rhapsody offers two sets of transformer taps to step-down the high voltage/high impedance output of its 300B power tubes in an effort to better match the lower impedance and higher current demand of the attached loudspeaker.

Specifically, the Rhapsody has 4mm outputs conceived to ‘match’ nominal 8ohm and 4ohm loads, even though, in practice, very few speakers provide this linear impedance. Instead, the amplifier ‘sees’ a load that swings up and down with frequency as the various reactive components of crossover and drivers come into play, causing the system response to rise with increasing speaker impedance and in turn fall with decreasing speaker impedance.

The severity of these response variations is determined by the magnitude of the swings in speaker impedance versus the source impedance of the amplifier (~2ohm from 20Hz-20kHz for the Rhapsody).

As the Rhapsody’s treble response drops away quite markedly via its 4ohm tap into 4, 2 and 1ohm loads, it is crucial to match it with speakers offering a ‘bright’ response, high sensitivity and a high, or increasing, HF load impedance.

For our listening tests we choose to partner it with the DeVore O/93 – this floorstander offers a useful 90dB sensitivity coupled with a load impedance that’s broadly >7ohm (20Hz-20kHz), has acceptable swings in phase angle of +54°/-60° through the bass and a thoroughly ‘driveable’ worse-case 3.1ohm/99Hz EPDR. The black trace shows the Rhapsody’s extended HF response via its 8ohm tap into a non-reactive 8ohm load while the dashed trace shows the response via the same 8ohm tap into the DeVore O/93.

These relatively modest ±1.8dB response variations, in the bass, will not be disruptive but the Rhapsody driving a tougher speaker via its 4ohm tap might look, and sound, very different indeed.

approach it in a secular mood, as it is, content aside, pure country music. Its star qualities are her crystalline vocals – almost a template for distaff Country and Western warbling – alongside the metallic attack of banjo.

While these are very much to be expected – and the Rhapsody proves as adroit with female vocals as with Latin percussion – we are entirely unprepared for the speed of the transients, the crispness of the plucking or the sound of the banjo’s vellum head. It’s so truly, convincingly authentic that we just have to hear it through speakers as sonically far apart as the Quad ‘57 and PMC prodigy1, and it remains consistently ‘real’ from speaker to speaker. We should add here that we play the tapes through the amplifier’s XLR input – easily worth the effort for

added impact in the low registers and quieter background silences.

Loretta is joined by a chorus on *How Great Thou Art* and a few other tracks. The multiple voices enjoy some of the most convincing grouping we could hope to hear, such that we wish the tape comes with a road map or floor plan. Whatever their actual location, they’re arrayed across the soundstage without that Viewmaster 3D flatness which compromises stage depth.

Having sampled the sacred via Nashville, we start to crave some more spiritual but orchestral music. So, as Christmas is in the air at the time of testing, we turn to a couple of open-reel tapes rife with choruses: the Columbia Musical Treasures Orchestra’s *The Magic Of Christmas* and Arthur Fiedler And The Boston Pops Orchestra’s *Pops Christmas Party*.

Even if you don’t tend to celebrate the pleasures of Noel, you’d surely have to be the biggest Scrooge going to fail to admit that these tapes are of superior hi-fi show demo quality.

Trafomatic’s Rhapsody ensures that we get to wallow in the room-filling, full-blown and mighty glorious orchestral readings of *White Christmas*, *Sleigh Ride* and *Santa Claus Is Coming To Town*, some wholly (or holy) instrumental, others with multiple voices to the fore.

What is not compromised, despite the Rhapsody eschewing lushness for the sake of it, is that silky sheen which

The multiple voices enjoy some of the most convincing grouping we’ve heard

endears SET designs to the faithful. The best way to describe it is an inherent antidote to listener fatigue.

Conclusion

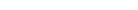
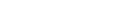
If there is any limit to this amplifier’s sheer command, it might prove to be the wattage, but that only affects your choice of loudspeaker. When paired with high-sensitivity models, the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody earns the most glowing testimony it’s possible to bestow on a product by simply stating one fact: our first listening session runs for seven straight, uninterrupted and utterly blissful hours.

At the risk of seeming a soft touch, our time with the Rhapsody is almost too rewarding. While its performance belies its power rating, that might still preclude hungrier speakers. Its operation is faultless, the facilities and ergonomics textbook perfect. Thus, we must acknowledge Saša Čokić’s mission statement: this amplifier is all about – and only about – the music. It is truly a *tour de force* ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Faultless operation; stylish design; superb sound

DISLIKE: Might preclude hungrier speakers; price

WE SAY: A quite astonishing amplifier regardless of the price

OVERALL

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★