



An integrated amplifier with a valve pre-amp stage and transistor output, fed by a separate power supply? An interesting concept from Italy's Audiozen, says Jon Myles.

Zen Thinking

Two box amplifiers are hardly new – separating the delicate pre-amp stage from the muscular power amp makes sense in terms of isolation, avoiding interference between the two.

Not so common is the approach Italy's Audiozen has taken with its Alchemy Reference combination. There's still two boxes – but one is a linear power supply while the other is an integrated amplifier.

Naim has long done this with its higher-end power amps – but doing it with an integrated is new to me. It keeps mains transformer hum fields in the power supply well away from the hum-sensitive valves in the preamplifier, giving a quiet output – so there's a logic here.

The integrated amplifier has a valve pre-amp stage utilising two NOS (New Old Stock) E88CC valves, allied to a transistor output to deliver a claimed 90 Watts per

channel into 8 Ohms and 170 Watts into 4 Ohms (see Measured Performance).

Inside the power supply box are three toroidal transformers dedicated to serving the separate sections. To connect the two units a pair of hefty captive umbilical leads are used to supply separate DC power to the pre-amp and power amp sections of the integrated.

The Audiozen combination is big – the main unit measuring 135mm

x 340mm x 295mm (H/W/D) and weighing in at 4.8kg. Not surprisingly, with its hefty toroidal transformers, the power supply box is even heavier at almost 8kg and measures 95mm x 340mm x 245 mm (H/W/D).

With the integrated amplifier section facilities are kept to a bare minimum – four analogue RCA unbalanced inputs on the rear alongside a pair of large 'speaker binding posts that will accept banana plugs, spades and bare wire. It's an amplifier for purists: no fripperies such as an internal DAC or Bluetooth module exist.

On the front there are rotary controls for source selection and volume, plus stand-by/on. In stand-by mode the valves heaters are kept on; switching On triggers a relay in the PSU that turns on HT and the power amp section. A supplied remote control gives full access to all the functions from across the room.

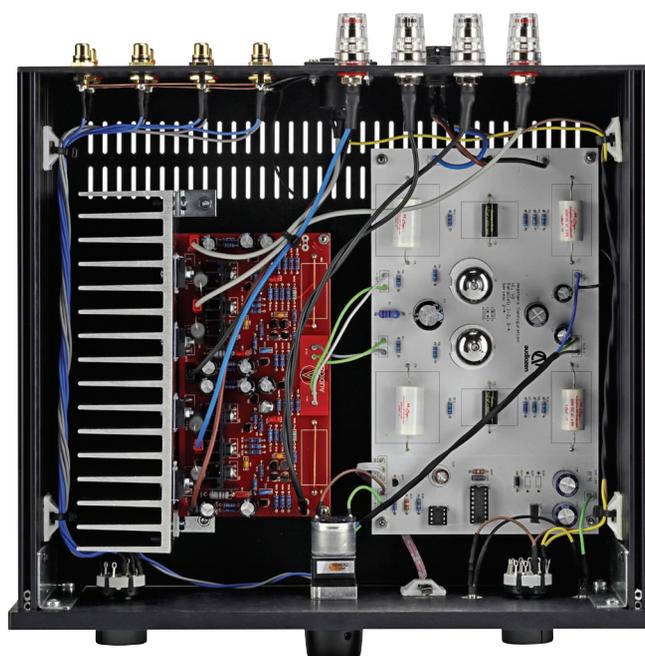
Build-wise the Audiozen is well-constructed with good, solid casework and a smooth feel to the

The Lightning Seeds' 'Pure' was rhythmically taut, having a bite to its jangling guitar parts and good depth to the sound. The Alchemy revelled in the up-front nature of this track, driving it along with verve.

Switching to The Fall's 'Live At The Witch Trials' the late and great Mark E Smith's voice had its distinctive Northern-infused growl – all flat vowels and biting cynicism.

Due to the valve pre-amp section I was expecting the Alchemy to bring some warmth to this stark album. But no, the Audiozen veers more towards a transistor-like sound, bringing out detail and digging deep in the bass.

That was evidenced on Charles Mingus's classic 'Pithecanthropus Erectus' where his double bass had plenty of body and a realistic tonality.



Inside, the amplifier uses a valve pre-amplifier stage (right) with transistor output stage (left). Note also Alps motorised volume control and mechanical rotary selector switches.

However, Mal Waldron's piano did sound a little edgy with a brittle feel at times.

Switching to a pair of Spendor A1 standmounts – which are more of a price match with the Alchemy and warmer than the Logans – proved a better match on this track. Now, that piano had a sweeter sound although the soundstage wasn't as big or all-encompassing as through the big American 'speakers.

The more I listened to the Audiozen the more its qualities came into evidence. Chief among them is its ability to latch onto a beat and sound big and punchy. There's more than enough power on tap at all times.

Led Zeppelin's 'When The Levee Breaks' made the Spendors shake the room with the volume control turned up just a few notches. The wailing harmonica flooded the listening space and brought a smile to my face as I just enjoyed letting the music envelop me.

It was similar with Deep Purple's 'Smoke On The Water' where the famous opening guitar riff sounded like a sledgehammer – as it should.

However, on Arvo Part's more delicate 'Tabula Rasa' via a typically well-produced ECM recording I couldn't help but feel the delicacy and nuance needed to get the best from this gentle piece went a little



The rear panel of the Audiozen amplifier main unit has four analogue inputs (right) plus the two captive power supply sockets at the bottom.

rotary controls. Because of the size, though, you'll need a big rack to accommodate both units. In theory they can be stacked but – as the design is based around keeping the power and amplification sections apart – I'd recommend using separate shelves which is what I did during the listening sessions.

For the £2750 asking price you are getting a lot of hi-fi real estate for the money – an amplifier that looks like it should cost a good deal more. But facilities are few.

SOUND QUALITY

Connected to a pair of Martin Logan's Impression ESL 11A hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers (see review in this issue) and fed via an Oppo UDP-205 universal disc player the Audiozen immediately made an impression with its open sound.



E88CC valves are employed for the pre-amp section. Audiozen sources new old stock (NOS) tubes for this.



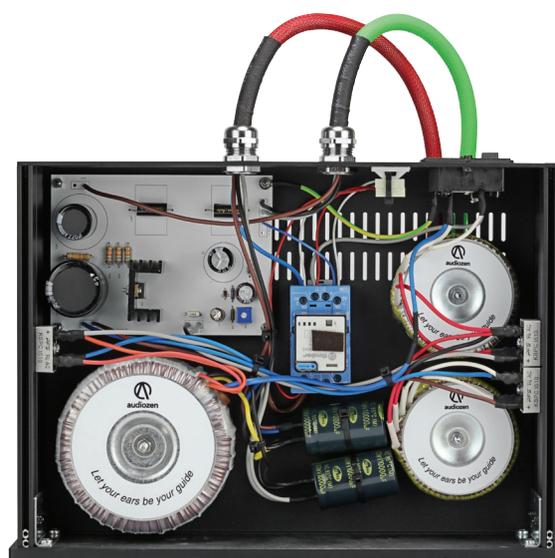
A basic remote gives access to all functions.

astray. Gidon Kremer's violin and Keith Jarrett's piano were there but didn't quite seem to gel together as much as you'll hear from the likes of an Icon Audio Stereo 30SE integrated valve amplifier.

There was nothing wrong but a certain lack of atmosphere and nuance about the whole – rather more clinical than it should be with the violin not quite having the resonance I'd want.

It was as though the Audiozen was telling me it wanted to rock and not stroll (sorry!).

But put back into that rock mode with Joy Division's 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' its qualities came to the fore again. Bernard Sumner's guitar kicked out from both the Spondors and



The Audiozen's power supply unit uses large custom-made toroidal transformers to provide steady DC current.

Martin Logans while the punch was back with Peter Hook's bass line. Yet again, the Audiozen was back to its foot-tapping best and motoring along,

making me want to turn the volume up – which I did!

So, in the final analysis this distinctly different Audiozen amplifier won't be for everyone. But I couldn't help liking it for the things it does well and the way it goes about its business. That said, I'd recommend you audition first before deciding.



The captive leads attach easily to the rear of the PSU.

CONCLUSION

This is an interesting amplifier from Italy's Audiozen. It is powerful, able to drive most loudspeakers with ease and provides a foot-tapping sound. At times it can lack a little finesse but if you like its overall presentation then that can be overlooked. Careful 'speaker matching, though, is recommended to be sure it suits your tastes.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Power from the Alchemy measured 112 Watts into 8 Ohms and 182 Watts into 4 Ohms, so this is a powerful hybrid that can go very loud in any system and room.

The Alchemy produced second harmonic distortion attributed to the valve sound that seemingly came from its valve preamp stages.

But not so. It got stronger as the power amp was asked to deliver more power. With steady input to the preamp (200mV) distortion from the output stage increased steadily, reaching a high 2.2% (-1dB below full output). But when output power was held constant at 12W and input to the preamp changed, distortion stayed constant at 1%, showing that the transistor power amplifier produces strong second harmonic distortion – perhaps to give a 'valve sound' in Audiozen's view.

Although purely second harmonic our analyser showed, 2.2% distortion is high.

At high frequencies (10kHz) the Alchemy gave a similar result with no extended harmonics – it doesn't suffer aurally unpleasant crossover distortion.

Distortion at 1W of 0.2% and full output of 2.2% from the transistor output stage doesn't look good on paper; how it affects sound can only be judged by listening.

Input sensitivity was very high at 100mV for full output; the Alchemy will jump to high volume at a small twist of the volume control. It also suits low output sources like low-gain phono stages. Noise was low at -85dB (IEC A weighted) considering gain.

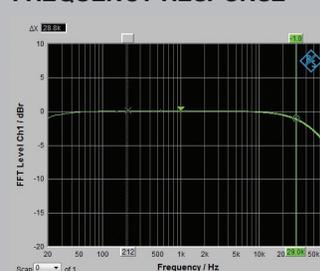
Frequency response reached 30kHz at half volume setting (5 on a scale of 10) as shown, broadening a little at lower and higher volumes.

With lots of power and very high gain, this amplifier will seem powerful to a user. Its distortion characteristics suggest unusual design likely to give a distinctive sound. **NK**

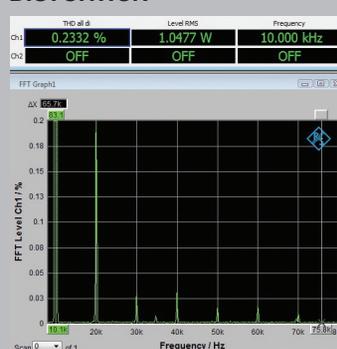
Power	112W
Power Frequency response (-1dB)	20Hz-30kHz
Distortion (10kHz, 1W)	0.25%
Separation (1kHz)	97dB

Noise (IEC A)	-85dB
Sensitivity	100mV

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



**AUDIOZEN
ALCHEMY
REFERENCE
HYBRID
INTEGRATED
AMPLIFIER/
AUDIOZEN
ALCHEMY PSU
£2750**



EXCELLENT - extremely capable

VERDICT

The Alchemy revels in up-front tracks. Lacks some nuance but makes up for it with overall performance.

FOR

- big sound
- styling
- rhythmic ability

AGAINST

- best with rock
- careful loudspeaker matching needed

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