



Icon Audio's new Stereo 845 PP integrated amplifier is eye catching. Jon Myles dons his Ray Bans.

Light Fantastic

People often say there's nothing new in the world of hi-fi. Icon Audio's tube guru David Shaw is obviously out to prove those people wrong.

How else to explain his latest flagship integrated amplifier, with no fewer than four massive 845 tubes?

Over the years the Leicester-based company has established a well-deserved reputation for

producing well-engineered, hand-built valve amplifiers at real-world prices, using mainly tried-and-tested circuit designs. But their latest product is said to be a world's first – a pure triode stereo integrated amplifier using the mighty 845 tube.

These directly-heated triodes were originally designed by RCA in the 1930s and pressed into service in cinema amplifiers and AM transmitter modulators.

They're big, high-voltage and also operate at a high bulb temperature – which is why you don't find them in many domestic products. And certainly not integrateds.

The inspiration for the design came from the success of Icon Audio's MB 845s – a pair of monoblocks that, as the name suggests, similarly use the beefy 845 tube.

Icon Audio say they realised

many customers loved the sound of the 845 valves but didn't have the space for two large monoblocks and a pre-amp or, indeed, need the power on offer.

So whereas the mighty monoblocks push out some 110 Watts per channel, the valves in the Stereo 845 PP integrated operate in a more relaxed manner with a quoted power rating of 40 Watts. But as David Shaw points out, that should be enough to drive most

Additionally, a high/low input level switch on the back alters the amount of feedback and the amplifier's gain. Sensitivities of 1V (low gain setting) and 400mV (high gain setting) are offered which should cover most needs. Low gain is the setting that applies feedback and this is the default, Icon say, because technically at least the amplifier performs best with feedback, as do all amplifiers. With feedback off you get not only higher gain, but a tad more bass and

paired with an Audiolab M-DAC, the 845 PP showed it was capable of delivering an expansive soundstage with a wonderfully rich and realistic timbre.

Playing Berlioz's 'Symphonie Fantastique' there was a lovely sense of body and scale that belies the 40 Watts per channel output. The 845 are able to ascend from near silence to thundering instrumental crescendos with apparent ease and gave a lovely flow and feel to the music as well. There's no evidence of the flabby bass and blunted edges of some other integrated tube amplifiers – merely an inherent rightness and body to the instrumentation.

Turning to Joe Zawinul's classic 'Live At Birdland' and the sheer sensuous nature of the music is a joy to hear. The multifarious instruments were locked together in harmony, each occupying its correct place in the overall musical landscape and with just the right tonality. What's more you can hear the exuberance in the musicians' performances as well as the whoops and hollers of the audience as the performance grows in intensity.

Switching to something more contemporary with Nick Cave's 'The Lyre of Orpheus' and the big 845 tubes bring a palpable sense of realism to the vocals – Cave's deep sonorous tones portrayed with just the right amount of menace.

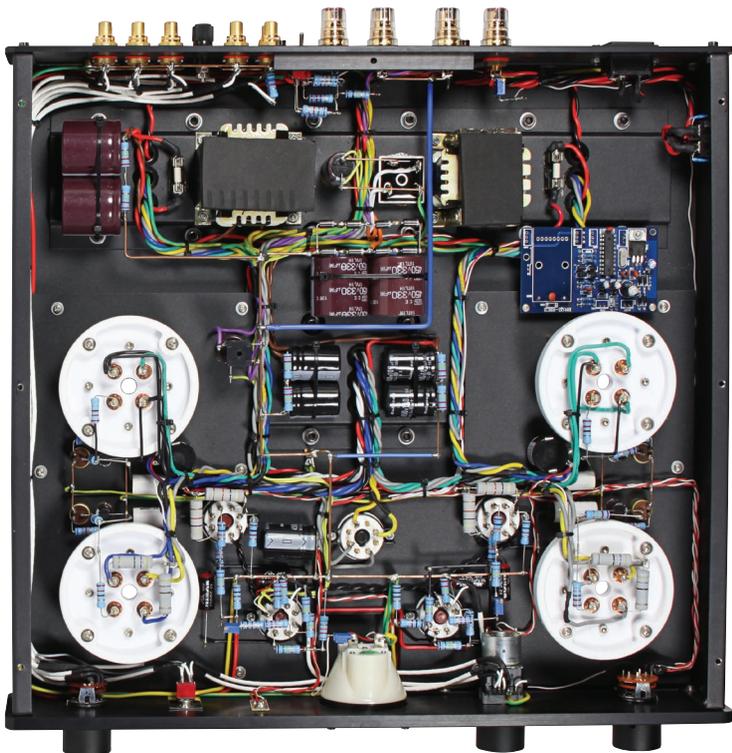
Although smooth, there's also a crispness about the presentation that means the Icon Audio never tips over into the realm of blandness.

That quality brings a rhythmic snap to more up-tempo music such as New Order's 'Bizarre Love Triangle'. Here Bernard Sumner's guitar had a clear edge to the leading notes while drums and bass pumped along with total conviction.

There might not be quite the bass authority or overall grunt of a big, powerful transistor amp but the 854 makes up for that with a rather more musical and less mechanical sound.

All this was achieved with the 'speakers connected via the 8 Ohm taps. Moving over to the amplifier's 4 Ohm connections and there seemed to be an ever-so-slight softening of the sound with the stereo image losing a little focus. It's not a night and day difference but enough to make individual experimentation advisable.

The same goes for the feedback



loudspeakers to decent levels – the difference between 100 Watts and 40 Watts is only 4dB in terms of power.

The amplifier is a push-pull design utilising four matched 845 valves, a pair of 6SN7 first-stage valves, two 6SL7 output drivers and a GZ34 driver-stage rectifier.

The valves all come packed separately but slide easily into the high-quality and well-labelled holders.

A meter on the front panel allows for easy biasing of the four 845s, as well monitoring power output. Internally the amplifier is all hand-wired point-to-point with silver plated, pure copper PTFE covered audio cable and it uses an ALPS volume pot.

Four line-level inputs are fitted, as well as Tape in/outs. A solidly built remote control alters volume and applies mute and a Plexiglas cover can be fitted to keep prying hands or errant pets away from those hot valves.

a slightly more open and airy sound.

Build quality and finish are exemplary in true Icon Audio fashion and, as you'd expect, once in situ there's an undeniable satisfaction in switching on and seeing those big 845 tubes spread their glow around the room. This is a big amplifier though, weighing a hefty 35kgs, and measuring 440mm wide, 400mm deep and 240mm high without the cover.

SOUND QUALITY

Icon Audio's David Shaw says the Stereo 845 PP provides a warm, luxurious valve sound allied to real bass power. It doesn't take long into the initial listening session to understand exactly what he means. Those eye-catching 845 tubes don't just look big – they sound big too.

Hooked up to our resident Quadral Aurum Wotan VIII loudspeakers and spinning CDs through a Cyrus CD8t transport



setting. Personally, I preferred the high setting – but yet again this will be very much a matter of personal taste and, in some cases, partnering equipment.

Speaking of which, the Icon Audio has more than enough resolving power to delineate between high-definition tracks and Red Book CD.

Feed it some source recordings of the highest quality and the 845 throws out a holographic soundstage that wouldn't fail to bring a smile to any music lover, I feel.

Playing a 24-bit/96kHz recording of organist Iver Kleive's 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' recorded in Bergen Cathedral was breathtaking. All the power and texture of the organ were captured vibrantly within a wonderful sense of the cathedral's acoustic space. Call it a cliché – but, yes, you could close your eyes and imagine yourself being there.

And that's the beauty of the 845 PP. It

can transport you to an organ recital in a far-off cathedral or, if you prefer, recreate the ambience of a smoky jazz club with John Coltrane blowing away on stage or it can get down and dirty with the likes of Led Zeppelin.

So much so that at times I found myself abandoning critical listening and just enjoying the music. It's that kind of an amplifier.

CONCLUSION

Make no mistake, the Icon Audio 845 PP is a truly exceptional amplifier.

The big 845 tubes are not easy to implement or work with (see Noel Keywood's box-out) but they do have a seamless, fluid and eminently musical sound.

And that's exactly what you get with the this new integrated. Whether you prefer jazz, rock or classical the Icon Audio will make it sound vivid, alive and thoroughly realistic.

Yes, it'll set you back a penny short of £6,000 – but if you are a true music lover you'll find it's money well spent.

Just turn off the lights, bask in the glow of those jumbo-sized tubes and then lose yourself in the music.

NOEL SAYS -

The bright glow of big 845 valves is an arresting sight – and this amplifier has four of them. 845s glow brightly because they consume a lot of heater power – 30 Watts each. Run valve heaters like this from an ordinary transformer and it will overheat, so an independent heater transformer is needed. The Stereo 845 has two mains transformers as result and the heater transformer has no fewer than six windings, four of them for the 845s because each one must have its own 10V@3A winding.

The big 845 anodes run from a 750V line, rectified by diodes, and the preamp valves run from a 250V line rectified by a GZ34 valve. In all, both transformers feed no less than nine individual power lines. Big valve amplifiers like this one invoke power station engineering!

Happily, the Stereo 845 doesn't just look good, it also sounds good. Big 845s are beasts to use in a design, but when driven properly they are a sonic delight, as well as rugged and inexpensive. **NK**



MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Stereo 845 produced 40 Watts into 8 Ohms and 36 Watts into 4 Ohms, so it has been load matched for 8 Ohm speakers. It was fairly linear, producing around 0.1% distortion at a few Watts output into an 8 Ohm load. Into 4 Ohms distortion measured around 0.2% but since harmonics were mainly second and third order this is no big issue. Distortion

levels were at their lowest with feedback in, meaning Low Gain on the rear panel sensitivity switch (that alters feedback) and results were good all round.

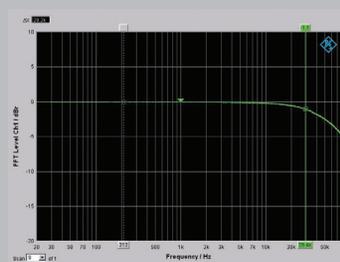
Frequency response extended to 34kHz (-1dB) with feedback on and altered little with feedback off, higher frequencies due to the wide open-loop response of the transformer.

With feedback on (Low) sensitivity measured 1V, a low value but adequate for silver disc players. With feedback off (Hi) sensitivity rose to 400mV for full output.

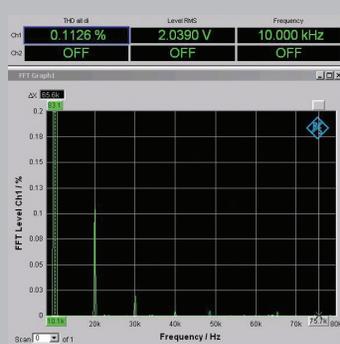
Feedback also affects output impedance and damping factor, and with feedback on (sensitivity at Hi) damping factor measured 5.6. With feedback off this fell to 2.

The Stereo 845 gave a neat set of figures under measurement. Building amplifiers like this is difficult and results were good against what is expected from 845s and against other valve amplifiers in general. **NK**

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



Power	40 Watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	3Hz-30kHz
Separation	84dB
Noise	-105dB
Distortion	0.15%
Sensitivity	1 / 0.4V
Damping factor (Low/High)	5.6 / 2

ICON AUDIO
STEREO 845 PP
£5,999



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

Gorgeous, liquid valve sound with decent power and a holographic soundstage. Demands to be heard.

FOR

- flowing musical sound
- superb stereo imaging
- easy biasing
- looks superb

AGAINST

- runs hot
- large and heavy

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