

Sonic Iconic

Leicester-based Icon Audio has updated and improved upon its original, valve-based, headphone amplifier. Paul Rigby reviews the enhanced HP8 Mk II.



Icon Audio's HP8 MkII has been a longstanding favourite for those looking for a quality valve headphone amplifier. The great news is that this successful design has now been upgraded. Utilising the same 12AX7 and 6SN7 valves (despite the deceptively different glass casing shape), the chassis has been enlarged (excluding buttons and sockets) to 160mm x 275mm x 160mm from the original 155mm x 255mm x 140mm while the weight has increased from 5kg to 7kg. The increase in chassis size provides more room for component layout, helping to lower noise, while half a dozen circuit design improvements also bring potential sonic benefits. The new power supply transformer is also larger with a tweaked design, hence the extra weight. Another reason for that is the slab of copper

that sits on top of the chassis adding aesthetic and damping benefits while the rear adds a pair of inputs, providing additional connectivity options.

This is an all-analogue unit with no on-board digital conversion. Valves drive an output transformer with three switched settings: High, Medium and Low output. Our measurements show output was extremely high by transistor headphone amplifier standards: the HP8 MkII easily drives any 'phones. Beside the output level is a volume control. In between are a power switch and a 1/4in headphone jack.

The earlier original design was also confusingly called the HP8 Mk II (henceforth referred to here as the 'old' design; coke bottle-shaped valves identify the newer, upgraded design).

SOUND QUALITY

I began with the jazz vocal of Dakota Staton and the original issue of her Capitol LP, 'Round Midnight'. Our

tests flagged up the HP8 MkII's high gain and output and I can confirm this as my hard-to-drive Sennheiser HD800s were easily handled by the Icon even at the Medium (M) setting via the Output selector on the front of the chassis.

Sonically, the differences between the new/old HP8 products were evident from the start and the cause was initially down to instrumental separation.

Before Staton launched into her performance, both the strings and clarinets alternated during the introduction. The original HP8 MkII presented each instrument as singular entities whereas the new HP8 told me that there was, indeed, a group of violins and a group of clarinets present during this sequence. In addition, the playful piano accompaniment exhibited air and space while the occasional harp excerpt provided a rich and full presentation.

As for the vocal? Staton had a clean, calm delivery on the new HP8, enhanced by a delightful, subtle reverb. A reduction in noise also benefited the sound. For example, there was noticeable sibilance during the performance which could only really be properly corrected during mastering yet during the line "Supertime I'm feeling sad" the measure and ferocity of that sibilance was vastly reduced to more acceptable levels.

Playing the 10" disc of Rootmasters' self-titled 10" EP and the rather bizarrely titled tracks 'Elephant Puddle' and 'Book of Hours [Autolump]', I was struck by the open and airy nature of the synth sweeps while the vocal samples had a new accuracy and improvement in diction, as opposed to the slight smearing from the older unit.

Bass, although not etched, honed and punchy in solid-state fashion, was still deep and massive in terms of size and weight. There was a distinct

gravity to the bass on this track that acted both as a foundation to the guitars roaming above it, and also a driving force behind the rhythm.

I was most impressed by the dynamic extension within the upper midrange frequencies and the treble. This enhanced clarity not only provided added detail but also gave the entire track a breezy sense of freedom. I never felt that the performers were being held back or restricted in any way.

On a more orchestral level, I turned to the original soundtrack of the spaghetti western film 'Django' by Luis Bacalov from 1966 and the relatively brief mood piece 'Town

caverns, adding to the eerie nature of the presentation of this instrument. Strings offered a more naturalistic flow, a 'sighing' effect that almost indicated a feeling of emotional loss.

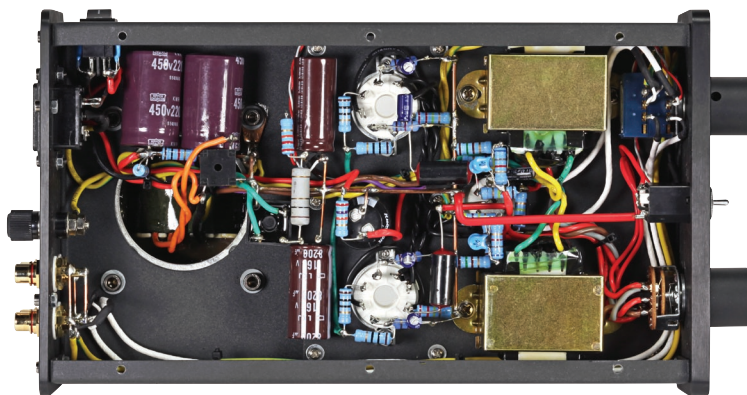
CONCLUSION

The added mechanical features are useful and welcome but the HP8 really scores in terms of its enhanced sound quality over and above the original design. The lower noise floor increases both clarity and transparency and opens up the entire midband to increase both emotion and tonal realism, while giving the soundstage a relaxed air, allowing music to flow in a natural manner.



The 'coke bottle' shaped valves utilised in the new iteration of the HP8 MkII

A Signature Edition of this headphone amplifier, with upgraded output capacitors and valves is also available for an additional £155.



Internally, you can see the unit's output transformers at right. It is hard wired too – there is no circuit board.

SYSTEM USED

- Origin Live Sovereign turntable
- Origin Live Enterprise 12" arm
- Transfiguration Proteus cartridge
- Leema Essentials CD player
- Icon Audio PS3 phonostage
- Aesthetix Calypso pre-amp
- Icon Audio HP8 Mk.II (original release)
- Vertex AQ & Atlas cabling
- Sennheiser HD800 headphones
- Kimber Axios headphone cable

of Silence' which features strings, a portentous piano, a plucked guitar and secondary percussion.

Again the difference in sound quality was immediate and quite stark, the plucked guitar exhibiting a large amount of reverb that appeared to carry on for some time while the sinister piano backing now appeared to be emanating from the deepest of

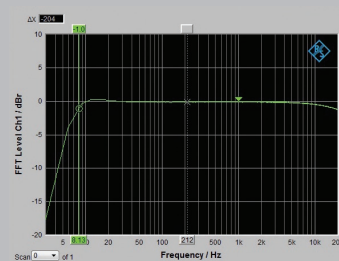


The new edition headphone amplifier adds a pair of Inputs to the rear to form a loop.

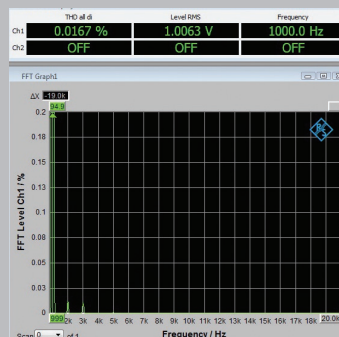
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The HP8 MkII has high gain and very high output, as is possible from valves

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



working through an output transformer. Set to High (H) it was capable of a massive 27V out (1V is very loud) and the gain is x34, or 31dB. Medium (M) gave 15.6V out and gain measured x20, 26dB, whilst Low (L) would be fine for most headphones with its 8.8V maximum output – more than enough for any headphone available – and x11 or 21dB gain. A small 100mV input would give 1.1V out - very loud.

Frequency response extended from 8Hz to 18kHz at all three gain settings. Noise was low at -90dB and so was distortion too, measuring 0.01%.

The HP8 MkII has sufficient gain and output to cope with all situations and all headphones; it measured very well all round. NK

Output (H/M/L)	27/16/9V
Frequency response	8Hz-18kHz
Separation	88dB
Noise	-90dB
Distortion	0.01%
Gain (H/M/L)	31/26/21dB

ICON AUDIO HP8 MKII HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER STANDARD EDITION £699



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

Effective and welcome improvements in both design and sound quality.

FOR

- low noise
- airy midrange
- dynamic extension
- new inputs
- cooler running

AGAINST:

- nothing

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