

Choice EXOTICA ICON AUDIO STEREO 845 PP
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER £5,995



Bottle fed

Icon Audio's thumping new Stereo 845 PP integrated amplifier has got one hell of a lot of bottle, reckons **David Price**

Who remembers the early thirties? They contributed a lot to the world in which we live now. From Edward Elgar opening Abbey Road studios and the debut of what went on to become the Royal Ballet, to the issuing of The Highway Code and the pound coming off the Gold Standard, things would never be the same again. Meanwhile, in the United States, things were moving apace too – and in one little corner of RCA's factory, a new and rather remarkable thermionic valve began manufacture.

The 845 power triode started life as a radio transmitting vacuum tube; physically large and with an

impressive anode dissipation of 75W, it ran 1,250V on the anode no less. The thoriated tungsten filament – which glowed like a light bulb – was powered at 10V and 3.25A, so any transmitter that ran a large complement of them was always going to make the lights dim! The same goes for hi-fi amplifiers too, as the 845 went on to make excellent audio tubes. And now in 2014, the Icon Audio Stereo 845 PP shows how.

In a word, it's a showstopper. Whether you love, hate or simply don't care about valve amps, there's no denying the effect that one of these sitting on your sideboard has. As well as putting it under mortal

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Icon Audio
Stereo 845 PP

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
35kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 240 x 400mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power 38W RMS per channel (8ohms)
- Class A triode front end, push pull output
- 4x 845, 2x 6SL7, 2x 6SN7, 1x GZ34 valves
- Power amplifier direct option

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strain (it weighs a whopping 35kg, and actually feels heavier), it will soon warm your room. It also has another function, which is to amplify relatively low, line-level signals up to the level that will wake up your loudspeakers – and depending on what they are, your neighbours too. This is no shy, retiring violet of a valve amp then, rather in tube terms it's the stormtrooper of the apocalypse, ready to ram its 38W (claimed, but totally believable) of power right up the back of your sofa!

To maximise its power potential, the Stereo 845 runs in push-pull mode, telling us that it is not one of the more specialist, far-out valve amplifiers. Other configurations such as single-ended give what tube aficionados would say is a sweeter, easier and more expansive sound – at the expense of vanishingly low output power, so horn-loaded loudspeakers are called for. The Stereo 845, however, is more of a valve amplifier designed to fight it out in a modern solid-state world; you won't need to change your speakers or suddenly start listening to simple acoustic music with no bass to keep it happy.



are used, along with a GZ34 driver stage rectifier. Two separate 10V AC heater supplies are provided, a separate power supply for the driver circuit, which uses a valve rectifier and another choke.

The Stereo 845 is certainly built well, but then again so it should be at £6,000. Still, the finish isn't quite as good as some price rivals, both tubular and transistor. For example, the Audio Research VSi60 or 75, whose prices the Icon Audio straddles, and the Musical Fidelity AMS35i, seem swisher. The Icon Audio amp's copper top plate is lovely, and copper isn't cheap these days, but some of its black powder coated steel casing parts aren't as classy, and nor is the front panel switchgear.

It is lithe, but has a vast thump down south like the audio equivalent of a JCB

Sound quality

Valve amplifiers are normally especially sensitive to the loudspeakers they are being used with, but in the case of the Stereo 845, it seems far more sure-footed. Showing precious little fear of any loudspeakers I pair it with, from Yamaha NS1000Ms to Sonus faber Olympica IIs, it's one of the few I've reviewed over the years that sounds genuinely powerful and gutsy. But those hoping for it to be as transparent as a transistor amp shouldn't hold their breath, because it is quite coloured. So much so that you might say it stamps its sonic personality all over the music, like a giant walking over your front lawn.

This is a bold and characterful amplifier, but in a very good way.

It might not come as a total surprise to learn that the Stereo 845 is warm sounding, although in fairness it's never gloopy and syrupy, with a bass like it is walking through treacle. Instead it is fast and lithe, but still has a vast thump down south, seeming like the audio equivalent of a JCB. It's pleasingly sumptuous but never sounds overblown in a well balanced system. For example, the walking bassline on Black Uhuru's *Party Next Door* is a delight with my current reference Sonus faber loudspeakers doing a passable impersonation of a PA stack at Glastonbury.

Moving up to the midband, and the Stereo 845 doesn't lose much warmth, although it does dry up slightly. Everything gets a nice, rosy glow, meaning that recordings that were previously viewed as a little acerbic – like The Bodines' *Scar Tissue* – suddenly seem to calm down and chill out. There's never any sense of the sound being laser etched out right in front of you; instead you're drawn into this wide and deep soundstage, with a lot of the action going on behind the plane of the speakers. Things hang back a little, yet it is so expansive that you still feel quite immersed in the proceedings.

It's a lovely sound, no matter what sort of music you like. It gives a beautiful clarity and ease to even some of the most uneasy human voices – like Bob Dylan's for example. *Highway 61 Revisited* is a lot less strident than normal. There's no doubt that this is a wonderful power valve to have driving your speaker cones; it's so clean yet warm in a way that almost all no other valves are. Yes, like lesser tubes it is coloured, ▶

Many smaller valve amplifiers have self-biasing, using resistors to set the cathode voltage correctly, but the sheer size of the 845 valve means that four resistors dissipating about 20W of power each would be needed – making for lots of wasted power and heat. That's why Icon Audio has fitted a bias meter, which helps users to manually set the biasing, as well as warning if a valve is on the way out – something you won't know about with a self-biasing system. Seasoned valve sorts will know this is the right way to do things.

The Stereo 845 follows Icon Audio's general best practice – which means a rigid steel chassis into which good quality low distortion, tertiary wound output transformers are bolted, and these are potted to reduce noise. High quality passive components are used throughout, including Solen/SCR capacitors, with the option of Jensen copper foils. Silver-plated copper internal wiring (all hand wired, point to point) is used, along with a Japanese-sourced ALPS volume control. As well as the four Psvane 845 valves, two 6SL7 first stage valves and two 6SN7 output driver valves

It might not be the best-looking valve amp, but it'll warm your room up

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

David Shaw
Icon Audio founder



DP: Why make an amplifier using 845 valves?

DS: It's a challenge and they make superb music! The 845 valve is in a class all of its own. It's big, reliable, relatively cheap and fairly easy to drive. Its curves are very linear and has four times the power of the 300B. Designed in 1932 in an age when function was more important than form, it belongs to a class of primitive directly heated triodes, which are not far removed from the old light bulbs! Like the RCA 2A3 and Western Electric 300B. These for various reasons, possibly due to their simplicity, all have superior sonics. Their better linearity than modern designs gives them the ability to give the same results at low and high signal levels, and coupled with a lower impedance enables a simple amplifier to give superb results.

Would you describe it as a tube amp for the transistor generation?

Well, the majority of 21st century speakers have become very inefficient and power hungry, and arguably people's expectation of sound levels have got higher. So for many, a 20W valve amplifier is just not enough. This is where the 845 fits in; it still makes an excellent audio driver valve for transmitter use, but as a true audio valve is possibly more relevant today than ever. It has sonics in the same league as the 300B, but is capable of higher power output. It's big, it gets hot and is difficult to design around due to its high power and voltage demands. It also demands both power and output transformers to be very large and of high quality. In my humble opinion it is the finest sounding audio valve available. Less mechanical and more fluid than modern designs, what's not to love?

How is it different to Icon Audio's MB 845 monoblocks?

The basic circuit is the same, but modified for lower power. I wanted to make a more refined version offering an integrated solution for driving more efficient speakers or smaller rooms, yet retaining the essential elements that set the 845 apart from more common or garden valves.

IN SIGHT



- 1 845 power triode
- 2 6SL7 first stage valve
- 3 GZ34 rectifier valve
- 4 6SN7 output driver valve

HOW IT COMPARES

When you're comparing valve amps, there are several things to consider – what type of circuitry, what tubes are used and how well it's done. The Audio Research VSi75 (£7,500) is similar as it's a powerful push-pull design, but uses KT120 tubes, and is superbly built and finished. The 845 tube has a bigger, warmer, richer and more powerful sound than the KT120, which sounds faster, feistier and thinner – more like a solid-state amp. They're worlds apart, so an audition is essential – but both are very powerful and true objects of desire. The only unequivocal thing is the superiority of the Audio Research's finish, and the slickness of its user interface.

but it's far more resolute and detailed sounding, and doesn't make the music descend into some sort of audio comfort blanket. It's got more warmth and guts than a 300B, yet a sort of KT88-like get-up-and-go; in other words it's a perfect combination!

The treble is lovely. Suddenly, cymbals played through even a top quality Class A solid-stater like the aforementioned Musical Fidelity AMS35i seem a bit steely and scratchy. Also, they don't time as well; the filigree hi-hat work on Rush's *Subdivisions* sounds more like it's being played on a drum machine on lesser amps, whereas the Stereo 845 seems to flatter the sound of both Neil Peart's vast drum kit and his playing. The Icon Audio has an easy sound – rather like a large Harley Davidson motorcycle, it just never seems to break into a sweat. No matter how complex the music gets, it just shrugs it off and keeps playing.

Even at high volumes, it displays grace under pressure in practically any living room, although ask it to power the school disco and you'll find it loses its sophisticated demeanour pretty sharpish. Running up to fairly high levels in a largish room with medium sensitivity speakers, it sounds powerful and assured – it's just that you can't push it as far as a solid-stater. There's also something that never leaves you – that coloration. It's lovely, but if we're honest it shouldn't be there and

makes the amp less able to pick out the tonal differences between recordings and even instruments. Some solid-state purists will find the bass just slightly slurred too; it is magnificent, but it doesn't switch on and off with the speed of an LED.

Conclusion

This is a lovely thing that bestows luxury and a sense of specialness on its owner. It oozes character and its own unique charm – making a sound that virtually no other amplifier can. However, don't expect it to be the last word in openness, subtlety, speed or clarity; others do better here. Still, most Icon Audio Stereo 845 PP owners simply won't care; they'll fall in love with what it does best, which is to make some of the most sumptuous sounds around ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Fat, sumptuous, silky sound; power
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing, if you like this sort of thing
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Magnificent, mellifluous sounding and mad!
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL

