



Icon Audio's latest Stereo 25 integrated amplifier offers valve sound at a new low price. Noel Keywood tries it out...

New Entry

The popularity of valve amplifiers has grown strongly worldwide over the last ten years. But they still have drawbacks; price is too high for many and power too low as well. The best way to tackle low power is to use a high sensitivity loudspeaker, meaning a decent floorstander. The issue of price is a little more difficult. The solution manufacturers adopt is to head East and manufacture in China. And that's where Icon Audio source their latest attempt to produce a valve amplifier anyone can afford, the Stereo 25 priced at just £499.

For this modest sum you get an equally modest amount of

power, 25 Watts per channel from a pair of EL34 output pentodes running in push-pull. This is a classic arrangement and a safe choice too because the EL34 is an inexpensive valve in plentiful supply.

What to make of 25 Watts? It's fine providing you don't have a small bookshelf loudspeaker or something exotic like an electrostatic that you want to drive really loud, as loudspeakers like this usually need lots of power. By way of contrast a modern floorstander like the Monitor Audio PL300 I review in this issue produces a massive 90dB and nearly blew me away with the Stereo 25 connected. So this amplifier's modest power isn't necessarily a

drawback, depending mostly on the loudspeakers it is used with. Icon Audio have a valve amplifier friendly loudspeaker in their product range, the £995 MFV3 and the £340 Q Acoustics 1050i we tested last month [*Hi-Fi World*, November 2008] is a good choice too, being as sensitive as Monitor Audio's PL300 but a little less expensive!

Budget it may be, but the Stereo 25 is nicely put together. It has a polished stainless steel chassis and the control knobs feel solid and rotate smoothly. Weighing just 15kgs it is relatively light too, an easy lift by valve amplifier standards, if not by those of Class D. Compact dimensions enable it to be placed on

a 12in shelf and a width of 32cms and height of 22cms allow it to fit into most set ups. There are three sets of inputs with a rotary selector to choose between them. Measurement showed sensitivity was high, so just about any source can be handled natively, except LP.

The rear panel carries phono input sockets, plus heavy duty loudspeaker terminals that accept 4mm plugs, spades or bare wire. There are 8 Ohm and 4 Ohm output options. Only the power switch, situated at rear on the left side of the chassis could be awkward to use.

Switch on is silent, a small blue LED lighting on the front. The glow of the filaments is just visible and for those who want to see more the top cover lifts off freely, as it is unsecured.

The Stereo 25 uses what is termed compound bias. It self adjusts to accommodate differences between valves but needs occasional adjustment; Icon Audio suggest it is checked yearly [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE].

Although not quite as compact as a solid-state amplifier the Stereo 25 is fear-free and no more intrusive; just as it should be for this sort of entry-level product. It looks a lot more interesting of course, especially with the top cover off. But does it sound like a valve amplifier?

SOUND QUALITY

Spinning Phil Collins 'I Don't Care Anymore' on a new 200gm vinyl LP had drums sounding tight and impactful with a hard, fast edge to them that emphasised speed. There was plenty of body to Collins' voice but it was timbrally a shade lighter than I know it, shrinking chest size by an inch or two. Horns opening the next track had a good solid blare, cutting out of our Spendor S8e loudspeakers strongly - I jumped just a little. I know this opening sequence well and it was a little larger than life from the Stereo 25. Impressive, that's for sure, but not quite as I know it from a valve amplifier, but then this is classic EL34 sound, light, bright, fast and detailed. Cymbals were forceful and rim shots fired from the loudspeakers with menace.

Switching our Pioneer PLC-590 turntable to 45 rpm. Amy Winehouse's 12in single 'Tears Dry On Their Own' had firm, tuneful bass that reached down endlessly, it seemed. I ran the Stereo 25 alongside a Sugden A21a Series 2 that was icily clear but made the Spendors sound bloated at low frequencies, whilst the Icon amplifier told a completely different story. It isn't usual for a valve amplifier to sound both fast and

fluid in its handling of bass lines and drums yet the Stereo 25 proved to be unusually lithe in its presentation of lows, although never too heavy.

Dropping back to 33rpm for Duffy's 'Rockferry' brought a little weakening of the rich textural patterning within her vocals, exchanged for slightly more specific enunciation it seemed, but again I wasn't overly convinced about this swop. However, spinning Goldfrapp's 'Supernature' CD on a Yamaha CD-S200 clearly pinpointed just what the Stereo 25 was doing well. Rasping synth jumped from one loudspeaker whilst bass pulsed deeply between them and Alison Goldfrapp's vocals hung clearly between; it was a sharply outlined and dynamic presentation that would startle anyone expecting a nice soft valve sound. The Stereo 25 has real punch, combined with good control and it sounds dramatic with material like this.

The Stereo 25's strengths translated well when it came to handling Classical programme. Violins were brightly lit but well picked out as the Royal Philharmonic played the Prelude, Act III of Wagner's Lohengrin. I was impressed by the way basses grumbled deeply in the background whilst horns blared triumphantly in front of them. There was a good sense of space around instruments, convincing stage depth and a nice spread of cleanly defined instruments in a large assembly between the loudspeakers. The Stereo 25 is not so much svelte as controlled and vigorous - and it maintained this presentation across a broad swathe of classical programme.

CONCLUSION

The Stereo 25 strikes me as a classic EL34 valve amplifier. As I said earlier it has a fast delivery that will not be a shock to anyone transferring from solid-state. There's more depth to its sound than solid-state can muster and surprisingly lithe and expressive bass that will appeal to Rock fans and Classical music buffs equally. I'd



have liked a broader tonal palette; as it stands the Stereo 25 matches solid-state amplifiers here perhaps, but doesn't show what a good valve amplifier is capable of.

The delightful smoothness and liquid clarity of a good valve amp - qualities that those coming to valves may be hoping for - isn't really available either. Perhaps I am too wedded to the silky but expensive 300B valve, or overly impressed by the clean, punchy KT88. EL34s never quite did it for me, but I have heard them sound very good, albeit in an amplifier considerably more expensive than the Stereo 25.

So Icon Audio's budget amplifier is good as it stands; it is exciting, squeezing about all you can expect from valves at this very low price. There are, inevitably, technical limitations, in the transformers I suspect, so the full benefits of a valve amplifier aren't quite there. All the same, it offers an interesting alternative to transistor amplifiers, with tighter bass and stronger dynamics, and that may be good enough for all those unwilling or unable to spend more.

VERDICT

Worthy budget valve amplifier that gives a flavour of the breed, if not the full experience!

ICON AUDIO STEREO 25 £499

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FOR

- fast sound
- decent dynamics
- compact and attractive
- super value for money

AGAINST

- limited power
- opaque sound

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Icon Audio Stereo 25 produces 25 Watts only if a high 3% distortion figure is used. Using a more conservative 1% figure the Stereo 25 manages just 7 Watts. The reason for the dramatic reduction is that the amplifier distorts steadily by slewing, almost certainly due to its budget output transformers, behaviour that produces third order and higher odd order harmonics. This isn't ideal by any means and it usually adds a glassy edge to the sound, although some like the sense of incisiveness that prevails, identifying it with 'speed'. At low power though the Stereo 25 is relatively linear and distortion free, so its sound is very power dependent. Bias on our sample measured 6.6V against 7V recommended and I found 8V gave slightly better linearity so the amplifier was run at this bias voltage.

Sensitivity was high at 210mV and hum very low at 0.5mV. Noise (hiss) was also low. A damping factor of 4 is reasonable and bass distortion kept in check providing 5 Watts or so is drawn. Frequency response was wide and flat within the audio band.

The Stereo 25 has limitations; it lacks the low levels of distortion that better output transformers bring. However, used conservatively with sensitive loudspeakers it should sound clean and open. NK

Power	25 Watts
Frequency response	6Hz-32kHz
Separation	76dB
Noise	-98dB
Distortion	0.12%
Sensitivity	210mV
Damping factor	4

DISTORTION

