

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Icon Audio Stereo 60 MkIII Valve Integrated Amplifier

By Roy Gregory

**T**his is not your normal review. In fact it's a strange sort of hybrid, part think-piece, part product assessment. And the problem with that is keeping those two competing aspects in some sort of balance. On the one hand I'm suggesting a general approach that, if it works, could (should?) deliver a different upgrade path or system architecture – one that offers extremely high returns in terms of musical value. On the other, I'm looking at a product that fits that mold, but also offers exceptional value in and of itself. Would the approach work with other amplifiers? Yes, I believe it would. Does the amp work in a different (more traditional) context? Yes it does – although there's no escaping the benefits you'll gain by treading the path described here. Either way, it's worth keeping both sides of this particular story in mind...

With the veritable tidal wave of Chinese sourced product hitting these shores, it's no surprise that they've got most of the bases covered – all save one. For some (to me completely inexplicable) reason, I can't seem to find a single valve power amplifier that embraces both the "high value" and "high power" tags. You want flea-powered triodes? No problem. You want tubes the size of milk bottles? Likewise, no problem. But if you want a hundred Watts of load-tolerant, push-pull, affordable power – now that's a problem...

With a hi-fi history that includes the considerable commercial success of amplifiers like the ARC D70 and D115, the Beard P100 and any number of Conrad-Johnsons, you'd think that someone would have recognized the very real world appeal of a valve amp that's actually capable of handling most musical demands on the majority of loudspeakers. Even given the dubious influence of audio fashion, this seems like an oversight of near Nelsonian proportions. No ships? Not so much as a rowing boat. And that despite the clear evidence (in the shape of various integrated amplifiers) that these self same designers and manufacturers are not only aware of the appropriate tubes and circuit topologies, they know very well indeed just what to do with them.

The problem is that budgetary sensibility so often prevents the use of just such a high-value solution with really top-flight (for which read "expensive") speakers, whilst in ultimate terms, the performance will also suffer from the quality of the line-stage built into these products.



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW / ICON AUDIO STEREO 60 MKIII VALVE INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

All of which got me thinking... Why not take advantage of the opportunity offered by just such an integrated design to see just how much performance might be wrung from it if driven by a serious source and line-stage? Why can't a high-powered, integrated amp act as a sensible stepping-stone to greater things, its basic control stage doing the job until something better can be added? As an exercise, the potential options it opens up when it comes to building higher value systems with greater versatility (and accessibility) more than justifies the effort, whilst who knows, it might just encourage a few of the slightly more adventurous brands to offer either a power-only version of just such an amp – or at the very least, a set of power-in sockets!

Imagine my surprise then, to discover that in fact, just such an animal does exist, even if the manufacturer isn't exactly shouting from the rooftops about the fact – or promoting what might be termed the power-mode of application. Enter the Icon Audio Stereo 60 Mk III, a designed in the UK, built in the Far-East product that actually offers a genuine 'power amp' mode, with a rear panel switch that drops the input sensitivity, so that you can connect the output of a line-stage directly to the tape inputs and wind the Stereo 60's volume pot to max\*. Which would be irrelevant if it didn't also promise the requisite sonic excellence, and in this respect the Icon amp is definitely a stand out. Let's survey the high-points:

- Push-pull, ultra-linear output stage which, equipped with Tung Sol KT120 output tubes should be good for 85 Watts of predominantly Class A output.
- Hard-wired circuitry – generally assumed to sound better than PCBs, although that might well be because it encourages manufacturers to keep things simple.
- High quality transformers built on Japanese EI cores.
- Over-engineered, choke-regulated power supply.
- 6SN7/6SL7 driver and phase splitter valves, mounted in ceramic bases.

Which, taken *en masse*, pretty much ticks all the necessary boxes. Less obvious are the inclusion of Teflon insulated silver for all the input wiring, OFC copper for the transformer windings and the very tidy internal construction. The "copper plate" on the chassis is actually anodized aluminium alloy – which doesn't discolour the way pure copper does, while having a similar sonic benefit, bringing a little extra focus and harmonic purity to the sound. Whether that's down to mechanical/damping effects or something else entirely, designer David Shaw is reluctant to guess, but he's not going to ignore the advantage just because he can't explain it – which I for one find refreshing. He goes further to state that pure copper would sound slightly better, but cost and practicality rule it out.

Add to that a passive 'pre-amp' section built around the extremely cost-effective ALPS blue volume pot and you've got a potentially worthwhile starting point in the control stakes, and one that's not eating too much of the budget (or sucking on the power supply). The unit itself follows the traditional tubes front/transformers rear layout and comes with a practical and attractive (well – everything's relative) valve cover. Front panel controls switch the unit on and from standby to full-power, as well as setting level, source and allowing you to run the tubes in triode mode if the fancy takes you. There are three main inputs

and a tape input, as well as a pre-out (which is best used for connecting to a tape deck, or possibly a second power amp in a bi-amped system if Icon ever release such an animal).

In addition, there's also an upgrade (or "Signature") package that adds Jensen paper in oil caps and superior Full Music 6SN7/6SL7 tubes to the circuit – and £330 to the otherwise £2,000 price tag. These modifications were included on the review unit and add to the appeal of the Stereo 60 as an amp to grow with your system. With that scenario in mind, I inserted the Icon Audio unit into the 'second system' at home, positioning it between the EERA CD player and a pair of Spondor SA1 loudspeakers – examples of genuine budget esoterica, products whose performance really can defy their cost and give a glimpse of the stars. Is there a chance of a power only version of the Stereo 60? Again, according to David Shaw, you can special order the amp without the ALPS pot but you gain very little: you still need a 100K resistor in its place, and there's no saving in cost, so why not have the passive switching as insurance against a rainy day? One response might be that the amp would look nicer without the controls, but what price aesthetics?

Initial listening, with the EERA CD player up front, feeding the CD input of the Icon revealed a big, powerful and capable amplifier, with most of the expected attributes coupled to a nice sense of overall musical and rhythmic integrity. It might not have offered the most immediate sound or sense of presence, but everything was in the right place and hung together, making music engaging and enjoyable. In search of greater resolution, I substituted the Wadia 861SE for the EERA, which did improve levels of detail but did nothing to banish the subtle, veiled softness that lay across the performance.

Time to ring the changes, first step being a switch to the low-sensitivity input on the Stereo 60 Mk III, fed from the Wadia's own variable outputs. Normally speaking, I've always preferred to run the signal out of the 861 at full level – but that's when it's connected to a high quality line-stage. In this case the effect was both instant and dramatic. Taking Art Pepper's *Smack Up* as an example, there was far greater immediacy ▶

The distinction between a lower sensitivity and an attenuated input is important when it comes to sound quality. Dropping the input sensitivity actually eliminates the need to attenuate the input level, but also reduces the amount of attenuation applied to set level – a genuine win-win situation. Listeners are often seduced by the "My amp goes really loud without turning the volume control" syndrome, equating volume with power. In fact, the opposite is true and excessive sensitivity just results in excessive attenuation – or, in other words, a whacking great resistor across your input!

▶ and presence, the instruments becoming crisper and their lines and phrasing clearer. The tempo took a step forward too, injecting a sense of spring and controlled energy into what had been a slightly lazy step. The double bass started to emerge as an independent influence and the snap of the snare was far quicker and more insistent. But the real difference was just how much tighter the band sounded. There was a greater sense of acoustic space and greater transparency and focus, but there was more musical space too, which is far more important. Now, the undulating, plaintive solos of 'Las Cuevas De Mario' soared above the rock solid rhythm work, carried on the underlying urgency of the stabbed piano phrases and supporting percussion. Fed via its own passive line-stage, the Icon had left you with the feeling that this track in particular could (and should) have been a lot dirtier. Bypassing the volume control delivered stark confirmation of that fact, whilst also demonstrating just how much the power amp's performance is eroded by the presence of the passive control section employed. Shorn of that buffer to musical expression, the system really started to click, in turn allowing the band to find its groove.

Time to introduce a pukka line-stage, in the shape of Pure Sound's transformer coupled L300, one of the most affordable truly top-flight musical performers that I've come across. But the question here is double edged: what can the L300 bring to the system and how effectively can the system (more particularly the Stereo 60) reveal the L300's real qualities. On the first count I needn't have worried. Adding the Pure Sound line-stage to the signal path immediately moved the listener much closer to the performance. A disc like the Philharmonia's live Enigma Variations gained a dramatic sense of presence and atmosphere, both musically and acoustically. The sound of



the instruments and the orchestral perspective were both far more natural, with tonal separation bringing a clarity to the structure and interwoven strands of the playing, underpinned by the improved spatial definition. Put bluntly, it was much easier to hear who was doing what and where and when they were doing it. Which includes the audience – the coughs, rustles and fidgeting between passages took on a far more distinct and identifiable quality, stepping in front of the speakers and placing you right inside that audience, further adding to the dramatic atmosphere of the recording. The result was to bring the concert venue right into the listening room, allowing you to forget the immediate environment and immerse yourself in the performance.

## BUT HOW DOES IT ACTUALLY SOUND?

The short answer of course, would be "That depends" – not least on the choice of line-stage, but even driven directly from the Wadia, the Stereo 60's essential qualities still shine through. This is a big, bold, energetic and purposeful performer that projects music with a real sense of substance and presence. In fact, it offers all the attributes I expect from the breed, with musical and dynamic coherence well to the fore. If the amp has a weakness it's in terms of ultimate resolution and headroom – but then 90 or so Watts will only ever be 90 Watts, so expecting limitless power is unrealistic. What you do get is a much greater sense of power than you might expect, down to the combination of enthusiastic dynamics and sheer substance. Bass is deep, solid and capable of surprising shading and texture, providing the foundation on which the amp's unflustered musical clarity rests. Going solid-state at this price will generally offer greater transparency and detail, as well as a more defined or etched presentation, but the secret with the Stereo 60 (just like all its ancestors) is not the amount of information but what it does with it. Actually, there's more real detail than you might at first think, but its very integration makes it less obvious than the high-def competition. The result is music with a natural warmth and dimensionality, impressive impact and long-term listenability. Yes, you can get greater transparency, immediacy and resolution – but not in my experience, at this price; at least not combined with this level of musical communication and satisfaction. The Stereo 60 delivers music to savour, rather than sound to dissect – which is just as well, given its ability to grow with your system. ▶

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW / ICON AUDIO STEREO 60 MKIII VALVE INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



▶ And what a performance... With the L300 quite calling the tune, the music gained a sense of poise and grace, stability and authority that had been quite missing previously. And the louder it got, the more obvious that became, the system able to transit the most demanding crescendos without strain or cramping. The timp rolls and pizzicato playing in the strings that are such a feature of this piece were brought vividly to life, with real texture to the drum skins, of pluck and release to even the most muted of the string parts. That and the newly apparent acoustic space speak volumes about the increased definition at frequency extremes and the control of bandwidth instilled by the L300; exactly what you'd expect from a decent line-stage. The effortless musical organization and grace under fire are just the most obvious aspects.

There's no doubt that adding the L300 to the mix reveals just how capable the Stereo 60 Mk III's power amplifier really is. Just like putting Lewis Hamilton at the wheel of a Ford Fiesta, it's surprising just how much he can get out of a modestly priced car. But also like Lewis Hamilton in a Fiesta, there's no escaping the fact that he could go even quicker given a higher-performance vehicle – and this system has finally started to outgrow the Stereo 60. In absolute terms, it's now the narrowest gate in the path; you don't quite get the vivid drama and presence that the L300 is capable of in the best systems, the almost unstoppable sense of power and drive. But delivering that is going to cost you way, way more than the price of the Stereo 60 Mk III – an amp that's far from disgraced even in this company.

Repeating the exercise with the EERA and Raidho or Sendor speakers, but this time employing Tom Evans' Vibe in place of the L300, just reinforced the lesson, the superior musical qualities, control, authority and resolution of the Vibe really raising the system's game, whilst also showcasing the amp's ability to get a grip of speakers with more representative electric characteristics and sensitivity. Even the C2s, which place a heavy premium on the quality of partnering equipment, responded with gusto to the energetic attentions of the Vibe/Stereo 60 Mk III combination.

I set out with an agenda and questions to answer and the Icon Audio Stereo 60 Mk III has proved a willing respondent. This exercise has underlined in no uncertain terms the following facts of audio life:

- The one place you can't afford to scrimp in a system is the line-stage (and I'm sorry, but even the best passives or auto-transformer units don't cut it).
- Affordable power amps can perform surprisingly well in even quite exalted company.
- When it comes to power amps, the tube-based 100-Watt push-pull stereo chassis is definitely a price/performance sweet spot.

The Stereo 60 Mk III is a great example of the breed. It combines the

ability to project music with real presence, energy and enthusiasm with surprising levels of subtlety and resolution, once you feed it a good enough signal. In stock form, used as an integrated amp it's a good but not brilliant performer that certainly won't disappoint. But that passive control stage needs to be viewed as a stop gap, one that will get you by until you can afford something better (or get you by when your "something better" misbehaves).

Icon's clever implementation of the power-in facility makes the Stereo 60 Mk III a real wolf in sheep's clothing. As a versatile and affordable unit that will grow with a system it knows few equals and in these value conscious days that makes it a pearl almost beyond price. +

### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Valve Integrated Amplifier

**Valve Complement:** 2x 6SN7, 2x 6SL7, 4x KT120, 1x OD3

**Inputs:** 4x line-level single-ended (RCA)

**Input Sensitivity:** 350mV (line) 1.2V (low sensitivity power input)

**Outputs:** 1x tape, buffered

**Rated Power:** 85 Watts/Ch into 8 Ohms

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 440 x 230 x 400mm

**Weight:** 33kg

**Price:** £2,000, £2,330 (Signature Version as reviewed)

**Manufacturer:** Icon Audio

**URL:** [www.iconaudio.co.uk](http://www.iconaudio.co.uk)

**Tel:** +44 (0) 1162 440593

