

Icon Audio ST40 MkIIIm



The 'm' variant of the long-running Icon Audio Stereo 40 series has a small front panel meter so that the user can easily check and adjust the bias applied to its four KT88 output valves. This can also be used to show the output level – averaging the two voltages at the 8ohm speaker terminals – which is arguably less useful. Since the switchable negative feedback is also taken from this point, these are the outputs used for my listening tests, with the sensitivity set to low.

The Stereo 40 is very well specified with three line-inputs plus a proper tape loop, a remote volume control, a low power 'standby' mode and a switch for triode or ultralinear configuration of the KT88s. I used the latter which offers roughly double the output power with little change to the sound quality.

An interesting technical point is that the 6SL7 input stage and the two 6SN7 drivers are powered by a big 274B rectifier in the centre. In common with most modern amplifiers the output stages still have their needs met by conventional silicon diodes, however. In common with the Ming Da MC368-BSE [p43], point-to-point wiring is used throughout.

POWER FOR POP

In my setup, the response yielded by the Stereo 40 seemed to be a bit 'up and down' with the Level 42 track,

RIGHT: Icon's 'm' series is distinguished by its combined bias adjust / power meter. Our sample was fitted with KT88s



bass was heavy and vocals vivid but the lower midrange sounded slightly 'sucked out', as did the extreme treble. In practice, this turns out to be a fair balance for much rock and pop music where the Stereo 40 comes across as a strong and lively performer able to make good use of the available power. Its mains transformer does get rather hot after a few hours of use, however. Stereo imaging and soundstaging was similar to that offered by the Pathos, centred about each speaker.

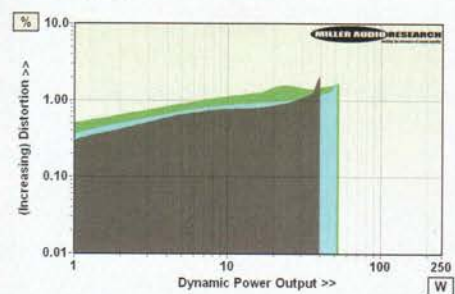
A presence lift raised Katie Melua well clear of her backing group even if her voice wasn't quite as silky sounding as with the Mystère. But if you prefer your music with a crisper edge then this may well be more to your taste. And even if Mahler's strings could not match the drama of Melua's vocals – they could seem slightly lost – the sound was always smooth and detailed.

Sound Quality: 80%



HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Evidently, while Icon Audio was retrofitting its ST40 mkIII amplifier with an integral bias meter, numerous other 'tweaks' were implemented. This new version is actually very slightly less powerful than its forebear, its power output almost precisely matching its 40W specification into 8 and 4ohm loads under both continuous and dynamic conditions up to 2% THD (the ST40 mkIII offered a little closer to 45W). More importantly, the amplifier's response has been 'flattened', up from -2dB/20kHz to -1.1dB/20kHz into 8ohm, and hugely extended into the sub-bass from -1.7dB/5Hz to +0.25dB/5Hz here. Its performance into variable loudspeaker loads also benefits from a reduced output impedance of just 0.75ohm – a worthwhile drop from the ST40 mkIII's 3ohm. Another indication that the ST40 mkIII's feedback has been tweaked is suggested by the reduced 0.35-0.75% distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W) and the substantially improved 94.4dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW). Stereo separation is also boosted by a good 20dB over the older model. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<2% THD, 8/4ohm)	40W / 40W
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	40W / 40W / 51W / 54W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.75-1.05ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.1dB to -1.1dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/40W)	155mV / 1080mV (Low sens mode)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/40W)	94.4dB / 110.5dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.35-0.75%
Power consumption (idle/Rated o/p)	222W / 320W
Dimensions (WHD)	390x210x410mm



LEFT: Three line level inputs and a tape loop, plus outputs for 4 or 8ohm loudspeakers. The small switch near the centre sets the overall gain to either high or low by altering the feedback