

Three & Easy

Icon Audio seem to have made the affordable valve amplifier market their own with products such as the Stereo 40 integrated. Tony Bolton tries out its latest incarnation, the mark III...

AudioNote Ongakus they are not, but since the company's inception in 2000 Icon Audio has gained a reputation for good budget valve fare. Basic yes, but effective and in some cases quite worrying for some more expensive tube products on the market. It was products like the Stereo 40 that did this. It's not a show stopper, but then again it costs less than many mainstream mid-price transistor designs.

It's been through two previous incarnations, the second being an altogether larger machine than the original, (and, at 23kg, weighing 7kg more) boasting remote control for the Alps Blue Pot volume control and white bodywork. The 12Ax7 and 12AU7 input and phase splitter valves were replaced with a 6SL7 first stage valve and a pair of 6SN7 valves for phase inverting. These have been retained for the Mark III model you see here, and supplemented by the introduction of a valve rectifier, using a Western Electric 274B valve (the big one in the centre). This is not an insignificant tweak...

Less visible changes from the previous model are the introduction of tertiary output transformers, where the transformer has a third extra winding, which allows it to compare the input and output, and to "null" distortion. According to the manufacturer no global feedback is used within the circuit. The power supply includes eight capacitors and a large choke in a 'Pi' configuration.

All the internal wiring uses Teflon coated silver cable and is hand wired point to point in the normal Icon manner.

Although all three models have been called Stereo 40, I seem to recall that the Mark I actually output 37W per side in Ultralinear mode, and 17W in Triode. The changes to the circuit and the power supply have resulted in a claimed power output of 40W and 20W respectively in the two different modes of operation.

The 10mm alloy front panel contains three large dark chrome alloy rotary knobs (power, volume and source selection), between which are three switches (for Ultralinear, or Distributed Load, as it is sometimes called, where the output valves are run as pentodes), or Triode (which is self explanatory). To the right of the volume control is the standby switch, that allows the valves to kept 'hot' but uses less than 50% of normal power requirements. This can be used when the unit is not being played for a while, but is not a substitute for switching off completely at night or if going out. Beside this is the remote control sensor and then the tape/ source switch.



The back panel is populated by very substantial speaker binding posts for both 4 and 8 Ohm speakers, as well as the usual collection of gold plated phono sockets for the three line level inputs and the tape loop. A mains IEC socket completes the line-up.

After unpacking and plugging in the valves (each one is numbered on the base as well as the box, since they are biased to that one position at the factory). I allowed it to warm up for about fifteen minutes and then checked the bias settings, as per section six of the instructions. I was pleased to find everything correctly set and the unit ready to go.

SOUND QUALITY

Despite the relatively modest power output, I decided to start off listening using the Clearaudio Master Solution/ Leema Agena front end, with the Stereo 40 driving my Chario Ursa Majors. I would describe the sound as deceptively laid back, a point demonstrated when playing



Smetana's 'Ma Vlast' (My Country) played by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent. The piece consists of six tone poems, each describing an aspect of the composer's homeland. The fourth movement ('From Bohemia's Mountains and Forests') starts vigorously with the full orchestra, then suddenly drops to a quiet, almost surreptitious rustling of leaves, before the sound of the flute's birdlike noises leads back to the full orchestra and the sound of, as Smetana once described it, "kind of peasant merrymaking" with a polka

reiterating the opening bars.

The Stereo 40 was in its element, displaying balanced tonality and a pleasantly deep, but not overblown, texturing to the music. Even with only 20 Watts on tap the transition from solo instrument to the crash of a full orchestra was fast and believable. Listening again in Ultralinear mode I had the impression of greater power reserves on tap should they be needed, but the overall perceived volume seemed little different. Indeed, this greater power came at the cost of a slight

feeling of grain in the sound when compared to the liquid smoothness

when using the Triode setting. To be fair it was only really noticed when going back to Ultralinear from Triode.

In both settings, certain characteristics remained the same. The soundstage retained its generous dimensions, coming well forward into the room and seeming to extend a good couple of feet outside the speakers. The different sections of the orchestra were accurately placed, and inter-related, but not overly defined.

Changing the music for Bach, as played by the Jacques Loussier Trio, demonstrated this amp's rhythmic abilities. The intricacies of Loussier's arrangements of Bach, retaining the original timing frame, but interpreting in a (early nineteen sixties) contemporary jazz manner, were explored and revealed in a very effortless and graceful way that did justice to composer, arranger and performers.

The sound was solid and reassuring, but still gave a vaguely 'laid back' impression which I tend to associate with EL34 valves. Spending an additional £100 buys the KT88 equipped version. The specification is identical but I think that these valves would give a little more punch to the sound and would certainly be more suited in already mellow and relaxed sounding systems. The EL34s are very easy to live with and very inoffensive, but may lack a little bite for some tastes.

"it offers a well furnished and detailed soundstage, excellent timing and a beautifully textured tonality.."

The opening drum beats of Banco de Gaia's track 'Mafich Arabi', from the album 'Maya' were influenced, as the name suggests by Middle Eastern beats. The instruments that followed, some synthesised, some real, confirmed and explored the exoticism of the locale, backed by a reasonably subtle dance beat. Here, at high volume there were more noticeable benefits to running in Ultralinear, with a sense of greater extension of the lower bass notes, and of their having a fuller, more detailed shape. Returning to less antisocial playing levels and the difference ceased to be worthy of comment.

I was pleased to note that the mid and upper frequencies stayed unchanged throughout this, being open and fluid, with good, though not stratospheric extension. Small inflections, such as the altering of the shape of the drummer's hand coupled with a plethora of minute background details flowed in a natural and unforced manner.

Curious to hear what eight years and three generations of development sounded like, I plugged in my original Stereo 40. I reviewed this when it first came out and remember being seduced by its musicality. If I describe the difference as being that between a Mark IVV



Golf and the Mark V version then you will probably be with me. In the same way that the two cars display a visual and mechanical heritage, visually and sonically there is a family resemblance between the amps; but the newer version proved to be streets ahead in nearly all aspects. The original's imaging was quite vague in comparison, and the bottom end extension and detailing were more restrained. Also the higher

frequencies seemed a little curtailed. The two characteristics that hadn't altered were the tight and accurate timing and the innate sense of that very subtle and difficult to achieve thing we call musicality.

Interestingly, removing the stainless steel and Plexiglass valve cover on the original amp produced a noticeable improvement in the feeling of air and space in the recording. The new all-Plexiglass design, although lacking the art deco infused glamour of the older design, seemed to have only minimal effect on the sound, and ended up staying in place most of the time.

Now whether it is worth trading in your original Stereo 40 for this new one is a more difficult question. Having relistened to the original I can criticise it in certain areas but in the all-important business of transmitting the energy and emotion of music then it still does an excellent job. To revert to the car analogy, the original Golf is a classic that still holds its own against far more modern machinery. However, the newer one offers more power, better handling, better facilities. If the spare cash is available, I would most certainly consider it as a serious option.

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CONCLUSION

To put this all in perspective. The Icon Audio Stereo 40 Mark III offers a well furnished and detailed soundstage, excellent timing and a beautifully smooth, musical and well textured tonality. Build quality is bombproof, and the current design quite handsome. The relaxed nature of the EL 34s

VERDICT The third generation Stereo 40 brings focus and scale to a perennial entry level valve integrated favourite. An excellent budget buy.

ICON AUDIO STEREO 40/III £1,099
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- FOR**
- smooth musical sound
 - solidly built.
 - choice of output valves.
 - value
- AGAINST:**
- EL34 laid back

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Icon amplifiers evolve and this one is very interesting. Bandwidth is limited to 15kHz (-1dB) and -1.3dB at 20kHz (and is a little volume control dependent), so the Stereo 40 MkIII will sound warm. Power output measures 40 Watts (1.5% thd) into 8 and 4 Ohms (20W in Triode mode) so the 4 Ohm tap is effectively coupled. Distortion levels were low at 1W, just 0.16% at 1kHz and 10kHz. Bass distortion was also low at 0.5% and 1% near full output (3rd harmonic, a transformer effect). Triode mode reduced all figures to 0.2% maximum, so was very effective (Triode modes are usually ineffective). Sensitivity was very high at 260mV so even low gain phono stage will match. Damping factor was low at around 2.5, so feedback is limited.

acoustically well damped loudspeakers, but it measures well, exploiting EL34s very effectively. NK

Power	40 Watts
Frequency response	8Hz-15kHz
Separation	58dB
Noise	-96dB
Distortion	0.16%
Sensitivity	260mV

The Stereo 40 MkIII will sound warm, but clean and very tidy with good bass. Low damping means using

DISTORTION

