

# How Low Can You Go? The Icon Audio Stereo 20PP Integrated Amplifier

By Roy Gregory

Icon Audio's Stereo 60 amplifier, a high-powered valve integrated designed in the UK and made in China reviewed recently, left me mightily impressed, I noticed on its price list that the company also offers a model dubbed the Stereo 20PP. If the first thing that caught my eye was the name, the next was definitely the price – £499.99. Dig a little deeper and I quickly discovered that Icon's entry level amp hasn't just adopted the moniker of its illustrious Leak forebear, it uses pretty much the same valve complement and even cites the original as its inspiration. Depending on your point of view that's either brave or foolish, aiming high or borderline sacrilegious...

It was also way too tempting to resist, especially given my affection for the original Leak Stereo 20, an amp I always preferred to the more highly touted Quad 11. In fact, only the much rarer and more expensive Radford STA15 comes close, but that's another story. The real question is, how much of the original model's impressive DNA has Icon managed to retain, especially given the astonishingly low price?

The large cardboard carton containing the amp duly arrived and sparked not a few misgivings; it seemed unfeasibly lightweight if this pretender was to get anywhere near the musical grunt and authority of the Leak. However, opening the box

revealed a thick cocoon of foam surrounding a compact and remarkably dense unit, buried right in its centre. Things were definitely starting to look up. Closer inspection revealed further reasons for optimism. The Stereo 20PP\* retains more than just the valve line-up from the original. As well as the single output pairs of EL84s and the small but solid chassis, the internals are entirely hard wired. The GZ34 rectifier has gone, replaced by a solid-state device (a victim of cost constraint I suspect) but instead you get passive switching for three line-level inputs, volume control and a tape input. There's also an earth post in case you want to use a record player (you'll need a standalone phono-stage) and ▶





▶ a headphone socket on the front panel – all of which make the Stereo 20PP a far more practical proposition than the vintage power amp from which it's descended. Given just how many bedrooms it will find itself in, the headphone socket is an inspired addition.

The practicality goes farther than just the facilities; the tubes employed are all affordable and readily available (although experience suggests that if you want to get as far as tube rolling a £500 amp, the quality of the ECC82/12AU7 driver valve has a significant impact on the overall sound of the amp) while the price also includes a Perspex valve cage. Speakers are connected via five-way binding posts (one pair per channel, suitable for speakers in the 4 to 8 Ohm range) whilst my only real complaint was that the RCA sockets used don't seem to allow full insertion of the plugs. They still make a connection, but slightly more positive mating would be reassuring.

Similar logic suggests that the natural habitat for the Stereo 20PP would be sandwiched between a CD player (or lap-top/

iPod) and a pair of small bookshelf speakers. But, given the leak's propensity for punching way, way above its weight, I had no compunction about starting the Icon experience by connecting it between the Wadia 861SE and the focal Stellas! There's nothing like asking a lot of a product to find out what it's really made of – and in this case it was a challenge the Stereo 20PP rose to with gusto. I'm not sure quite what I was expecting but it certainly wasn't the sure-footed, confident musical substance and authority that this diminutive amp delivered. This went way beyond astonishment and well into silly grin territory.

Playing small-scale female vocal tracks – Taken By Trees – the Stereo 20PP displayed a winning, tactile intimacy, while larger scale works such as the Ivan Fischer Mahler 4 were handled with surprising aplomb. Okay, you had to watch the levels on the really big orchestral tuttis, but what really impressed was the dynamic coherence and rhythmic integrity of the presentation, the way the amp kept hold of the shape and sense of the performance.

It's ability to get a grip on the pace, scale and density of proceedings was underlined by tracks like Lloyd Cole's 'Forest Fire' with its hitch kick changes of ▶

*Icon Audio also produces a Stereo 20SE but it is an entirely different animal. Running a single KT88 per side in single-ended mode, it does incorporate valve rectification (via a WE275) a swankier chassis and a price-tag that's twice the size of the 20PP's.*

▶ pace and undulating rhythmic foundation, its sparse opening and the intensity of its finale. The little Icon puts in a real singalong performance, full of energy and musical enthusiasm.

Let's not get too carried away. Judged by the sort of standards that pertain to these elevated partners and their performance expectations it's not hard to put your finger on the Stereo 20PP's shortcomings: stereo spread is broad and reasonably deep, but focus and transparency are lacking; drums have really good attack and leading edge location, but they do lack a little of the substance and impact that come with bigger, more capable amps, perhaps related to: the overall character of the amp which has a slightly hollow tonality across the broad mid, robbing singers of chest and orchestral instruments of some colour and identity, making tonal separation less obvious. In some ways it's a bit like Audrey Hepburn in the Ascot scene from *My Fair Lady*; astonishingly convincing until it gets carried away, when the rough edges bubble to the surface. It might not actually scream "shift yer arse" but you get the idea...

So the Stereo 20PP isn't even close to perfect. But then, at £500 it has no earthly right to be. What it is, is far more capable and musically accomplished than you have any right to expect, a quality that stands it in good stead once it starts mixing in more realistic company. Run with a pair of Focal 807V stand-mounts – the kind of two-way loudspeakers that frequently used to grace so many budget systems – and either a basic CD or iPod source, the results were remarkably engaging, even invigorating. The overall musical integrity of the little Icon amp gelled perfectly with the rhythmic coherence and enthusiastic dynamics of the 807V, delivering music with a real sense of get up and go when required, but surprising delicacy and intimacy too. Tonally, the two were a good match, the slightly rounded top and bottom and lean middle of the Icon smoothing over any aberrations in the 807's balance without impeding the sense of musical integrity or flow. Overall the bass might be described as enthusiastic (a step the right side of loose) but it was coherent enough, with enough momentum to make the speakers sing, even in a smallish room. Revisiting my student days, The Cure's A Forest had all the familiar hypnotic rhythmic pulse that I remember so well, while the attitude and attack of Talking Heads were all present and correct as well. Asked to do more than it can, the Stereo 20PP will simply gloss over the wider demands and give you what it's good at: It keeps the music interesting and entertaining – which is exactly what it should do.

Add to that the fact that the headphone socket runs straight off the output transformers and you've got one hell of a headphone amp in your hands. It's a modern trend that delivers results and recognizes a reality in which headphone listening is becoming more not less important. Used with a pair of upmarket Sennheisers, the results were exceptional, bringing welcome body and substance to the sound, as well as a greater than normal sense of space. Okay, so the combination isn't going to give Stax any sleepless nights, but it definitely delivers the musical goods.

The Icon Audio Stereo 20PP is an astonishingly capable and entertaining amplifier. It would make a perfect first amp – and a perfect second amp too, meaning that once you can afford something bigger and better, it will happily sit

*“What it is, is far more capable and musically accomplished than you have any right to expect, a quality that stands it in good stead once it starts mixing in more realistic company.”*

in the wings, playing substitute until you need that second system. A worthy inheritor of the Leak Stereo 20's mantle, it definitely lives up to the legend. Sure, the original is probably still better, but it is also more expensive, less practical and a lot less available. The new 20PP is just what we need – a lot of music when, where and how we want it, at a price people can actually afford. You could easily spend a lot more than this and end up with a lot less; budget esoterica in the real sense, the Icon Audio Stereo 20PP can be warmly recommended. It's the sort of amp that will stay in the family for years – just like its namesake in fact. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Integrated valve amp

**Valve Complement:** 1x 12AU7/ECC82, 2x 12AX7/ECC83, 4x EL34

**Inputs:** 3x line-level RCA, 1x tape RCA

**Outputs:** 1pr 5-way binding posts/ch 1x ¼" headphone jack

**Rated Output:** 15 Watts/ch into 8 Ohms

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 270 x 160 x 256mm

**Weight:** 9.5kg

**Finish:** Black

**Price:** £499.99

**Manufacturer:** Icon Audio

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