



# Life begins at 40...

Reached a point in your hi-fi existence where a change is as good as a rest? This amplifier could avert the crisis, says **David Price**

**I**t's amazing if you think about it. In the second decade of the 21st-century, some 100 years or so since the technology was invented, the hi-fi world still wants valve amplifiers. That's no hollow rhetoric – all you have to do is to walk around a hi-fi show for proof. There's loads of the things, their little glass bottles glowing quietly under the lights, showing that consumer tastes aren't quite as linear as the big electronics giants would prefer.

This integrated amplifier is the latest in a line of mid-price designs from a British brand that sensed a gap in the market, a decade or so ago, and has gone from strength to strength since. The company's products are aimed precisely at the niche that's appeared in the market – affordable, high quality amps that don't quite make it into the realm of 'superfi', yet boast a sound that's rather hard not to like. The Stereo 40 Mk III is a David Shaw design that boasts all the latest trickery to give better sound.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Icon Audio Stereo 40 Mk III

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
Valve integrated amplifier

**WEIGHT**  
2.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
390 x 390 x 230mm

**FEATURES**

- Quoted power output: 2x 33W RMS
- Class A, push-pull, zero global feedback
- Triode front end and output stage
- 4x KT88 output valves, 1x 6SL7 first stage valve, 2x 6SN7 phase inverter, 274B valve rectifier

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Icon Audio

**TELEPHONE**  
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**WEBSITE**  
iconaudio.com

Power is delivered courtesy of something that harks back to the days when Cliff Richard was Britain's brightest boy about town – the KT88 beam tetrode, as introduced by GEC in 1956, which runs at a sensibly low voltage, yet gives out high current. Being a general purpose amp, the Stereo 40 runs these in full Class A push-pull mode, giving a claimed 33W per side. Four of these are fed by 6SN7 and 6SL7 tubes, which also appeared at roughly the same time. Valve rectification is used, courtesy of a 274B, which is the central valve set.

Although glowing bottles are the headline news in any tube amp, it's nothing without decent output transformers; they have a huge effect on the final sound. Icon Audio has fitted its own custom-designed, Japanese hand-wound (99.9999%) pure copper wound tertiary output transformers. The other central transformer is to supply power, and the Stereo 40 Mk III sports choke regulation and eight large capacitors in a traditional 'Pi' configuration.

All wiring is hand fitted and soldered, and laid out 'point to point' for the shortest signal paths; a printed





circuit board isn't used, says Icon Audio, because it colours the sound. A Japanese-sourced ALPS Blue volume potentiometer is fitted, as are Taiwanese "audiophile quality" metal film resistors and Japanese Rubicon and Nichicon power capacitors and SCR and Solen polypropylene audio caps. The company offers the option of Jensen 'oil in paper' capacitors (£320), beloved by enthusiasts, plus a range of premium and "new old stock" valves (costing up to £500 extra). The tubes supplied do the job, but valve aficionados realise the sonic gains that can be had from fitting high-quality glassware.

The chassis itself is the usual Icon Audio fare, solid steel given a decent coat of black paint and the lavish copper top plate. The frontal 10mm aluminium alloy fascia plate sports polished dark chrome alloy knobs, and there's a somewhat prosaic valve cover, which should always be used if there is the faintest possibility that the movements of children, pets or indeed adults might strike the valves – they run at very high voltages and aren't anywhere near as domestically friendly as some folk expect.

**The Stereo 40 Mk III is extremely well made and finished given its modest retail price**

Set up isn't as simple as with a solid-state amp, but it isn't exactly tough, either. All eight valves need to be fitted into the right sockets; luckily they're all numbered so it's hard to screw up here! This latest Mk III version of the Stereo 40 sports a natty retro-look bias meter, which makes adjusting the output valve bias a breeze in conjunction with the bias setting control and the four trim pots on the top plate. But this shouldn't need to be done for a good long while, as it's properly set at the factory. Generously, Icon Audio has fitted a tape monitor loop (a classic

## It does nothing to challenge that myth about valve amps being musical

three-head open reel looks rather nice sat next to it), and there are four line inputs – something you wouldn't have got with your original fifties tube preamp! The other key control on the front is the triode/ultralinear mode selector, more of which later...

### Sound quality

Good as the Stereo 40 Mk III is, it hasn't abolished the laws of physics, so you'll need to partner it with a sympathetic pair of loudspeakers; ones that are reasonably easy to drive with a good sensitivity figure (over 90dB/1W/1m is a good general guide). This done, you'll find the Icon Audio to be a big and ballsy performer, with – in ultralinear mode – an upfront and engaging sound that veritably leaps out of the speakers. The music is fluid, dynamic and vivid with an apparent openness that makes most solid-state amps seem rather grey and congealed.

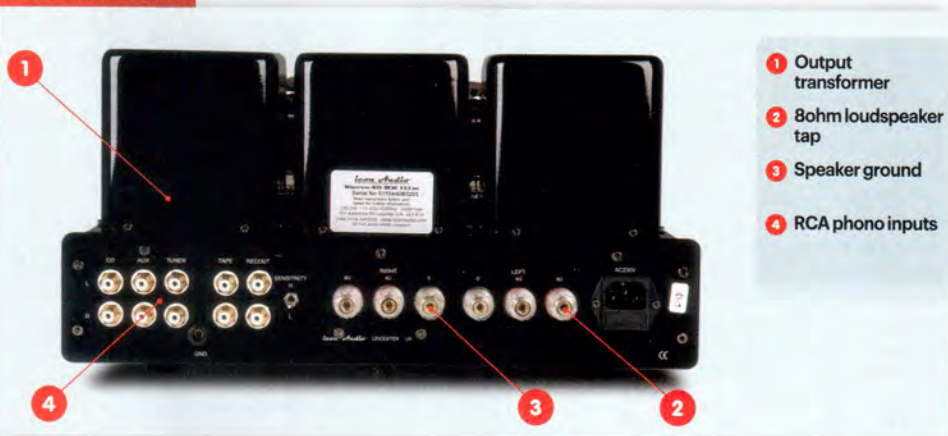
For example, Steely Dan's *Ricki Don't Lose That Number* comes over in

a wonderfully carefree and insouciant way. Coming from the excellent Creek Destiny 2 solid-stater, the Icon Audio makes even this sound a little stilted and prone to standing on ceremony. It has an easy, mellifluous sort of nature that shuffles along and makes any music it plays a breeze to listen to. It won't deconstruct things, giving you lots to think about in a 'hi-fi' sense, rather it romps along in time with the music like a puppy that's just got past the garden gate. The Stereo 40 does nothing whatsoever to challenge that myth about valve amps being musical.

Still, with a damping factor of 5.0, don't expect it to grab onto your speakers' bass bins like the chancellor of the exchequer clutching your wallet. It doesn't have the same bottom-end tenacity as a good transistor amp, so although I find the bass lines on the Steely Dan track to be satisfyingly quick and supple, there is that tube trademark 'bloom'. It's less than the Ming Da MC368 we reviewed one summer ago, but still it advertises its thermionic origins just a touch too much for some tastes. Conversely, for many customers this will be precisely what they want it to do – and with a sweet and detailed upper midband and treble, you get a 'valve sound' – one you'd never confuse with a chrome bumper Naim!

The Police's *Everything She Does is Magic* is an interesting challenge for this amp, showcasing its strengths and weaknesses in equal measure. The soundstage is sublime, almost more vast than you'd expect from surround sound at its best. It is as if someone has pushed an almighty 'stereo wide' button and suddenly your listening room isn't quite the same any more. Inside this vast recorded acoustic, vocals come over softly and sweetly, and there is so much room between instruments that you can sit and languish in any one of the many tracks of the recording – ▶

### CONNECTIONS





## Q&A

**David Shaw**

Icon Audio chief designer



**DP: Where does the Stereo 40 fit into Icon Audio's range of amps?**

**DS:** The original Stereo 40 was born in 2000, and was at the heart of what we do, good-quality amplifiers at a reasonable price. I don't force more expensive upgrades into the price because as a British company we can either add them here or do them later for those with more challenged pockets. Our range is wide because it is fun and exciting!

**Why was a push-pull design chosen for the Stereo 40?**

We also make Single-Ended Triode amplifiers, but they are a bit left field, not easy to get right, low powered, can have poor bass, poor efficiency etc. So any mid-market product such as the ST40 III will have to work with a wide range of speakers, some with low efficiency and poor characteristics. Therefore, this amplifier will need a robust performance and good stability. Push-pull overcomes so many disadvantages and you get more than the sum of the two parts. An EL34 on its own will give about 12W, in push-pull you can easily get 36W – three times the power. Any common noise and distortion within the amplifier is cancelled out in the output transformer. As the output transformer does not get saturated like SET amplifiers, low-frequency bass is much better. A designer can choose either to use these advantages to make a really high-performance amplifier or to economise and make something that's mediocre. We naturally take the high road!

**Is the amp based on a proprietary circuit, or is it a bespoke one designed for this exact model?**

It's a mish-mash of ideas with several 'nods' to ideas the giants of the past like GEC, Blumlien, Williams, Philips, etc, worked on. This circuit has been refined over time to give the qualities that I like, especially with the transformers, which we have spent many hours comparing performance of subtle changes here and there to get what I think is the correct sonic signature.

This version features Chinese sourced KT88 output valves



**HOW IT COMPARES**

The Stereo 40 Mk III is in a gang of one at this price, but provides a marked contrast to one of the best sub £2,000 solid-staters around. The Exposure 3010S2 (£1,350) won a recent group test and has a wonderfully big and punchy sound; it doesn't have the 'hyper real', out-of-the-box soundstaging of the Icon, but it's not far off, and knits the music together in a tauter and more controlled way. Bass is tighter and more powerful, and it's better at driving speakers to high listening levels with its 110W per side. It captures the overall dynamics of recordings better, is more detailed and less music-dependent. Still, given undemanding material, the Icon sounds nicer.

my attention is drawn to the brilliance of Andy Summers' guitar work, for example. I also love the sugary cymbal sound of Stewart Copeland, but somehow he seems to have lost his manic energy. This amp is great with microdynamics, but doesn't quite have the guts to communicate one of his famed cymbal crashes as it should. At the same time, Sting's vocals are wonderfully sweet, but his bass lines aren't quite as taut and propulsive as they should be.

This epitomises the Stereo 40 Mk III. Whatever you throw at it, it obligingly serves up a lovely sound back at you – as opposed, of course, to an accurate one. It's never less than peachy to listen to, seemingly able to make even miserable music smile back at you. Even the dour strains of The Jam's *Going Underground* float along in a mellifluous, relaxing way. Switch to triode mode and things smooth and soften even more, the soundstage falling back, but narrowing slightly. The upper mid and treble sweetens, and the recording becomes more 'easy listening' than 'new wave'. All very nice, but it is powerful, sinewy source material such as this that shows how much this amplifier is compressing things, making the midband sound gloopy and opaque. So the truth is that this amplifier suits gentler music more than rockier stuff.

## Conclusion

With decent amounts of power by tube standards, a rich tonality and a nice, bouncy sound there's practically nothing to object to about the Icon Audio Stereo 40 Mk III on its own terms – it's a great, affordable tube amplifier that does precisely what it says on the tin, so to speak. But if you want explosive dynamics, vast tracts of bass power and forensic detailing, then you'd more than likely never entertain the prospect of purchasing such a thing in the first place. This amplifier isn't a universal panacea then, and not everyone will like it, but if you are shopping for something with classic tubular traits then you'd do well to put it very high up on your shopping list ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Spacious sound; rich, warm tonality; fluid, musical, rhythmic nature; build; value
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Loose bass; limited power; it rather lacks incisiveness
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Fine affordable tube amplifier; an essential audition
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL

