



hi-finews
OUTSTANDING
PRODUCT

RIGHT: The pre/PSU and two mono'd power amps – totalling 110kg – are stacked for illustrative purposes only! Display turns red when the pre is muted by turning one of the four smaller, heavily-chromed knobs. Tube status is shown by LEDs inset into the power amp's fascia

These functions use the LEDs below the front panel meter, one per tube. Green indicates a weak valve, calling for imminent replacement, while red shows that a tube is drawing excessive current. The circuit will switch off the amp before a failed tube can do any damage. The meter is there to examine the current of each tube, when used with the 'test' knob on the right; the left knob is power on/off, and it also switches off the meter light if so desired.

As for the two-chassis Master Preamplifier, this, too, has a fully-loaded back panel that also demands a study of the owner's manual. The front is self-explanatory, with the massive volume control and source selector dominating, while smaller knobs deal with mute, logo illumination on/off, power on/off and 'cinema' for the bypass stage if integrated into a home theatre system. The logo lights up red when the preamp is switched on but muted, and blue when it's operating.

Inside are one 6922 double-triode per channel for the 'zero-feedback' Class A line stage, the optional phono stage adding six 12AX7s. The phono section justifies its £12k cost by providing selectable MC load impedances of 470, 300, 250, 200, 150, and 100ohm and MM loading of the standard 47kohm, plus 30k, 25k, 15k, and 10kohm, all chosen via a rear panel rotary. You can connect a pair of decks, via single-ended RCAs or balanced XLRs, and a toggle selects between the two of them.

MOTOR SKILL

This will accommodate just about any analogue source you might wish: line inputs 1/2/3 are single-ended, but 4/5/Cine provide single-ended and balanced, with a toggle switch to select either for each. Input 6 becomes phono when the module is fitted, or line level without it. There are also four sets of main outputs, two each of XLR balanced and RCA single-ended, which are also selected by yet another toggle.

VAC supplies an all-metal remote for volume control and mute [see p45], and here we find another area where the cost is justified. I called Kevin Hayes in Florida, who explained, 'In order to make it possible to adjust the volume remotely, it was necessary to engineer a motor drive system, which is mounted on rubber isolation bushings. Our direct cost is about \$1000 just for this volume control, and



it's there for only one reason: we use it because it sounds the most like music!'. Meanwhile, the belt-driven control is the admired ALPS HQ PRO. 'This is a precision-made unit with four shielded decks, and it is purely mechanical and manual.'

Hayes also revealed that his philosophy was triggered by a mix of inherited expertise from a father with engineering experience, his own audiophile tendency and genuine mystification at the variance between what he heard and what the magazines of the era described. He was

also flummoxed by the discrepancies in performance with various speakers, so in 1986 he began to design what would become the first VAC amp.

To explain the copious amounts of hard-wiring, he said he chooses to 'utilise many "old school" techniques if/when/where there are good reasons to do so. In comparison to printed circuit boards and ribbon cables, the extensive use of point-to-point, hand-wiring designs allows us many more degrees of freedom in the selection of conductor material, size, &