



ABOVE: Outboard PSU [bottom] includes an extra transformer and umbilical to feed the optional MM/MC phono board included in our Master Preamp [top, right]. Six line inputs are available, inc. one direct (HT) and three with balanced (XLR) options. Dual preamp outputs are offered on RCAs and balanced XLRs

even the bass nearing the unleashed capabilities of tape. The biggest giveaway, if you're curious, was deeper stage depth with tape, but vinyl playback was still dazzling.

With the remastered version of The Doors' *Morrison Hotel* [Rhino/Elektra R2 627602], Morrison's voice was revealed to possess subtlety and nuance that also approached the open-reel tape [Elektra X5007], and the gap was smaller because the latter was 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ ips. I was utterly seduced by the sinuous, supple guitar work, the VAC pairing exhibiting a way with textures that I'm sure would enable aficionados to identify the make of strings used by Robby Krieger on 'Maggie M'Gill'.

HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

The vinyl set also contains the CD, so that, too, was exploited to show format differences, but there will be no CD-bashing here as the VAC amps have an ameliorative effect on digital. Yes, even streaming.

Probably the most overwhelming display of the system's prowess via vinyl came with the admittedly-magnificent One-Step release of Patricia Barber's *Café Blue* [Impex IMP6035-1]. Because this is a lean recording with just

Barber on piano and a guitar/bass/drums trio, recorded with subtlety, the VAC system simply glowed – and I don't mean the light from the valves. Fed material that oozes finesse, the VAC pre/power neither enhances nor constrains: it simply lets the music breathe.

I do realise that seems a contradiction if I've described the VAC combination as tending toward the warm, but that is a sensation of an arguably moot nature, rather than a readily-identifiable sonic artefact like 'dry bass' or 'crisp transients'. They just seem more human, more lifelike than many over-etched, kick-you-in-the-gut amplifiers, and nowhere was it more evident than on Barber's arresting handling of 'Ode To Billy Joe'.

If you crave intimacy, especially if you are partial to vocals, you need to hear this set-up through LS3/5As, however incongruous that might seem. Then again, what they do with the Wilson loudspeakers... ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

A hint of schizophrenia here, but purely positive: I love the balance between old school and modern. VAC has lavished these units with cost-no-object niceties like that step-driven volume control, while eschewing new valve types in favour of venerable KT88s. The sound reflects this with detail and scale to match the best of solid-state, yet with luscious warmth to never let you forget it's a tube affair. Or a love affair...

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - 100



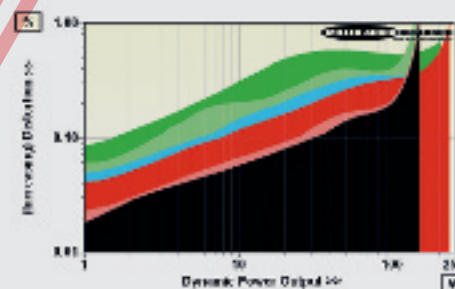
LEFT: VAC's heavyweight alloy remote offers control over the motorised (belt-driven) volume control and mute, but not input selection

LAB REPORT

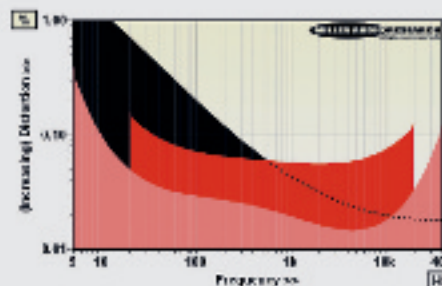
VAC MASTER PREAMP/SIG. 200iQ

VAC's Signature 200iQ is a hot number in terms of performance and temperature! In practice, hotspots of 85°C were measured on the top surface of the perforated grille above the KT88s, so adequate ventilation is essential. These KT88s are given no quarter, all four tubes achieving a mighty 145W/8ohm and 205W/4ohm in mono mode via the 4-8ohm tap (or a lower 145W/4ohm via the 2-4ohm tap). There's some headroom for increased dynamic output too [see Graph 1], with 151W/8ohm and 235W/4ohm sourced via the 4-8ohm tap, and 232W/2ohm and 210W/1ohm available via the 2-4ohm tap (or 140W via the 1-2ohm tap). The response is also affected by choice of tap [see boxout, p42]. Also, as expected, distortion increases at very low and high frequencies [see Graph 2], from 0.016%/1kHz to 0.05%/20Hz and 0.035%/20kHz (re. 0dBV), and with level from 0.016%/1W to 0.063%/10W and 0.21%/100W (re. 1kHz) – all comfortably below the level of most contemporary loudspeakers.

The great 'strength' of the Signature 200iQ is its combination of +24dB gain (balanced in) with a very wide 94dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV) – a quality it shares with the equally 'low noise' +9dB gain/98dB S/N ratio (re. 0dBV) achieved by the partnering Master Preamp. The latter shares a similar broad-spectrum spread of distortion harmonics with the 200iQ, although these are higher at low frequencies (0.7%/20Hz) before decreasing with increasing frequency to just 0.011%/20kHz [black trace, Graph 2]. The response is usefully extended, rolling gently away below 100Hz to -0.7dB/20Hz (and -2.9dB/5Hz) while reaching out to ±0.0dB/20kHz and -3.6dB/100kHz. PM



ABOVE: Dyn. output vs. THD into 8ohm (4-8ohm tap, black), 4ohm (4-8ohm tap, red; 2-4ohm tap, pink), 2ohm (2-4ohm tap, blue) and 1ohm (2-4ohm tap, green; 1-2ohm tap, br. green). Max. current is 14.4A



ABOVE: THD vs. freq. for Master preamp (0dBV output, black) vs. Sig. 200iQ amp (1W/8ohm, pink; 10W, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	145W / 205W (4-8ohm tap)
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	151W / 235W / 232W / 210W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	45ohm / 0.76–0.78ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	–0.7 to –3.6dB / +0.7 to –0.4dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	358mV (pre) / 178mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	98.2dB (pre) / 93.9dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.011–0.68%/0.056–0.15%
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	240W/345W (94W, preamp)
Dimensions (WHD, Pre/Power)	457x109x368/457x222x439mm