

Hungry for ears!

Valve Audio Predator

PEAKS

VERDICT

Again, a superbly rendered, high-end product from our own shores. The Predator delivers huge dollops of musicality in an utterly compelling way. And it's built to exceptional standards. Exceptional.

SUPPLIED BY Valve Audio 083 388-4534

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The Valve Audio brand is no stranger to regular AVSA readers. Pretoria-based Schalk Havenga has been producing world-class tube/solid state hybrid amplification for many years now, and over the past decade or so, we've reviewed several examples.

These include the groundbreaking Model 802 integrated amplifier, the Black Widow pre and power amps, and more recently the Exclamé 50/80/100 designs. Indeed, it's a little surprising that the components remain as elusive today as they were when we first came across them a decade ago.

As the name suggests, the Predator is something of a beast -- but a musical beast, I hasten to add. The most powerful of Valve Audio's integrated amplifier designs, it used to be part of the original product line-up, but has since been substantially upgraded. In fact, it should actually be called the Predator II.

Nominally, this is a 200 watt per channel hybrid design. Styling is true to the Valve Audio ethos of keeping it simple, with an all-metal construction that includes a thick, anodised aluminium faceplate with a rotary control and round selector buttons for source selection.

At the rear, a set of XLR balanced inputs is partnered by four additional single-ended RCA input socket sets, while robust binding posts allow easy connection of even heavy-gauge speaker cables. There's a kettle-type power socket, suitable for use with upgraded power cables.

Indeed, the review sample was supplied with an optional Valve Audio power cable, which seemed to work particularly well. And talking of option, it's well worth looking at adding the optional Predator remote control handset -- a design machined from solid aluminium, and providing a level of operational precision light years ahead of the usual plastic designs.

In this, its latest iteration, the Predator still employs a mix of tube and solid state technology in a hybrid configuration aimed at linking the sweet musicality of valve circuitry to the thrust and dynamics of MOSFET transistor designs.

The input stage employs two pairs of Sovtek 6922 dual-triode tubes (one for each channel) running in differential mode, boosting noise rejection and allowing the provision of a balanced input set for top-end source components.

The output stage remains a single-ended design, however, and is a high-current, dual-mono design utilising a further two pairs of Sovtek 6922 triodes in partnership with latest-generation MOSFET arrays, and employing a huge 625 VA toroidal transformer manufactured locally by Toroidal Technologies.

At the core of the Predator is Valve Audio's high-yield rectification concept that, together with the high-output power transformer, achieves a low output impedance supply. Smoothing

capacitance is kept to a minimum, but does afford the power supply a quick recovery rate, the company claims.

The focus on quality is apparent throughout the circuitry, with careful attention to component selection, ground star earthing, physical layout, precision soldering, and the use of heavy-gauge OFC wiring. Power management and signal switching is achieved via logic control, while the input selectors use palladium/gold alloy contacts and special, audio-grade relays.

The review unit has already been run in (it actually belongs to AVSA colleague Joel Kopping) and was given an hour or so to warm up before any serious listening began.

What transpired thereafter soon had all the danger signs of an all-night session: the kind of impromptu event that has you reaching for one record, one CD, after another, just to hear what another familiar, precious recording sounds like.

And yes, those of you who have read other Valve Audio reviews in this publication, either by me or one of my reviewing colleagues, may find this repetitive, but it's true: the Predator sounds world-class, with a beguiling, thoroughly involving delivery that demands rapt attention, and gets it.

Let's start with the ability of the Predator to open up a soundstage to such an extent that you feel like walking right into it. Stereo like this would seem to make any need for surround sound unnecessary: there's a sense of being enveloped by the music that underscores the three-dimensionality of the delivery.

Then there's the sheer speed and grace of this amplifier: it's ultra-quick and ultra-controlled, never allowing the music to run away with it. Nor does it suffer any of those vagaries valve critics accuse tube circuits of: the Predator is never sluggish and always articulate. Pace and control are inherent traits woven into the overall substance of this amplifier.

If you're expecting a sweet-sounding amplifier, you may be disappointed, however: the Predator is on the neutral side of the tonal scale, and focuses more on precision and clarity than on any mellowing of the input signal. It means that a poor recording will be presented as just that -- and that a great one will be spotlighted with equal vigour.

Part of the reason is this amplifier's ability to neither cloud nor mask anything -- fine detail is presented with as much honesty and accuracy as the more obvious elements.

As for power, this amplifier has it in abundance. The 200 watt per channel rating is clearly conservative, and with its high-current delivery, no speaker load is too difficult -- the Predator easily coped with the Revel Performa M22s, which don't have the easiest combination of impedance and sensitivity.

With this latest Predator, Valve Audio has another winner. Frankly, those committed to stereo will probably never need anything more -- power, speed, finesse and musicality are all provided for in abundance. Reliability is rated at 15 000 hours, which is more than most of us would expect of pure solid state.

Factor in the price, and the imported competition simply wilts. For the money, there's nothing better out there.

Deon Schoeman