

Equipment Reviews

Octave Audio V 110 Integrated Amplifier



Written by Hans Wetzel Created: 15 January 2015

I am, in general, no fan of vacuum tubes, and said as much a few years ago in an editorial that earned me scornful e-mails from readers. I have been guided to that conclusion by a philosophical stance and by sonic taste. While I greatly respect the multitude of people who prefer tubed to solid-state amplification, and welcome their presence in the marketplace, tubes have just never held my interest. Earlier this year, I resolved to review a tubed integrated amplifier and give this archaic technology a fair and impartial perspective. Enter Octave Audio's V 110 integrated amplifier.



Ze Germans

Doug Schneider visited Octave Audio's factory, in Karlsbad, Germany, earlier this year. Andreas Hoffman, who founded the company in 1980 and is Octave's chief designer, told him, "I like perfect products. That's why I try to make my amplifiers as perfect as possible." I had this in mind when Hoffman's flagship integrated amplifier, the V 110 (\$8300 USD), arrived at my apartment a few months ago. Despite dimensions of 17.8"W x 6.7"H x 16.3"D (some of that height is accounted for by the included tube cage), I was surprised by the V 110's heft: 50 pounds.

The attention to detail is fantastic. The all-aluminum bodywork, available in black or silver, is gorgeously upscale: thick faceplate, substantial and ideally weighted source and volume controls (the latter is motorized), and a bespoke feel that I'm not used to seeing in the sub-\$6000 category of electronics that I call home. This extends to the huge binding posts on the V 110's rear panel, of a kind I'd never seen before. They were extremely solid and easy to use. The weighty aluminum remote control, on which is engraved Octave's logo, has nothing but a pair of big volume buttons, and was a pleasure to hold. I'm always shocked by how little quality manufacturers invest in remote controls -- the object that, after all, most users will interact with far more often than the component itself. Nice work.



The master power switch is on the left side panel, directly behind the protruding edge of the faceplate. Rear-panel connections are plentiful: four line-level inputs (RCA), an input for the front left and right channels of a multichannel source (RCA), an XLR input, a tape loop (RCA), a preamp output (RCA), and a connection for Octave's optional Black Box capacitance upgrade for the V 110's power-amp section. Also present are two switches: a small one with three settings (Amp Off, Eco Off, and Eco On), and one that permits the V 110 to output 70 or 110Wpc. The lower output is to allow the V 110 to accommodate KT88 or 6550 tubes without overload, as opposed to KT120 tubes, which come standard with this amp. In Amp Off mode, the power tubes are turned off, while the input tubes remain on. Set to Eco Off, the V 110 remains active for quite some time before eventually going into standby. Eco On mode reduces the amp's power consumption after nine minutes without a signal, reducing heat output and electricity usage while lengthening tube life. All very thoughtful.

The V 110, a push-pull pentode design, is specified to deliver 110Wpc into 8 or 4 ohms. It does not have multiple output taps, which Octave says cause phase anomalies and, in turn, nonlinearities and instabilities with amplifier feedback. The claimed frequency response is 5Hz-70kHz, +0/-2dB, at 10W; the input sensitivity is 220mV, and the minimum speaker impedance is 2 ohms. The V 110 consumes 160W at idle, 500W at full bore.

Octave Audio prides itself on its engineering prowess, and is not content to rehash the decades-old designs of others. Transformers are designed and built in-house, a result of Hoffman's father having been an electrical engineer who specialized in transformer design. Special attention was also paid to the power supply, to maximize efficiency while producing exceedingly low noise. Octave also has a keen interest in safety and reliability; the V 110's circuitry is designed to protect all of the major components from overload and resultant failure, and includes a specially designed solid-state gain stage that Hoffman has found provides optimal performance. Before leaving the factory, every Octave product undergoes stringent quality-control checks and a 48-hour durability test. And the V 110 comes with one of the most informative and easy-to-read owner's manuals I've seen.

Setup

Before its four KT120 power tubes can be installed, the V 110's tube cage must be removed -- easily accomplished using the included Allen key. The three low-level signal tubes, one 12AX7 and two 12AT7s, are installed at the factory. Octave thoughtfully includes five KT120s -- one is a spare -- and recommends that the V 110 never be operated without the cage in place. But safety be damned -- the amp looked terrific without it, and that's how I left it. I connected it to KEF R900 loudspeakers with Dynamique Audio Caparo cables, and to Arcam's irDAC with Dynamique's Shadow analog interconnects (RCA). I attached the included power cord, and linked the DAC to my Apple MacBook Pro music server with a Nordost Blue Heaven USB cable.

After powering on the V 110, I had to double-check the tubes' bias. Turning the source dial fully clockwise illuminates three LEDs on the centrally positioned display, which is easily visible without being obtrusively bright. If the LEDs show green, as they did on my review sample, that means that the V 110's tubes are properly biased and that the V 110 will be ready to go after it senses a signal. Should the LEDs glow yellow or red, the bias needs to be adjusted, which is done with a small screwdriver (included).

Performance

My preconceptions about tubes led me to expect the Octave V 110 to sound a bit warm, a bit fat through the midrange, and somewhat dark. In fact, I heard none of those qualities -- I could have sworn I was listening to a solid-state design. The V 110 sounded as tonally neutral as the various transistor amps I've heard over the past few years, which themselves haven't sounded dramatically different from one another. Considering that those solid-state designs have included the finest integrateds that such stalwarts as Briston Ltd., Hegel Music Systems, and Simaudio can muster, that's a remarkable feat. And while I can see tube aficionados scoffing at such an observation, I discovered that the V 110 offered more than at first met my ear.

Toward the end of my first month with the V 110, it dawned on me that I'd gradually grown aware of its sonic signature by an indirect route. I noticed that the music I listened to had deviated from my usual diet of heavily processed pop, electronic music, and soundtracks, and increasingly favored recordings featuring voices. As "Charlie Boy" sprang from my KEF floorstanders during a stint with the Lumineers' eponymous debut album (16-bit/44.1kHz ALAC, Dualtone Music), it struck me just how terrific the V 110's midband was. Wesley Schultz's voice had a deliciously three-dimensional, almost holographic quality that totally enchanted me. Not only was there plenty of detail and texture, it all had a density and a richness that I hadn't heard from my system before -- other than the time I spent with the fabulous Devialet 120 integrated amplifier-DAC.

Giddy with my discovery, I turned to "The New Style," from the Beastie Boys' Licensed to Ill (16/44.1 ALAC, Def Jam), and was pleased to hear the voices of Ad-Rock, Mike D, and MCA arrayed with total transparency in front of me, each occupying a distinct location on the soundstage. This was a sound high in transparency: the Boys emerged from an eerily silent backdrop, with clarity and zero coloration. Although this 1986 CD-based recording was characteristically thin and lacking in vibrancy, the Octave's midrange was still thoroughly engaging.



By contrast, "Every Single Night," from Fiona Apple's The Idler Wheel Is Wiser than the Driver of the Screw and Whipping Cords Will Serve You More than Ropes Will Ever Do (16/44.1 ALAC, Clean Slate), is a stellar recording, with a raw, unscrubbed, full-blooded feel. A xylophone thoughtfully breaks the dead silence of the first few seconds, before Apple's voice subtly takes the fore. Despite cranking up the volume, I couldn't hear any noise floor from my listening position, 10' from my KEFs, and Apple's voice was as compelling as I've heard it with any of the many components that have passed through my listening room in the past few years. In terms of voicing, I found the V 110 exceptional.

With hotter, livelier recordings, such as "Take My Hand," from Dido's No Angel (16/44.1 ALAC, Arista), the V 110's treble was a little on the polite side. It by no means sounded rolled off, but the reverb was slightly more subdued than I'm used to, making the apparent size of the recording venue sound a bit smaller and more intimate. I suspect this is why I slowly and subconsciously began exploring the singers in my music collection.

The V 110's bass was quite good, if ultimately lacking the finesse and speed I expect from highly damped solid-state amps. "Hold My Liquor," from Kanye West's latest self-indulgence, Yeezus (16/44.1 ALAC, Def Jam), has a pulsating bass line that sorely tests the excursion limits of larger woofer cones. Here, the Octave was loudly lean in the weight and volume departments, and less agile overall. Admittedly, this could be speaker-dependent -- tube amps are sometimes more sensitive to difficult speaker loads than are generic, class-AB solid-state designs -- and these were subtle limitations that I found in no way objectionable during my months with the Octave. Also remember that Octave's Black Box and Super Black Box options would address such concerns. As it stands, the V 110's minute abbreviation of bass energy and its politeness would address such concerns. As it stands, the V 110's minute abbreviation of bass energy and its politeness would address such concerns. As it stands, the V 110's minute abbreviation of bass energy and its politeness would address such concerns.

Comparison

Speaking of solid-state, I've enjoyed Hegel Music Systems' flagship H300 as my reference integrated amplifier-DAC for two years now, and have found it to be a benchmark of performance, connectivity, and power for \$5500. It offers 250Wpc into 8 ohms, a fully featured DAC, a great remote, and some of the most pristine and resolving sound you can find in one box. Ruthlessly linear, it paints every contour of a recording in vivid detail. And while its sound isn't "bright," it is clean, clear, and forward. The H300 doesn't invite me in so much as knock me back with its enormous sound and its ability to retrieve the finest details. I expected the differences between the Hegel H300 and the Octave V 110 to be profound.

They weren't. Using my Arcam irDAC with both, I found that the Hegel was ruler-flat in its treble response, every recording airy, and sound with which I could easily explore the upper-frequency boundaries of every recording. The Octave, on the other hand, sounded a touch recessed, tending to focus more on the musical performance itself, and less on the recording venue. Two types of sound that will appeal to two types of listener, I suspect, and that will vary depending on the recording.

Through the all-important midrange, the Hegel has a bell-like clarity and litheness; the Octave was more robust, hearty, and deliberate. The V 110 was able to reveal the dimensionality of voices and instruments in a way that the Hegel, for all of its gifts, cannot. But this was never at the expense of tonal neutrality -- both amps were faithful to the recordings. In the bass, the Hegel was more able than the Octave -- it dug deeper, was more impactful, and ultimately quicker to resolve -- but these differences were slight.

From an aesthetic perspective, the Octave is the clear winner. Its case of bolted aluminum panels is a looker compared to the Hegel's folded metal, and its tubes added a gravitas to my system that quite enchanted me. The V 110 also feels of higher quality, with those huge binding posts out back and, up front, the heavy, brushed source and volume knobs. In terms of build quality, you certainly get your \$8300 worth -- almost all of the V 110's parts are made in Germany, which can't be said of the Hegel, designed in Norway but manufactured in the Far East.

Conclusion

Octave Audio's V 110 is a delight. Thoughtfully engineered and impeccably built, it veers from many of its tubed brethren to chart its own paths in both circuit architecture and sound. The V 110 lacks the tonal colorations one might expect from its seven tubes. Its reproduction of music is as clean and pure as it is supple and vital -- I suggest giving it a listen for its exquisite midband alone. This is one special integrated amplifier.

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- Associated Equipment
- Speakers -- KEF R900
- Integrated amplifier-DAC -- Hegel Music Systems H300
- Digital-to-analog converter -- Arcam irDAC
- Source -- Apple MacBook Pro running iTunes
- Speaker cables -- Dynamique Audio Caparo
- Analogue interconnects -- Dynamique Audio Shadow (RCA)
- USB cables -- DH Labs Silversonic, Nordost Blue Heaven

Octave Audio V 110 Integrated Amplifier
Optional: internal phono stage.
Warranty: Three years parts and labor; one year, tubes.

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