

Albarrý M1108 power amplifiers

by Steve Dickinson



Okay, so I was wrong. In my review of the M608 amps for issue 90 I cited Albarrý's designer, Neil Burnett, saying "He thinks its 60 Watts output is enough for most situations when you've got that sort of headroom for dynamics, and I believe he may be right". It was pretty clear to me, from my time with the M608s, that their modest 60W output, coupled with the enormous reserves of the unfeasibly oversized power supply, would probably prove sufficient in most circumstances. And to be fair, so it has proved in practice since then.

But... but... it still turns out that I was wrong, because it also turns out that, as far as the Albarrýs go at least, there's more to it than simply the on-paper power output.

Some markets demand more than 60 Watts if you're to be taken seriously, so Albarrý developed the M1108, a 110 Watter shoehorned neatly into exactly the same casework as the M608. (This may be a boon to existing Albarrý owners who, having read this review, may decide that a little surreptitious upgrading is necessary, without having to answer any awkward questions about 'those new boxes').

Albarrý's initial intentions in developing the M1108 were that it was to be an export model for those power-sensitive markets, and the M608 would be just fine for everywhere else. But it quickly became clear that the M1108 was more than just an M608 with a bit more grunt. On paper, its 110W output is generous rather than enormous, probably what Rolls Royce used to describe demurely as 'adequate'. In ▶

► practice, it has that sense of effortless ease which comes with a truly powerful amplifier, thanks once again to a grossly over-specced power supply, but without the sense of mass and inertia that can so often also accompany a truly powerful amplifier. It's a neat trick, like a middleweight boxer operating in territory normally reserved for heavyweights, while retaining the agility of his lighter frame.

The truly unexpected aspect of the M1108s performance, for me at least, is that it remains true to the M608s sense of agility, but adds a deftness and assurance rather than simply a dollop of extra scale and weight. Hearing the M1108 is rather like watching a skilled craftsman at work: one is struck by the economy of effort, the ease and fluidity of movement, the way the desired outcome is achieved with the minimum of wasted action. It feels as though, with the M1108, Albarry has found a true sweet spot. Happily, Albarry seems to agree, and the M1108 is available alongside the existing M608.

There is, also, the odd occasion where the music is getting boisterous, when you can almost feel the M608s digging deep into their reserves and rising to the occasion. In those instances, it's very much a case of the Plucky Little Amp That Could. Things don't fall apart (I'm plundering my library for book titles here), but you sense the M608s giving their all. The M1108 rises to the challenge, retaining its composure, and you just know that it's got it covered. The Bad Plus' take on 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' is just such a test. Its massive energy and exuberance has been the undoing of any number of lesser systems in its time. The timing and the energy delivery has to be just-so or it sounds like the band is trying to continue playing while the piano crashes headlong down a flight of stairs. The M1108s manage the energy and the timing of its delivery to a nicety, adding convincing scale and authority to the piano, without conceding any delicacy or speed. It is this ability to relax into the music and just let it happen, rather than trying to force it to happen, that sets the M1108 apart.

More jazz piano, this time Michiel Borstlap and 'Cherish Your Sunshine' from the album 88. I heard this trio for the first time earlier this year, live at a jazz festival, and I was struck by the dexterity and fluidity of Borstlap's piano, and the astonishing skill and inventiveness of the percussion. The M1108s gave a better sense of the interplay between the musicians, and also between the left and right hands of Borstlap's piano. He sometimes plays extremely rapid runs which can, in the wrong circumstances, just seem like unnecessary flourishes and showing-off. The M1108s portrayed much more of a sense of musical purpose to these fast sections, by revealing more of the articulation in the playing. Similarly, the percussion sounds more dynamic and impactful – I think one key aspect to the M1108s success lies

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in its lack of overhang – silences happen just as suddenly and completely as do the leading edges of notes, so transients retain their presence and effectiveness because they don't bleed into the rest of the music. Like its less powerful siblings, the M1108s stop and start on a dime; the extra power is all sinew and muscle, no fat, bloat or inertia here. Borstlap's bass player is also unobtrusively skilful and highly talented, an analogy which also serves to describe the M1108 quite well, particularly given that much of the benefit emerges in the quality of the bass it produces.

The extra power thus brings greater authority. Pianos are muscular and more sonorous; big bands are bigger, brassier and bolder; vocals have both 'head' voice and 'chest' voice. Bass has more power, but also more control, benefitting both tunefulness and the sense of propulsion. The M1108s retain the M608s textures, speed and nuance, even when some parts of the music are trying to bludgeon their way through. Take Leonard Bernstein's account of Mahler's 1st Symphony with the Concertgebouw orchestra. Here was a greater sense of the character of instruments, and the movement of air they created. Clarinets had real 'bounce'; physically large instruments had a greater feeling of mass, a better impression of cellos and basses enclosing a large volume of air, for example. This was also helped by the air and space around the instruments, meaning that 'tutti' sections were clearer and less congested. All of this would be but a party trick, if it wasn't reined in where necessary. Crucially, the opening of the first movement retained its numinous quality ►

▶ because it was easy to perceive the way the orchestra was being held back; the greater the sense of pent up power and potential, the more moving the effect when it is held in check - something many a bruiser of an amp fails to do because it can't separate mass and inertia from volume and power.

Pop music also benefitted: 'Good Vibrations' from *Smile* had plenty of bounce and motion – a feeling of flow, rather than just forward progress. In among all the vocal harmonies and Theremin wackiness, there are some pretty hardworking cellists. Here there was a clear awareness of the cellists leaning in and applying their shoulders and elbows, their phrasing and timing much more apparent, and effective, in propelling the music forwards. All told, the M1108 turns out to be rather more than just an M608 with more power.

Since my review the AP11 preamp has also had some useful revisions, which unfortunately accompany a rise in price to £2,495. A new volume pot and internal changes to reduce noise even further mean that the preamp is even more agile. It retains its freshness and exuberance but adds a useful extra dollop of nuance and sophistication. The enhancements are, in my view, easily worth the price premium. I've also had a chance to use the inbuilt (MM) phono stage (moving coil users can purchase the separate MCA11 head amplifier for £500), and am happy to confirm that it concedes little to outboard phono stages costing a significant proportion of the entire preamp's asking price, indeed there are quite a few, at some fairly serious prices, which lack the AP11 phono stage's sense of freedom and dexterity. The phono stage is an ideal complement to the rest of the Albarray amplifier offering, it is nimble, tuneful and authoritative, and every bit as good as the line stage itself.

I thought, when I reviewed the Albarray AP11 and M608 combination, that it brought a level of insight into the performance that I hadn't expected for the price. The M1108 raises the bar even higher. It is also a considerably more expensive amplifier at £5,750 against the M608s £2,995, but it manages a neat trick. It uses its extra power wisely, and discreetly, to underpin the performance and let the music speak for itself. It is an athlete, rather than a bodybuilder, treads a happy line between strength and nimbleness and the result is a supremely confident and convincingly musical performer, well worth the asking price. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Albarray M1108 monobloc power amplifier

Output: 110 Watts into 8 Ohms (20.5dBW)

Frequency response: 2Hz-110 KHz

Damping factor: greater than 500

Input sensitivity: 725mV 0dB

Signal to Noise: better than 113dB 'A' weighted 2/3s power

Size: 140mm x 158mm x 265mm (HxWxD)

Weight: 14Kg (per pair)

Price: £5750.00 per pair

Manufacturer: Albarray Music Ltd

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URL: www.albarraymusic.com

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