

EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Albany AP11 preamplifier and M608 mono power amps

By Steve Dickinson

Albany comes from that honourable tradition of small British hi-fi manufacturers, each ploughing an individual furrow and (hopefully) cultivating an enthusiastic group of adherents along the way. Some have moved up to a bigger league, others remain small, specialist and, largely, below the public's radar. The particular blip that was Albany burned brightly for a while, gaining many admirers in the 1980s, but faded from view years ago. Well now it's back.

Fans of the original Albany designs will recognise the red acrylic casework, and the gold screen-printing, not to mention the shoebox-style of the mono-bloc power amplifiers. It's an individual look, befitting a range that is almost blatantly true to its roots. The translucent red casework is distinctive and attractive, and I particularly like the way the red monitor LED lights up the internals in the dark, although if I'm honest, the graphics do look a little dated nowadays.

Fans will also recognise the 'house sound' in these new units. The M608 mono amps derive directly from the older M408 and M1008 designs, offering 60 Watts into an 8 Ohm load and almost twice that into 4 Ohms. However, the implementation has been significantly updated, and the M608 comfortably outpoints the old M1008's 100 Watts, largely thanks to considerably greater reserves in its power supply. Albany's designer, Neil Burnett, tells me the M608's power supply is capable of delivering almost a kilowatt for transients and is only cruising at the amp's rated output. He thinks its 60 Watt output is enough for most situations when you've got that sort of headroom for dynamics, and I believe he may be right. Big orchestral material, played loud, impresses by its extraordinary lack of congestion. For example, the Jansons/Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra's Dvorak Symphony no. 9, on SACD, retains depth, detail and texture, even in this most exuberant symphony's more climactic sections.

The AP11 pre-amplifier is completely new; its form more closely resembles a duty-free bulk pack of cigarettes, and it doesn't weigh that much more. It offers four line-level inputs including a dedicated CD input, recording loop, and a built-in moving-magnet phono stage. I don't use a vinyl source, but the designer was keen to point out that this is much more than just a throwaway. Those with record players might afford it serious consideration before assuming they need an expensive add-on. The CD input has lower gain than the other line-level inputs, and one thing I really like is that the volume control has a sensible and usable arc of operation. There are a lot of amplifiers out there whose volume controls go from 'is it working?' to 'Anti-Social Behaviour Order' before you've got past the 10-o'clock position. With the Albany, the music really starts happening from about ▶

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▶ the 8-o’clock position but, depending on the recording, is usable all the way round to 2-o’clock, and beyond. And, despite the modest on-paper figures, that 2-o’clock position will coax enough output from the M608’s to ensure that your neighbours have the local council’s environmental nuisance department on speed-dial. This is definitely the sort of combination where the numbers only tell part of the story.

And storytelling is what the Albarrys excel at. Whether it’s large-scale orchestral or girl-and-guitar; jazz, Gregorian chant or brass bands, the Albarrys get right to the heart of the musical message and bring you the performance. It’s a combination of lots of things, done well. Whether it’s timing, tunefulness, speed and dynamics, or pretty much any other touchstone of performance that matters, the Albarrys give you no cause to doubt them. Like the David Berning ZOTL/ZH230 combination, they are completely even-handed in their treatment of any music you care to throw at them. They are not a ‘poor man’s David Berning’ though, partly because, even at under a third of the price of the Bernings, they are still a costly prospect, but mainly because describing them in that way is trite, and fails to do justice to their remarkable capabilities. Still, if you’re lusting after the Bernings but can’t stretch the budget, seek out the Albarrys, and be happy.

They are extremely fast, having the lightness of touch that seems so often to be the preserve of relatively low-powered amplifiers but, in

this case, there is a core of steel supporting that nimbleness. Earlier this year I heard Return To Forever play live at a jazz festival. Stanley Clarke’s bass attack is almost violent in its speed and impact, and very difficult to reproduce in a hifi system. ‘Sorceress’, from the live comeback album *Return to Forever Returns* starts with Clarke’s whip-crack bass and percussion, working together to create an effect which is almost a physical blow. The Albarry amps didn’t have the intensity of the real thing, but came close, kept the depth and impact of the percussion, and remained true to the pitch of the bass notes. The whole performance was considerably faster, more exciting and more enthralling than anything else I’ve played it through.

I also learnt things about familiar, favourite recordings I thought I knew inside out. Prokofiev’s compelling Piano Concerto no. 2, played by Yundi Li with the BPO under Seiji Ozawa has many dense and powerfully climactic sections, masterfully and convincingly rendered, but the big surprise was the second movement. I like the Li interpretation much more than the familiar Ashkenazy account, for the fluidity and dexterity which breathes life and fire into the first movement cadenza, a section which Ashkenazy renders somewhat taxing and laboured. But, the second movement is a *moto perpetuo*, which I’d previously felt Li took at too fast a tempo, preferring Ashkenazy’s more articulate and measured approach. But, with the dCS Puccini playing through the Albarrys, Li’s phrasing and exquisite control suddenly makes much more sense; it is without question played at a breakneck pace, but despite this pell-mell dash for the tape, it never seems rushed.

One of the most outstanding aspects of the Albarry approach is this preservation of inner detail, and the sense it conveys. Much of the credit goes to the pre-amp which is ▶



▶ easily among the most transparent and engaging examples I've found and, frankly, peerless at the price. It drives when it has to drive, it trips lightly when tripping is required, and it can convey a degree of stillness which can be almost numinous. But, this is definitely one combination where there isn't a weaker half. The power amps work their own magic on the pre-amp's output. I've no doubt either component would work well in conjunction with other partners, but the combination is rather special. It has an ease and fluidity that effortlessly reveals the musicianship in a performance, yet digs deep and drives hard when the occasion requires it.

Many amplifiers faced with a big orchestra simply default to a muddled heap of sound. In stark contrast, the Albarrys continue to discriminate between the component elements. This resolves the wall of sound into something rather more than the sum of the parts. Tchaikovsky in general, and Capriccio Italien in particular, might not be an obvious choice if you're looking for subtlety in phrasing and musicianship. I was playing it because the system was getting some amazing results out of the denser, blowsier orchestral canon, and I like it, so what the heck? Anyway, some of the full-on orchestral sections have a percussion part for a tambourine, usually heard as a vague shimmering in the background, but this time it was clear that the skin of the tambourine was also being struck by fingertips, the texture of the strike was readily discernible, and quite separate from any other percussive sounds going on, not to mention the rest of the Royal Philharmonic in one of its more extrovert moments.

Partnered with a suitably articulate source (I got astonishing results with the dCS Puccini and U-Clock) the amps repeatedly proved themselves more than capable of preserving all the nuance and subtlety the player dug out of the disc. It's a no-brainer for complex jazz and modern music. Something like Hard Fairy by Graham Fitkin: two pianos battling it out with a soprano saxophone; dense, layered and complex, but the Albarrys kept their head and presented not only two distinct pianos, but gave quite extraordinary insight into the phrasing and the musicianship of their players.

There is an overall feeling of cleanliness about these amps, but without any hint of sterility. The Albarrys, unlike the Bernings, do add a little of themselves to the music: a sort of organic feel which I found entirely welcome. It's not warmth or any obvious coloration and tonally the amps are quite lean and neutral. It's perhaps that there is a sense of fluency about their presentation, which the more analytical and transparent approach of the Bernings eschews. The Albarrys are slightly more relaxed in their treatment of leading edges of notes; never losing the impact or the timing, but a touch more legato than staccato. They won't beautify your music for you, but if there is beauty to be had, they'll find it. More to the point, they give a level of insight into the performance that I've never found at this price. Much as I love my Accuphase, the time has clearly come to put it out to pasture. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Albarry AP11 pre-amplifier
(figures for line section)

Inputs: 4x line

1x (mm) phono stage

1x tape loop

CD input gain: 4.5 dB

Other line inputs: 15dB

Sensitivity: 3 mV

Size: 75mm x 440mm x 158mm (HxWxD)

Price: £1995.00

Albarry M608 monobloc
power amplifier

Output: 60Watts into 8 Ohms (18dBW)

Damping factor: Greater than 500

Input sensitivity: 500mV 0dB

Size: 140mm x 150mm x 265mm (HxWxD)

Weight: 14Kg (per pair)

Price: £2550.00 per pair

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