

The Neoteric Listener... the Mystere ia11 integrated amplifier

by Dean Seislove



You must remember this, a click is just a click, a sigh is just a sigh...

Nothing against online retailers, they are convenient and often cheaper, but for a big purchase like audio gear, I need to be reassured that the person selling me the product is not a computer program or a voice on a headset. You already know that audio dealers, like many of the denizens of the audio world, are an interesting and varied bunch. As a kid growing up in Southern California where audio chains dominated strip malls and radio ads, I spent a lot of time ogling a giant pair of Altec Lansing speakers, and listening to the patter of the salesmen of that era. They were always smart, always a quick study, always with an angle. Johnny Spec would grind you down with measurement cryptography promising big watts and low distortion. Kip Wine Cooler seduced you with visions of Pink Floyd billowing out of your quadraphonic speakers while you kicked back on the waterbed with your fine, fine lady. My favorite was Mr. Decibel, who treated amps like fuel boosters to blast his speakers out of the atmosphere, or crash and burn trying. Liszt or Led Zeppelin, didn't matter, it was all shot out like a howitzer. He knew it all, too, from specs to wire to rare import B-side 45s, kind of like Hulk Hogan channeling Harry Pearson. "Kid, get ready" he would say, leaning down to press the play button on the cassette player, "this is guaranteed to hit your music G-spot!"

While I never experienced that particular stimulus package from any of my audio gear, I bring all this up because of my recent experience with the Mystere ia11 integrated amplifier. Because my most vivid personal experience with tubes featured a blown 6L6GC Sylvania, a gang of smart-ass lowlifes, and a floundering Fender Super Twin, I've since viewed tube amplification with some trepidation. Of course, when things were running right, that amp sounded so good that nobody would notice that I didn't. Still, I empathize with potential customers who share my tube bi...er, anxieties. Despite the many assurances that modern tube amp design has practically eliminated the audiophile nightmare of a sudden pop, an alarming smell, and a mocking silence, there's no doubt that reliability and product support is especially important when the pistons of your sound machine rely on glass and electrodes.



Kevin Deal, the U.S. distributor for Mystere, offers a wide variety of high end audio products. You've probably seen his ads for Upscale Audio, the richer-than-Croesus repository of rare and exotic tubes. Engaging, professional, and absolutely accommodating, Deal touts Mystere (and Prima Luna, too) because he has been in the business for a long time, and he doesn't want to deal with 3 a.m. phone calls from customers whose amps have just crapped out. There's no hustle here, just a firm belief that this product offers exceptional sound, lasting reliability, and good value. But everyone promises that, so let's see if the Mystere ia11 is a duke or a duck.

For those who can't wait for the envelope, here are my listening notes:

The B. Glad Express Line Review, 6 Items or Less

"Santa Clause Go Straight to the Ghetto"- James Brown, ***Santa's Got A Brand New Bag*** (Rhino)

Nothing conveys the meaning of spiritual renewal better than the man who made being black become, both, a cause and a coronation. With Christmas cookies in hand and fuzzy reindeer antlers on my head, the Mystere ia11 and I had a spirited time wassailing to this holiday classic (a classic around here, anyways). Compared to my Arcam A-80, the syncopated horns had a fullness and immediacy that, while not necessarily more defined, definitely made for a more realistic presence. The electric guitar fills picked close to the bridge enjoyed a similar transformation because the notes gained more body and less shrillness. Likewise, the depth and decay of the amplifier's spring reverb emerged more readily from the amp, as opposed to merely being a rendering of an effect. James Brown's unmistakably expressive singing was as real as a patrol car in Georgia, and the extra warmth in his voice meant that, for the moment, we had mothers and soul brothers in my house, too.

"What Are You Doing New Year's Eve" - Mary Margaret O'Hara, *The Best Christmas... Ever!* Various Artists (Import, Virgin Records)

From one of those strange compilations that only a job could love, this stunning rendition of the Frank Loesser classic was sumptuously presented to full advantage by the Mystere ia11. Bathed in echo and delay, O' Hara's quavering voice shimmered in the best thirties ingénue tradition. The tone of the accompanying clarinet and oboe had a roundness that proved utterly convincing, and the ia11

enabled my Tannoys to produce a deft handling of wind instruments. The bassoon harrumphed in a manner that was eminently enjoyable, but it also underscored that this amp renders bass in a manner that is expressive, not explosive.

"Duas Lagrimas De Orvalho"- Mariza, **Transparente** (EMI Europe Generic)

A song from the fado genre (the word means "destiny/fate" in Portuguese) this is a tour de force from popular international star, Mariza. Again, the Mystere shines by coaxing a strikingly emotive rendering of music from the Arcam CD/Tannoy pairing. "Duas Lagrimas De Orvalho" is nothing more than a single voice and a hauntingly beautiful counter melody played on cello, but the EL34s showcase both singer and instrument so that the combination of the two is a study of singularity in perfect accord. In the hands of the Arcam, the strings of the cello may be slightly more articulated, but the atmosphere (I can't think of any other way to describe it) regrettably has been diminished.

Organ Symphony No. 6 in G minor, Op. 42, No. 2:1. Allegro, **Widor Organ Favorites** (Naxos). Robert Delcamp, Organ

I'll admit to being a classical music dilettante, but there's nothing like a big pipe organ to rattle the screws of my Tannoys. These speakers do have pretty deep voices for wee people, but the chief reason for mentioning this selection is that, compared to the Arcam, the Mystere's organ sound seems more like a product of pressurized air, not a digital analog converter. True, it wasn't realistic enough to have me watching out for the deacon in the pews, but it was an impressive improvement, nonetheless.

Joachim: Violin Concerto No. 2 in D minor, Op. 11 "In the Hungarian Style", **Brahms & Joachim Violin Concertos** (Chicago Symphony Orchestra; Carlos Kalmar, conductor). Rachel Barton Pine, Violin

The entire orchestra is presented in a lush, but not artificial, manner, and the violins are as sweetly conveyed as anything heard in my living room (and plenty of others, too, I'll bet!).

"Girl With One Eye" - Florence + The Machine, **Lungs** (Island)

A strange, moody, and ultimately wonderful song, this selection from the British indie rock band's debut album illustrates how well the ia11 can dish out big time rock n' roll. Sure, if you want your bass to have the disturbing depth of a trash truck idling in the driveway, you'll need to look elsewhere, but if you want an amp that can really nail guitar, drums, bass, and twenty-something desperation, step right in. From the *Gumbyesque* theme chords at the beginning, to the wail of sound crescendo at the end, the Mystere ia11 masterfully enlivens the layered harmonics of the electric guitars. Bass drum, snare, cymbals, and other percussion instruments are presented as music, so, again, if you like a little concussion in your percussion, you might want to enlist the services of the ia11s older brother, the Mystere ia21.

But wait, you only know the half of it...!

Zap em' with your tubes, man! Zap em' with your tubes!

Actually, before you even get to the tubes, the purchaser of the ia11 is rewarded by an almost pathological attention to packaging, aesthetics, and first-impressions. Assured by Kevin Deal that my review sample is "exactly like it would be if you were a customer," I was astounded by how securely boxed and protected the Mystere ia11 is for initial use: additional baffling, each tube securely nestled in its own tube holder, the entire amp shrink wrapped tight like a bake potato at a Bakersfield road stand, etc. Having recently returned from the Los Angeles Auto Show, the high gloss piano black lacquer finish of my review sample evoked the dazzle of gleaming luxury model cars (sans the silicone hood ornaments). After donning the tidy white gloves included for removing the tube cover, I removed said cover and admired the sleek Art Deco styling. Neoteric or otherwise, most listeners place a premium on a product's visual appeal, and the ia11's dramatic and captivating appearance will be sure to please for many years to come. The amp has two large knobs on the front panel, one for input selection (four inputs—not a lot, but sufficient for my needs) and the other knob is a high quality 24-step volume attenuator. Both knobs were used copiously during my listening period, and

everything clicked with reassuring solidity. As I have no heat in my little house, I was hoping that the ia11 would run hot enough to provide winter cheer. Unfortunately, it doesn't, so it was scratchy sweaters for me.

The tubes of the ia11 operate in a pentode push-pull design. Standing tall in the back row are four EL-34 power tubes (estimated tube life: 2,000-3,000 hrs), and in the lower tier are four 6SN7input/driver tubes (estimated tube life: 10,000 hrs). If you don't recognize the brand Mystere, how about Prima Luna, of auto-biasing and hassle-free tube rolling fame? Same company, same mix-and-match tube sensibilities. The manual (each one personally signed by the amp's designer, no less!) even goads the user that the "Adaptive AutoBias circuit... automatically adjusts each tube to its sweet spot. Want to try different EL34s? Just plug them in!" Now, I'd love to say that my first priority as a reviewer is to provide an objective evaluation of music equipment performance and value, especially as it pertains to first-generation audiophiles, but... my first priority is not to break, discommode, or nettle any of the review samples. Needless to say, I didn't start shoving in tubes to see how the sound changed. If I owned the ia11, however, you can bet a box of audio stones that I'd be driving myself poor and crazy by trying every hunted-to-extinction Mullard or glass refugee from Kyrgyzstan that I could scavenge. Still, for those who can't bear to trouble with quibbles, you don't have to.

Hey, my appliances work for me, not vice-versa!

For those who just want to light 'em up, and let 'em rip, the Mystere amplifier is game fer dat, too. Right out of the box, the sound was superb, and it got better and better as everything settled in and heated up. By way of preface, let me remind you that my daily amplifier is the Arcam A-80, allegedly upgraded to sound like the A-85 (whatever that's worth, which for me was about 500 bucks) but the short of it is this amp has been variously described as "forward" "smooth" and "neutral" by various authorities, never "warm," much less "tubey." The Arcam is partnered with Tannoy Eyris speakers that soften the high frequencies, extend the midband, and are invariably British-grade "pleasant". The pairing works for me, most of the time, because my volume levels and music choices are also invariably pleasant. My amp choice was deliberate, though, because, while I really love tube-bloom at first blush, my love fades quickly over time. Truth be told, there's a part of me that suspects that an overly warm tube sound is some sort of trick, a sonic saccharin that disguises what the sound should really be. Again, that probably hearkens back to my music days when the dreamy guitar waif played open tuning chords through his uncle's Vox AC30 while all the hot girls swooned and I stood in the back, shouting "Wake up! It's the amp, dammit!"

But I digress...The point of all this is to let you know right away that the Mystere ia11 is *not* one of those amps that lather you up in tube warmth...or subtle added distortions... or euphonic sound, or any of the glittering generalities used to describe whatever the hell it is that tubes do. If you're looking for something that goes over the top in that manner, or if you want something that is lightning fast and booming loud, then bookmark this product for when you don't. Simply put, the ia11 gives added dimensions to the music without sacrificing the clarity (or control) of the overall presentation. It's solidly and meticulously built, too, so it looks like it will perform for many tube years to come. Buy with confidence!

Mystere ia11 Integrated Amplifier
Retail: \$1995

Mystere
web address: www.mystere-usa.com