



## GOLDEN EAR AWARDS 2001

### Vacuum Tube Logic ST-150 Stereo Amplifier

**L**ike a hunk with a college education, VTL's ST-150 amplifier offers the ideal combination of brawn and brains. It always has power to spare, and never hints at caving in even at the loudest passages. In the brains department, the ST-150 has a feature that sets it apart from conventional tube designs, and allows it stunning range and versatility: It can switch between triode mode, in which three of the quadrants in its output tubes are powered, and tetraode mode, in which all four quadrants are operating. Triode mode provides pure and detailed reproduction of small ensembles, while tetraode mode increases power output and enhances playback of large-scale music with challenging dynamics. This feature mirrors the design of the ST 150's marvellous little siblings, the Tiny Triode TT-25 monoblocks (review, Issue 123).

In either mode, the ST-150 can reproduce the ephemeral quality of a live performance to a degree that is so astonishing, I have given it a Golden Ear this year. I go to many live concerts, and at times I just sit and listen to see how much detail I can actually hear, and how well I can distinguish one instrument, or one voice, from another. If I listen to the ST-150 with my eyes closed, I am often surprised at how much the sound resembles a live performance. Though not infrequently, a recording will yield an even more detailed picture of the location of the players and the sound of their instruments than I can honestly say I get at



many live events. The incredibly detailed stage placement achieved by the ST-150, in combination with its capacity to create a wide and deep soundstage, and the power to sustain it, will turn most high-quality recordings into a great listening experience.

That was certainly the case with *Songs of the Auvergne*, a classic Vanguard stereo LP

[Stereolab VSD-2090, with Netania Davrath, soprano], which I played in tetraode mode. The songs were orchestrated by Joseph Canteloube, whose careful instrument selection sometimes reflects rustic exuberance, at others evoking the peacefulness of nature. Davrath's light, penetrating voice suits the music perfectly, and the whole performance is brought

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delightfully to life by the ST-150. The orchestra is spread out behind her in magnificent detail, while still providing a clear picture of the sound quality of each instrument, without spotlighting. Davrath is clearly placed ahead of the orchestra at center stage. Her voice and the instruments playing with her provide an ideal opportunity for the ST-150 to demonstrate its fine harmonic balance and consistency through different registers, especially noticeable throughout the midrange and into the highest octaves of the human voice.


On a somewhat smaller scale, the "Birth of Kije" [*Lt. Kije*, by Sergei Prokofiev, Chesky LP RC10] shows tetrode mode at its most intimate. You can almost feel the players at their desks on the subtly layered soundstage, and there is very little sense that you are on the outside looking in – transparency is so good that the listener is more or less in the room with the performers, an effect sustained even at louder volume levels. The high *pianissimo* violin passage, with its haunting tremolo, comes through with beautiful harmonic integrity, sounding wistful and distant.

Mozart's "Sonata for Two Pianos" K448 [CBS Masterworks CD MK 39511, Murray Periaiah and Radu Lupu] illustrates the glories of triode mode. The keyboards are arranged so the pianists face each other, and the strong visual placement of each instrument in relation to the other makes the interplay between them all the more fun, since, with the ST-150, you can hear it in tremendous detail. And the sound of the pianos! I loved the liquid beauty of the notes in the upper midrange, especially, and by the body and weight of the instruments so palpably present onstage. It's typical of the results I've had with smaller ensemble recordings played in triode mode.

This system can easily overblow a small

space, and when it does, it also blows out all the benefits I've been describing. Luckily, however, the ST-150 performs best when room dynamics have been optimized by the proper volume, and the choice of a modest volume level will actually improve the sound in a small listening room.

Both loudspeaker systems I have used in the course of preparing this review fall just below VTL's minimum recommended sensitivity of 92 dB, but both have worked well with the ST-150. The Energy C-2s are a bookshelf design with sensitivity of 88 dB, while the larger Veritas 2.3s are a floor-standing four-way design at 90 dB. No matter how loud the climax, in either mode, with either loudspeaker system, the ST-150 never showed any sign of fatigue. It wasn't fazed by any of the big, brassy passages in Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 1* [Chesky LP CR2], and stayed consistent through Callas' loudest utterances in "Casta Diva" [from *Norma*, EMI Classics 5 66428 2, 3 CD's], when she soars over the orchestra and chorus in her best declamatory fashion. In so doing, the ST-150 did not forget to deliver the tiny nuances that give music its beauty, such as Callas' subtle phrasing in the languorous *legato* passages at the beginning of the aria.

Even without the capacity to switch between triode and tetrode modes, the ST-150 would be a strong performer and a worthy contender. For my money, though, the versatility added by that feature is a persuasive reason to take a serious look at the ST-150 if it suits your system's needs. When you also consider its almost uncanny ability to reproduce the feel of a performance, the case in favor of the ST-150 becomes very compelling. 

JOHN HIGGINS

#### MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

Vacuum Tube Logic, Inc.

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Phone: (909) 627-5944; fax: (909) 627-6988

Price: \$3,750

#### SPECS

Tube Complement: 8 x 6550C, 2 x 12AT7, 2 x 6350

Output Power (20 Hz -25 kHz  $\pm$  0.1 dB, 3% THD):

Into 4 ohms, Tetrode mode = 175 watts/channel; Triode Mode = 90 watts/channel

Into 8 ohms, Tetrode mode = 140 watts/channel; Triode mode = 75 watts/channel

Input impedance: 1.0V/100 k/ohms

Output impedance: 1.65 ohms

Signal-to-noise ratio: -95 dB, 120 Hz

#### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Linn Sondek LP12 turntable with Ittok LV II pick-up arm; Van den Hul MC One Special Cartridge; Classé Audio .3 Mk II integrated CD player; Conrad-Johnson PV-5 preamplifier; VTL Tiny Triode TT-25 monoblock amplifiers; Energy C-2 2-way dynamic bookshelf and Energy Veritas 2.3 four-way dynamic floor-standing loudspeakers; Nordost Blue Heaven interconnects (CD player and preamplifier output); Nordost Blue Heaven bi-wire configured loudspeaker cables; Monster Power Home-Theater Reference PowerCenter HTS 3500