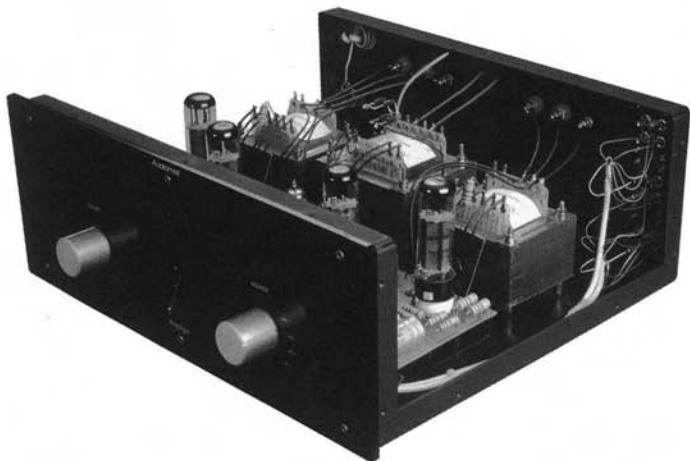


Audiomat-ic

The French: Is there anything they can't do?
Review by Bruce Kennett



Arpège integrated amplifier

Type: tube integrated amplifier

Output tubes: EL34EH

Input sensitivity: 300 mV

Output impedance(s): 4 or 8 ohms

Rated power: 30 wpc, class A (to mid power)

Weight: 55 pounds

I've been under the spell of this amp since I first heard it at the Montreal audio show in March 1999. That's two solid years of pleasant memories. I spent several hours listening to the Arpège on the last day of the 1999 show, and I reported back to Fearless Leader that this would be a great product for us to audition. Last spring I returned to the Montreal show and was more convinced than ever.

This being the budget amp of Audiomat's line, you'd think it would be-

have like a Chevy 2 or a Dodge Neon. Nope. The amp is derived from Audiomat's middle-rank *Prélude*, which has been a European favorite since 1987. Having enjoyed a lot of success with this amp, Audiomat wanted to create something lower-market that would still have the musical rightness of the *Prélude*. To say they've reached their goal is an understatement.

Audiomat makes everything by hand in limited quantities in a small facility located between Marseille and Aix-en-Provence in southern France. Brothers Denis and Norbert Clarisse started the company in their parents' house in 1986. Denis is responsible for the circuit design and schematics (his background is in computer science engineering); Norbert has a degree in political science and sociology, and he manages the company. Mutine's website states an interesting fact about this fraternal partnership: "At the beginning, Norbert's passion was Music; Denis's passion was Audio." What comes out of

Audiomat now is the synthesis of those interests, and it makes for a very powerful listening experience. This is a modest company that sets out to make a few things extremely well. All the design development happens at a snail's pace. They believe in simple circuits and no feedback. New products are launched rarely, and only after thousands of hours of listening sessions and performance testing.

Audiomat now offers three integrated amps: the *Arpège* (in production since 1998), the *Prélude Référence* (\$3300, 1987), and the *Solfège Référence* (\$4900, 1994). They also make three DACs (all 24/96, all solid-state, priced from \$2300 to \$5990) and a phono stage (also solid-state, priced at \$990).

While the other Audiomat amps and DACs wear machined aluminum faceplates and cases, the *Arpège* uses non-magnetic steel, with a plastic faceplate as a cost-saving measure. This has actually given the *Arpège* a lot of sex appeal: The faceplate is

made from a ¼-inch sheet of smoked acrylic mounted to the front of the chassis with small stainless bolts. However, they've cut a small horizontal rectangle in the front wall of the case, above the two control knobs, and this allows the owner to gaze through the smoked plexi to see the tubes aglow while the amp is running. I rate this as a fabulous inspiration—but it is diminished in its beauty by Audiomat's use of a blazingly bright blue LED to indicate power-on state. In a darkened room the blue LED bores into your eyeballs like a dentist's drill, and the much-fainter tube glow doesn't really show. I solved this by cutting out a small square of Post-It material and sticking it over the LED; Mutine tells me my grousing has been passed along to Audiomat, and perhaps they'll add a resistor to the LED to make it dimmer in future production. I hope they do.

I said earlier that this was a budget version of the original *Prélude*. In fact, inside

the chassis, the circuit and components are identical to those of the original (and more expensive) amp that put Audiomat on the map. To bring down the price, the Clarisses omitted the tape monitor switch, made the acrylic faceplate, and—perhaps the most significant difference, sonically—used very good connectors instead of the absolute best. The gold-and-teflon hex-headed connectors were simply too expensive to use, as they would add hundreds of dollars to the retail price of the unit.

The circuit is push-pull, with four EL34EH output tubes driven by three 12AX7As. It's direct-coupled between the first two stages, and the output circuit is auto-biasing. Audiomat has opted to use a semi-passive rather than active preamp, based on results of their listening tests. Also, instead of resting on cheaper rubber feet, the amp sits on three massive cones machined from solid brass. The cones and the component masses directly above them have been positioned carefully, again by ear. When they originally planned this budget amp, the Clarisses intended to use rubber feet, but the sound wasn't up to standard, so they went ahead and fitted it with the same expensive cones used on the upper-level amplifiers.

This is a minimalist amp. On the front you'll find only a volume knob, an input selector with four positions, and an on-off switch with LED. (I wish the inputs were labeled something other than LINE 1, LINE 2, *etc.*, but this amp is distributed all over the world, so the choice made is indeed the most practical and universal.) On the back are four pairs of line-level RCA inputs, two pairs of RCA line outs, single speaker outputs with red 'n' black plastic terminals (and a choice of 4 or 8 ohms), and an IEC socket for the power cord. No remote control available. And that's it, folks—but it doesn't really matter much once you hear the amp in operation.

As with the Rogue Tempest (Vol.7, No.2), I tried the amp with our usual speakers—Reynaud Offrandes and Spendor BC-1s, both 89-decibel stand-mounters—as

well as with a pair of Equation 7 floorstanders (87dB, although I suspect 86 might be a fairer rating). I used our Well Tempered Classic with Dynavector XX-1L cartridge as an analog source, running into either an Exposure 13 or an Audiomat phono stage; I used an Exposure CD Player, or the combination of a Vecteur D2 transport and Audiomat Tango DAC, for digital. I listened to everything under the sun, and I had a lot of fun doing it.

What impresses me the most about the Arpège is its humanity. Yes, I'm talking about that same quality I found in the Reynaud Trentés and which Steve and I agreed upon in the Reynaud Twins. In a recent visit to the Internet's Audio Asylum, I noticed someone requesting that if any asylum inmate went to CES and auditioned the Trenté or Offrande, would they please "listen, and speak to us with some useful prose. Do not, please, tell us they're emotional...unless you tell us what else turns you on." This amuses me, since I find standard audiophile descriptions so uninteresting, and the more I think on this, the more important emotional content becomes. I acknowledge that my use of "emotions" in describing audio components is not a good gauge for everyone, but that's how I'm built, and it's all I can bring to the table. Even if I happened to have an anechoic chamber here in the barn, I doubt I'd spend much time there. So I'm going to write the same kinds of things here. As someone who's trying to steer you toward the "good stuff," I will say that this amp excels at reproducing music in all the normal hi-fi ways, but what makes it special goes far beyond that. Let me give you an example.

My friend Jack Dryden* gave me a cassette tape of his music back in 1981. He dubbed it onto a Maxell LN60 tape—that's right, LN, the cheap-ass stuff you buy to tape lectures. Despite its low-fi sound and accumulating dropouts, I've played the tape

**By the way, if any of you readers happens to know where Jack is, ask him to get in touch with me through Artie, okay?—B.K.*

a zillion times, because the music on it is so fine. It's a complete blowing session, an hour of tunes captured in the studio with Jack on double bass (all the compositions are his, too), Bill Frizell on guitar, Billy Drewes on sax, Biff Hannon on keyboards, and John Riley on drums. Even though Jack was never able to sell this album, I consider myself very lucky to own a copy. And let me tell you, it has *never* sounded as fine as it does when played through this Arpège (source is our old Nakamichi BX1). Especially where Jack's bass is concerned, the Arpège reveals extra measures of deftness in his playing, more melodic inspiration, and more feeling in the music. Makes you able to climb right inside the music. In my opinion, getting this kind of substance from a mediocre tape is *exactly* what good equipment is all about, not reproducing the spinning quarter in some audiophool recording. And it's the same with my old Jimmie Lunceford records or a CD of the Budapest Quartet and George Szell play-

ing Brahms and Schubert quintets at the Library of Congress in the 1940s—the real music just leaps out of the Arpège and leaves the low-fi limitations behind.

This amp's power and authority took me completely by surprise once I heard it in a non-show setting, set up here in the barn with our own stuff. I am not a tube jock like Gizmo, Herb, or Artie, but I have always thought KT88s were more powerful than EL34s (or the EL84s that we have in our Altec mono integrated amp). The Arpège is rated at only 30 watts per channel, yet throughout the weeks that I've listened to both the Arpège and the Rogue Tempest, it was the Arpège that dished out more power. The Tempest was super quick and propulsive in ultralinear mode, but even then, at its 60 wpc rating, the Rogue didn't seem as free and easy driving any of our speakers as the Audiomat. Could the differences lie in power supply? Construction of transformers? Driver stage configu-

ration? I can't tell you, but the effect was consistent and clear.

This modest tube amp also exhibited bass control that I'd otherwise only expect from a solid-state amp. It gives a taut fullness to orchestral music, compared to the Rogue's amp serving. Dynamics are explosive, until you get up to higher listening levels. Notes decay so delicately, lingering on and on. Paradoxically, an overly bright CD like Dee Carstensen's *Regarding the Soul* becomes *more* listenable: You still hear all that treble energy, but what's happening farther down the scale is so rich and lifelike that the thing becomes a more balanced and enjoyable whole.

Depending on the program material you give it, this amp is vivid, delicate, seductive, warm, powerful, glowing, tender, humorous, liquid, pure, fast, lithe, spacious, beguiling, and serene (all these words lifted from my scribbles while listening). I don't think the word "accurate" ever crossed my mind, so firmly did I find myself in the magic of the music. Where the Rogue is grand and architectural, this amp is all feelings and emotions. The word I really want to use is "ineffable"—but that means it's indescribable! All of you readers expect me to sit here and tell you how the Arpège puts so much magic into the music, but beyond what I've written here, words fail me. And, of course, I can't describe how *you* will feel when you hear it—you're on your own there, podnuh.

How did the Arpège fare with our three speakers? The soft-ish bass of the BC-1s was held in tighter rein by this amp than by the Rogue, but the musical nature of the Spondors was a fine match with the Arpège. They've never sounded better. The Offrandes have very extended range and go quite deep for a stand-mounter. They also have a trace of warmth that the Arpège shares, and both products give the listener full access to human feeling in the musicians. The Equation 7's are leaner and more contained than the Offrandes, maybe a shade more *Apollonian* in nature than the more *Dionysian* Offrandes. In the end I

liked the 7's best of all lashed up to the Arpège, but it was close. In comparison to the Arpège-7, the Arpège-Offrande combo was a squeak too much of a good thing, like eating one bite too many of some delicious, rich food. But really, any of the three were a fine match, and by extrapolation, I can confidently predict that this amp should mate happily with most speakers.

Would this be the ultimate integrated, then? At its price point I have not encountered anything comparable. I did have the chance to listen to the more expensive Prélude Référence integrated and can vouch for its even tighter bass control, greater sense of ease and spaciousness, better handling of speaker loads, and more profound clarity. It made a slightly better-balanced match with the Offrande than did the Arpège, but, then again, it costs \$1200 more. I felt an increase in dynamics, a more open top end, and more power. It uses the same tubes as the Arpège but has a stronger power supply, uses the top-quality connectors, and has two sets of speaker outputs. The Prélude Réf is even more sure of itself rhythmically, but the budget Arpège is no slouch in this department.

This is a restrained and elegant piece of equipment. It is very capable. It's human and musical and very powerful. It's pretty to look at (as long as you shoot out that blue LED with your BB gun...) and feels very refined and delicate, visually, compared to the more muscular appearance of the Tempest. Like the Rogue, it's made with great care and attention to details. It is not nearly as flexible as the Tempest and lacks features the other amp can contribute to your life, if those are important (remote control, bi-amp expansion, external preamp, a fifth source). But if you just want to plunk yourself down and get lost in your favorite music—and not spend a fortune getting there—I can think of no better path to bliss than the Arpège.

Quality: ★★★★★-1/4

Value: ㄨㄨㄨ