

## Home Audio Equipment Review

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### Audiomat Arpège Integrated Amplifier

by Mike Masztal

One of the great things about being a reviewer is having the opportunity to hear both new and new-to-the-US gear that pushes the performance envelope. In an audio market already flooded with companies, many foreign manufacturers, although well established in Europe or Asia, have a difficult time penetrating the US market. A good example is the auto industry. Pick up a Brit or French auto mag and see some of the cars offered over there, but not here. I'd love to get my hands on a TVR or Citroen and burn up Deal's Gap here in north Georgia.

Additionally, new small manufacturers tend to have fewer resources when it comes to advertising and marketing their products. Most of their capital appears to go into product development and tweaking rather than full-page glossies in the audio mags. Based on my experience at the last two CES and HI-FI shows, it seems that the smaller manufacturers are making big strides in quality sound reproduction and product offerings.

While high-profile mega-expensive gear should sound great, a lot of the mega-priced "components de jour" are often merely expensive and hi-fi-sounding offerings. Slick-looking maybe, but that's about it. Sadly, a lot of burgeoning audiophiles, not trusting their own ears, try to build systems put together by equipment reviews they've read. I did this myself several years ago and, despite having put together a solid "Class B" component system, I ended up with a really bad-sounding rig. Look at Audiogon or [rec.audio.marketplace](http://rec.audio.marketplace) and you will find many of these components.

My first exposure to Audiomat was at the '98 CES when our publisher introduced me to the North American importer, Pascal Ravach of Mutine, Inc. After a visit to the Mutine suite and a listen to the system on display, Ravach and I sat down for a long talk about audio -- our experiences, likes and dislikes -- and the possibility of a review.

Audiomat was started in 1986 by two brothers, Denis and Norbert Clarisse. Denis is a computer engineer

*"I find the Arpège's \$1900 price tag ridiculously inexpensive."*



### Review Summary

**Sound** "Accurate timbre," "speed and finesse"; "works for piano excel on the Arpège."

**Features** High-quality construction and good looks; tripod spike arrangement puts the amp on solid footing; mature design -- no Mk II or Signature versions on the way.

**Use** Large and heavy, so watch your toes and allow ample room.

**Value** "A big-time best buy" that impressed Mike enough for him to recommend Reviewers' Choice status.

and designs all the schematics and circuitry. Norbert has a degree in political science and sociology, and manages the company. With Norbert's passion being music and Denis' being audio, the brothers were obviously a synergistic combination. Their first product, an OTL 20-watt stereo amplifier, sounded so good that they made the decision to bring it to market. This first Audiomat amplifier, using 16 triode 6AS7G tubes, was a very original design: only two stages, no feedback loop, pure class A, and 110 pounds! Besides the Arpège, Audiomat offers several other amps, a phono stage, and two DACs. A CD transport is in the works.

The Clarisse brothers' design philosophy ensures that the customer is not going to get hit up for an expensive Mk II or Signature upgrade a few months after purchase. In a nutshell: quality of parts and simplicity of circuitry help insure high-quality sound and reliability; countless listening sessions lead to the correct technological choices. It's not uncommon for Audiomat to take several years to perfect a prototype before releasing the component on the market. And there's stability of the product line: Audiomat products normally sell for five to ten years before the next generation appears (digital excluded, of course)

### **The fun begins**

During a business trip earlier this year, Ravach dropped off a new Audiomat Arpège, the entry-level integrated in the Audiomat line. The Arpège is a \$1900 integrated amp using 2 Sovtek EL34 WXT power tubes per channel and a preamp tube complement of three 12AX7s. Accordingly, the power rating is 30Wpc. What first impressed me was the size and weight of the unit. The Arpège weighs in at nearly 60 pounds and measures 17"W by 17"D by 7.5"H.

The Arpège is no slouch in the looks department either. Instead of the thick brushed aluminum faceplate on Audiomat's more expensive models, the Arpège uses a thick translucent black Plexiglas-type faceplate that allows the user to see the glow of the power tubes. Quite sexy! The front panel is fairly simple with only a toggle on/off switch, a silky smooth Alps volume pot and a four-input selector switch. Chassis construction is of very heavy-gauge steel with a graphite-colored powder-coat finish. The wrap-around cover attaches with flush-mounted stainless-steel Allen screws. Removing the cover shows why the Arpège weighs so much. Besides a heavy chassis, the unit has huge output transformers and power supply. Wiring is also first-rate. Instead of rubber feet, the Arpège uses large pointed cones in a tripod setup. Bases for the cones are included. RCA connectors and speaker terminals are high quality in light of the relatively low cost of the Arpège.

### **Listening impressions**

My listening tests included the use of three CD players: a dated, but pretty good and tweaked CAL rig, a new \$2300 Vecteur CD60 (same company that made the megabuck turntable back in the '80s), and my reference Wadia 860. Introducing each of the three players in the system showed respective levels of increasing resolution and musicality. At first, this may not seem to be such a big deal. But my experience has shown me that many amps are colored to the point where upstream component changes make little, if any, difference. And remember, the Arpège is only \$1900.

First up was Holly Cole's well-recorded CD *Temptation* [Metro Blue CDP 7243 8 31653 2 2]. Besides Cole's diverse vocal style, the release has an incredible amount of low-level detail and imaging, making it a great test CD. David Piltch's upright bass sonically takes "form"; you can hear each note emanating from the instrument. His fingering styles are also clearly heard -- snappy at times and soft at others. This quality also speaks for the accurate timbre the Arpège exhibits. Aaron Davis' piano also sounded quite natural. On "Temptation," there is a whining dog heard quite clearly at the beginning and the end of the song using the CAL rig, but with the Vecteur and Wadia players, the dog is whining on repeated occasions throughout the entire song. The Arpège has no trouble reproducing it at any time.

## Associated Equipment

**Loudspeakers** – Equation 7, Silverline Sonatina, Silverline SR17, Silverline SR12.

**Amplifiers** – Audio Research CA60, Mesa Tigris, and Aronov 960I.

**Digital** – CAL Alpha/Delta, Vecteur CD60, Wadia 860.

**Interconnects and speaker cables** – Actinote LA and MB, JPS Labs Superconductor, Silverline Sterling.

**Accessories** – DH Cones and Squares, TDS Passive Audiophile, Vecteur Cones, Vecteur Anticones, Corner Tunes, various homemade room-tuning devices.

On *The Songs of Robert Schumann-1* [Hyperion CDJ33101], the Arpège handles the delicate nuances of Christine Shafer's blithe soprano and Graham Johnson's piano from pianissimo to robust forte with no hint of strain or sibilance. In fact, works for piano excel on the Arpège. The piano is typically a difficult instrument to record, due in part to its large dynamic range. Often it can sound hollow, plinky, brittle or overly sonorous. Mikhail Pletnev's *Scarlatti: Keyboard Sonatas* [Virgin 7243 5 45123 2 2] is one of the best piano recordings from a technical standpoint I have heard to date. Simply, it is a great recording. The Sonata K.24 in A major is a rapid piece that showcases Pletnev's dexterity as he flies up and down the keyboard. The presto passages do not get bogged down with the Arpège, but retain speed and a naturalness of sound. "Bachmeister"

Angela Hewitt's recording *Bach: Fantasia, Inventions, Chromatic Fantasia, Fugue* [Hyperion CDA66746] is another disc that allows the Arpège to show its musicality.

Orchestral passages do well considering the Arpège's power rating. A couple cuts demonstrating some hefty orchestral dynamics come from the excellent Reference Recordings' CD *Tutti!* [Reference Recordings RR-906CD]. Bruckner - Symphony 9, Scherzo allows the Arpège to show both its speed and finesse -- and at the next second, its slam. The same goes for cuts 15-16, Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition - Baba Yaga, Great Gates of Kiev." Both pieces allow the Arpège to demonstrate its soundstage-projection capabilities. One characteristic tube electronics have over solid-state designs is the tube's ability to produce three-dimensional space. The priciest and best solid-state (note priciest and the best are not synonymous) electronics I've heard can produce a very wide, two-dimensional soundstage, but not the space of even moderately priced tube gear. Call that space what you will, but it's there and I like it. Admittedly, solid-state designs do excel at bass slam and control, but I find the sound of most designs to have a hyper-detailed, technicolor aspect that doesn't appeal to me.

OK, but can the Arpège rock? Fleetwood Mac's *The Dance* [Reprise 9 46702-2] is getting a lot of play at my place these days. This live recording has some nice acoustic ambience to it. Throw in some decent work by Mick Fleetwood and Lindsay Buckingham's trick guitar playing and you have 79+ minutes of fun. No problem for the Arpège. Drum dynamics have their proper "thump" rather than "snap," and Buckingham's guitar intro to "I'm So Afraid" has the right amount of bite without sounding offensive. On the flip side, songs like "Landslide" and "Silver Springs" are reproduced with seductive intimacy. Stanley Clarke's, *The BASS-IC COLLECTION* [Epic EK64277] has some wicked bass transients, and the Arpège handles them with ease. On cuts like "Silly Putty," you hear Clarke's bass dwelling in the low places while maintaining tonal correctness and not turning into marshmallow.

Comparing the Arpège to three other integrated tube amps -- Audio Research CA60, Mesa Tigris, and Aronov 960I -- I've had experience with, I found the Arpège handily outperforming all three in terms of focus and dimensionality despite the Arpège costing considerably less than any of the others. But probably the best indicator of how much I like this amp comes from my wife. She's been complaining about my lack of presence. I'm guilty -- I admit it. I've had a hard time tearing myself away from my Arpège-powered system.

## Conclusion

Yes, I'm impressed, enough to make the Arpège only the second component I've recommended for a

Reviewers' Choice award. Considering the level of performance, I find the Arpège's \$1900 price tag ridiculously inexpensive. It's a big-time best buy.

...Mike Maszta

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**Audiomat Arpège Integrated Amplifier**

**Price:** \$1900 USD.

**Warranty:** Two years parts and labor.

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