

August 2000

Review Follow-Up**Audiomat Arpège Integrated Amplifier**

by Neil Walker

The discovery

For years, all hi-fi seemed to disappear for me. There didn't seem to be a step up from my Heathkit 20Wpc amplifier. Everywhere receivers that featured great lighted displays, multiple channels of amplification, bass boost, mega-bass, multi-bass, slam-bass seemed to sprout up everywhere. My favorite store had tons of stuff that cost too much and focused mostly on features that seemed unrelated to sound quality. My lifetime of experience in photography had taught me that lens quality is everything. That's why I hang onto my 20-year-old Hasselblad.



So where are the Hasselblads of audio? I kept wondering. Then I got on the Internet, and I found that there were still manufacturers who value the quality of the sound above all else. And that's when my audio life took a turn for the better. I read about tiny-output tube amps. I read articles from people who listen to *music*, not foundation-shattering warp-speed leaps into other universes. I read about people who love to listen to music between midnight and 3:00 AM because the power source is cleaner or the earth's electromagnetic vibrations line up with alpha waves -- whatever. I found a local audiophile chat group, Toronto Audiophiles.

And I found out about some local Toronto dealers of high-quality audio equipment -- like Angie at American Sound and Rob at Applause Fine Art and Audio. And there I was, in Hasselblad hi-fi heaven. Angie had the superb Simaudio I-5 in stock, and I used it to audition the CD transport and DAC I now use. And one cold night in early winter, Rob Doughty came with me to my house lugging about 150 pounds of amplifiers and phono stages weighing down the back of the car.

At about 9:00 PM, I thought I had suddenly recovered the hearing of my teenage years. I turned to Rob and said, "Wow. All that's on *that* record?" We had just switched to the Audiomat Arpège after listening to an excellent transistor integrated amp. The sheer musicality of it, the complexity of detail it revealed, the ease with which it brought music into the room astonished me. My StudioLab M600s, which I had always enjoyed, became new speakers. My Nakamichi RE-1 receiver, another fine piece of equipment, suddenly seemed more than inadequate. The Arpège had hooked me.

Then I read [Mike Maztal's review](#) of the Arpège on *SoundStage!*. Three weeks later, I took delivery of my own unit, and the rest.... Well, the rest is a tale of daily discovery. Mike had written, in referring to a passion I share with him for the Scarlatti piano sonatas performed by Mikhail Pletnev (*Scarlatti: Keyboard Sonatas* [Virgin Classics 7243 5 45123 2 2]), that the Arpège was excellent for listening to piano music. I would add, after listening to a broad selection of jazz, classical, hip-hop, electronica, turntablist, bluegrass and rock that he was ungenerous in singling out piano music.

The good stuff

Perhaps the greatest disservice to rock, R&B, rap, and industrial rock is the myth that this music is meant for knuckle-draggers and therefore can only be heard properly through high-powered amps with exaggerated bass playing through 15" woofers located in speakers the size of broom closets. The Arpège proves the fallacy of this belief. There is a lot going on in *all* good music, be it Ministry's "Jesus Built My Hot Rod" (*Psalms 69: The Way To Succeed and the Way to Suck Eggs* [Sire/Warner Bros. CD 26727]) or Beethoven's violin sonatas. The quality of bass that the Arpège kicks out combined with the clarity and depth of detail in the midrange and upper frequencies makes liars of the people who insist on the headbanger mythology, which further does not permit tube amps for rock. Try Beethoven's "Wellington's Victory" with its sound effects and cannon. The best recording by far is by The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields conducted by Neville Marriner [Philips 426 239-2]. Listen to Dexter Gordon's rich voice introducing each piece on *Dexter Gordon Live at Carnegie Hall* [Columbia/Legacy CK65312]. The Arpège brings him to life. The snap of James Carter's baritone sax on "Round Midnight" (*The Real Quietstorm* [Atlantic Jazz 82742-2]) ceases being a sound effect and becomes real music.

The Arpège rocks with turntablist Kid Koala's brilliant double LP *Carpal Tunnel Syndrome* [Ninja Tune Zen 34]. The Kid's samples live again in resonance and reality -- voices, a Bob and Ray skit on sound effects, scratches and actual melodies all come through the Arpège's EL34s vividly. What makes this integrated amplifier special here is its ability to provide a balanced sound that is heavy with minute detail.

Listen to Leila Josefowicz perform Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst's "Le Roi des Aulnes - Grand Caprice for Solo Violin after Schubert D. 328" (*Leila Josefowicz Solo* [Phillips 446 700-2]) and hear every detail of the violin's gritty resonance on the low notes and feel the alder branches whipping at the boy as his father rides desperately, reassuring his son of his safety. When minimalist drummer Leon Parker plays on his own body as the introduction to his first album (*Above & Below* [Epicure EK 66144]), you hear hands on flesh, not just a rhythmic slapping. The Arpège reproduces the detail you missed the first hundred times.

I have now lived with this integrated for over six months. Every day, I hear a new aspect of sound. With thousands of CDs and LPs, I have a lot to hear yet. But yesterday I put on a favorite that I bought in September of 1998, *Beethoven Die Violin-sonaten* performed by violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter and pianist Lambert Orkis [Deutsche Grammophon 457 619-2]. I had not listened to it closely for months. The timbre of Mutter's violin and Orkis' piano made me doubt my memory of this great recording.

And that is how I summarize my feelings about the Arpège: Play a record or CD on it after hearing it on another amplifier of similar or higher price and you will wonder if you are listening to the same piece of music with the same performers. The quality of the music and the detail are *that* much better.

Almost forgot: it looks beautiful, too -- with and without its ten-pound cover (fastened with 24 machine screws). The blue "on" LED and the muted glow of the tubes through the heavily smoked Lucite front piece are pretty at night. The orderly detail of the wiring impresses even adept solder-gun wielders. And the chassis layout looks like a textbook lesson on balance and symmetry in art.

The down side

But surely, you say, I thought this was a follow-up review, not a panegyric to Saint Arpège. Is there any way in which this amplifier lacks? Are there any shortcomings? Is there not anything about it that upsets you, even a little?

My answer? Yes. Bi-wiring is impossible -- there are three connectors for speakers: 8 ohm, 4 ohm and ground. There are two tape outputs, no tape loop and no preamp outputs. It is not as good-sounding as the Audiomat Prélude Reference or the Audiomat Solfège (both of them absolutely stellar performers at higher cost). There is no remote control for any function whatsoever -- a real pain in a household where the dynamic range of music creates problems when the music takes an upward leap and a remote muting or volume control would be helpful.

But music? Aural complexity? The Arpège makes available to ordinary mortals the kind of quality Audiomat provides in their higher-end models. And for me, that's enough -- until I become sufficiently extraordinary to take the Solfège leap. The Arpège is a [Reviewers' Choice](#) product all the way.

...Neil Walker

Audiomat Arpège Integrated Amplifier**Price:** \$1900 USD.**Warranty:** Two years parts and labor, six months on the tubes.North American distributor:
Mutine, Inc.E-mail: mail@mutine.comWebsite: www.mutine.com