



## The law of diminishing returns revisited

The last time I reviewed an Audiomat amplifier, I began by asking whether there is such a thing as a law of diminishing returns. In that case, I was reviewing the Audiomat Prélude Référence and comparing it to the Arpège. In that case, both amplifiers had identical manufacturer's specifications and the Prélude cost an additional 50 per cent.

In the case of the Opéra integrated amplifier, it costs an additional 40 per cent. It also has different specifications: Instead of operating as a Class A amplifier up to half power, it is 100 per cent Class A. Still, given the happiness the Prélude delivers, how could the French expect me to swallow the line that this almost identically sized aluminum box was worth an additional 1,800 dollars?

Virtually the same tube complement. Only an additional two pounds additional weight. So what was Audiomat trying to do with this box of goodies? As with the Référence, they said, better resistors, better capacitors, better transformers and 100 per cent Type A. As before, I thought to myself, "If I can't show my friends that my tubes glow better or that my resistors have a luminescent paint job, how can I justify that my listening room now houses an amplifier which costs another 1,800 dollars? In what appears to be the same white aluminum box."

As before, I feared that I would not be able to hear the difference between these two amplifiers.



Once again, I set up the amplifier on my nice little table from Vecteur, another French item I treasure. I plugged in the power cord and all the other cables, this time using a full set of Actinote cables. (I had been promised that Actinote cables had undergone enough changes to put them up against such as Nirvana speaker cables and JPS Superconductor 2 interconnects.)

As with the *Prélude*, its volume control turned itself to zero the moment I turned it on. Then I waited for the green light to stop flashing as a red light glowed steadily.

Finally the red light went out and the green light stopped flashing. I turned the selector switch ("This one feels more substantial," I thought. "Must be dreaming.") to position one, selecting my cd player. I put Shirley Horn's Verve album, *You Won't Forget Me*, (847 482-2) into the CD player and started the player. I went to track 11, "If you leave me."

Forty-five minutes later, I went up the stairs to turn in for the night. My heart was racing. My stomach had the feeling that comes from an extraordinary win or loss. I felt light-headed and nowhere near ready for sleep.

### **Electrification of Reviewer**

Next day I returned to the *Opéra*. I listened some more. It really was all that the *Prelude* was plus a lot more. The following day, I had to switch in the *Prelude* to let someone else audition the *Opéra* in another location. Not as smooth. Not as detailed. Not as musical. Not quite the same clarity in bass slam. Excellent, but not the *Opéra*.

When the *Opéra* returned, I found the same magic as before. Then I started playing. The distributor had provided additional gear so that I could listen to the *Opéra* as part of a system whose components matched its quality. (More

on this elsewhere.) The Actinote cables and interconnects were supposed to be far better than those Actinotes I had tried out a few years ago, so I started changing them around. Since I had also been listening to the Audiomat Tempo DAC with the Opéra, I went to my trusty record player. Out came the JPS, in went the Actinote. Then back to the JPS. Then back to the Actinote. The JPS were still superb, as they had always been. Full, rich sound. But the Actinote had such clarity, speed, presence. In the "Thunder and Lightning Polka" (Johann Strauss Jr., Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, *Strauss Waltzes*, RCA Victor Red Seal, LSC-2500), the strings were liquid, the cymbal crashes metal against metal, and the bass drum fast and transparent. The JPS cables were a different experience, with all the good qualities I had come to enjoy, but with one difference. The Actinote cables provided sound that was bigger, airier; it was as if the ceiling of the room had been raised several feet. The verdict? Personal taste will always dominate, because the JPS cables are accurate, immediate and without unpleasant additions of emphases.



The cables were a good match for the Opéra, but were clearly not the source of the magic that I was hearing. Now I knew better what the amplifier was giving me. This sound was refined, more transparent. The Opéra has all the qualities the Prélude Référence has - just more of it.

The Opéra is a silvery white box of brushed aluminum that conceals some seemingly simple, very well assembled electronics. At seven and a half inches high, 17.5 inches wide and 17.5 inches deep, it is bulky, but attractive no-

netheless. Its front panel is a one-quarter inch thick slab of machined aluminum with its switches and lights aligned in a groove between the volume control and the input selector knobs. According to the manufacturer's blurb for the Prelude, the case is "aircraft aluminum." No such description for the Opéra, but it appears to be the same material.

Like the Arpège and the Prélude, the Opéra rests its substantial bulk, 49 pounds, on three sharp metal cones which make a great job of sinking into whatever you rest it on. Just in case you plan to put it on top of an heirloom, Audiomat supplies three little bronze cups in which these stabbers may sit. They are, of course, also beautifully machined, just like the ones which accompany the other Audiomat gear. As with the Prélude, I found that if you remove the cups, the sound is just a little tighter, a shade more focussed sounding. The warning I made before stands: the solution is not to move the amplifier once it is carefully hoisted into place.

The back of the amplifier is easy to work with. Input sockets not so close together that attaching, tightening and loosening your RCA connectors is like flossing your molars. Its RCA connectors are almost an inch apart, center to center. There are five input receptacles and one pair of tape outs. No tape loop or pre-amp outs are available.

The speaker terminals are also easy to get at, and having two complete sets of them means that following the bi-wiring myth is easy. In response to reviewers and listeners' complaints about those awful plastic knobs molded around speaker tightening nuts, Audiomat has put in high quality all-metal, gold plated speaker terminals – easy to use, no detaching from the tightening nut, a great improvement.

I am at a loss as to how to proceed from here. I listened to a variety of CDs and vinyl records with this amplifier. It does everything the Prélude does, but at a qualitatively different level. This amplifier made magic music. What more can I say?

It is fast, detailed, great bass, musical throughout the range and not given to any weird results. Despite its increased abilities I am told that it is less demanding of source components than is the Prélude. Don't be confused about this difference - like any other good amplifier, it obeys the GIGO rule, but it is less fussy than the Prélude. So I am told.

Soprano Sumi Jo singing Constanze's "Martern aller Arten" from *Die Entführung aus den Serail* [Sumi Jo sings Mozart, Erato 0630-14637-2], generates shivers even more than before. The texture and detail I raved about for the Prélude is there and there is no question (as one reader seemed to find) of harshness. Elvis Presley dropped in again to perform "Fever" on the LP, *Elvis Is Back* [RCA Victor LSP 02231 re-issued by DCC as LPZ-2037]. With the Opéra, the staging was clearer, and the sensation of the singer's physical presence strong.

The kind of detail I noted is there in such a way that Shirley Horn's CD [You Won't Forget Me, Verve, 847 482-2] had the same effect on me the second third and fourth time I listened. Shirley Horn's "If you leave me," was enough to make one weep -- but I didn't; I just got shivers.

I listened to Mikhail Pletnev's performance of Domenico Scarlatti's sonatas on the piano [*Scarletti: Keyboard Sonatas*, Virgin Classics, 7243 5 45123 2 2] as I had with the Arpège and the Prélude. The speed and detail of this excellent recording remain light, quick and natural sounding but they now sound as if they are coming right from the piano. I cannot say whether this has to do with the idea of blackness between the notes, but that is the metaphor that appeals most to explain how I felt about this amplifier's performance.

James Carter's recording of Django Reinhardt's "Nuages (Clouds)" on Carer's 2000 CD, *Chasin' the Gipsy* [Atlantic, CD83304] on the Opéra is rivetting. The initial snap of the saxophone's reed is presented as if one's sense of time has been distorted (no, I was not in a state of altered consciousness) so that you hear every vibration. Then the accordion sings, the bass drum fills the room and James Carter takes over the soul of Reinhardt's music.

Finally, the test of tests: Nicolas Kynaston playing *Liszt Organ Works* (Imp Masters, Carlton Classics, 30366 00032) on the Klais Organ of Ingolstadt Münster. This is an exceptional recording of rarely heard music. It captures the sometimes ethereal nature of this organ and the thunder it generates in all parts of the audio spectrum. To say that the bass notes in "Excelsior" or "Fune-railles" are literally moving understates the experience. The Opéra generates the power and faithfulness that this recording contains without reservation.

## **Conclusion**

This is a superb amplifier for the money. It provides a musical reality that can be quite shattering in the magic it creates. If that is what you want and you have the sources and speakers with which to give the Opéra the material to work its magic, then I cannot imagine anything to give more satisfaction at this price. I do not know how the Audiomat gang does it, except through endless tweaking and experimentation. The Opéra, to look at, is simplicity embodied. The build quality, as in other Audiomat products, is excellent and should provide years of pleasure – reliability also appears to be an Audiomat feature.

Recommendation? Yes, without hesitation or qualification.

**[Neil Walker](#)**

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