



the EL34 push-pull output tubes.

The amplifier comes with a remote control, with buttons for volume and muting. Being an Audiomat product, even this is not a generic remote. There are buttons for fast volume adjustment, so you can get where you're going in a hurry, and others for fine adjustments. Instead of the ubiquitous mute

button, the remote has a "mute on" button, with a separate "mute off" button that is red and slightly recessed, like the record button on a VCR, so that it won't be pressed accidentally. And since the volume knob is motorized, the Opéra turns its own volume all the way down while it's warming up. This is a bit of a nuisance for reviewers like us: to be sure to keep the same volume, any time we turned the amplifier off we had to hold the volume knob in place during warmup. The volume knob is unlabelled, and instead of covering an arc from 7 o'clock to 5 o'clock, it goes from 5 to 3. In a number of ways, the Audiomat is a different world.

Our sample was supplied not with the usual junk power cord, but an Actinote CS150 cord (CS490/US\$370) with two conspicuous filter pods on its length. When we tried substituting our usual Foundation Research LC-2 filter, which of course replaces the power cord, the Opéra buzzed. Even odder is this: when we tried the Actinote cord on a Shanling amplifier, the *Shanling* buzzed! We didn't investigate further.

Our Opéra arrived well broken in, but we made sure it was good and warm — make that good and *hot* — before we connected it to our Alpha system. We ran our CD player directly into one of the inputs, bypassing both our own amp and preamp.

We opened with the newest disc from the fabulous young violinist James Ehnes, playing Dvorak's *Romantic Pieces, op. 75* (Analekta FL 2 3191). We figured it would sound good...but perhaps not quite *this* good.

The violin sound on this recording is among the best we have heard on CD, with a natural silkeness that caught our attention right off. Even Albert, who

# AUDIOMAT OPÉRA

**H**ave you noticed that the only amplifiers Audiomat makes are integrated? We noticed it only after the listening session, when Albert thought he'd like to try one of Audiomat's preamplifiers. Impossible!

And it's not for reasons of economy. This tube amplifier may not be quite as expensive as some separates we could name (and lust after), but if Audiomat has cut any corners we couldn't prove it.

The Opéra costs more than double the price of the *Arpège*, which we reviewed in our last issue. It uses the same EL34 output tubes, and it claims the same 30 watts per channel. The difference: the 30 watts are in pure class A. Does that need an explanation? Just in case it does, here goes.

Most push-pull amplifiers (using two tubes or transistors for output) run in what is known as class AB: the two amplifying devices split up the task of handling the positive and negative half of the signal, but they overlap their operation somewhat, in order to minimize errors at the zero volt level, when one device hands off to the other. In class A operation, both devices run flat out all the time, to obliterate the potential anomaly. Extra energy is of course wasted, and must be dumped as heat. This is a drain on your air conditioning system (or an aid to your furnace, depending on how you choose to look at it), and when you consider that vacuum

tubes throw off quantities of waste heat anyway, you realize that by choosing an amplifier like this, you're putting music over ecology.

To which you may choose to reply: (1) I want to be a good citizen, so it's back to class D, or (2) shut up and leave me alone while the music's playing!

As we shall see, there are reasons you might swap your SUV for a Toyota Prius, to compensate for what is an exciting addition to your music system.

The Opéra is large, a huge hunk of what seems to be aluminum. The two knobs are respectively for volume and selection of one of the five inputs (labelled Line 1, Line 2, etc.). The two toggle switches are for power and the tape loop.

At the rear are a set of very good jacks, and six input binding posts that look like WBT's but aren't, to allow selecting either the 4 or ohm output. There are two complete sets, to make biwiring easy.

Inside, the circuit includes a 12AX7 dual triode as an input amplifier and buffer, a pair of 12AU7 dual triodes as phase inverters and drivers, and finally

**In this case, "class A" refers to more than the principle of operation.**

finds most violin recordings unnaturally bright, was impressed by this rendition. The piano was soft, and yet always clear. The dynamic palette was broad, the rhythm light. "Did it run shorter this time?" asked Gerard. "It just seemed to be over in a flash."

We continued with another favorite Analekta recording, featuring soprano Karina Gauvin and the Tafelmusik orchestra in excerpts from Handel's opera *Alcina*. Despite the amplifier's (theoretical) power limits, the dynamics were impressive. On the aria *Barbara*, Gauvin throws the name out with power, and the impact is certainly there, but without the annoying percussive effect we sometimes hear. Her astonishing warbling effects made us laugh a couple of times, and made us smile *all* the time.

And it wasn't just the voice. The orchestra sounded exceptional as well, with silky smooth violins (again!) and clarity that lets even minor instruments be heard. The harpsichord, which is normally buried in the busier passages, stood out wonderfully well.

We had put our favorite choral recording (*Now the Green Blade Riseth*, Proprius PRCD9093) into the mix, figuring that it could trip up the Opéra if anything could. Well, perhaps nothing could. Not this recording, at any rate.

"Right from the first measures you know it will be all right," said Reine. "Just the sound of the flute is enough to reassure you." Ah, but then the voices came in and confirmed the rightness of it all. Both male and female voices were exceptionally natural. We found it easy to make out individual voices, yet they blended into a perfect whole. The counterpoints were flawless.

So was the feeling of space, which is exceptional on this CD. "The voices seem to expand until you think they'll fill all the space," said Albert. "Everything is there, and none of it is shocking to the ear." The double bass and the organ both made their presence felt, and the rhythm was superbly rendered. We couldn't find any goodies left off the list. By now we were so confident we could have stopped the session right there...only there would have been a revolt. *More, I want more!*

So here's more. *Almighty God* is an

Ellington tune arranged for saxophone and pipe organ in a large, reverberant church, part of the Proprius *Antiphone Blues* disc. We used the HDCD-encoded version (FIM CD003), which does everything but glow in the dark.

Or perhaps everything *including* glow in the dark with this amplifier. "I was all alone in that huge place," reported Reine. "I like this even better than the reference." The organ was impressive, its power not at all diminished by the amplifier's supposedly limited output. The Audiomat reproduced the majesty of the piece, and not just its notes.

The saxophone, which can easily get a little shrill, was smooth and natural, never running out of breath even in the higher registers where the bats live. Gerard thought it sounded close than it did with our reference amplification.

"But that's not really a flaw, because it always stays at that distance, never moving forward the way it does with some amps.

It was time for something jazzier. From the *Come Love* CD with the Swedish Jazz Kings (Opus 3 CD19703), we listened to the very lively *Buddy Bolden's Blues*. It sounds good with nearly any system, but the good humor doesn't always survive the transition. It did this time. "Joyous music," said Albert. "Music of jubilation," added Reine. All three of us were grinning broadly. You can't sit still when you hear this.

The different musical timbres were well reproduced, of course, but more important than the neutral timbres of the individual instruments — saxophone, clarinet and sousaphone notably — was the way they came together. The rhythm swung, the melody would have made us sing along if we had had a song sheet. We heard lots of a new details, such as the particular texture of the sousaphone notes, or the banjo which remained clear even when it was in the background, but it was the magic that we talked about when it was (too soon) over.

We ended the session (also too soon) with one of Doug McLeod's blues songs, *Chill on Cold* from his CD *You Can't Take My Blues* (AQCD1041). It's full of subtle, fragile emotion, for it's by a man who has just lost big in the game of love, and

### SUMMING IT UP...

**Brand/model:** Audiomat Opéra

**Price:** C\$7490

**Dimensions:** 44.5 x 44 x 19 cm

**Claimed power:** 30 watts per channel

**Most liked:** Virtuoso musical performance

**Least liked:** Incompatible with the Kyoto accord

**Verdict:** Ever wonder why these people don't bother making separates?

is not morally up to making his voice carry.

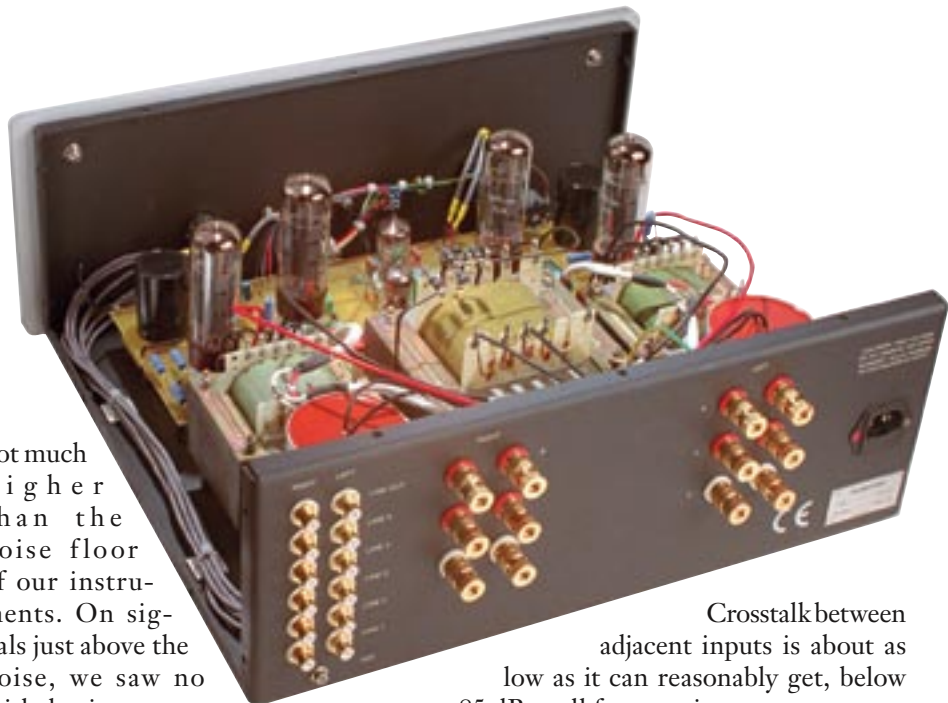
It worked, oh how it worked! McLeod's inventive acoustic guitar work was exceptional, and we could *see* his fingers on the strings. Attacks were pure and natural, with no veiling. The percussion was perfect, and the rhythm always strong, to the point where Reine found herself tapping her foot. McLeod's voice was clear, with a nice little bit of reverberation at the end of each phrase. "Even his silences and hesitations are expressive," said Albert. All three of us talked about the *emotion* that came through, unfiltered by the technology.

By the end of the session, it seemed to be *warm* in the room. Was it those tubes running in class A? Or was it the music...definitely A class too? But all good things come to an end. We hooked up the instruments to see what they could tell us.

What they told us is that the Opéra measures as it sounds. Noise is very low,

not much higher than the noise floor of our instruments. On signals just above the noise, we saw no misbehavior.

Power was about what Audiomat claims. The fully-warmed Opéra *will* put out 30 watts per channel, both channels driven, though not undistorted. It made it to a clean 29 watts at 1 kHz, and a fraction of a watt less at 30 Hz and below.



Crosstalk between adjacent inputs is about as low as it can reasonably get, below 85 dB at all frequencies.

The Opéra is Audiomat's most expensive amplifier. We know quality doesn't always follow price, but in this case it's right in line. Are you still wondering why vacuum tubes have made a comeback? Wonder no more.



## CROSSTALK

Face it, no company in the world makes *only* good products. There's always something in the lineup that has been created for purely commercial reasons, or that was designed by someone who left the company years ago leaving no notes on the design. You can't expect it to be any other way.

But if there's a product like that in the Audiomat lineup, I have yet to run across it. I've heard most of the products this company makes, and in every instance I've been sad to see it go. No exceptions.

Well, I'm perhaps a little sadder than usual to see this big amp leave. It is a model of what a tube amplifier should be. Not only does it serve music well on anything you may choose to listen to, but you'd be hard put to spot anything that some *other* amplifier could do better. *Louder*, perhaps.

It's not cheap, but chances are you won't be changing it for a long, long time.

—Gerard Rejskind

The Opéra has unfolded its wonders with the assurance of a champion confident of topping his personal best, and then doing it. Let me tell you that, if it's tough to evaluate a

poor product, it's not much easier to express total contentment.

I could of course list its talents. I could invite you to dream of its opulent bottom end, its generous midrange, and a top end that would thrill any musician. I could underline its broad horizontal and vertical image, its perfect overall coherence, its championship-level reproduction. I could talk of silky strings, of purity and naturalness of instrumental and vocal timbres, of a sax and organ duet that plunges you into an ethereal world without stooping to artificial effects. While I'm at it I could mention the good humor of musicians, that can come through even the voice of a sousaphone, or the guitar and its natural metallic sound that is so engaging.

I could add that the Opéra can recreate the concert ambience by its extraordinary distribution of layers of sound.

But why all these words when one can suffice: *masterful!*

Audiomat continued to amaze me. I think its products are as good as they can get, and then they surprise me. Two questions. How are they going to top this? And where will

its climb toward perfection finally stop?

—Reine Lessard

You know, I could *live* with this amp. It felt as if layers of unnecessary noise and coloration were stripped away, to reveal the essence of the music as it was meant to be. Music bloomed to fill the space, it seemed, and I enjoyed the transparency that emanated from the performances, and the soothing effect it provided.

I always feel that way when something makes the music just right. Some people get up and dance to the rhythm, while others play conductor or resort to furious foot tapping. I occasionally do all of the above, but when things sound just right — and it happens very rarely — I often find myself sitting deeper in my chair, as I feel my face slowly relaxing. No effort required to translate what I hear into real instruments, real voices — *real sound*. Timbres are just beautiful, performers are right there, and I even hesitate to speak, as if they could hear me as clearly as I hear them.

A rare experience!

—Albert Simon