



AUDIOMAT RÉCITAL

It was Reine who threw down the gauntlet. We had just ended our listening session with the Audiomat Opéra, then the company's top amplifier (it's on the cover of *UHF* No. 69). "How are they going to top this?" she asked. She probably meant it as a rhetorical question, but the answer wasn't long in coming: Audiomat's own Récital is billed as offering three times the sound of the Opéra for twice the price.

Of course the Récital was not *really* born of Reine's challenge, because it is in fact the product of a good decade of development. Audiomat is not the sort of company that lets itself be influenced by marketing deadlines. Or that lets itself be rushed, either.

Though Class A tube amplifiers mostly have low power, the Récital has four 6550 output tubes on each channel, and should be able to drive nearly anything. The tubes are self-biasing, though there are potentiometers for fine-tuning after a tube change. This means opening the unit and poking voltmeter probes inside, and non-techies may want to turn to their dealers for this adjustment.

There is a family look to the Récital, with a flawless brushed aluminum case we have seen before, which is however

notable for being more than half a metre deep! It sits on three machined cones...a warning not to lean on one of its rear corners when you're connecting a cable. Like the much smaller Arpège amplifier, it has a front panel that is partly translucent, letting you see the glow of the tubes if you listen in the dark. The two large knobs are for volume and source selection respectively. In the centre are switches for power and for muting.

Muting can also be accomplished from the remote control, which adds no fewer than four volume buttons, for rough and fine tuning. Unfortunately the remote didn't work for us, because the infrared photocell is inserted so far back in the panel that it won't "see" the commands unless you are within 15° of straight on. Audiomat has been made aware of the problem, and a solution is in the works.

The rear panel is straightforward, with good input jacks and highly sat-

It turns out the superb Opéra was not the end of the road after all

isfactory output binding posts. Indeed, there are *two* sets of binding posts to accommodate biwiring. As with other Audiomat amplifiers, there is an output for taping, but no tape loop.

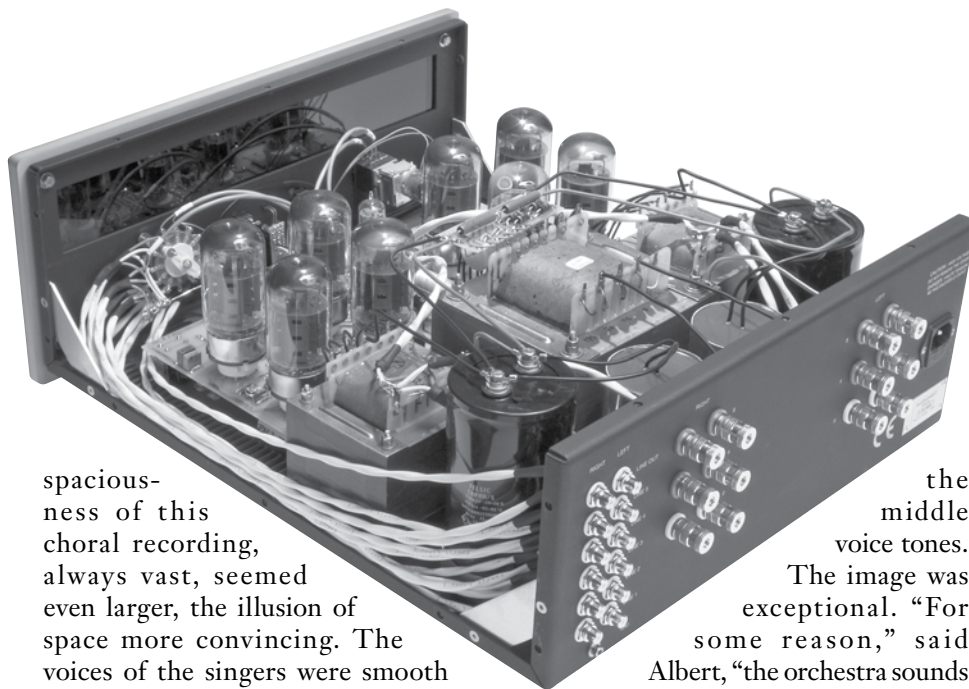
The binding posts provide access to both the 8 ohm and 4 ohm taps on the output transformers. As we've explained before, some audiophiles with 4 ohm speakers prefer to use the 8 ohm tap, because the signal goes through only half as much of the wire in the output transformer's secondary winding. By curiosity, we did a quick listen using both outputs, and the results astonished us. The 8 ohm output sounded dramatically better, and we decided to do our listening that way.

The amplifier's imposing dimensions and weight prompted us to make a change in our Omega system. Instead of the glass-shelved Target table we have been using for secondary components (such as our cassette deck), we brought in a second Vecteur table like the one our major components sit on. Even so, we were warned that putting the amplifier on its top shelf could compromise low-bass performance. Still, there was little choice, short of simply putting it on the floor.

We began the session with one of our favorite CD selections, one of Dvorak's *Romantic Pieces* (Analekta FL 2 3191), with its flawless emotional rendition by violinist James Ehnes. We all noted the great smoothness of Ehnes' violin, whose notes flowed like a mountain stream, with the notes from Eduard Laurel's piano falling like shiny pearls. Ehnes' total mastery of his Stradivarius came through wonderfully well, as did the expressiveness of his playing.

Was the sound different from that of our reference? Yes, and we situated them in the very lowest frequencies. Gerard thought the violin had a more "resinous" sound, and Albert expressed it a different way: the violin sounded less "woody." Was it because of the stand? That would be confirmed later.

We continued with another favorite, which can be celestial or infernal depending on what you play it through: *Now the Green Blade Riset* (Proprius PRCD9093). With the Récital, the reproduction was tilted all the way over to celestial. The



spaciousness of this choral recording, always vast, seemed even larger, the illusion of space more convincing. The voices of the singers were smooth and lovely, well-detached from each other, though — Albert noted — less weight to the male voices. When all the singers came in together, balance was perfect, with both wonderful togetherness and lifelike separation of individual voices. The final crescendo, sometimes shrill even on better gear, was so smooth Gerard didn't realize the piece was over. "It seemed so short," he said.

We must report that we can't tell you a lot about the third recording, because none of us felt much like writing. It was Pauline Viardot-Garcia's song *Plainte d'amour*, sung by — or perhaps we should say *recreated* by — soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian. This song, on a mazurka by Chopin, does not invite mind-wandering at the worst of times. With the Récital Bayrakdarian's velvety and expressive voice attained a sublime plane. "She is present here with us," remarked Gerard, "disturbingly so."

We continued with another female voice, Esther Ofarim's *La Vezina Catina*. We knew this electrifying song back when we used the original LP, titled *Esther*. This time we played it from a new FIM SACD sampler, *Audiophile Reference IV*. In this case the singer was not in the room with us, rather we were projected into her world. "It's so beautiful it almost hurts," commented Gerard.

Indeed, Esther's voice was at once smooth and clear, with the final syllables being particularly luminous. The flawless rhythm and the almost scary dynamics wowed us, as did the sheer warmth of

the middle voice tones. The image was exceptional. "For some reason," said Albert, "the orchestra sounds louder than it did with our own amplifier, and that makes it seem a little harder, but I'm pretty sure it isn't the amplifier's fault."

We were getting the idea that, despite the Récital's highly satisfying dynamic headroom, it would be in reproduction of very fine details that it would truly demonstrate of what it was capable. Perhaps our favorite harp selection would be particularly revealing. It's Carlos Salzedo's delicate and magnificent *Variations sur un thème ancien*, played by Susann McDonald on *Caprice* (Klavier K11133).

We were right. Though McDonald's harp virtually glows with our reference amplifier, it grew incandescent with the Récital. "How can it reproduce notes so soft without hiding anything?" asked Reine. The clarity of the playing and the precision and transparency added another layer of magic to a recording

that is no stranger to sorcery. In this music the harp dips to lower notes than you'd expect, and the resonance of the instrument was at once delicate and satisfying.

We pulled out another SACD, the overture to Rossini's *Barber of Seville* (Pentatone 5186 106). "This is Rossini at his best," said Reine approvingly. The overall orchestral sound was bright, but in a natural fashion, with the brass instruments especially lovely. The strings were energetic yet silky, and their *pizzicato* passage had some extra snap. The entire orchestra sounded refined.

We ended the listening session with the Ray Brown trio's *Take the 'A' Train*. We sometimes use the LP version of this exceptional recording, though in this case we selected the high-resolution DVD (Hi-Res HRM2011). This is a two-sided disc, with a 24-bit/96 kHz DVD version on one side, and a DVD-Audio 24/192 version on the other side. Since our Linn Unidisk is a universal player we selected the latter, firing up our little 7-inch black-and-white TV so we could hack our way through the DVD-A menus.

Would Brown's prodigious plucked bass have the ponderous impact it does with our own amplifier? Not quite, though its *tone* was magnificent. The Récital through into stark relief the complex timbre of the huge instrument, and it did the same with Gene Harris' piano. There was another change that is more difficult to put into words, though both Reine and Albert referred to it as *intimacy*. We were *there*, in the night club, and with the sort of table you have to tip the maitre d' a couple of twenties to get.

We wondered whether the slight lightness in the bottom end really *could* be due to the amplifier being perched on the third shelf of a stand, even a supremely good one. We listened again to the Ray Brown recording, and then put the Récital right on the floor (it took two of us to get it there without breaking anything). Yes, we could now hear more extension in Brown's bass, and more impact, though in every other way the music sounded the same. Big amplifiers like this one really do need to be closer to bedrock.

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Audiomat Récital

Price: C\$14,900/US\$12,200

Dimensions: 43 x 19.5 x 51 cm

Published power: 85 to 90 watts/channel, pure class A

Number of inputs: 5

Most liked: Musicality that invites few comparisons

Least liked: Nearly unusable remote control (but see text)

Verdict: *Now* how will Audiomat top this?

We ended our listening sessions just as summertime made a large tube amp impractical in our non-air-conditioned building, but we took the time for technical readings. We hooked up our large 8 ohm dummy load resistors to the Récital, and did some measurements, after warming it up for 30 minutes at one third of its 90-watt per channel rated power.

At a frequency of 1 kHz, the Récital had little difficulty meeting its promised power, with 91.8 watts before it clipped. It should be noted that well-designed tube amplifiers don't run out of steam suddenly. They begin to distort, but typically they will clip off

the top of the signal wave 10 or 20 watts further up. The Récital maintained low distortion to just below clipping.

That wasn't *quite* the case at the frequency extremes. At 20 kHz, clipping came at just over 92.5 watts, but some distortion of the waveform was visible beyond 77 watts (though of course harmonics of 20 kHz are inaudible). At 20 Hz, noticeable distortion began at 70.2 watts, with clipping at 80.7 watts. Of course at such low frequencies the amount of iron in the output transformer is a limiting factor. The results with the Récital indicate that attention has been paid to the transformer quality.

Low-level performance (at just over

a thousandth of a watt) was flawless, but then the contrary would have astonished us.

Crosstalk between adjacent inputs was so low we had difficulty measuring it. Even at 20 kHz it was a superlative -79 dB, and *that* was actually the worst reading we saw!

The Récital is not about power and distortion, however, but about music. The very best amplifiers and preamplifiers seem to exist beyond earthly confines and open a window onto the wonders of a musical performance. That a single box like this one can do this helps put its price into perspective. We can say that its competitors are few.



CROSSTALK

Here, we are in a different league, people, perhaps even a club so selective it may have just one member. The sheer *size* of this unit shows it means business for any type of music, in any type of setting. And after you hear how it transforms your music, you might wonder how such a giant can uncover so much, with such utter beauty, and raise the performance level of the rest of the system.

So is it perfect?

"Have no fear of perfection," said Dali, "you'll never reach it." Thus a component may be sublime, as the Audiomat Récital assuredly is, yet I may wish for still more, *especially* because it is so good. More? You'd probably say so too if you had listened to it. More weight in double basses and organ, more wood resonance in string instruments (but read the full text) — and yet I loved the smooth, silky transparent sound that transported me to the actual performance, a few feet away from the musicians.

I don't know how it can achieve that and still maintain the level of clarity and free-flowing natural sound I experienced during this session. Actually, *all* Audiomat products I have listened to have always gone way beyond my expectations. This one proves again the unending source of the Audiomat team's superb talent.

—Albert Simon

I find all large tube amplifiers scary, for their size, for their price, and also for the blazing heat they give off. What's scarier is that not that many of them reward you

adequately for giving them the sort of surroundings in which they (and you) will be comfortable.

The Récital does, and it's all but perfect at it. It has all the power and headroom you are likely to need in anything short of a château. It is always smooth and reassuring. And it gets the sound of pretty much any instrument exactly right. Compare with live music, and you'll hear for yourself.

This last is more of a trick than it sounds. If we were to play our little pack of recordings through a number of competing amplifiers, most would make us wince more than once. The Récital never came close to doing that. My guess is it never would.

But that is really only part of the story. The Audiomat Récital is a true music lover's amplifier, and it scarcely matters what *kind* of music you like. When you finally tire of what this amplifier gives you, you will know you have become weary of life itself.

—Gerard Rejskind

You need confidence to go up against the high-performance components that make up our Omega reference system. But then I *did* launch the challenge when we reviewed the Audiomat Opéra, and it looks as though the challenge was picked up. I can see them now. *We'll show her we haven't yet reached the end of our efforts to attain our ideal of excellence.*

I came out of the extraordinary event that was this session head over heels in love with the Récital. How time flew! How often I put aside my notes to bask in the intoxication of the moment! For when music is

distilled with such art, it becomes the finest vintage you will choose not to resist. So come on, Reine, strip off your armor, and confess...by the time you got to the fourth piece, you put aside your pen to abandon yourself to the magic of the moment.

Let's look together at the virtues which make the Récital unique among audio components.

There is the image, which spreads generously into every dimension, to let through an abundance of effects and ornamental notes. There are the exceptional dynamics. There are the enchanting timbres. There are voices of often troubling beauty which attain the sublime. There are mixed choirs with harmonies and counterpoints that are wonderfully reproduced, with words that remain clear even in pianissimo passages.

There is impact, verve, energy, *life!*

You will no doubt protest that the same virtues can be found in amplifiers from other designers, and you will be right. Yet the Récital adds that little intangible *je ne sais quoi* marking the frontier where mere excellence becomes transcendence. I rejoice not only for the audiophiles who will enjoy this amplifier but also for the artists who will be so well served by it, for it is capable of reconstituting their musical mastery and their emotions with so much ardor and precision, and without cheating.

There come moments in life when one must make costly decisions, and choose among diverse temptations. Why not select one that can give you years of happiness? After all, we have one life to live, and *then that's it!*

—Reine Lessard