

EQUIPMENT REPORT

Classé Audio Omega Monoblock Amplifier

Built For A Lifetime

Jacob Heilbrunn

It's easy to forget that when settling on a loudspeaker you're also going to have to match an amplifier to it. A loudspeaker, I once read in a leading German stereo magazine, is the slave of an amplifier. How true!

High-sensitivity horns are matches made in heaven for single-ended triode amplifiers. But on the other end of the spectrum, large planar or moving-coil loudspeakers can often impose big power requirements—bigger than manufacturers are sometimes prone to acknowledge. Having used the Magnepan 20.1 loudspeaker for the past eight years, I know firsthand the frustrations that can accompany trying to drive fairly low-sensitivity designs (though the Magnepan does feature a fairly benign 4-ohm resistive load—that is, there aren't any brutal plunges in the impedance curve that can drive an amplifier batty). The blunt fact is that high power is not an option with many loudspeakers; it's a requirement. Even the magnificent Wilson MAXX 3 loudspeaker, which I've had the pleasure of using during the past year, benefits from a good dose of power, though it's rated at 90dB sensitivity.

It's also the case that high-powered amplification delivers something that smaller units typically can't. If you're chasing after the holy grail of big orchestral crescendos and a large soundstage, then a robust amplifier is more likely to deliver the goods, plain and simple. I must confess that it would be hard for me to live without that kind of power. The grip and control of a heavy-metal amplifier would be hard to sacrifice. I love the inner glow, the mellifluousness of low-powered tube designs—for a few hours. Then I want more. The rub, however, has usually been that high power exacts its own costs, particularly when it comes to solid-state designs. Yes, the damping factor of solid-state is enormously superior to that of tubes, which translates into iron-fisted control over the drivers. But high power has often been synonymous with a lack of refinement and sonic bliss. Rare is the solid-state design that manages to marry delicacy with grandeur.

Classé Audio's Omega monoblock amplifier is such a product. The Omega is not a good amplifier. It is a scintillating one. The Omegas, which each weigh 192 pounds and come with heavy-duty Cardas-supplied 20-amp power cords, prowl around in the territory where the wild things are—behemoth amplifiers like the Boulder 2050s and the Levinson No.33. The Omegas are fully capable of roaring their terrible roars, producing thunderous orchestral climaxes, then moving to sweetness and light within a split second. The sole limitation of the Omega appears to be the amount of current that it can extract from the wall outlet. This is, and not by a small margin, the most musical, detailed,



and transparent solid-state amplifier I have ever heard, capable of making me freeze in my tracks with its astounding clarity and fidelity. But the Omega is also, in its own way, sonically unobtrusive. It seems to get out of the way of the signal, giving you a direct connection to the music. How does it accomplish this feat?

Central to the Omega is its sophisticated design. It is the second version of the Omega series. The first version consisted of a dual-mono amplifier in a single chassis that weighed 250 pounds and was capable of excellent performance. But the true monoblock version is considerably superior in speed, control, and lack of grain. At the heart of the Omega mono's claim to fame is its separate regulation of each output transistor—in effect, says Classé's executive vice-president of brand operations, Dave Nauber, an amplifier within an amplifier. This, Nauber told me, is an approach "typically not employed because it's an expensive way to get the result." Thirty-two bipolar transistors regulate 32 output devices. This accounts for the exceptional linearity of the Omega. In conventional amplifier design a capacitor will provide energy storage for a bank of output transistors, but a voltage sag will almost inevitably occur. The Omega is essentially immune to this. Each output transistor is kept within its linear operating range by the separate regulator transistor; all that technology also

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helps account for why the amplifier is so large. The Omega is rated at 500 watts with a 3000VA transformer in each unit, but it doubles its output power as the impedance is halved down to 2 ohms, another sign of an amplifier that will never crack or bend under the strain of reproducing a demanding passage, whether it's an orchestral fortissimo or a rap bass line.

Still, there are plenty of powerhouses out there. Power is cheap. But beautiful power isn't. What separates the Omega from the pack is its careful union of finesse and brute force. It displays great purity, capturing the tiniest nuances with preternatural accuracy. The treble seems to extend to the very heavens, but the Omega also has just a touch of warmth to it—not enough to detract from its grainless presentation, but a pinch that helps preserve the palpability and richness of the real thing.

Again and again, I have been left slack-jawed at the ability of the Omega to convey minute musical details with exemplary precision. Listening to the LP *An Evening with Alex Welsh and His Friends* [Black Lion], I was bowled over by the cut "It's All Right With Me," which features bravura playing by two trombonists, Roy Williams and George Chisholm. When the band stops playing and Williams and Chisholm embark upon a several-minute long improvised duet, the Omega not only provided a jet-black background, but reproduced multiple shadings and the burnished sound of the trombones as they play at lightning speed. You could almost see the trombone slide moving back and forth and hear the spit valve burbling. This cut also testified to the Omega's ability to ramp up sonically, almost instantaneously, from zero to 60.

Another album that brought home the accuracy of the Omega was Stanley Turrentine playing with the 3 Sounds on the wonderful blues ballad "Willow Weep For Me." This Blue Note recording, which I have in mono, features Turrentine's tenor sax at its most soulful. Much of Turrentine's extended solo is played at a whisper, but the Omega delivered the most subtle pitch-definition and time variations. The Omega presented Turrentine essentially massaging his instrument, wailing and exploring subtle gradations in bending notes, often haltingly. In many ways, time, you might say, seemed to stop. In this regard, a further strength of the Omega was that it seemed to slow down adagio passages and to speed up ones that moved at a fast clip. This probably occurred because of its iron grip. While there is no overhang with the Omega, it prosecutes the conclusion of a note to its final decay with uncanny verisimilitude.

In essence, the Omega abolished the sense that I was listening to an LP and made it sound more akin to a mastertape.

What about soundstage width and depth? I wouldn't say that the Omega has the fullness of the 1250-watt VTL Wotan monoblocks, which sport twenty-four 6550 output tubes each. Indeed, the solid-state versus tubes conundrum has rarely been more acute than in contrasting these two amplifiers. The sound of tubes is definitely more holographic, plangent, and seamless, particularly on instruments such as the saxophone. The VTL makes you sit up with a bang. It's a rollercoaster ride—larger, in some sense, than life. But it's sure darned exciting.

But stick in the Omega and suddenly there's another octave of air in the treble and a soundstage that goes deep and wide, especially in the bass. The Omega seems to expand the boundaries of the room. My take: The incredible grip in the bass frequencies means that the drivers are simply better controlled with the

Omega, which produces the sensation of an effortlessly deep soundstage. But no, it's not as warm and rich as a powerful tubed amplifier. Take Eiji Oue's performance of the third movement of Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* [Reference Recordings]. The sound is crystal clear as the violins open with snapping figures, then the bass comes in with an authoritative whack. With the Omega you can see all the way into the back of the hall even as the orchestra produces a swirling kaleidoscope of sound.

I don't mean to suggest that the Omega is dry or clinical. That is most emphatically not the case. It possesses a wonderful clarity that makes listening to it hour after hour such a pleasure, allowing the MAXX 3 loudspeaker to disappear completely. When Wilson Audio's national sales representative Peter McGrath recently visited me, for example, he was agog at the transparency of the sound when the Omega was coupled with the supremely quiet, transformer-coupled Allnic L-4000 linestage. It is only when contrasted with tubes that the character of the Omega becomes even clearer. That characteristic is probably best described as exceptional neutrality. I would suggest that the Omega, to a greater extent than any other solid-state design I have heard, imparts very, very little coloration to the signal. And the noise floor, of course, is vanishingly low.

The perfect amplifier? Horse feathers. Sadly there is no such thing, probably never will be. The truth is that for me the whole audio reproduction chain is tainted at the beginning by the pesky presence of that small device known as a microphone. Go listen to the J. Gordon Holt CD where he moves from one microphone to another while speaking and you'll know what I mean. Which is the voice of the real Gordon Holt? Beats me. Unfortunately, I never met the man. But the lesson has stuck with me over the years.¹

Still, I would wager that the linear performance of the Omega comes closer to capturing the real thing than a good many of its competitors. Listening to the Omegas reminded me of a passage

SPECS & PRICING

Classé Audio Omega Monoblock Amplifier

Frequency response: 20Hz–
20kHz +/-0.1dB

Output power: 500W into 8
ohms, 1000W into 4 ohms,
2000W into 2 ohms

Inputs: Single-ended and
balanced

Net weight: 192 lbs. each

Dimensions: 19.5" x 12" x 24.8"

Price: \$35,000 per pair

CLASSÉ AUDIO, INC.

5070 François Cusson
Lachine, Québec

H8T 1B3, Canada

(514) 636-6384

sales@classeaudio.com

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VTL Wotan monoblock
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in the famous conductor Sir Thomas Beecham's diverting memoir, *A Mingled Chime*, in which he describes his early love for the music boxes that proliferated towards the end of the nineteenth century. Beecham sentimentally recalled "that delicate tintinnabulating tone, those laughing cascades of crystalline notes, that extravagance of ornament truly rococo, the comic battery of drums and other tiny clattering things, how I loved them then, and how I lament their absence now!"

Those are some of the wonderful characteristics that I hear with the Omegas. On a splendid Argo recording of *Purcell's Complete Funeral Music*, I simply stared in disbelief as each voice in the choir of St. John's College seemed to be clearly audible even when the ensemble sang in hushed tones. And the wheezing sonority of the sackbut ensemble was to die for. When a piece of equipment moves you to make the emotional connection with music that profoundly, you simply know that it's a winner. I'm not the only one who thinks that way. According to Classé's Dave Nauber, "Our most extreme customer has a B&W Nautilus, quad-amplified system with an active crossover that comes with it for each of the amps. He has a Nautilus stereo and 5.1-channel systems. He bought 28 Omega monos." After enjoying the Omegas, I can easily understand why he did. Classé has gone all-out with this design, whether it's the brushed aluminum finish, the elegant heatsinks, or the eye-catching flight cases that the amplifier nestles in when traveling. This is an amplifier built for a lifetime and maybe even beyond. It sounds that way, too. **tas**



¹ That track appears on the first *Stereophile* Test CD. When I was that magazine's Technical Editor, I put together a collection of professional microphones and recorded Gordon reading one of his old essays, switching between microphones and editing the piece together. The idea was to vividly demonstrate the massive differences in tonal balance between commonly used microphones. **-RH**