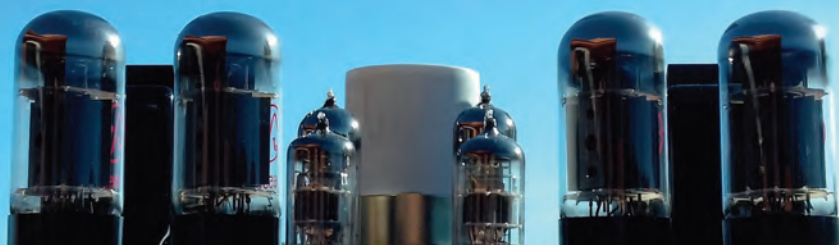


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BACK TO THE FUTURE

By Ian Kuah

We live in a consumer society where people have come to expect fast and efficient service and gadgets with lots of features that work for a time before being replaced by the next best thing.

This throwaway mentality means the junk pile created by old electronics is only growing, bolstered by cheaply made products designed with built-in obsolescence to keep the factories going. As many people have also come to realise, this is a very wasteful system that is certainly not good for the planet.

However, things were not always this way, and before the heyday of the transistor in the 1960s audio amplifiers used vacuum tubes or valves as they are also known, as their motive force.

Unlike modern solid-state circuit boards, which are useless once the components are 'fried' the valves in a traditional amplifier can simply be changed when they wear

out or fail. Other parts can also be replaced ad infinitum, which means you are investing in an amplifier for life, or until you upgrade to a better or more powerful one.

As we noted above, transistors began to take over in the 1960s. They are certainly cheaper to make, but the early ones sounded pretty awful. While valve amplifiers are characterised by their smooth and musical sounds, early transistor units sounded bright and clinical by comparison, and were tiring to listen to over time.

The irony of course is that transistor units always measure better on test instruments, and their proponents used this presumed superior accuracy as a marketing tool.

While valve amplifiers measure comparatively worse in terms of total harmonic distortion and some other parameters they create a more realistic musical image with a greater sense of three dimensional

air and space along with sweeter treble. What you have to remember though is that our aim is to listen to music, not watch square waves being reproduced perfectly on an oscilloscope!

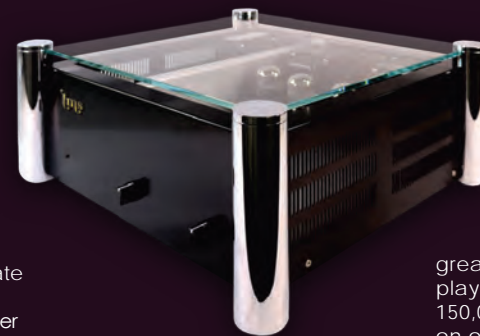
On the other hand transistor amplifiers do generally have a superior damping factor and can thus control deep bass frequencies better. However, over the years improvements in the design of valve amplifiers have mitigated this to a large extent and current valve amplifiers matched to the right speakers can deliver fast, dynamic and breathtakingly realistic insights into recorded music that will have you captivated for hours.

While transistor or solid-state electronics took over the industry, the valve amplifier never went away. Rather, its more euphonically pleasing music reproduction qualities saw it become the doyen of enthusiasts, whose passion drove the continuous development of separate high-end pre- and power amplifiers as well as the integrated units that went before.

It was his passion for music and good sound quality that led Stephen Robinson to create his own amplifier manufacturing company. A former PhD bio-chemist by trade, who worked for multi-national companies in the medical-pharmaceutical industry before retiring to Marbella in 2017, Stephen used to build valve-powered guitar amplifiers for friends during his school days many moons ago.

Looking for something fun and creative to do with his spare time, Stephen decided to revive his old hobby, but this time his aim was to create a line of valve-powered audio amplifiers with outputs ranging from 60W to 100W.

Each tms amplifier is hand-made to order for its owner



Naming his company **Time Machine Sounds (TMS)** because it uses traditional technologies brought up-to-date, Stephen offers some unique propositions to his clients.

Usually hi-fi companies sell products through a dealer network and you never get to meet the man whose name is above the door. However, because each TMS amplifier is hand-made to order for its owner, the ordering process is akin to having a suit made for you by an haute couture tailor.

A prospective client is invited to visit Stephen at home and listen to a wide variety of

music from classical to rock, that shows off the musicality of the amplifier. If the owner so wishes Stephen can even attach a plaque engraved with the customer's name to underline the individual commission. This is bespoke audio at its finest and ownership of a TMS valve amplifier thus comes with a great back-story that will be a talking point when friends visit.

Like valve amplifiers, record players never went away, and recent years have witnessed a significant vinyl revival all over the world, even amongst young people who were not yet born when the CD made its debut in the early '80s. In fact buyers today have a far greater choice of record players from 100 euros to 150,000 euros than was ever on offer back in the 1980s.

A good vinyl LP record has the potential to sound better than CD, and when you listen to it through a TMS amplifier you suddenly realise that the sound quality of digital recordings and transistors was not necessarily the real progress it was made out to be at the time.

The transistor just made things cheaper and faster to manufacture, and the industry's subsequent fast changing music formats have only helped to bolster the piles of electronic junk in landfill sites.

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