

The VAS Audio Citation Sound 2 monoblocks

I knew I was on the right path when I started this review. Steve Leung, the owner of VAS asked me what I was listening to as a reference (the ACT2 series 2 and Premier 350 from C-J) he said, "I have an ACT 2 also, I love it!" So, I figured there was a pretty good idea that we would see eye to eye on the kind of sound we liked.

The VAS Citation monoblock amplifiers are based on the design of the original Harmon Kardon Citation II amplifiers, with some circuitry and parts updates. Also, turning them in to monoblocks offers some obvious advantages to a stereo amplifier. A pair of these amplifiers is \$2750 and you can get them with 6550 or EL-34 output tubes. My test pair came with EL-34's and I made it a point to substitute 6550's during the test period.

The Citations are very small, only measuring about 4" wide and about 14" deep. They come packaged with little cages to protect the tubes, but you are going to want to keep these in the boxes so that you can look at the tubes glow!

The faceplates are nice and beefy and the underside of the chassis revealed all point to point wiring, very neatly carried out. There is a switch on the top of the chassis that allows you to use the Citation monoblocks in triode mode (at ½ the normal power output), which will come in handy for those of you with very efficient speakers. Each monoblock uses a 12AU7, 12AX7 and a pair of EL-34's per channel along with a 5U4 rectifier tube. What puzzles me is the comparison to the Citation II, as a quick perusal of the schematic reveals that it used three 12BY7 beam pentode tubes driving a pair of 6550/KT88 tubes with a solid state, selenium rectifier.

Initial setup

The only downside to a pair of amplifiers means that you need a pair of power cords instead of just one. I left the stock power cords in the box with the cages and substituted a pair of Audience POWERChord cables. The Citations had their own dedicated 20-amp line and clean power with my Running Springs Duke.

The rest of the review system consisted of my Aesthetix Callisto Signature, Wadia 581 and AVID Volvere turntable. Towards the end of the review, the CDP Preamp/CD player from Aurum Acoustics was substituted for the Callisto/Wadia combination, with excellent results, ditching one interconnect and power cord in the process! Speakers were the ACI Sapphire XL's with the Titan XL subwoofer and the Princess Floorstanders from Peak Consult.

Within about three days of continuous play, the Citation monoblocks were sounding their best and once broken in, took about ½ hour to warm up from cold. The output tubes in these amplifiers are biased manually, and just to be safe confirmed that they were ok before any listening. Once the tubes had about 100 hours, I touched up the bias and did not have to make adjustments after that.

EL-34 or 6550, that's the question...

If you are a tube enthusiast, you are probably pretty familiar with these tubes, but in case you are a newcomer to the world of glowing bottles, these two tubes offer up a pretty different sound. While there are some definite variations on the theme, the EL-34's are usually more known for their midrange delicacy, while the 6550/KT88 usually puts out a bit more power along with more bass definition and slam.

The flavor you prefer will often depend on the rest of your system, but I was really in a midrange detail kind of mood these days, so I grudgingly gave the 6550's a go after I was pretty familiar with how the amplifiers sound was shaking out.

While it sounds like a cop out, this amplifier does pretty well with either tube. Personally, I really like the EL-34 version just a bit better, because I feel it gives this amplifier just a bit more warmth. And I'm always a sucker for great midrange, being an SET lover, so please bear with me. Those of you that are more slam/dynamics fanatics should just go for the 6550's (or perhaps a pair of KT-88s) right from the factory and ignore me.

Very good indeed

Buying a tube power amplifier in the 2-3000 dollar range can be a harrowing experience just because there are a lot of good choices; please add the Citation monoblocks to the list.

Just like with the Manley Mahis that we reviewed a while back, I really appreciate the ability to switch to triode mode when the mood strikes. The EL-34's are already a bit on the dreamy side, but going to triode mode makes these amps even more dreamy. You guessed it, break out the female vocal records or CD's and you might even get fooled that you are listening to a 300B amplifier!

I thoroughly enjoyed these amplifiers in triode mode, especially with the outstanding Princess speakers. Granted, this is a bit overkill, hooking up a pair of just under \$3000 monoblocks to a preamp and speaker combination costing ten times as much, but these little amps strutted their stuff quite well! The Princesses are extremely revealing of whatever is hooked up behind them and no matter what speakers I used them with I was very happy with the performance.

Lets cover the bases, and address the lower registers first. For the uninitiated, you don't buy an EL-34 amp for the bass, so if this is your preference, order the 6550 version. The bass is there with this amp, but when listening to some of my favorite hard rock records the bass that there is lacks a little bit of ultimate drive, as does any other EL-34 amp I've heard (except the Manley 250s' that have 10 EL-34's per channel!) If you are going to listen to Dark Side of the Moon, you might be a little non-plussed, but put Meddle on and you will be surprised. Move over to Morph the Cat or your favorite Crowded House record and you could be easily fooled into thinking that you are listening to more expensive amplifiers indeed.

On to the mids; this is where the magic of all EL-34 amps lurks and the VAS amps are no slouch here! The Crowded House Woodface album has some great layered vocals and my favorite is track two, It's Only Natural. With three vocal tracks and a few separate guitars going on, it's easy for the mix to get cloudy. The VAS amps did a great job and threw a pretty big image with the Princesses that had a very nice sense of depth too.

Same thing with all of my favorite jazz records. Ok, I'm boring and I probably like way too much Miles Davis and John Coltrane, but this time I was listening to the very cool Charlie Parker box set that our music editor gave me for Christmas last year. If you are a bebop fan, this is a fantastic box set and you can really hear that sax jump between the speakers. (Miles sounds great too!)

Female vocal lovers will really be in heaven with these amps too! The Citations really have a great midrange with that dreamy quality, yet they are not rolled off on top like a vintage EL-34 amplifier. This is the kind of thing that tube lovers really love and it seems to be that "thing" that is almost impossible to capture with all but the very best solid state gear. The big surprise for me with these little amplifiers was what a nice job they did with the upper third of the audio spectrum, offering up a lot less grain than I am used to at this price point.

Of course the triode mode is a bit more mellow, but as always only offers up half the power. For the Princesses they were too mellow for my taste, but I borrowed a pair of Quad 57's for a weekend from a good friend and this was a very nice match indeed! Same thing with the Final 1000i's I have in for review; these offer up a very expansive sound with a pair of the right electrostatics like these that have modest drive requirements. They did not have enough giddyup to power the Martin Logan Vantages.

A few tweaks if you must

Taking this a step further, if you are of the persuasion that likes to roll tubes, you can make a few changes and get even more refinement. Swapping out the stock tubes for some NOS 12AU7's and 12AX7's adds a little more dreaminess. I would have liked to swap the rectifier tubes for the excellent 274B from Sophia, but the tubes are just a little too close together on the chassis for that. I am looking for some NOS RCA rectifier tubes. If you are really a tubemeister and just happen to have some great vintage EL-34's in your stash, these amplifiers will open up even more, but if you have to go buy a set, plan on spending about 6-800 dollars!

Even though these little amplifiers have some pretty beefy power transformers, upgrading to a bit better power cord is not a bad idea. As I mentioned earlier, stepping up from the stock power cords helped a bit too. Just a touch more dynamics and a little bit lower noise floor.

A solid performer

The VAS Citation monoblocks offer a lot of value and performance for well under 3000 dollars a pair. They are very versatile and were very easy to mate with a number of different speakers, especially with the triode mode option and the ability to use 6550's as well as EL-34 tubes. I also appreciated that they had more of a modern tube amplifier sound than a vintage sound, which also made for more options in different potential systems.

Bottom line, if you are considering 50-60 watts per channel of tube power for a modest price, the VAS Citation monoblocks are very worthy of your consideration.

The Citation 2 monoblocks

MSRP: \$2750 per pair

Manufacturers Information:

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Peripherals

Preamplifiers Aesthetix Callisto Signature, Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP

Analog Source AVID Volvere Turntable/SME 309 Arm w/Shelter 90x cartridge

Digital Source Wadia 581i, Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP

Phono Preamplifier ModWright 9.0 SWP

Speakers Tetra 506 LTD Custom, Peak Consult Princess F/S, Quad 57, Final 1000i,
ACI Sapphire XL

Interconnects Cardas Golden Reference, Audience AU24

Speaker cables Cardas Golden Reference, Audience AU24

Power cords Audience PowerChord

Power conditioning Running Springs Haley, Running Springs Duke