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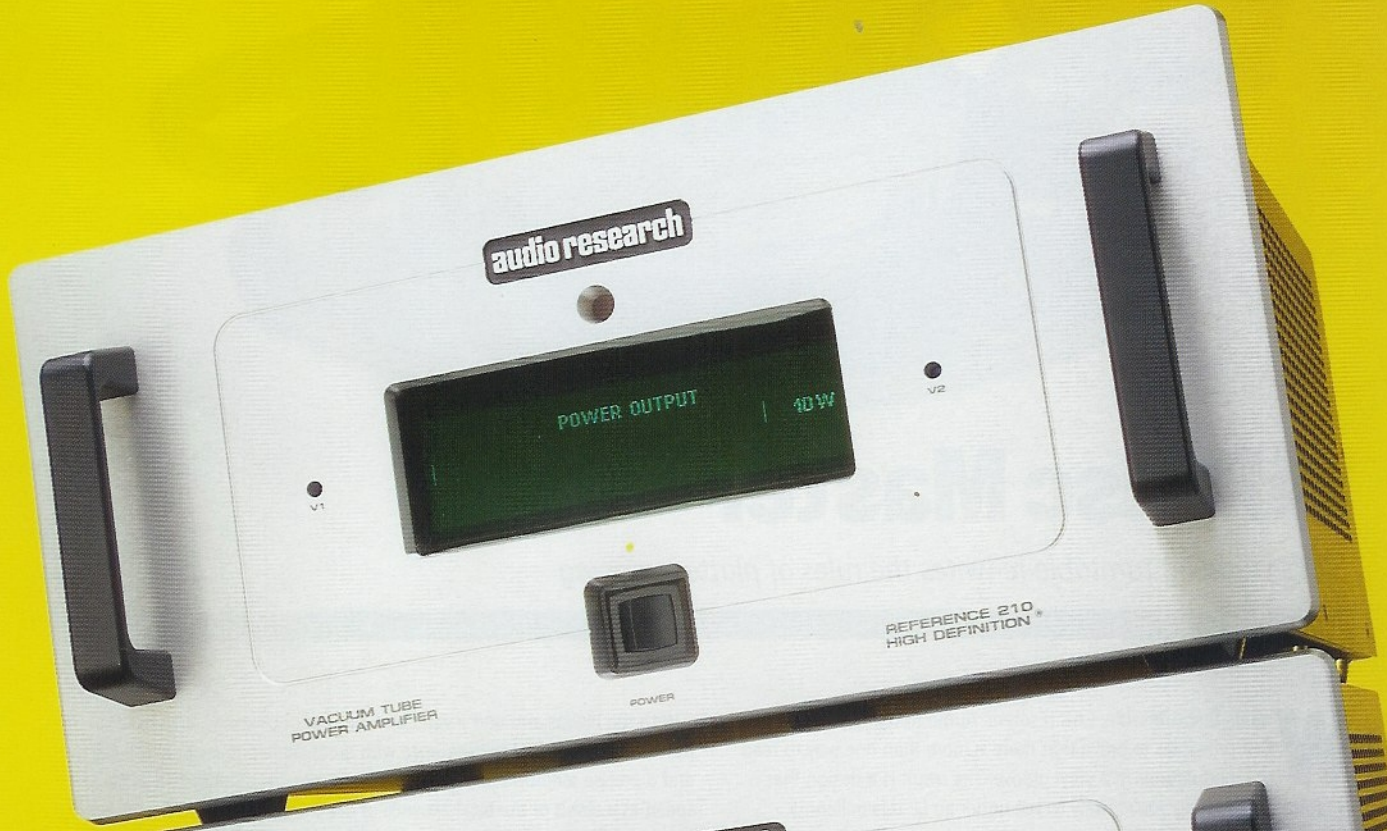


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Audio Research Reference 210

Forget the stereotypes – this 210-watt monoblock sounds unlike any other valve amp you've heard

PRICE £8,950 each (£17,900 per stereo pair) CONTACT Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Rd, London SW20 0TW ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.audioresearch.com

To say the Audio Research Reference 210 mono power amps are big is something of an understatement. Each one is 48.3cm wide, 22.2cm tall and 49.5cm deep, and weighs 33.6kg. In fact, they are smaller, more affordable versions of an even bigger amplifier – the 600-watt Reference 610T, a tower of power with a little forest of valves along its top surface.

Not that the Reference 210 is light on valves. Each chassis has three matched pairs of 6550Cs in the power output stage, another matched pair of 6550Cs in the driver stage, a 6N1P in the gain stage, plus a 6N1P and yet another 6550C in the regulator section. That's eleven valves in total, only two of which (the 6N1Ps) are miniature double triodes.

With so many tubes, the Reference 210 inevitably runs warm. To keep temperatures down, there's a built in cooling fan that runs all the time and produces a bit of noise – a gentle whirring/swishing. So, it's best to position the amps well away from your listening seat – but you aren't going to use amplifiers of this size, power and heat in a broom cupboard! There's a two-minute gap while the amps settle down and warm up after switch-on, during which time the signal is muted.

Each chassis has a single balanced input via a three-pin XLR socket, but no single-ended phono connection. There are three outputs for loudspeakers of four, eight and 16-ohm impedance. The 'correct' one for your loudspeakers gives the highest volume, but do experiment – we favoured the four-ohm setting for its extra tightness and control, though eight ohms sounded louder.

“Even played quietly, the Reference 210 sound has a commanding presence that's both uncanny and remarkable.”

But perhaps the most obvious and fascinating aspect of this valve-based monoblock is its cool front panel display, like a scaled down version of the Audio Research Reference 3 preamplifier. Functions displayed on the panel include the choice of six levels of illumination, plus display off; bias measurements for each output tube; mains voltage; logarithmic, scalable power output (0-10, 0-50, 0-100, 0-200 watts); and total hours of tube use. The vacuum-fluorescent display is addressable only through the remote control, which is actually a handy diagnostic

tool that's used for trimming the levels, shutting down the amps and operating the display. With this much flexibility, it's little wonder the amplifier also comes with a 12V trigger for remote power on. It's also little wonder that the amplifier has a 20A IEC connector – at full tilt, each amp draws nearly a kilowatt and pulls 380 watts even at idle and 680 watts at the rated output. In amplifier terms, this is as environmentally-chummy as a Range Rover having a tug-of-war with a Hummer in a rainforest.

SOUND QUALITY

Why do you need something this meaty? Because a pair of Reference 210s make the best stereo power amp this reviewer has ever heard. By a country mile. And they get better over time – while the sound is extremely good from cold, things improve steadily as the various components reach their proper operating temperature. After about an hour to an hour and a half, the sound is even smoother and more effortlessly transparent, with a fantastic sense of rightness that you simply have to hear to appreciate.

The Reference 210 produces a big sound, notable for its massive scale and spellbinding immediacy. Even played quietly, it has a commanding presence that's both uncanny and remarkable. The musical presentation is at once relaxed and effortless, yet sharp and focused.

Tonally, the 210 is supremely open and natural sounding. The music is crisply focused and tactile, with firm and plentiful bass and clean, transparent highs. Pitch definition is quite simply outstanding.

At the other end of the spectrum, the bass sounded firm and very powerful, with clear definition and impressive clarity. Although subwoofers were not connected, the Reference 210s made it sound like they were – the bass was that powerful, that deep. Yet, despite the very full bottom end, bass lines sounded clear and well-defined. Remarkable!

This is a very refined-sounding amplifier, but not in the usual smooth/rich/warm sense. One of the first CDs tried was George Michael's *Jesus to a Child* from the album *Older*. This track is exceptionally difficult to reproduce

cleanly; the treble is a touch edgy and splashy, while the bass sounds thick and somewhat lumpy. There's an artificial reverberation added to prolong the vocal sound. Every time there's an 'S' it comes out as an 'SSSSSS'.

Sonically, this track often disappoints, but not this time. Although the Reference 210s sounded super sharp and very bright and immediate, the treble was surprisingly clean and free from 'edge'. Not only that, you could really follow the decay on the emphasised sibilants. Rather than sounding smeared and splashy, each sibilant was crisp and clear.

The Reference 210s also made it easier to hear the words of songs. They seemed to project the vocals, and in doing so made the words clearer. The amps really gave the music its head – let it flourish and expand – without seeming to impose limitations or control. The result was a dynamic sound of effortless clarity.

For a big amp, the Reference 210 sounds surprisingly agile and articulate. Some big amps only come fully into their own when pushed hard, but this one sounds good even when played at a whisper. Mind you, the sound is so clean and effortless, you're positively encouraged to play things loudly. With over 200 watts on tap, each amp has power to spare, but they don't need to be played at excessive levels to fill the room with music.

We have already commented on how outstanding the extreme treble and bass are, but perhaps what's more remarkable is how integrated the overall sound is. The flow from deep bass to high treble is absolutely seamless. Transient attack is super fast, and very clean, with no hint of detail being smeared. Separation of individual strands is outstanding, creating superlative clarity and definition.

Finally, we did some listening in single speaker mono, often an instant failing of even high-end monoblocks. Not here – the Audio Research sounded fine. The extra quality of the sound somehow compensates for the lack of stereo. In musical terms, the reproduction was sharp, clean, and open – with all the necessary information seemingly intact.

The Audio Research Reference 210 trashes all the usual stereotypes. It has all the sharpness, clarity, attack, dynamics, detail and bandwidth you'd expect from a transistor amplifier, yet it's valve-based throughout. We've never heard anything quite like it – and that's the truth. Which makes us wonder... how much better could the Reference 610T monoblock power amp be?! **HFC**

Jimmy Hughes