

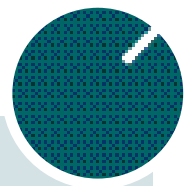
Stereonow

The Audio Research tube preamp SP8 and its crucial role in kick-starting the UK true high-end.



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In some ways the Audio Research SP8 valve preamp is more deserving of legendary status than you'd initially think.

I'm not talking here about the sound quality which was, and remains, exemplary *even by today's standards*, nor indeed the rather odd (for that time) styling which has over the years become more acceptable to the eye. No, I'm talking about what it represented in terms of the UK audiophile market in the mid 1980s.

My view, and it seems I'm not alone in this, was that this single product – in isolation – quite probably kick-started the UK high-end. And inextricably linked was the vision, ruthless drive, unbridled ambition and ultimately, success enshrined in Mr Ricardo Franassovici – the founder of Absolute Sounds Ltd.

Ordinarily I try to separate the personality from the product

That's easily said and harder to achieve in practice. Sometimes the scale and nature of the personality dwarfs, initially at least, the product. Mr T of Linn is a case in point and Mr M of Musical Fidelity is another. Mr F of Absolute Sounds – in terms of influence, a tendency to hubris and the confidence to see through a vision, *his* vision, is justifiably up there with them all.

The difference is of course that arguably there was no real high-end in the UK

before Absolute Sounds whereas Mr T and Mr F were at that time using home grown products in a market they knew well or at least were getting to know well.

From my view as one of the first Absolute Sounds *major* retailers (Subjective Audio), his risk was slightly different. There was no way he could be certain that there *was* a latent high-end in the UK.

The 'evil axis'?

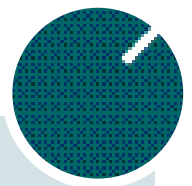
Remember if you would please that the UK arena was dominated by the axis of Linn / Naim where sadly and misguidedly in my view usually discerning people (media, retailers and 'civilians') were caught up in a sort of hysteria where there was only one 'solution' to the challenge of achieving wonderful sound reproduction in the home – and that pinnacle was the Linn / Naim Isobaric system. In terms of coloration, truly awful in my opinion compared to today's standards.

Anyway, those dark days are long gone although the impact still ripples through the UK audiophile market even today. And so Mr F, who's musical knowledge and love of music in general was never in doubt but which would not dilute his drive to achieve a substantial business, entered the arena. It took both money and balls. I guess he had both, even then.

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Drive and ambition are not enough to gain success

You need a series of products with the faint hope that at least one of them will turn out to be the battering ram to smash the door down. As it turns out, from my personal experience, it was the ARC SP8.

Mr F was even in those early days a man with a keen understanding of the need to set a commercial strategy and the requirement to have a set of tactics that stood a better-than-even chance of achieving that strategy. Consequently he had a number of weapons in his armoury (a much more appropriate phrase than 'tools in a toolbox') at his disposal. All of them excellent, *even by today's standards* and frankly mind blowing 25 years or so back. These included Krell and Koetsu. Nevertheless it was the SP8 that did it.

First of all, it looked like nothing we'd ever seen before. Yes of course there were various valve preamps around, but as far as I can recall, nothing with 19" rack holes, grab handles and a very tall 5.5" front panel. The fit 'n finish were first rate and as close to Japanese *without being Japanese* as we'd seen. German audio had yet to make its presence felt in the UK. In contrast, Naim equipment of that era looked and felt like an ammunition box in comparison.

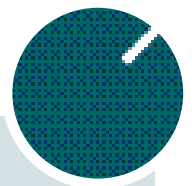
I should point out that at that time I was a Meridian man through and through. It was in my DNA and to some extent regarding their 'golden age' still is. This meant I had negligible interest in valves. I perceived them as hissy, dangerous, unreliable, temperamental and altogether not what I wanted to be involved with – at all. Not even a little bit. Suffice to say the ARC SP8 pretty much changed that.

I never was a big ARC retailer

Those pieces I sold were usually the preamps. I sold six times as many pieces of Krell. But truth be told, in those days the original Krell preamps were fairly average and the ARC power amps were I thought not worth the backache. Logically then, an ARC SP8 with a Krell Power amp was ideal, magical in its sound, pleasantly profitable, reliable and above all – an easy sale. And occasionally a Naim-nutter could be converted.

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The pleasure I took from ARC preamps was far greater than the profit

Sonically, despite my predudice, I rather liked the sound of the SP8. It was, for the time (more on this later) surprisingly good on phono. Somewhat more open and ambient than my Meridian preamps but the phono input lacked the sheer bass grip and visceral speed of the Meridian. Fair enough I thought. Horses for courses.

I wasn't all that impressed with the microphony on early units. But then again I reasoned, who in their right mind goes up to an operating valve pre amp and smacks it hard on the top surface? Err, well, I did. No idea why though.

Happy memories

The lingering impression I retain from all those years ago was one of sonic credibility, or believability. It was more like music and less like hi-fi. This was particularly apparent in the mid range where even today (and I know this for a fact, more on this shortly) it would be a damn hard act to follow. Against my references of the time though I felt the extreme bass to be a bit soft and the extreme top to lack sparkle. But then again, the SP8 was designed as an infant against the subsequent giants that were and remain the SP10, SP11 and so on.

Without the SP8 then, it's my contention that the real high-end would have got off to a slower start here. Moreover my ignorance and predudice re valve gear would have remained in place and I wouldn't have championed the home grown Beard valve amplification.

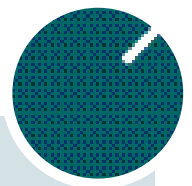
Enter, stage left, Mr Bill Beard

And just as a side issue re this, I can tell you with complete certainty that Bill Beard never built a valve preamp as good as the SP8 – however his ultra rare mono P-100 valve power amps were the equal of ANY Audio Research power amps I ever used.

Arguably, if you listen like I listen, then an SP8 with twin mono Beard P100s might, just might, be the only valve amplification you'll need.

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Now then, retuning to the topic . . .

I see here from my notes at the time that I suspected that batch to batch, the sound quality of the SP8 improved consistently but not spectacularly. My suspicion, as I noted at the time, was that there was a trickle-down of knowledge gained from the SP10. It might, I noted, have been my imagination, but I doubted it.

So, coming up to date. A few weeks back I encountered a pristine SP8 in a house in North London. I was there because the owner felt, with some justification as it turned out, that the onboard phone stage was a bit below quality compared to modern devices. He was using a Logic DM-101 modified years back by Pink Triangle (an external power supply) with an Ittock and a Koetsu Red (possibly Rosewood) into the SP8, driving a Plinius power amp into the ultra rare Gale 402 speakers. 402s were not, as was commonly misunderstood, a wooden version of the chrome Gales. That was the 401C.

Anyway, the sound, even before I inserted a PS Audio GGPH phonostage was quite wonderful. Truly one of the finest vinyl-only systems I have heard anywhere and at any price. And in the middle, was the SP8.

The PS Audio, which was purchased, being a far more modern design, addressed the Achilles Heel of the SP8 immediately.

The system, already dramatic and dynamic, became even more so. Background hiss was eliminated and detail was increased – a little.

What conclusions can be meaningfully drawn from this recent experience?

1. First, the SP8 is still terrific, despite the years.
2. The onboard phono stage is still pretty good (excellent for the time) but can usefully be improved by quality external devices.
3. Finally, it's a bargain. Examples today sell for as little as £650. Nuts – considering the quality.

In summary then?

The SP8 is a true classic in every sense of the word because it offered an alternative sound characteristic to the incumbent one that dominated the 1980s UK scene AND – it was a crucial tool in kick-starting the true high-end in the UK. Mr F, in this respect at least, you deserve a medal.

Howard Popeck

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