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The Real Deal

The Amplifon WL25 Integrated Valve Amplifier

by Jimmy Hughes

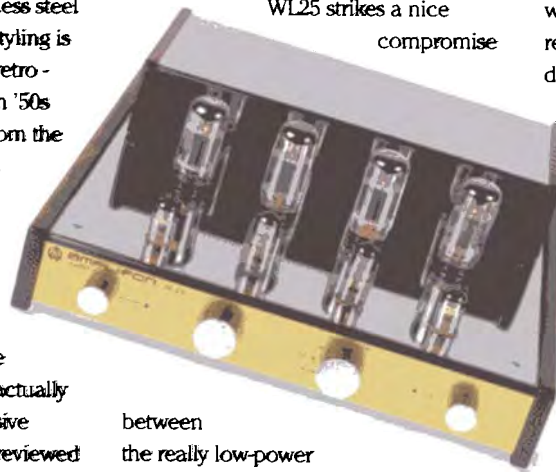
Amplifon WL25? No, I hadn't heard of it either. But remember the name. I certainly will. And remember the price. Made in Poland, and imported by London dealers Walrus, it's a clean honest-sounding amplifier that offers excellent results at a surprisingly affordable £799. Build quality is extremely good; polished stainless steel and varnished wood, and the styling is vintage-traditional; attractively retro - albeit more late '60s Kitsch than '50s cool. Sonically, I liked it right from the word go. And if anything things improved as time went on.

To begin with, it's an amp that sounds balanced and easy on the ear. Full-bodied and detailed, results are tonally natural and pleasing. And while I couldn't say hand on heart it actually sees off any of the more expensive integrated valve amplifiers I've reviewed in the past few months, it's definitely not their inferior either. Different? Yes. Worse? No way. Bass is full and strongly defined: powerful and controlled, with a solid weighty rounded quality.

The WL25 has a nice creamy tonality and very good definition. The overall presentation is warm and rich, but nonetheless quite lucid and articulate - sometimes surprisingly so. Don't think that because the sound is attractive and easy on the ear, it's soft and lacking in brilliance - it's not. I liked the WL25 because it's a very easy amplifier to listen to; refined, inviting and at the same time crisp and involving. Timing is good, retaining the rhythmic drive of the music.

In order to lengthen valve life and eliminate the possibility of changes in sound quality as the amplifier warms up,

the WL25 is designed to be left on all the time. In Standby mode the valve heaters are kept switched on, but not the high tension (ht) supply. So, although all the valves are lit up, they're not actually operational; left in Standby, the valves stay nice and warm but aren't wearing out. With an output of 28W RMS, the WL25 strikes a nice compromise



between the really low-power single-ended designs, and amplifiers offering 50W or more. Although output appears somewhat limited, a little goes a long way; given reasonably efficient speakers the WL25 will be powerful enough for most situations. It's got a remarkably gutsy sort of sound, creating an impression of weight, power, and presence. Pitch definition proved excellent, and it proved surprisingly difficult to get the amp to clip. Pushed hard, the sound stayed clean. There was a little bit of compression at very high volume levels. But to be honest I couldn't be sure if it was the amplifier or my Impulse H-I speakers giving out! Even though sound pressure levels were approaching 'uncomfortable' (loud!) the amp seemed to cope. Partly out of fear of annoying the neighbours, I couldn't get hard

clipping on rock/pop: pretty amazing for an amplifier of just 28W.

Massed choral forces didn't faze the WL25 either. Playing John Eliot Gardiner's Philips recording of Bach's *Magnificat*, there was no sign of intermodulation or breakup even with volume levels significantly louder than I would normally listen at. This particular recording is a real amp killer. It's deceptively dynamic. Subjectively, you

don't appreciate how demanding the peaks are. To the ear, there's a small rise in volume. But this apparently slight increase can easily call for twice as much power (sometimes more) compared to the average/mean level. Playing the final *Gloria Patri*, the WL25 did not flinch. High voices, some clashing harmonies, and piercing razor sharp baroque trumpets, aren't the easiest things to reproduce cleanly. However, there was no sense of the amp struggling. Yet I know from past experience that many amplifiers (some having a lot more power output than the WL25) hard-clip on this section when played loudly. The WL25 sailed through, remaining impressively dimensional and dynamic.

Although not quite in the Jadis DA-50 class, the WL25 sounded quite holographic - able to make the speaker boxes 'disappear' as sources of sound - so that the music floated freely in space. It did not create the Jadis' remarkable sense of image height, but nevertheless it was good at clarifying and separating out the various musical strands in complex recordings while vividly recreating the spatial qualities of your recordings. Playing the Tom Jones/Art of Noise track 'Kiss', I was impressed at the

● EQUIPMENT REVIEW

► way the various phasey imaging effects were vividly recreated. This clarity and dimensionality is one of the characteristics of a good transformer-coupled amplifier in my view. Unusually, the WL25 employs toroidal transformers frame type transformers most manufacturers use. Amplifon presumably use toroids because they like the result produced. Certainly, the performance seems in every way to be excellent, so no complaints from me.

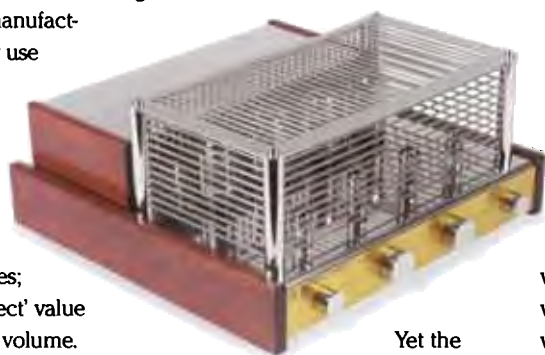
You've a choice of loudspeaker output impedances; 4 Ohms and 8 Ohms. The 'correct' value is the one that gives the loudest volume. However, if you're able to sacrifice a little power output, you may agree with me that the 4 Ohm setting sounds slightly firmer and more precisely defined.



Certainly, this output option offers the lowest source impedance. And this in turn seems to result in a tonally darker more precisely focussed sound. Bass and treble extremes are very well balanced. The bottom end sounds full and extended, with nice warmth and weight. The mid-band is fluid and rich, while the treble is airy and sweet. The overall impression is one of integration and cohesiveness. There's nothing flashy or spectacular about the way the WL25 reproduces music; it's not a gaudy extrovert amplifier. Instead, it gets on with the job, doing what has to be done quietly and efficiently.

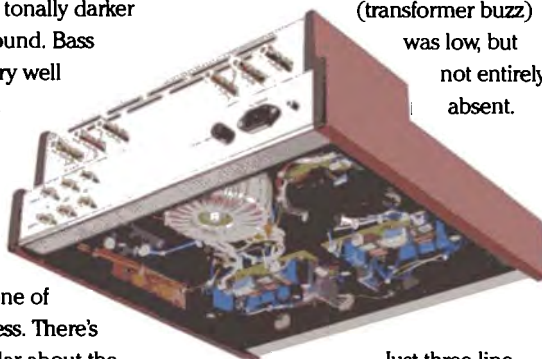
I really liked the way the WL25

seemed able to clarify dense, busy musical textures. Despite a tonal balance that's warm and honeyed, the WL25 is very clear - sometimes almost deceptively so. You can hear right into the music.



Yet the WL25 is not obviously 'detailed'. It doesn't thrust detail in your face. Rather, it clarifies by keeping individual strands separate. As a result, voices and instruments retain more of their individuality.

Noise can be an issue with tube amplifiers. The WL25 was pretty quiet, but I noticed a slight residual buzz from the speakers when sat close by. During normal use this was completely inaudible, and I wasn't troubled by it at all. However, those with very efficient speakers may notice it, especially sitting close by in a smallish room. Interestingly, the noise was slightly reduced with the amplifier volume at maximum! Physical noise (transformer buzz) was low, but not entirely absent.



Just three line inputs are offered. So clearly the makers aren't after a slice of the AV market! And there's no set of line outputs for taping. Actually a number of recent amplifiers have dispensed with tape out

sockets - something to do with the quiet death of the cassette deck, and the direct digital connection of devices like CD, DAT, MD, and CDR. It's probably been going on for some time, only I hadn't noticed... Tube compliment consists of two 6N2P-EB and two 6N6P, with four 6P3C-E output tubes used in class A/B Push Pull. Bandwidth is wide, with a quoted response of 5Hz to 82kHz -3dB at 1W. Power band-width is almost as good; 18Hz to 64kHz at full power. But as is often the case, specifications alone do not tell the whole story. The amp is self-biasing, which eliminates all the fiddling about when valves are replaced. I'm told EL-34s can be used in placed of the supplied 6P3C-Es if desired.

An outstanding amplifier, very reasonably priced, succinctly sums up the Amplifon WL25. Sonically it's very hard to fault; I'd be more than happy to live with one. You could pay an awful lot more and not get a sound half as good. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated valve amplifier
Valve Complement:	2x 6N2P-EB, 2x 6N6P and 4x 6P3C-E
Inputs:	3x Line-level
Input Impedance:	50 KOhms
Line Outputs:	None
Speaker Connections:	5-way binding posts for 4 and 8 Ohm taps
Power Output:	28 Watts into 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435x235x430mm
Weight:	16Kg
Finishes:	As shown
Price:	£799

UK Distributor:
Walrus Systems
Tel. (44)(0)207 724 7224
Net. www.walrus.co.uk

Manufacturer:
Amplifon
Net. www.amplifonaudio.com