

Review

A case of *fruit*

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Model: Amplifon Audio WL25 integrated tube amplifier

Price: RM6,500

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THIS review has its origins in fruit. Let me explain. On a chance excursion many moons ago, I caught sight of this amplifier in a neighbourhood hi-fi dealer's window showcase, bristling with "pineapples". A fruity amplifier?

Well, I had thought it strange initially when more than a few websites and some of my audio buddies referred to the 6C33C triodes as such, but the distinctive trio of nipples on the crown of this Russian military tube is somewhat analogous to the fruit. But the cool thing about 6C33Cs – and the point that stuck in my mind – was that you could get attention snapping dynamics and crystal transparency running them in OTL (output transformer-less) configuration, per the likes of Joule Electra, Tenor Audio and Balanced Audio Technology amplifiers, which I thought would be just dandy.

An Amplifon unit arrived in due course, but the pineapples were not to be. As chance would have it, the Amplifon WT40 with said 6C33C triodes was not available. The WL25 amplifier that did greet me, however, was not without promise.

From the tree

The WL25 looks similar to other amplifiers in the Amplifon orchard, and save for the output tubes peeking from behind the protective stainless steel wire cage, little sets them apart visually. Then again, Amplifon prides itself on sound fundamentals that are featured throughout its designs. Eschewing conventional transformer options, Amplifon use only toroidal transformers, a particularly more expensive way to go, for both power and output applications.

The Polish company's amplifiers also boast triode input stages, utilising primarily military-spec tubes with power supply rectification and filtering for each channel, and automatic biasing of output valves. All these nifty features come ensconced in highly polished stainless steel casework, capped by wooden cheeks on each side.

The WL25 is a push-pull configured amplifier operating in ultralinear Class-AB. It comes standard with a quad of Russian military 6P3C-E tetrodes, and promises 28 watts of output. Nonetheless, users can tube swap either 6L6s, 6L6GCs, 5881s or the ubiquitous EL34s into the WL25. Amplifon literature claims that swapping the 6P3C-Es for EL34s will push power output to some 35 watts. The triode input stage is also populated with other mil-spec tubes such as the 6H2P-EBs and 6N6Ps.

Peeling and preparing

The WL25 is easy to set up, so going the "macho man" route and not reading the product manual is absolutely fine. In any case, the prose in the attendant manual isn't the easiest to read, to say the least. Nonetheless, all one needs to do is place the amplifier securely on a firm base, make all the



CAGEY BEAST?: Certainly not. The Amplifon WL25 tube integrated amplifier is as genteel and civilised as they come.

necessary cabling attachments, power it up, allow it stabilise for a spell, defeat the standby switch and proceed thereon. As the internal circuitry is tasked with calibration duties, there is no need for the user to make periodic bias adjustments for the four output tubes. Believe me, manual bias adjustment can be a cool feature at first, but having to make scheduled adjustments becomes tiresome in a hurry.

While the amplifier warms up, do take some time to appreciate the fine casework, which in my mind sets a new standard on quality metalwork and deft finishing at this price bracket. The wooden flanks in particular are choice; finished in gloss lacquer, it has a translucence that recalls piano finish. Nice touches all around.

Alternating between Sonus faber Minima Amator and Audio Physic Spark speakers during the break-in period, I was pleasantly surprised that the sonic signature of the amplifier was rather fetching. There could have been some degree of burn-in prior to this audition, but listening was promising from the word go. Further listening over the weeks confirmed a decisive synergy with the Sonus fabers, which rewarded with consistent musicality and good extension to both extremes of the audio spectrum.



SHINY HAPPY AMP: The Amplifon is definitely one polish-ed act ...

On the upper extreme, there's a sweet clarity and lightness that allows finer shading and textural differentiation, and leaping off the amplifier's inherent quietness, the listening experience is characterised not only by the spatial cues of depth and width, but more so by fluidity and transparency. Some may opine that the toroidal output transformers (which accord greater bandwidth) used here in the Amplifon serve as the basis for this top end quality, but be it as it may, the treble quality was substantially better for it. It was no accident

therefore that the listening material for this review was predominately SACD, where the higher resolution of the format could be better realised.

The same was true on the other end of the spectrum, where bass detail was rendered with delicacy and finesse. That being said, the bass delivery veered more towards definition than quantity or intensity. To be sure, there was sufficient bass dynamic and drive to keep the rhythmic stride together, but it does sit closer to leanness than otherwise. A similar dry vein ran through vocals as well, where the focus lay on detail over other parameters. On male vocals in particular, the presentation was directed towards the mouth area – fleshed out detail is there, but the warmth and visceral quality that would be garnered from a full-bodied (or chest-infused) presentation was somewhat subdued.

On a dessert platter

If you feel that this overriding quality of detail over presence is the work of the output tubes, and would prefer a warmer alternative in EL34s, the WL25 will duly oblige, having been designed with that very versatility in mind – it'll accommodate alternative output tubes without fuss or need for recalibration.

Actually, I would go further to suggest that the WL25's propensity for detail may in fact win it fans that have become jaded with the overblown midrange that's now often associated with tube sound. For all that it is and to a lesser degree, what it is not, the Amplifon WL25 merits an audition for those on the lookout for a tube integrated. While you're at it, do enquire about the "pineapple" amp, as an alternative take.

For: *Sweet, transparent; great treble extension; detailed; excellent build and material spec; tube-swapping flexibility.*

Against: *Speaker sensitive – careful matching is key; dry, not for those looking for the archetypal*

tube sound.