



# AUDIOMAT ARPÈGE RÉFÉRENCE

**N**o, this amplifier model is *not* named for a perfume. “Arpège” is French for *arpeggio* (which is of course Italian), meaning a chord sounded by playing each of its notes successively rather than together.

But although Audiomat is a French company, this amplifier is built not in France but in Canada. Our sample was in fact the very first one to come from Mutine’s plant north of Montreal. The Arpège is an integrated tube amplifier, using push-pull EL34 tubes to produce 30 watts per channel. Audiomat claims that half of that power is available in class A...in other words that it’s a 15 watt per channel pure class A amplifier, with another 15 watts (3 dB) of class AB headroom. The preamplifier and phase inverter stages are provided by three 12AX7 dual triodes.

Though the chassis is made of thoroughly solid metal, the front panel is of acrylic, the material used in several high-tech products (our Audiomat turntable is made of it, right down to its platter). And it includes a transparent window, through which it is possible to glimpse the tubes and other circuits, if you turn the lights down low. We should

warn you that in real life it doesn’t look quite the way it seems to in our picture. We lit it specially to emphasize the transparency. There is in fact a metal backing to increase rigidity, but with a window to allow the innards to shine through. It is an attractive package, and it gets downright eerie if you like to listen in the dark.

There are just two knobs, for volume and selection of one of the four inputs, labelled Line 1 through 4. There are two tape outputs, but there is no tape-source switch...in case anyone still cares about tape loops.

We were disappointed with the phono jacks used, which are mass-market grade. The output binding posts, on the other hand, are of satisfactory quality, with posts for both 4 and 8 ohms. We used the 8 ohm connection, which was the correct one for our speakers, but we should add that some audiophiles choose the 8 ohm connection even with 4 ohm speakers. The rationale: the 8 ohm secondary

**Promise her  
anything, but give  
her...**

winding on the output transformer has only half as much wire as the 4 ohm winding. Of course the down side is a certain reduction in output power.

The line fuse is user-accessible, just below the IEC line cord connector.

The Audiomat’s power rating seems to call for matching with a reasonably efficient loudspeaker. We listened to it with the Reference 3a Supremas of our Omega system, but we disconnected the Supremas’ push-pull subwoofers. The complete Supremas are still quite efficient, at 91 dB, but they present a load that is a little scary for a small amp. The top part of the Suprema is still a full range speaker (the subs help out only below 50 Hz), and it is easy to drive.

But don’t think we were planning to go easy on the Arpège. We began with a backbreaker of a piece: Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man* (RR-93CD). Looking for dynamics? Check. Looking for deep bass? Check. Looking for a dense orchestration that can turn to mush if not handled right? Check and double check.

And of course the first thing we looked for was the available power. Could the Arpège do justice to this radioactive music? In fact yes, and we had no hesitation in concluding that. The bottom end was excellent, and indeed Reine judged that the brass actually had more body than with our much more powerful solid state reference amplifier. The tympani rolled with authority as well, and the gong seemed to push us back closer to the rear wall.

But there was more. Notwithstanding the highly satisfactory energy, the orchestra seemed farther back in the sound field, because that sound field was deeper. The added depth also opened up the breadth and the space. This was going to be *fun!*

The next recording merely confirmed the impression. The excerpts from Handel’s opera *Alcina* (Analekta FL 2 3137) are gorgeous if properly reproduced, but they are surprisingly fragile, easily growing harsh and shrill in the wrong hands. The Arpège handled them without missing a beat.

Indeed, considering that it has less than a sixth of the power of our reference amplifier, we could have expected

a certain moderation of the energy and impact of this music. In fact the opposite was true. Both the orchestra (the Toronto Tafelmusik ensemble) and soprano Karina Gauvin came through with unexpected power and impact. Attacks (for instance on the aria *Barbara*), were flawless. Not only was there plenty of detail, but the tiny nuances of both instruments and voice never blended together, as they might with an amplifier that is having trouble catching its breath. The rhythm? We characterized it as fast and light, and it carried us away. "This isn't a laid back amplifier," said Albert approvingly.

Speaking of rhythm, we were eager to hear our recording of Bruckner's *Symphony No. 9* (Reference Recordings RR-81CD). Its *Scherzo* movement has an insistent rhythm that can easily fall apart to the point you can't follow it. We had used it in our evaluation of the Cambridge S700 D/A converter (*UHF* No. 64). Would it survive its passage through this Audiomat amplifier?

In truth we hadn't expected it not to, and the Arpège didn't disappoint us. The music was beautiful in its soft introduction, and downright majestic once the Minnesota Orchestra really got going. The rhythm was perfect, nothing less. "An exceptional amplifier for exceptional music," commented Reine.

But there was more than rhythm of course. The strings had a natural sheen without the artificial brilliance some amplifiers will add. The brass sounded "right" as well, with bright dissonance but none of the distorted "white noise" we have heard on the same recording. The sense of space was convincing.

For the first time, however, we realized we were asking a lot of this amplifier, playing it rather loud in a very large room. In the loudest segments we could just tell that the power was limited, but that was only because we were doing direct comparisons. Some amplifiers "signal" that they are under stress by getting shrill or — more commonly — sounding thin. None of that here. The Arpège can pump a lot of music even into our considerable space without breaking a sweat.

It would demonstrate its capabilities once again in our next recording. The

suite from *A Chorus Line* on the Dallas Wind Symphony's *Beachcomber* album begins with a brass and percussion intro-

duction that, with our reference amplifier, is almost brutal. Surely the little Arpège couldn't match that...or could it?

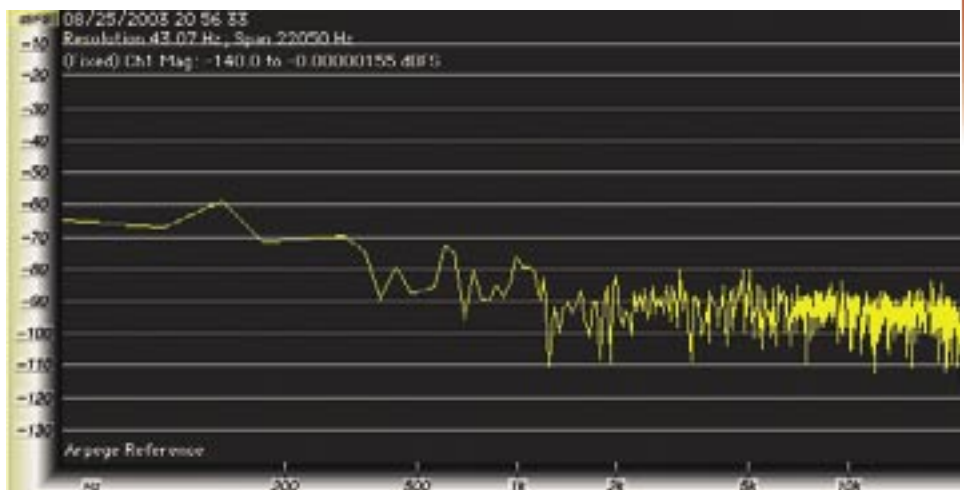
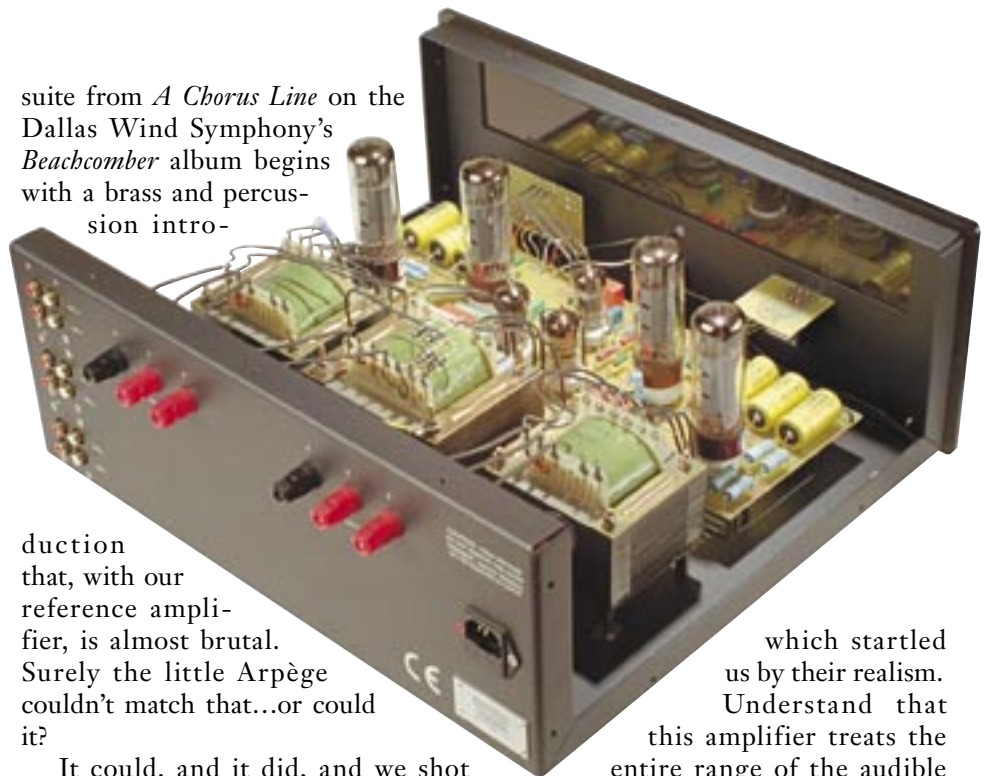
It could, and it did, and we shot amazed glances at each other, as if to say, "Did you just hear what I heard?"

A soft passage follows that dynamic introduction, and the Arpège demonstrated that here too it was at ease, digging out a rich trove of information without needing to work hard. Once again, the rhythm carried us away, and the lyrical sections of the music were most effective as well.

This suite includes, about halfway through, a passage for tympani that we love to play for visitors, because they mostly can't *imagine* hearing anything like that at home. Would the Arpège make it through that sequence without sinking to its figurative knees? Yes, of course. Even more surprising was its reproductions of the tubular bells,

which startled us by their realism. Understand that this amplifier treats the entire range of the audible spectrum without discrimination. That shouldn't be taken for granted. Some components can, for example, have sweet and beautiful highs but a merely adequate bottom end. With this amplifier, we weren't tempted to analyze it in that fashion, because it treats all the music equitably.

Of course it did well on our favorite choral recording, *Now the Green Blade Risetb* (Proprius PRCD9093). The female voices were clear but smooth, while the male voices were solid. They blended together naturally, but without "electronic" confusion. The flute passage was beautiful. The string bass marked the rhythm with plenty of energy. The organ at the end of the opening piece, which often tends to be swallowed in the



final crescendo, remained distinct. We haven't often heard it sound like that. "I don't speak Swedish," said Reine, "but I understood every syllable."

We ended the session with the Maria Muldaur song *Loverman* from the Hot Club of San Francisco's *The Lady in Red* CD. The introduction of this sultry torch song requires considerable energy from an amplifier, and the Arpège delivered. We admired the smoothness of Muldaur's voice, and the naturalness of sibilant esses. "She sounds clear," said Albert, "but not with an insistent clarity. Magnificent." The guitar solo (the ensemble is inspired by its French counterpart, and has a strong guitar base) was actually better than with our reference.

Gerard suggested one more test. We had disconnected the subwoofers of our Suprema speakers to make the load easier for the Audiomat to handle. What if we reconnected them? And what if we returned to the Copland recording we had started with? Heh heh!

We could tell that the Arpège was now working harder, but only just.

We were reminded of the fact that this recording really *does* have musical information down in the second basement, yet the amplifier showed no sign of folding.

We took the Arpège into the lab, and discovered that, like many other amplifiers, it doesn't quite meet its specs, putting out 27.6 watts into 8 ohms, with both channels driven, rather than 30. Results were worse at 20 Hz, where distortion became excessive beyond

23.7 watts. The explanation: North American voltages swing up or down a lot more than they are allowed to in Europe, and for that reason the Arpège is designed to operate at line voltages as high as 130 volts. We do our tests at 118 volts.

Noise, shown on the previous page, is very low, at -80 dB or better over most of the range. Most tube amps are a little noisier at low frequencies, and especially at the 60 Hz hum frequency. At no time was the noise audible.

Crosstalk between adjacent inputs was very low: -78 dB at most frequencies, and a still satisfactory -64 dB at 10 kHz.

You will by now have gathered that we were most pleased with the performance of the Audiomat Arpège. It is of classic design, with a tube configuration that would have seemed common 40 years ago, though with a definite 21st Century attention to musical values. What this means is that there is no way you would have heard an amplifier sound like this in 1965. Frankly, it's unusual even in 2003.



## SUMMING IT UP...

**Model:** Audiomat Arpège Référence

**Dimensions:** 43 x 40 x 19.5 cm

**Claimed power:** 30 watts per channel, 8 ohms or 4 ohms

**Most liked:** Great design, nearly flawless execution

**Least liked:** Mediocre jacks

**Verdict:** Why is it that the word "musicality" doesn't even seem adequate?

## CROSSTALK

This integrated amp left me ecstatic. Its exceptional qualities place it at the top of the heap, despite its very reasonable price. I could look for little flaws, but I'm not sure I'd find any.

The Arpège projects a remarkable sense of space, not only horizontally but also vertically. It sounds clear too, though I could already tell that wouldn't be the end of the list of goodies. With any program material, from human voices to chorales to strings to brass, every sound was rendered with natural warmth, and not a syllable was lost. The subtlest percussive effects found their way to my ear even through the loudest ones: drum rolls, tympany, and a gong whose astonishing resonance seemed to go on extra long.

This is a high end amplifier at a very tasty price.

—Reine Lessard

This experience is one of those rare moments when you realize that everything fits into place, all sounds appear as you

expected them and music flows unhindered.

And when I say it's rare I'm sure you know exactly what I mean. How often have you prepared for what you thought would be a treat, and then, as soon as the music started, you felt a pinch of hardness, a hint of confusion or, worse, a stab of vicious high notes — which you absolutely *know* are not on the recording? And your whole being tensed up as you anticipate the next selection.

Well, relax. You'll find none of that with this integrated amp. *Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté*, wrote Beaudelaire. (There, there is only order and beauty.) I thought of those words to describe that feeling I had during the listening tests with the Audiomat...when all is right and beauty is quietly there. Everywhere.

—Albert Simon

Can it be that getting all of the music to come through an amplifier unscathed is not

the product of exotic brute-force technologies and expensive adaptations of industrial components? Get a look at (and inside) this neat but deceptively simple amplifier, and it won't lead you to suppose that it is likely to hold surprises. Its circuit is mostly conventional — I designed similar ones in another life years ago. Even its jacks are nothing special, and they're scarcely good enough if you ask me. So what makes the Arpège sound so unusually good?

There's a common saying that the devil is in the details. Well, God is in the details too. The designers of this exceptional amplifier have clearly gotten the little things right. The key decisions were made in a music room, not on a drafting table. The result is...music.

The Arpège may not be the amplifier for every system, but I can't think of many systems that wouldn't be improved by substituting this amp for whatever has been driving the speakers up till now.

—Gerard Rejskind