



Dual mono design in the phono stage: the extra RAC socket accepts the supplied load resistor.

AMP WITH SUBLETTER

Separation and commonality can probably not be implemented more consistently than in Einstein's combination of 'The Amp Ultimate' integrated amplifier and 'The Little Big Phono' phono stage. How's that? Read for yourself ...

Integrated amps with an optional phono stage have been very much in fashion of late. However, the bandwidth of such options ranges from puny IC solutions which found their way into the actual amp based on marketing recommendations to very high-quality products which permit tailored solutions based on MM or MC pick-ups. The ongoing 'vinyl boom' both

informs the cynical former inclusion, and makes possible the attraction of the latter, better solution.

In view of the technological progress since the 1960s, one fact is inescapable: no really good phono section is developed just on the side – and therefore such a stage isn't going to be cheap. OK, that's two facts, but you get my point...

The lesson is thus to be careful when your choice of amp, possibly with a price tag in the upper 4 or even 5 figures, offers a „compatible“ add-on for your analog favorite for just a few hundred euros. Such stages will do your prized recordings no favours, and in many cases digital remains the winners in terms of sound through no fault of the analog medium – it is simply burnt by the use of a poor phono stage.

This risk can be ruled out in the concept of the Einstein Audio „Little Big Phono“. And that's not just because Volker Bohlmeyer, head of the fine manufacturer in Bochum, and his head of development

Rolf Weiler, have been working with analog devices for decades and phono stages and pick-ups have been part of the program forever. No, what sets this one apart is that the two also have a private passion for tickling maximum music out of a record's grooves.

Uncompromising phono

This explains why, when they started looking for a phono solution able to satisfy their very high standards for their integrated amplifier, „The Amp Ultimate“, they found it right under their noses – in the Little Big Phono. Usually available as a standalone unit, housed in two separate aluminum housings for the perfect channel separation, it has been integrated with the Amp Ultimate by the simple expedient of giving the integrated amp two power sockets to supply its highly delicate add-on.

This way you can select the ideal position for the phono section, ruling out humming from a powerful power supply or occasional noise from a converter. Exclusively designed for moving coil cartridges, the Little Big can be optimised for the cartridge in use with a resistor plug, avoiding the contact problems sometimes encountered with more commonly used dip-switches. A standard 470 Ohm is available to the pick-up without the terminal plug.

In order to amplify even quiet MC cartridges such as the higher-end Benz models without hissing, Einstein uses 48 selected field effect transistors in parallel, to ensure his high overmodulation stability and absence of noise are maintained. The initial stage of the Little Big Phono has very low resistance, as confirmed in our lab tests, so that one also



▲ Symmetric circuit design of the Circlotron circuit here implemented with transistors.

can experiment with longer cables, and while negative feedback loops are not used at Einstein, the measurements are still impeccable thanks to the careful circuit design with the shortest signal paths.

Furthermore, to avoid microphony especially for the extremely quiet signals supplied by the cartridge, the amplifier modules are embedded.

A circuit like not other

The integrated amp itself has tubes – but only in the input area: transistors generate the power. But chief developer Rolf Weiler has built a circuit designed to come as close as possible to the sound character of tubes: the Circlotron circuit. By using the same, strictly selected transistor types for positive and negative halfwaves, even harmonics are thus already eliminated by the circuitry, ensuring an especially natural transparency over the entire frequency range.

It's not exactly the cheap way to design such an amplifier, but Weiler says the significantly higher circuit expenditure

is justified by the resulting sound. The design team also had to perform another small miracle to ensure a high signal-to-noise ratio despite „hovering“ supply voltages – which again they have achieved admirably.

The very wide bandwidth of the tube input stage in triode circuitry makes do without a negative feedback loop, while the output stage has a weak feedback in order to achieve a good compromise between damping factor and bandwidth. In addition, the circuitry is designed so there is no potentiometer in the signal path, maintaining the same signal-to-noise ratio and low distortion, whatever the volume level potentiometer does not lie one the signal path.

Completing the design is a large power supply to ensure the amplifier won't be fazed by the connected load, and a channel-separated topology with short signal paths.

Watt per Euro? Not for you

Since all the above comes together with



◀ The massive remote control fits snugly in the hand

an exquisite and beautiful housing and is designed and built exclusively in Germany, let's talk price: it's €17,800 for the complete package with phono stage, or €16,000 for the integrated amp alone. For that you get an amplifier delivering 2x100 watts, and while that won't get power-fetishists to jump for joy, I guess they'll have to look somewhere else. However, it's worth noting that the complete variant (with phono stage) we tested is €1200 cheaper than if you bought the integrated amp and phono amp separately.

Dancer in the storm

Once we found the on-switch – it's hidden front left on the bottom – about three minutes elapsed until the first sound, giving us just enough time to look for something to listen to. We started with Steven Wilson on vinyl, and what an opening! The delicate, initially tangled webs of sound on „Transience“ very quickly revealed their fascination, thanks to the integrated and light presentation of the Einstein. Again and again we asked ourselves where this man gets his ideas, wondered how he holds these dozens of strings so skillfully and pulls on them just in the right moment.

The Einstein was so fleet of foot that it almost gave the impression either got information about the incoming music ahead of time or that it had some sort of clairvoyance circuits – it was so much fun and even put the Musical Fidelity VYNL (also described in this issue and in its own right outstanding beyond its price range) in its place.

Substance yes, brute force no

When connecting a quality CD player like the 3000 series T+A and the exceptional Bowers&Wilkins 802 D3 (with Audioquest, Silent Wire, and Ansuz cables), we discovered that the Einstein – for all its meticulous precision – never bit down too hard, and always played with great expression and tons of detail while exposing the sometimes quite subtle character differences between the cables.

The wild combination of different ensembles in Hazmat Modines „Whiskey Bird“ was reproduced thrillingly in all its tonal and rhythmic complexity, with a wide soundstage and openness, the Einstein harmonizing beautifully with the B&W. It also and also produced pleasing synergies with the Soltanus electrostats when the gentlemen of the Cuban Buena Vista Social Club made their appearance in the sound booth.

As long as it is not abused as to power loud parties, this amplifier will meet any demands with ease: even exhausting bass attacks such as Yuri Honing's „Walking on the moon“ were effortlessly pushed through the B&W into space, albeit just a hint thinner than the transistors of the top class would.

If you prefer the soft sound of tubes or love to sink into a thick orgy of basses, you may have to look elsewhere; if, however, you like playfulness, lightness, and tonality strictly oriented on the ideal, this amplifier will make you happy.

Just steer clear of speakers choosing to place themselves in the „Efficiency? What's that?“ category.

Michael Lang



▲ The rear-panel layout echoes the symmetrical design, right through to the separate channels of power supply for the phono stage.

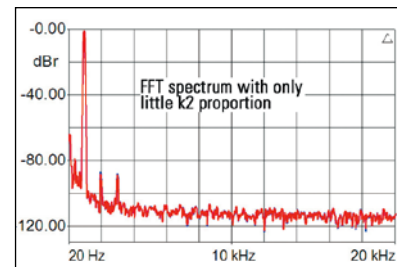
EINST. THE AMP ULTIMATE



starting at € 16,000;
test version € 17,800
Dimensions: 43 x 20 x 49 cm (W x H x D)
Warranty: 3 years (6 months on tubes)
Contact: Einstein
Phone: +49 234/9731512
www.einstein-audio.de

This stylish offering from Einstein also convinced us in the sound booth. The phono stage sounds outstanding, while the well-thought-out and practical design completes the positive image.

MEASUREMENT RESULTS



Continuous power at 8 4 Ohm/76 111 Watt per channel	
Pulse power at 4 Ohm	138 Watt per channel
Distortion factor	
at 50 mW 5 W Pmax -1	dB 0.008 0.01 0.02 %
Intermodulation	
at 50 mW 5 W Pmax -1 dB	0.01 0.04 0.1 %
Signal-to-noise ratio CD at 50 mW 5 Watt	85 102 dB
Channel separation at 10 kHz	62 dB
Damping factor at 4 Ohm	90
Upper cutoff frequency (-3 dB, 4 Ω)	>80 kHz
Electrical supply data	practice-oriented
Crosstalk Tuner/CD (10 kHz/5 kOhm)	75 dB
Timing error volume control up to -60 dB	0.1 dB
Power input	
On / Standby / Idle	0 / 2 / 78 Watt

LAB COMMENTS

Excellent measurement values in all relevant areas. Output power not huge but sufficient for all but the most demanding applications.

FEATURES

Five line-level inputs, one of which uses balanced XLRs, remote control, power supply for phono stage; matching resistor for phono; gloves and user manual. No labeling on phono stage.

STEREO-TEST

SOUND QUALITY	100%
PRICE/PERFORMANCE	
★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆	
VERY GOOD	