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VinnieRossi
Brama Integrated Amplifier

Jason Kennedy

VinnieRossi (the company) clearly decided to go all out with the Brama range of electronics. This is literally no stone left unturned, no expense considered too great, and no concern for whether a human being could manoeuvre the device in its packaging. The Brama Integrated Amplifier itself is not excessively large or heavy, but when packed in a flight case and boxed, you have a substantial, near-40-kilo monolith that requires one gorilla or two men to get into the listening room. If you're paying the asking price, I would hope that the dealer would do the dirty work and install it neatly in your system, despite appearances to the contrary, those guys and gals earn their keep.

Vinnie Rossi (the man) used to run Red Wine Audio, a rather more modest operation that started by modifying iPods, of all things. Since then, he has realised that if you want to make your mark in the cut-throat world of high-end audio, you have to do something extreme. His Brama electronics are certainly that. This is an integrated amplifier. Normally, such things are considered a stepping stone to separate pre- and power amps in this field, but Rossi set out to build an integrated that "serves as a long-term destination for serious listening systems". What's more, it's a hybrid design with Western Electric 300B tubes in its preamplifier or line stage, a classic directly heated triode tube that was created as an output device (nearly 90 years ago) and not something I have seen used in any other way.

Voltage gain

Rossi is using these classic tubes purely for voltage gain and running them at a temperature that "allows tube life to exceed 10 years", which, given their price, is an appealing factor. You don't see the 300Bs because they are installed horizontally within the Brama's elaborate chassis. Hopefully, there will be images with this review that reveal how this is done. This should also reveal the machined-from-solid nature of the Brama casework and the way compartments have been created within the chassis to isolate the pre- and power-amp sections, keeping the small-signal circuitry away from the high-current output stage. »

> As you might expect. the Brama Integrated Amplifier is a fully balanced design with independent volume controls for the left and right channels.

Machining a chassis from a single piece of aluminium is about the most expensive way to make one, but it results in a seamless structure with none of the fixings and joints found in regular designs. This gives extremely high rigidity, which keeps vibration at bay and allows the circuitry to be designed with the shortest signal paths that don't compromise electrical isolation, keeping noise at bay. The Brama Integrated is as quiet as any fully solid-state design. If they didn't tell you there were triodes inside it, you wouldn't know. The sound might give you a clue, however.

The output stage is based on two pairs of carefully matched MOSFETs per voltage rail. They are rated at 200 watts into eight ohms and twice that into half the load. This is clearly an uncompromising design. Unusually for a high-end amplifier, the Brama Integrated Amplifier does not have a linear power supply. The absence of a power transformer is the biggest clue. Instead, Rossi and his team developed a custom switched-mode supply from the ground up for the Brama project.

Good indicator

The fact that Linn and Chord Electronics, among others, have been doing this for many years is a strong indicator that switched-mode supplies have fully matured and are at least as good as their linear forebears. This implementation, however, sounds nothing like any other SMPS amp I have heard. There is none of the fine grain or hollowness that often accompanies the quicksilver lightness of touch that is their core strength, but rather a smooth, luxurious fluency that one associates with Class A designs. That is quite an achievement for an amplifier that is SMPS-based and has a Class A/B output stage.

As you might expect, the Brama Integrated Amplifer is a fully balanced design with independent volume controls for the left and right channels. Despite the simple appearance of the front panel, it offers a range of control options via the remote control. The handset is as nicely made as the amplifier itself, with a lovely machined aluminium case that doesn't weigh too much and provides access to various features on a small display. It connects via Bluetooth, which means there's no need to point it at the amp. This can be a power-hungry approach, so VinnieRossi included a USB charging cable in the box, and there's no need to change the battery. Features accessible from the handset include balance, gain, home theatre bypass, and what is displayed by the VU meter on the amplifier.

Before I found the remote, I managed to figure out how to turn on the amp, select the input and adjust the volume, so it's pretty intuitive. I like the way the needle flicks to points on the scale to denote which input has been selected. I was less enamoured with the fact that there are no RCA inputs on the Brama, just five pairs of XLRs. There was, however, a pair of RCA to XLR adaptors in the box. The jack sockets are for VinnieRossi's Brama link bus system.

A clever hybrid

The moment I pressed play on Joe Webb's new album of stride piano, *Neath Beat*, I was struck by how natural the Brama Integrated sounds. It put me in mind of a British tube amp maker's name: Super Natural Audio. They use 300Bs in a more conventional fashion, but the name was clearly inspired by the same sound. Vinnie Rossi has done a remarkable job of integrating the tubes and transistors in this amplifier, inasmuch as it doesn't really sound like a solid-state design at all, yet it has characteristics not generally found in a pure tube design. The midrange is distinctly open, detailed and revelatory in the tube style, but there is a speed and lightness of touch to the bass that brings a whole new dimension to the experience.

This amp delivers the charm of music with ease, reproducing the warm, rounded sound of acoustic instruments in the Class A style.

It gives them depth and body that are very inviting, alongside control in the bass that means you get the full power of more muscular material. This became immediately apparent when playing Angine de Poitrine's 'Sarniezz', which had a visceral punch and speed I had not previously encountered, even with big active speakers. It's here that the transient response of the Class D output stage comes into its own, controlling bass units as if the amp were directly connected to them. It's not a hollow sound either. There is substance and weight to the bass that is very appealing indeed. It is also clean, which means that compressed pieces like the above don't sound as hard as they can.

Languor

I also enjoyed the primeval blues of Ry Cooder and Ali Farka Touré's *Talking Timbuktu*. The track 'Ai Du' is so languorous that it makes even JJ Cale seem uptight, yet there is so much instrumental timbre and depth in the recording. The image

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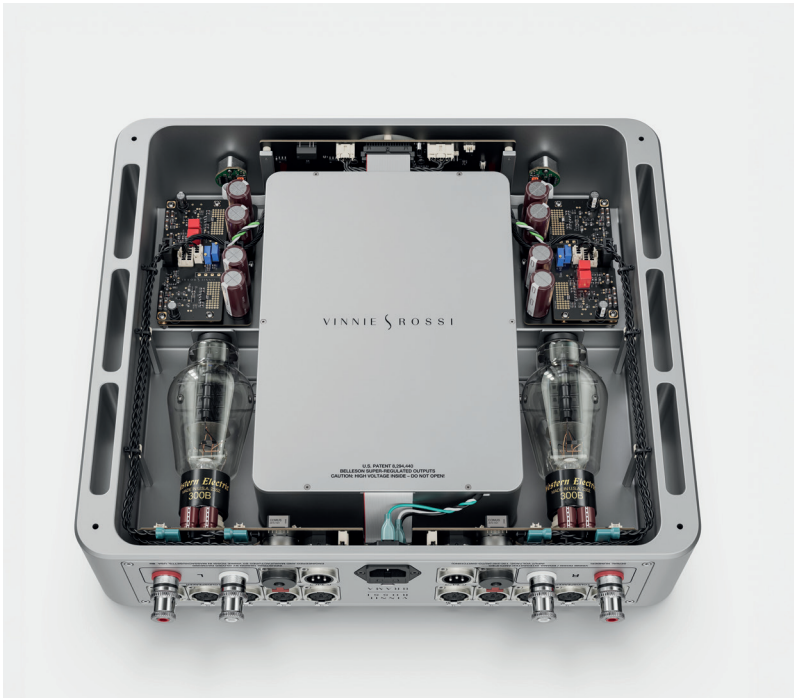

» really expands in all directions, the nature of the studio seemingly rendered in three dimensions before you. John Lee Hooker never sounded better…

There is always a physicality, a solidity, to the sounds presented by the Brama Integrated Amplifier. They take up a distinct space in the room. I found this with all manner of recordings, from great ones like Bill Frisell's 'Baba Drame' to lesser examples like Sarah Siskind's 'Covered'. Every recording has some dimensionality within it, be it natural acoustics and harmonics or effects created 'in the box', and this amplifier is exceptionally good at revealing it. More important, however, is its ability to engage you musically, to draw you into the performance. It often feels like you can listen into a recording and hear more clearly what individual musicians are doing. This is a classic triode characteristic, and one that turned everything I played on the Brama Integrated into a journey of discovery.

Dream on

I take my hat off to Vinnie Rossi; he has managed to develop a hybrid of tubes and transistors whose performance exceeds the sum of its parts. The attention to detail is clearly in another league, even by high-end standards, and the finish is truly world-class. But the sonic result is exactly the stuff that dreams are made of, listen if you dare. +

Technical specifications

Type: Hybrid, two-channel integrated amplifier with 300B tube line stage.

Analogue inputs: Five balanced inputs (via XLR connectors) optional AV bypass.

Digital inputs: None.

Analogue outputs: One pre-out.

Input impedance: 20kOhms

Output impedance (preamp): <100 Ohms

Headphone Loads: N/A

Power Output: 200Wpc @ 8 Ohms, 400Wpc @ 4 Ohms

Bandwidth: Not specified

Distortion: THD+N < 0.1% 20Hz to 20kHz.

Signal to Noise Ratio: >100dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 14 x 47.5 x 40.6cm

Weight: 22.7kg

Price: £49,995, €49,500, $47,995

Manufacturer VinnieRossi

vinnierossi.com

UK distributor CAS Distribution

cas.audio +44(0)1223 398600