

Tube Rolling

THIS MINIMALIST JAPANESE PRE-AMPLIFIER FROM CONCERT FIDELITY HAS EASY ACCESS FOR TRYING OUT DIFFERENT VALVES

The most obvious distinguishing feature of this very refined and carefully designed Japanese thermionic pre-amplifier is that the amplifying double triode pair is located on the back plate (partly shielded by a couple of strong safety bars). Designer Masataka Tsuda believes in 'tube rolling' [the practice of swapping valves of the same type but from different manufacturers – *Ed*], and has made it really easy as no covers need be removed (though do always set the unit to 'standby' when making changes).

Our review sample was supplied by Paul Stratton, an audio enthusiast and the founder of distributor Z-Axis Audio which includes Concert Fidelity in its modest product portfolio. Incidentally, Stratton also has a significant background in bespoke furniture. He explained the basis for supplying three different sets of triodes (plus a spare *EZ81/6CA4* rectifier tube) for the review: "A pair of Toshiba made and Pinnacle branded *13D5A* (*12AU7* *ECC82*) were factory burnt in but not otherwise specially selected. In addition I'd suggest gold pin JJ Electronic *ECC802s* equivalents, and finally NOS Mazda (France) *6189* (*ECC82*)."

The £12,900 *CF-08LSX2* is a neat looking pre-amp, fabricated from anodised aluminium plates bolted together with stainless socket head screws. The fine grain pearlescent finish is rather susceptible to fingerprint marks, so white cotton gloves are

provided for handling! It has two gain options, 6dB and 12dB (2x and 4x), individually selected for each channel on the rear panel. It normally inverts absolute phase, but this may be corrected if required by inverting the phase of the speaker cable connection. The mains power and standby switches are both located on the rear panel, so a top shelf location is advisable. Standby is operated after the mains is switched on to power it up, and is fine long term to keep the supplies well tuned, and also for swapping valves (but wait a couple of minutes for the glass to cool down!). The fitted feet are for transit and handling only, and the use of suitable audiophile supports is recommended by the designer. A 'ground lift' switch should help sort out any hum issues.

The remote handset controls only volume, not input selection. It's a hefty, part aluminium affair with just two buttons for up and down, and these have to be pressed successively to move up or down a rather coarse scale, predominantly made up from 2dB steps.

The front panel's numeric display indicates the volume setting. The volume knob has the same steps but a more continuous action, and in operation sometimes 'clicks' electrically. Simple lever switches provide muting and choose between the four inputs. Selection is at the input sockets to minimise signal path length, and this short signal path design has no tape loop, mono or balance facility.

Technology

Some features will help illuminate the interior build and circuitry of this deeply purist design. Like the original classic Sony *ES* series pre-amp, the signal path is symmetrical for each channel and also very short (about 4in), paying scrupulous attention to the central grounding. Interestingly, a maximum input level of 2V is suggested, as the input goes directly to custom designed 'solid state' resistors and an FET-selected volume control, with the resistor array mostly coded for 2dB steps; this arrangement also defines the input overload margin.

The signal then goes direct to an inverting triode amplifier configured in the familiar cascode configuration, using one pair of triodes per channel and providing a wide 100kHz bandwidth without the need for an additional cathode follower. The output is AC-coupled by selected 0.44uF capacitors,

