

Subjective Sounds

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A decade back John Howes – the polymath responsible for the Lowther-Voigt museum and the twice-a-year Audiojumble – produced a modified version of the famous Quad II monoblock valve power amplifier. This combined greater valve life with improved sound quality, and while I had no way of checking the former, the Howes-modified version certainly delivered superior sound quality over both the original and a current ‘official’ production version. That was history lesson number one.

History lesson number two is that I had acquired an old Leak *Stereo 20* valve power amp, longer ago than I care to remember. Its background is truly lost in the mists of time, as I’ve absolutely no idea how, when or where from I got hold of it. But I’ve long had considerable respect for the little *EL84*s it uses as push-pull outputs, and the end result always sounded much better than my own first hi-fi amplifier (an integrated, solid state Leak *Stereo 30* and unquestionably a mistake).

To bring things up to date, Howes has been busy again, and has managed to create a ‘supercharged’ version of the *Stereo 20*. The project arose after he received a badly scratched and rusting example that was in very poor condition. Knowing that I had an original example, he lent me his supercharged version, secure in the knowledge that I’d fall in love with it. And of course I’ve been so completely blown away by his version, I’m not exactly rushing to take it back. While the tonality is broadly similar, its dynamic expression is altogether and obviously superior, so much so that I find myself turning down the volume! And the bass goes significantly deeper with more authority than before too.

The modifications here are quite extensive. Let’s start with the cosmetic improvements, such as the useful inclusion of a switched and fused IEC mains input socket in place of the Bulgin original (chosen, I suspect, because the IEC socket hadn’t been invented back then!). The mains outlets have been eliminated and the new version now has a proper base and feet, an attractive painted finish, and the three little holes through the chassis now no longer exist. Input terminals were replaced with colour-coded examples. Better quality speaker terminals and new valve bases were then fitted.

The power supplies received particular attention, with the addition of smoothing chokes and extra capacitance. Adopting a dual-mono approach improved regulation and reduced crosstalk, improving the stereo imaging. The driver stage gain (and the noise floor) was reduced by replacing the *ECC83* double triodes with *ECC82* types, and all the resistors were changed to 1% and 2% tolerance military grade types. Wiring throughout was tidied up, with shorter signal paths, and N.O.S. Mullard valves are fitted throughout, including the *EL84* output stages.

The commercial plan is to create just a handful of examples – a limited edition of maybe five in toto – and these will be sold at around £2,500 each. However, if you’re interested you’ll have to queue up behind yrs trly, who’ll certainly be the first in line. I wonder if anybody out there might be interested in purchasing a used and entirely standard Leak *Stereo 20*...