

Valvet E1r, A3.5 MKII and L2 – review from “[hifistatement.net](https://www.hifistatement.net)”

26/07/13 | AMRÉ IBRAHIM

The effusive praise expressed by a friend and colleague from the United States gave the long overdue stimulus. Up to this point I had heard the name "Valvet" once in a while, but I didn't have a clear idea what it stood for. As it turned out, a serious audiophile oversight!



THREE IN ONE: VALVET E1R (TOP LEFT), A3.5 (BOTTOM) AND VALVET L2 (SILVER)

We have all been there: thinking you have heard them all, and that you know your way around. You think you are self-critical, open-minded - but eventually have to realise that something in you desperately wants to hold on to your prejudices. Recognizing this is not necessarily a quantum of

solace. Thus it was with "Valvet": again and again, I came across the marque in recent years, through the grapevine, reviews in the hifi press, and so on. Although I am of the opinion that both tubes and transistors can lead to Rome, I am a self-confessed tube sympathizer and as such have stubbornly stuck to the erroneous view that affordable high-end is more purposefully feasible with tubes - precisely triodes - than transistor circuits. This admittedly very, very subjective view, which is based solely on my personal tastes, will no doubt lead to indignant outcries. In any case, I have until now rarely come across transistor equipment that approached the triode charm so dear to me and that was affordable at the same time - whatever each of us understands by that. In the selection of audio components I follow a very simple philosophy: I need to be able to afford them! This does not mean that I refuse amplifier electronics or speakers that are as expensive as a house. No, I simply lack the budget for such bombastic listening pleasure - if there really is such. For me, the principle must be: "stick to what you know". This principle is also the driving force in my continuous search for better solutions for less money. Not that I need you to pity me – I am not that hard up!



IT'S ALL IN THE MIX: CARE AND CONSIDERATION DETERMINE THE SELECTION OF COMPONENTS UNDER THE ASPECTS OF SOUND, RELIABILITY AND SAFETY

A friend of mine, a reviewer for an American high-end magazine and owner of a nearly identical set-up, added the Valvet E1R to his fleet of amplifiers. As he usually drives his open baffles with a classic 300B amp in single-ended mode, I was intrigued by his new investment. The contact with Knut Cornils, the creative force behind Valvet, was established quickly. Maybe I have always been lucky in my encounters with developers – believe it or not, they are people too. Most of these were very passionate and committed to their cause. Thus it was with Knut Cornils, who inspired me with his friendly and open manner.

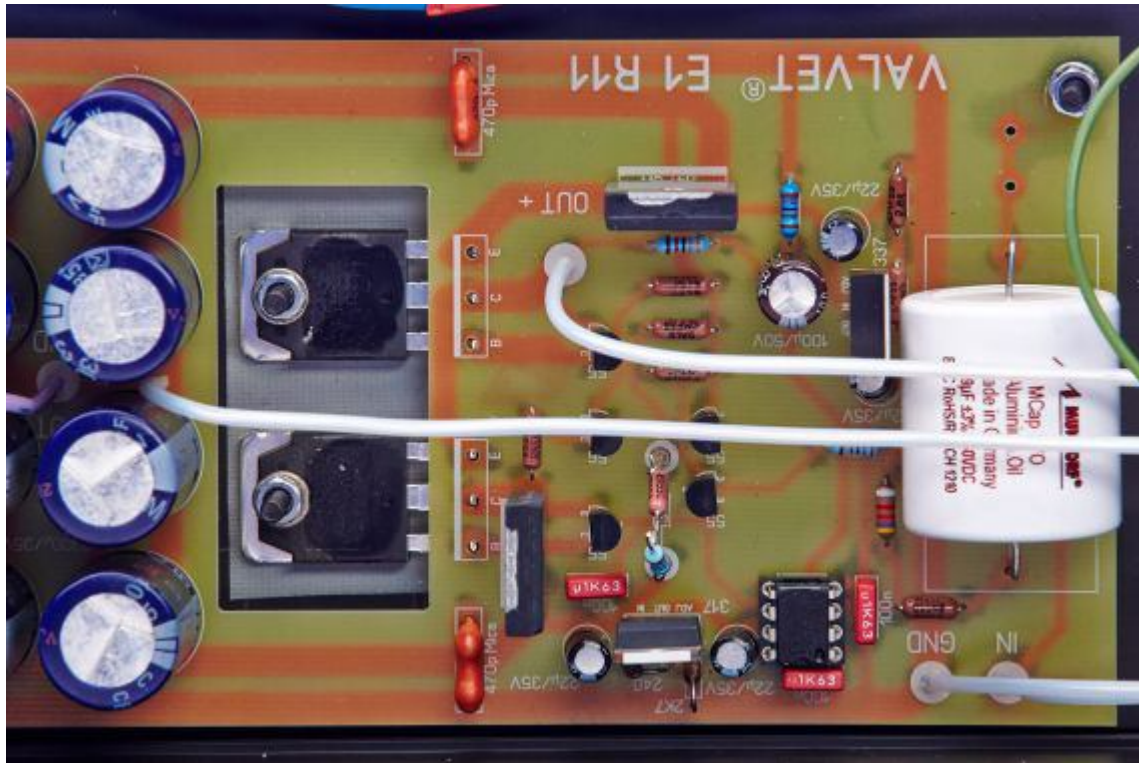
The product portfolio of Valvet is divided into two series - Bricks and Blocks - that allow some freedom in terms of customizing: In addition to the black or silver standard, front panels, side panels and heat

sinks can be ordered in different colors - of course for a small fee. An upgrade from RCA jacks or speaker terminals with WBT Nextgen in copper or silver is also possible, as well as different coloured LEDs for the Valvet "V" logo. If you want RCA sockets or terminals from other manufacturers, Knut Cornils will certainly be flexible. However, he is uncompromising in terms of the electrical safety of his devices – this has top priority.



THE LITTLE SINGLE-ENDER FROM THE BRICKS SERIES WITH WBT LS TERMINALS. VALVET IS OPEN TO REASONABLE REQUESTS FOR CUSTOMIZING

Less than 3 weeks after our first phone conversation I was able to take receipt of a package from Bargtheide containing a pair of Valvet-E1R amplifiers. Knut Cornils was kind enough to equip these mono blocks from the Bricks series with WBT NextGen binding posts. I have long given up attempting serious listening tests "out of the box". My brain adjusts too quickly to an acoustically incomplete performance and the subsequent surprises after a shorter or longer burn-in phase of various audio components. After a short - so much can already be said at this point - very pleasing audition and some initial notes, I took to heart Knut Cornils' advice and let the Monos play - with some periods of rest – for about 250 hours on my second system. Although the E1r amps in terms of their dimensions should be categorised as 'cute', they need some air to breathe because of their heat emission. The product philosophy of the E1R mono blocks is quickly outlined: purist but solid casing, a minimalist but efficient circuit, extremely short signal paths, a carefully selected mix of reliable components and a stable power supply to ensure the best possible listening experience at the lowest possible price. And this is immensely tempting: The pair cost a measly 1800 euro – and that's (hand) made in Germany, mind you!



CLEAN AND NEAT: A TEXTBOOK CIRCUIT BOARD LAYOUT - HAND MADE IN GERMANY

The class-A Single-Enders deliver ten watts at eight ohms and 18 watts into four ohms, which, of course, immediately raises the question of the appropriate speaker. Well, I really did not need to worry about this, as my Bastanis Mandala Atlas - open baffles with 100 decibels efficiency and actively driven dipole bass - get along really well with small tube power amps. Given the low power output, it is obvious that not every speaker will harmonise with the Valvet E1R, but these diminutive amps are able to go amazingly loud – according to Knut Cornils, already with speakers with an efficiency from 89 decibels. My biggest concern was that the amplifiers would not get along with my Fonel Renaissance preamp with SRPP circuit, but Knut Cornils put me at ease in our first phone conversation: The high output voltage of my preamps and the E1R amps had an absolutely trouble-free encounter, thanks to an input impedance of 50 ohms and a maximum allowable input voltage of about 800 millivolts. In addition, the Valvet phono respectively line preamps (except the Valvet Soulshine), already work in the SRPP mode. Since the harmony between speaker and amplifier electronics was assured, at least in theory, and the amplifiers had their recommended run-in period behind them, I could devote myself to serious listening. Before the first note rang out, there was already cause for joy: Despite 100 decibels neither hiss nor humming noise could be heard: a black silence! This impression of seriousness quickly gave way to a fun factor that - despite all the accolades in the hifi press – I simply had not expected.



VALVET KNOWS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF CURRENT FOR THE SOUND AND SHIPS SERIOUS POWER CABLES WITH ITS COMPONENTS. IN THE POWER CORD WITH BLACK CLOTH HOSE A DIFFERENT DIELECTRIC IS USED WHICH FURTHER BENEFITS THE SOUND OF A3.5 MONOS

For a number of years now, I begin each listening session with Steely Dan's "Babylon Sisters" from the famous *Gaucho* album. The first two bars of the track are my personal benchmark for the typical sound of a tom-tom in an earthy-tensioned drum kit. A drummer who strikes the toms precisely in the middle and with a little oomph, can elicit a dry, not too expansive sound. What the Valvet presented here, I can actually only describe with the term "right". This impression of "correctness" remained not only until the end of the song – it remained up to the point when the Monos left my listening room for the photo studio. No matter what music I played, the combination of dynamics, body, spatial resolution and imaging was simply consistent and easily came close to the much-described triode charm in single-ended mode. Perhaps I should explain at this point what kind of music I fed the amps: In almost every single-ended concept that came my way, I had to accept compromises in terms of imaging and control when it came to complex structures - especially in big orchestral recordings, modern electronic music with deep sub bass and wide-harsh sound design, as well as higher volumes. From this experience, I was fairly sure that this would be the case with the small E1Rs as well. The assumption was confirmed when playing Björk's "Yoga" or Celibidache / Bruckner *Symphony no4* at full volume. With Bernstein / Barber's "Adagio for Strings" or Kraftwerk's "Autobahn" however, which do not necessarily demand amplifiers with maximum authority, the small Valvet were so involving that I was inclined to press the continuous repeat button of my Lector CDP-7. Folk, jazz or rock, from Joni Mitchell via Avishai Cohen to The Raconteurs, are the natural terrain of the Valvet E1R, in which they move with absolute assurance: Whether it is the live atmosphere of Joni Mitchell's *Shadows and Light*, the piano-bass- intimacy of Cohen's *Duende* or the tamed strumming by Jack White on *Consolers of the Lonely*: these little beasts swing and rock the roof off.



NOT ONLY VISUALLY IMPRESSIVE: THE VALVET A3.5 MKII MONOS REALLY SHOW THEIR MUSCLES

Since the Valvet E1Rs had got me very excited and I regard them as a highly attractive alternative to single-ended triode amplifiers, I wanted to know a little more about the Valvet products and sample the "Block" series. What I had in mind were the A3.5 mono blocks in MKII version which Knut Cornils had supplied in a timely manner. With them, he sent me the Valvet L2 line preamplifier - but I'll get to that later. These push-pull amplifiers, about two and a half times more expensive than the little "bricks", also operate in class A operation, with only one power transistor pair. However with their 50 watts per channel into eight ohms they play on a different level compared with the E1R-monos. Given their power envelope, many more speakers can be considered as a potential partner. As in the E1R the A3.5 MKII have a toroidal transformer in the power supply. While the transformer for E1R is designed for 80 watts and 25,000 microfarads with 8 electrolytic capacitors, the encapsulated toroidal transformer in the A3.5 supplies 300 watts and 100,000 microfarads in each monoblock. In both circuit topologies Knut Cornils dispensed with the parallel connection of several power transistors since this is his view detrimental to the sound. As with the E1Rs, A3.5 MKII have extremely short signal paths - without capacitors.

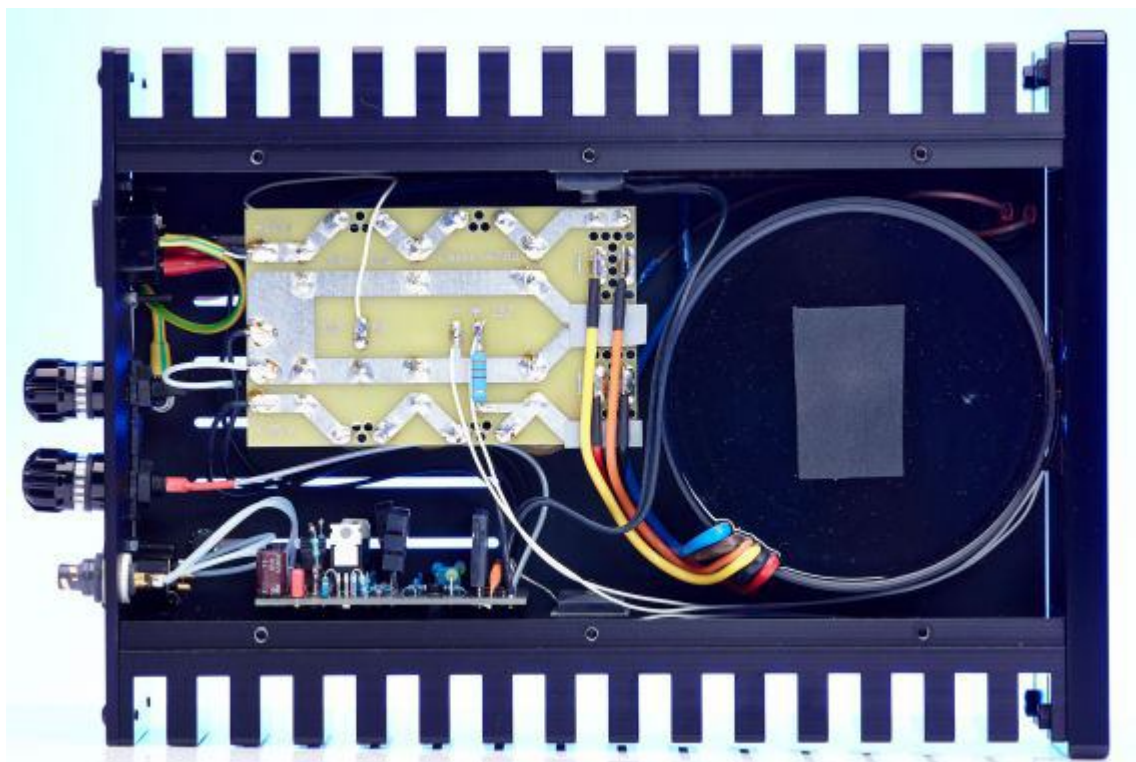


DETAILS TO IMPROVE THE SOUND: - VALVET A3.5 MKII COME EQUIPPED WBT AND WITH NEUTRIK (XLR)

My body had probably remembered the package weight of the E1R - I was a little surprised by the weight of the new amplifiers when the mailman delivered them. Appearance and feel of the A3.5 are of course of a different calibre - the difference in price makes clear that different levels of attention and material are lavished on them. The A3.5s come equipped with high quality WBT0201 input and WBT0703 output terminals. Valvet amplifiers are also supplied with high-spec power cables. Even the E1R have above-average power cables. The A3.5 ship with mains power cables that stand their ground compared to some which are as expensive as a pair Valvet E1R amplifiers.

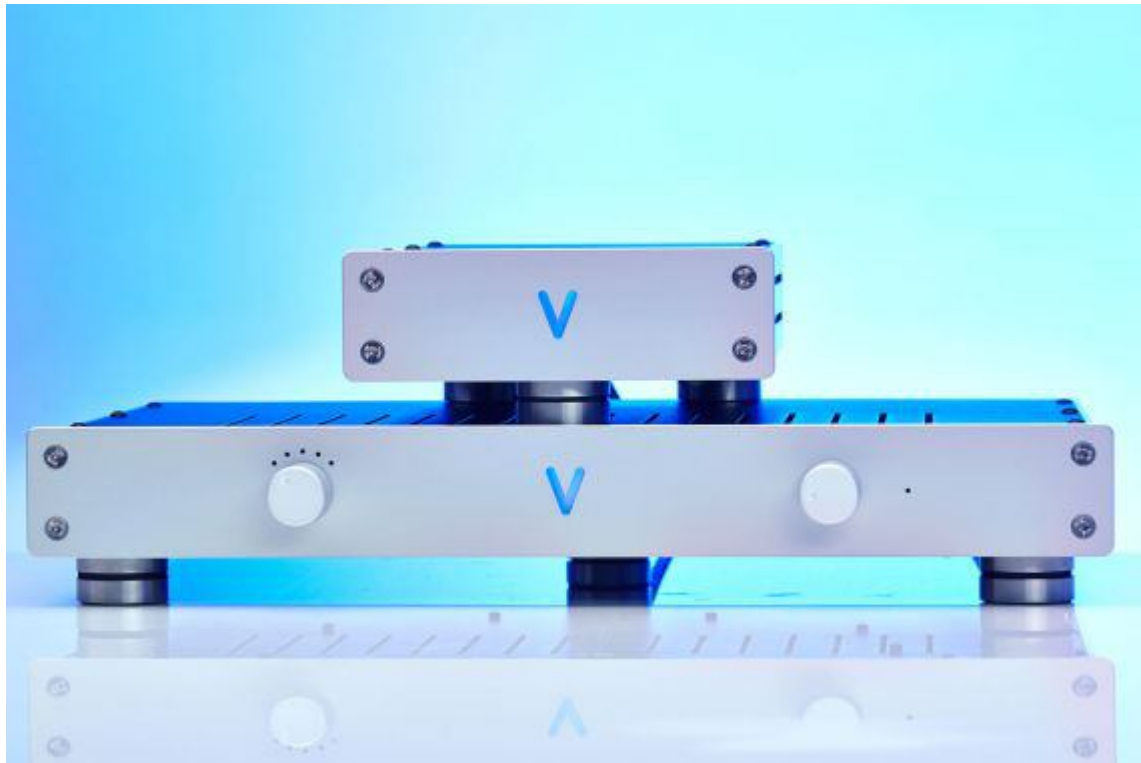
For these power cords Knut Cornils uses a different dielectric which works and sounds better with the more potent A3.5. But the E1R also benefit from this power cord: it gives the monos a touch more authority. Incidentally, the A3.5 are equipped with an XLR input, which however is not designed as a fully balanced input. "None of the Valvet equipment is fully symmetrical" confirmed Knut Cornils. "To do this right, you have to double the time and effort spent, which contradicts my principle to 'keep it simple'".

I allowed the A3.5 I the same time as the E1R monos before I started to listen in earnest. By the way, both the E1R and A3.5 need about half an hour warm-up before they get going. Despite the much greater power of A3.5 I could hear no humming noise or hiss from my speakers - excellent! Without having heard other Valvet amplifiers, I suspect that they all have the same basic sound character. This was confirmed in a direct comparison between the E1R and A3.5: both amps are on the ball, and offer an involving, musical sound, but have quite different virtues.



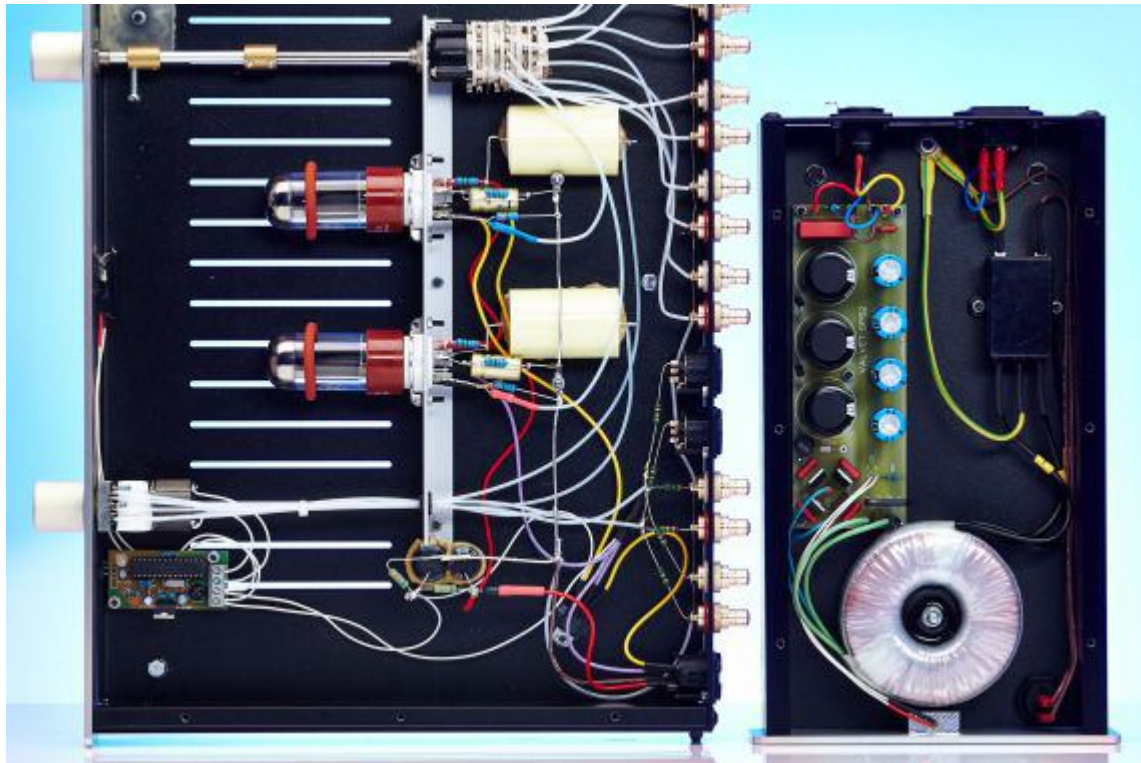
THE INSIDE OF THE VALVET A3.5 MKII SHINES WITH A SUCCESSFUL CHOICE OF COMPONENTS SUCH AS AN ENCAPSULATED TOROIDAL TRANSFORMER. VALVET ESCHEWS THE ADDITION OF EXTRA POWER TRANSISTORS AND CAPACITORS IN THE SIGNAL PATH

The Valvet A3.5s add to things in terms of resolution, fine dynamics and soundstage, but the most outstanding feature is the enormous authority with which they play - especially in terms of bass performance. Nothing really fazes them: From a pitch-black space a wide stage carved out in stone is created, which could not be shaken by the music examples mentioned before. The A3.5 was always in control of the abyssal subbass on Björk's "yoga". Bruckner's 4th with the A3.5 Monos became a spectacular affair. The unique Celibidache, especially the coda, becomes a dramatic and captivating experience, and thanks to the A3.5 an acoustic delicacy. You probably guessed it already: the Valvet A3.5 flex their muscles where the E1R may not have such developed biceps. And yet both amps foreground musicality and live character in their presentation. The E1R beguile with an extra portion of charm while the A3.5 impress with their authority. In direct comparison there can be no question of better or worse, both sound "right." Leaving aside the choice of speakers - the buying decision will have to be guided by personal taste and listening habits.



THERE WOULD BE ENOUGH SPACE. NONETHELESS THE VALVET L2 PREAMP FROM THE BLOCKS SERIES SHIP WITH AN EXTERNAL POWER SUPPLY – WELL DONE!

As indicated before, after the encounter with the E1R I was not only curious about the A3.5 push-pull power amps. I wanted to know how they would sound with a Valvet preamp. Knut Cornils' philosophy to design all preamplifiers (except for the Soulshine) following the shunt-regulated push-pull principle meets entirely with my own views. This type of circuit, first presented at the end of the sixties, is not common. The tube-based concept without negative feedback cannot be realized with operational amplifiers or transistors - the total harmonic distortion without feedback would be just too great. In SRPP circuits, tubes are push-pull switched, but DC voltage-wise arranged in series. This concept is seen as possessing speed and linearity, with a sound characterised by an incomparable live 'feel' and the typical tube virtues of voice reproduction.



6SN7 TUBES AND SRPP CIRCUIT WITH AN EXTERNAL, BEEFY POWER SUPPLY: UNUSUAL, BUT VERY IMPRESSIVE MUSICAL CONCEPT. HUM AND NOISE? NIL!

I did find Knut Cornils' approach not to use the Russian ECC83/-82/-81-tubes or their derivatives particularly interesting. In the L2 line-preamplifier, which he sent to me, he preferred the 6SN7. To his ears this double triode sounds more mature in a SRPP circuit. In addition, it "can do" current, in contrast to the ECC81 or even an ECC83, and thus be used as a driver, for example, with 300B output tubes. The 6SN7 is available at a moderate price in good quality. For a currently produced tube, the 6SN7 made by Tungsol and used by Valvet sound very appealing and have good short-and long-term stability. In addition, they are ROHS compliant.



A RARE SIGHT IN A PREAMPLIFIER: VALVET EMPLOYS IN THE L2 6SN7 TWIN TRIODES – A TUNING DREAM FOR EXPERIENCED TUBE-ROLLERS

There are other reasons to take a closer look at the L2, not least the price of 2,700 euros, but also the range of features that this member of the "Blocks" series has to offer: with six line inputs and three outputs, one of them can be designed as a Tape Out, it offers ideal conditions for smooth integration into my set-up. For someone as lazy as me, a remote volume control is included. Despite the fact that the L2 is a purist preamp and the case would provide enough space for a power supply, Knut Cornils ships the L2 with a separate, external power supply to eliminate any hum. For him, the interference potential of powerful transformers simply does not belong in a device that must handle delicate LF signals. The DC supply voltages are supplied to the preamplifier ungrounded, this saves a further potential source of hum. By outsourcing the power supply, it can be sufficiently oversized which of course benefits the sound.



WITH A TOTAL OF 6 INPUTS AND 3 OUTPUTS INCL. TAPE / REC. OUT, THE VALVET L2 PROVIDES SUFFICIENT CONNECTION OPTIONS. HOWEVER THE XLR OUTPUTS AND INPUTS DO NOT ALLOW FULLY SYMMETRIC CONNECTION

Even with the components Valvet remains faithful to its principles: the right mix and balance are key: pure silver wire in short signal paths, linear ALPS motor potentiometer, a carefully-selected pair of tubes. With an input impedance of 100 KOhms the choice of sources is not limited in the least, and with a maximum output voltage of ten volts and an output impedance of 2.5 KOhms the perfect interaction with the in-house amplifiers is guaranteed. After a run-in time of about 150 hours, the L2 was finally able to show what it could do. I allowed myself, after a long time of abstinence, Jeff Buckley's Grace in the limited Columbia U.S. pressing and removed the stylus only after "So real". Knut Cornils had not promised too much: the Valvet L2 plays completely calm on a solid bass foundation and offers an airy, open presentation, with a clearly structured soundstage. The live character which is related to the dynamics - that is what I expect most from preamplifiers with SRPP circuit - the L2 provided it in abundance. Even a touch more than my own preamplifier, which in turn was a little more subtle... but then it costs about three times as much unfortunately. With the Valvet the homogeneity of the playback is really impressive, and the L2 is neither gimmicky nor holding anything back. No part of the frequency range is overemphasized, nothing annoys, the middle frequencies receive a romantic touch more presence. Actually, you can transfer the last lines to all three Valvet amps under review here.



THE SUBTLE DIFFERENCE: LINEAR ALPS MOTOR POT AND PURE SILVER WIRE IN THE SIGNAL PATH - VALVET KNOWS WHAT IS NEEDED WHEN IT COMES TO SOUND

But in the case of L2, I'm sure that there is potential for more. So what does a tube lover do if he wants to find this out? That's right, he turns to tube-rolling! At this point let me give the obligatory warnings: "at your own risk", "no warranty" etcetera. But that should by now go without saying. From my 300B single-ended amplifier past I still had a couple of 6SN7 RCA Red Base and the Russian military equivalent, the 6H8C in the rare 1578 metal base design, which were used as driver tubes in those days. Both tubes catapulted the L2 into a higher sphere. Specifically, the 1578 produced more air and better fine resolution - albeit at the expense of a slightly leaner overall reproduction. Hum and Noise? Nil. Fun? Lots of it.

So what should I say in conclusion? Maybe something you have already read (too) many times? At the end of the day, I have no choice: Valvet E1R, Valvet A3.5 MKII and Valvet L2 are, considered by themselves and in their respective combination, audio components that guarantee long-term enjoyment of listening to music. For the price they are an absolute revelation. Technically there is nothing to find fault in all three Valvet devices. They are meticulously crafted and solid, as you would expect from "Made in Germany". At the next Miss World pageant the L2 and E1R will not necessarily occupy the first place - but given their prices whoever expects this has not really arrived yet in high-end reality.

IN A NUTSHELL

We cannot thank Mr. Cornils enough for enriching the world with high-end components such as the Valvet E1R, A3.5 MKII and L2. At a time when many amplifiers are beyond the financial reach of the average consumer's purse, he provides an impressive counterpoint with unusual approaches to development and robust Made-in-Germany fabrication: absolutely consistent, highly musical audio components at an affordable price. More, please, Mr. Cornils!

HEARD WITH

Preamplifier	Fonel Renaissance
Amplifiers	TubeGuru / DPA EL156 SE triode mono block in
Cable	Acoustic system LS & LF (Live Blue Line Series), Gregg Straley's Reality Cables LS, Bastanis Epilogue
CD Player	Lector CDP-7 TL MK3
Phono Amplifier	TubeGuru / DPA Reference
Record player	Garrard 301/Loricraft PSU / CartridgeMan Mat with Thomas Schick 12", Denon DL-103/Lignolab-chassis/Yamamoto Ebony headshell and tonearm with Decca Decca London Super Gold (Europe Race, CartridgeMan insulator), Nottingham Analogue Hyperspace / Dr. Foot power supply with Robert Fuchs 12" / Lyra Kleos and Origin Live Encounter MK2/Audio Technica AT33PTG
Subwoofer	XTZ SubAmp 1
Speaker	Bastanis Mandala Atlas Dipolbass version
Racks	TAOC LS-3
Equipment	Exclusive audio dcd Base & Silentplugs, FPH acoustic vibration, Duende Criatura damping rings, Fast Audi absorber, Acoustic System resonators
Accessories	MFE power strip, Bastanis Reference Power Chords, AMR, Furutech, AHP Fuses

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION**Valvet E1R mono amplifiers**

Circuit	Single-ended, class-A
Connections	RCA
Performance	10 watts into 8 ohms, 18 watts into 4 ohms
Input impedance	50 kohms
Input voltage	about 800 mV
Dimensions (W / H / D)	120/60/350 mm
Case	black / powder coated front bar: 4mm silver or black anodized
Weight	3 kg
included	quality power cord
Price	1700 EUR

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION**Valvet A3.5 MKII mono amplifiers**

Circuit	Push-pull, class-A
Connections	1x RCA (WBT 0201), 1 x XLR (Neutrik), output WBT0703
Performance	50 watts into 8 ohms, 90 watts into 4 ohms
Input impedance	50 kohms
Input voltage	about 800 mV
Dimensions (W / H / D)	230/80/310 mm
Case	black / powder coated front panel: 12 mm aluminum, black or silver anodized

Weight	about 10 kg
included	high-quality power cable (special version)
Price	4250 EUR

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

Valvet L2 preamplifier

Circuit	SRPP, external power supply
Connections	6 x RCA (inputs), 3 x RCA (outputs, 1 x Tape Out)
Amplification	10 times, max. Output voltage > 10 V
Input impedance	100 kOhm
Output impedance	2.5 kOhm
Dimensions (W / H / D)	445 x 45 x 300 mm
Case	black / powder coated
Weight	7 kg, power supply 3 kg
included	quality power cable, remote control volume
Price	2700 EUR

CONTACT INFORMATION

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