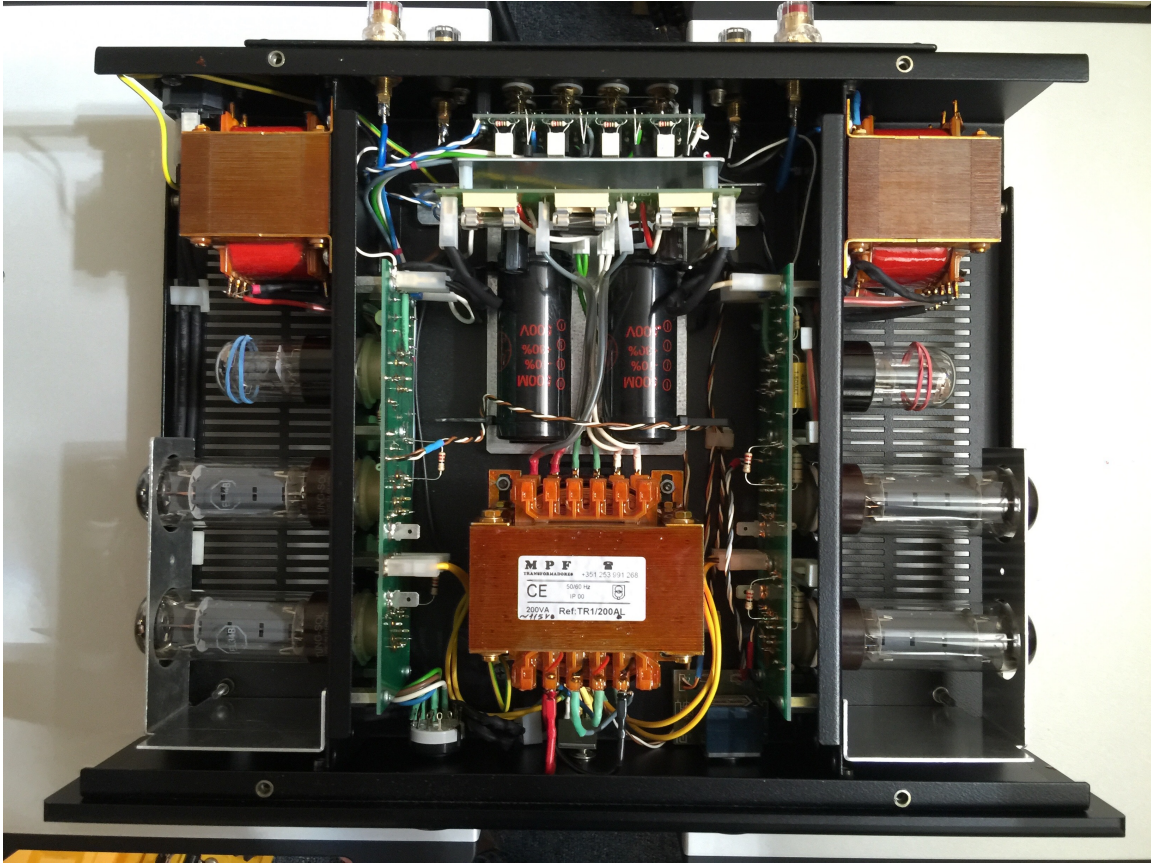


Audolici Audio A-25M Integrated Amplifier

Audolici (pronounced “Audio-lee-see”) is a high-end audio company based in Porto, Portugal. Audolici was founded in 2007 by Valeriy Kuchkovskyy, an electronic engineer with extensive experience in designing audio systems in the former Soviet Union and Ukraine. He was finally able to become an entrepreneur and found his own company based on the philosophy of providing uncompromised sound and outstanding construction quality. Audolici also partners with INESC Porto, a world class R&D institution for research on production techniques and audio engineering. Combining the latest in technology with the best practices of tube design and construction from the 1970’s - Audolici has chosen to take a unique approach. (<http://www.audolici.com/en/>)

One of the products of this outstanding resume is the A-25M Integrated Amplifier, conservatively rated at 25 watts/channel. The reviewed unit sports a pair of Tungsol EL34’s in push-pull configuration per channel, probably producing closer to 30 watts/channel.





The unit is beautiful in appearance as well as construction quality. The front panel features a selection switch to select between inputs for CD/Tuner/Aux 1/Aux 2, a volume control, and an ON/OFF toggle switch with a very cool green LED in the center of it that lights up when the unit is on. This unit is fairly light for a tube amp – 11.5 Kg. Connectors are all of high quality – heavy-duty gold plated RCA's and WBT binding posts. Internal construction quality is first class, using excellent quality components, and built with elegant simplicity.

This amplifier is unique in that it only uses ONE driver stage (6SL7), coupled to the output stage using specially selected paper-in-oil capacitors. Designer Valeriy Kuchkovskyy is a perfectionist when it comes to choosing components to achieve all the proper elements for the best sound. This selectivity combined with simplicity provides a beautiful, clean and uncluttered internal layout. In the words of Albert Einstein. "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler." Enough said!

After a suitable break in period, I listened to many types of music on the A25M, but for purposes of this review we will concentrate on my sonic impressions using several of my favorite "test" recordings, covering a wide spectrum of musical and recording styles. The A25M was connected to the Jatón Audio A&V – 803 Real Speakers rated at 90 dB efficiency. These are large 3-way speakers, but highly efficient and easy to drive. (See the end of the review for all associated equipment.)

Based on the amp's power rating, I would recommend it be used with speakers at least close to this efficiency, although like lots of tube amps, it seemed to have power beyond it's rating.

I opened with Stevie Ray Vaughn "Tin Pan Alley" (Couldn't Stand The Weather). I was immediately impressed with the very deep and well defined bass, not necessarily expected from a tube amp with this power rating! The transient sounds were very fast, with the right amount of sizzle and snap. Being a guitar player myself, I know what a Fender Strat run through a Mesa Boogie sounds like, and the guitar sound was very real. All drum transient sounds and the varying intensity of the hits was apparent. In the background, I could hear the slight AC buzz of the tube filaments on the guitar amp. Stevie's voice varied depending on his distance from the microphone – a detail that was new to me. For a small group, the sound stage was wide and deep, and had realistic height. Although it is an overused term, the presentation was very musical.

Next up, Joss Stone singing "The Chokin' Kind" (The Soul Sessions). This is a closely mik'd recording, and I could almost see her lips moving. Very vivid breath and chest sounds. This recording has tons of dynamics, and in this case they were off the scale!

On to Keb Mo' "Soon As I Get Paid" (Slow Down). Again, being a guitar player, this is one of my favorite "near-mid field" mik'd acoustic guitar recordings. The soundstage was obviously higher (Keb's voice was coming from a spot higher than on the Joss Stone recording). The layering of this recording was much more evident, although there is more going on here too. I heard more subtle details in the soundstage that I do not remember from previous listening sessions. Keb is also an accomplished music producer and is fussy about his sound, so it was obvious this recording was far superior to the Joss Stone recording. My final impression was of the outstanding drive and pace in this recording, with plenty of "wow" factor!

Next up, two cuts from one of my favorite techno groups, Yello, "Rubberbandman" (Baby) and "Indigo Bay (The Eye)". Yello is famous for their marvelous techno sounds and vocal theatrics, and there are tons of details that some amplifiers miss. Not so with the A25M. The bass was "a kick in the gut", and the soundstage bloomed to 10 feet outside the bounds of the speakers. The transient attacks were marvelous, and I heard nuances in these recordings that I had not heard previously. Also, something else I had never seen before – my cat Roxy (she likes to sit in the soundstage sweet spot when I listen to music) was looking around for where certain sounds were coming from! The bottom line on these recordings – the A25M certainly does not get confused with very detailed music.

Next, Lucinda Williams singing "Can't Let Go" (Car Wheels on a Gravel Road). I had not realized it before, but this is a very "vanilla" sounding recording – I mean nothing special is going on. It's a good recording, just not very exciting – the recording engineer certainly did not try to push the boundaries on this one! The

soundstage was now totally contained between the speakers. The transient attack and the layering of details was still better to me than ever before, BUT this recording showed how good this amp is at revealing differences between recordings.

On to another techno favorite, Roger Waters “Perfect Sense” (Amused to Death). For those familiar with this recording, it was done to “amuse” the listener with lots of effects and sounds seemingly coming from places all around you. The soundstage was very high and wide, and the thunderstorm sounds gave a good surround sound effect around my head. Roger’s voice had great breath and chest sounds. The whole recording has spatial cues galore, and they were all definitely there.

I finished up with a cut from a very well known recording, The Beatles doing “Sun King” (Abbey Road). Starting with the sounds of crickets and frogs at least 10 feet to the right of the right speaker, the soundstage gradually fills in from the edges to eventually form an expansive soundstage. Not all amps get this right – the A25M does.

For comparison sake, I listened to the same recordings in the same order on another integrated amp, the CODA Technologies CSiB. (<http://www.coda-continuum.com/product/index.php>) These two amplifiers are similarly priced, with the CODA CSiB at \$6000, and the Audolici A25M at \$5850. That is where the similarities end however.



The CODA is a solid state integrated amp built in the USA by a company that has been around US high-end audio for many years, started by some good folks from Nelson Pass’ Threshold days. Typical of nearly all US high-end audio products, this is a 55 lb. beast, and built like a tank, reminiscent of the Threshold products. It cranks out 400 watts per channel into 8 ohms – certainly enough to drive any

speaker, at least on paper. This unit has full remote control plus a number of other features including a subwoofer line out and balanced inputs.

Upon listening, the sonic differences were even greater, again using all the same components as with the A25M. The CODA had previously been broken in, and these listening sessions were done on successive days with long warm-up times, with listening notes in hand and my sonic impressions of the A25M still clear in my brain. Listening volume levels were kept as close as my brain could determine, but for the record, I tend to listen at a fairly high volume level. In my mind this tends to make the music open up a bit more, plus it somewhat takes me back to my days of playing in bands.

Starting again with Stevie Ray – the sound did not seem as focused but rather was doing a bit of a dance around the soundstage. The bass “slams” were definitely more defined, as one might expect from such a huge difference in rated output power. All transients were lightning fast. BUT there was an almost annoying high frequency component (a brightness, not a harshness) that was not there with the A25M.

Moving on to Joss Stone – my first impression on this close mik’d was that the sibilants were too “hot”. It was not enjoyable at this volume level and I went grabbing to turn the volume down. Great breath and chest sounds as before, and dynamics galore.

On to Keb Mo’ – the differences in the recording quality that I experienced with the A25M were not as evident with the CODA – it sounded amazingly similar to the previous recording, minus the “hot” sibilants which one would not expect in this recording presentation anyway. The soundstage was able to fill in slightly outside the speaker boundaries. My overall impression was good, but the sound was definitely not as involving as with the A25M in the system.

Back to the two cuts from Yello – the soundstage was back to being contained essentially within the speaker boundaries. Bummer! The vocals, such as they are on “Rubberbandman”, were not as well defined. The bass kick was definitely there and very well defined. The CODA got the drive and pace of these Yello cuts correct, but in a word the presentation was not as “interesting” as with the Audolici. There was also an annoying high frequency edge on the fast transients.

Next up – back to Lucinda Williams. As I said before, this is a “vanilla” sounding recording. The A25M seemed to breath more life into it than the CSiB. In comparison the CSiB made it sound amazingly similar to all the other recordings and in a word “boring”.

On to the super techno Roger Waters recording. This was easily the best sounding recording presentation of all the cuts played on the CODA. The soundstage was high and wide, with great surround and other effects. But again, not as involving as with the A25M.

Last up The Beatles “Sun King”. This was another great sounding cut on the CODA, a wide soundstage that filled correctly from the edges. The CODA got that much right, but once again the presentation was not as involving as with the Audolici A25M. Something was noticeably missing.

Conclusions:

Before I move on to my conclusions, I must mention that I am not being paid to write this review. Also, I own both of the units compared in this review, and have no reason to prefer one to the other. Not often, but every once in awhile I hit upon a product that sets a new standard in musical enjoyment, a “WOW” factor that must be written about to share with other like minded audiophiles. The Audolici A25M is such a product! The Audolici name is virtually unknown in the US at this time - it should (and will) be known now!

I learned some things from a couple of independent reviewers years ago that have stood the test of time, and were followed for this review:

1. Always begin with the new unit (in this case the A25M). This makes you listen more intently to it as you are trying to dissect its strengths and weaknesses. When you switch back to the product you are more familiar with (the CODA CSiB), if the new product was not audibly better, the differences are obvious. If it seemed like my descriptions of my listening with the CODA were shorter, that’s because the listening sessions were also shorter than with the A25M. This is due to the fact that the audible weaknesses of the CODA were so obvious that they appeared right away and there was no need for extended listening.
2. The “better” amplifier (defined as more revealing of subtle details) is the one that reveals the most differences between the different recordings. Here the Audolici A25M is the clear winner. Most of the recordings as heard on the CODA were confined to between the speakers and unfortunately sounded often similar in presentation. The A25M obviously revealed many differences between the recordings, which makes tremendous sense when you think about all the complex variables involved in the recording and mixing process.

If I could summarize the differences between these two amps in one word it would be “emotion”. Both the emotion and feeling within the recording itself and the emotion felt by me as I was drawn into the music. The Audolici A25M has emotion by the pound, the CODA CSiB much less so.

Before meeting the A25M I had spent many happy hours with the CODA, and considered it a “best” in the realm of \$6,000 integrated amplifiers. I have heard from reliable sources that it is about to get a very positive review in one of the major US audiophile magazines.

The CODA CSiB is a wonderful sounding amplifier. It presents the music with proper drive and pace, fast transients, good transparency, and killer bass control (BUT only slightly better than the Audolici A25M on my efficient speakers). It has more features, full remote control, and the power to tame just about any speaker. BUT again, it is typical of what I am finding to be the norm in US made high end audio equipment, be it tube or solid state – the tendency to coax out the last ounce of detail to end up being overly analytical, and leaving the “emotion” or “the soul” of the music behind.

The Audolici A25M did everything the CODA did, but presented more subtle details, differences in the music, and conveyed the “emotion” and the “soul” of the music as it was meant to be! Listening to the Audolici was a real wake up call. Shouldn’t high-end audio be about pulling the most musical enjoyment out of the music? Here, Audolici has hit a home run!

For those of your wanting this type of sound with lower efficiency speakers, please check into their top of the line I-50 SWING, the subject of a future review. For those owning speakers with 90dB+ efficiency already, the Audolici A25M may well be your final key to audio bliss!

Harold Cooper
11/7/2015

Associated Equipment:

- Jaton Audio A&V – 803 Real Speakers
- Audio Note CD-Two/II Transport
- Bricasti M1 DAC (using AES/EBU input)
- All audio cabling by Transparent Audio (Ultra series)
- Mexel power cords
- Room acoustical treatments and accessories by Michael Green Audio/RoomTune

A Note About the Author:

Harold Cooper was bitten by the high-end audiophile bug about 40 years ago, and has been experimenting with various systems and equipment every sense then. He is a retired electrical engineer, and now spends his time on hobbies, small business pursuits, and spending time with family and his first grandson. He is President of

Sound Consultant, Ltd. and Co-Editor of TuneLand (an audiophile forum).

