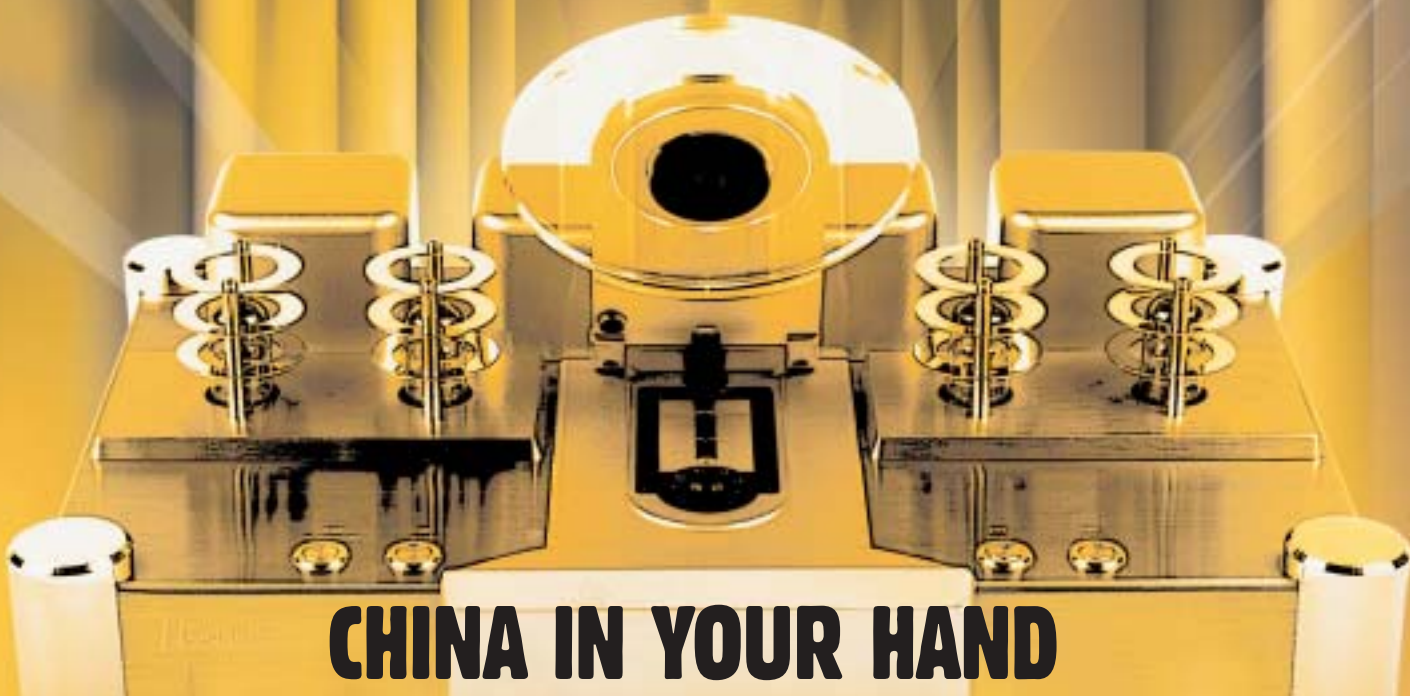


# hi-fi+

Issue 32  
£3.95

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS



## CHINA IN YOUR HAND

SHANLING, INCA DESIGN, AURUM CANTUS,  
CONSONANCE, QUAD

REIMYO, LIVING VOICE, KRELL, SUGDEN, PROAC, VECTEUR, DENSEN, AYRE,  
CHORD ELECTRONICS, REGA RE-WIRES





volume

select

00:00  
FM 100.1

# Consonance a120 Integrated Amp

by Jimmy Hughes

Way back in the late 1960s, when transistors were starting to replace valves, many reasons were put forward for making the change. Transistor amplifiers could be made smaller, lighter, cheaper, and were claimed to be more reliable. They also ran cooler and were mechanically and electrically quieter. When respected names like Leak, Quad, and Radford introduced transistor amplifiers and phased out their valve designs, it seemed to be all over for tubes.

Yet valves never really went away. And so it is that nearly forty years later we still have a choice between solid-state and vacuum tube. But what about combining both technologies in a single design? Actually, virtually all modern valve amplifiers incorporate solid-state components in the power supply, so in a sense they're hybrids. But a proper hybrid is one that uses valves and transistors for different parts of the signal processing circuit.

The Consonance a120 is a hybrid valve/transistor design, utilising a Sovtec 6H30 tube for line level amplification. For amplifier designers of the 1960s, one of the most important benefits of going solid state was the elimination of the output transformer. At the time this was seen as a major limiting factor so far as sound quality was concerned – in theory if you could only direct-couple the output of the amplifier to the speakers, you'd get significant improvements in sharpness and control.

Er, right. It's a convincing argument on paper. Even the best transformers suffer from phase shift, saturation,

and other non-linearities. Naturally, the Consonance a120 uses a direct-coupled transistor output stage, avoiding the need for an output transformer. This saves space and cost. Yet it's arguable that much of the 'signature' of a valve amp is its output transformer; the spatial clarity, separation, and smoothness which characterises the best tube amps is down to the output being transformer coupled.



As chance would have it, a week or two before the a120 arrived, I'd gone back to using the Consonance Reference 8.8 all-valve integrated amplifier I reviewed in issue 29. Now this is a very refined performer, creating a sound that's smooth and extremely natural with no hint of false glamour or glossy exaggeration. For some tastes it's perhaps a shade understated. But it's definitely a grower; the more you listen, the more you like it.

Going from the all-valve Reference 8.8 to the hybrid a120, I found the latter produced a distinctly different sound in terms of extra sharpness and immediacy. It was akin to moving ten rows forward in the hall; suddenly everything was closer and more tactile - a shade brighter too - and more crisply focused. Yet the sound didn't lack space or ambience, being clean and attractively coherent. Although a shade less silky, the overall

presentation was still very clean.

The Reference 8.8 produced a more refined and sophisticated sound; it was relaxed and articulate in a smooth balanced fashion. The Consonance a120 was more attention grabbing: sharper, leaner, more incisive. Tonally the hybrid amp was a shade drier and 'harder': tighter and more controlled. Yet

although I preferred the Reference 8.8, objectively I could not say the a120 sounded worse - simply different. Opinion, for or against, would depend heavily on the rest of your system and personal taste.

In terms of rhythmic timing, the a120 seemed a shade faster than the Reference 8.8. The music felt more energetic and lively, with increased attack and immediacy. At the same time the presentation felt very coherent and together. Although the musical impression was 'faster' and more incisive, the ear was not assaulted by a welter of uncoordinated leading edges. Whether this was down to the use of a tube at the front-end is hard to say, but my guess is it had a lot to do with it.

Build quality and finish are both excellent. The a120's front panel looks simple and uncluttered, with crisp lines and clean styling. There's a button for power on/off, a volume control knob, input selection, and that's it. Volume level and the input chosen are displayed on a blue LED panel. The front panel is made from solid brushed alloy, and the knobs are solid too. All this creates an air of quiet reliability and feelings of high class.

Operationally the Consonance a120 is pretty straightforward. As soon as you switch on, the amp goes into ▶

▶ standby and the motorised volume control returns to zero. There's a wait of about one-minute to allow the tube to warm up and stabilise. Then the amp is ready to use. During operation the amp runs fairly cool. With around 90W output it's very powerful, and seems to have bags of headroom. On a personal level I didn't care for the way the volume control reset itself to zero when you first switched on. I'd have preferred it had the amp remembered your previous setting. The volume control is motorised, but in an unusual way. Basically a slight turn of the knob increases or decreases output by one step. Even if you turn the knob quickly it still changes at much the same (slow) pace. The easiest way to increase/decrease volume levels quickly is via the remote handset.

Three conventional, unbalanced line-level inputs are offered using gold-plated



RCA phono sockets, plus a set of balanced inputs via gold-plated XLR sockets. There's two unbalanced pre-amp outputs which could be used to drive sub-woofers or an external power amp, but you've no phono stage. Noise is very low, being around 100dB below full output, and the other specifications like distortion, intermodulation, bandwidth, crosstalk

and phase linearity are all excellent.

All this goes to show that, whatever the valve in the a120 might be doing, it's not producing pleasant additive distortion effects. On paper the amp measures as well - if not better - than comparable

all transistor designs.

But sonically there's a greater sense of air and space, making the music sound freer and more liberated. Certainly, I liked the sound of the Consonance a120, feeling it offered a nice half-way house between pure valve or transistor designs.

The Polish Amplifon design

I reviewed last issue retails for a similar price, and offers a much richer, warmer, fuller sort of presentation,

very definitely a golden glowing 'valve' sound.

By comparison the Consonance a120 sounded tauter and more immediate, with more obvious control and greater dynamic attack. I'd say it's sonically closer to the best transistor designs, rather than all-tube amps, but nonetheless there are

definitely elements of the best of both.

Bass is very good: deep, powerful and firmly controlled. The specifications quote a very high damping factor of 500 or greater, indicating that the output has an impressively low source impedance. I happened to be using the a120 while ringing the changes with Chord's Blu CD transport and DAC-64, and was

impressed by the way it revealed the various differences.

It seemed to mirror each change very faithfully, rather than imposing its own signature on things.

The Consonance a120 is definitely an amp to add to your shortlist if shopping for something in this price range. It's involving and exciting to listen to, while remaining relatively easy on the ear. I liked it very much indeed, and found it a pleasure to live with. ➤+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hybrid integrated amplifier
Input Valve:	1x 6H30
Inputs:	3x single-ended line-level 1x balanced XLR
Outputs:	2x single-ended pre-outs
Power Output:	90w/ch
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430x80x320mm
Weight:	15Kg
Price:	£795

#### UK Distributor:

Alium Audio  
Tel. (44)(0)1273 325901  
Net. [www.aliumaudio.com](http://www.aliumaudio.com)

#### Manufacturer:

Net. [www.operaaudio.com](http://www.operaaudio.com)