

AVM OVATION PA8 PREAMP AND SA8.2 POWER AMPLIFIER

Equipment+

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From the outside, the AVM Ovation Series PA8 preamp and SA8.2 power amplifier look like any other big and beefy high-end duo, in the manner of true Americana, but with a softly spoken German accent. Appearances can be deceptive. This is an extremely flexible and modular design, which pulls inspiration from the computer industry every bit as much as it does from the best of audio. When you look a little closer at the pair of AVM models presented here, you see the kind of screwless polished and anodised aluminium case and build quality that looks more like aircraft engineering than audio design. The fact AVM goes the extra mile is evidenced by it even making its own valves – now that's dedication.

The quality of the build paradoxically can work against a brand, because it gives an impression of some big, faceless corporate entity. In fact, AVM is more like a family business; it's all about the sheer energy and love of music for AVM's owner Udo Besser, and new UK distributor Steve Woodard of C-Tech, who has just joined the family. It's a family with real engineering skills, though.

It's rather hard to pin down the PA8 preamplifier, because of that design. It's built on a motherboard, with a series of daughter boards creating a wealth of options. There are eight input and two output module cards, so you can configure your PA8 with additional RCA or XLR line inputs, MM/MC phono input, one of two DACs and an FM tuner with RDS, as well as an additional tube single ended or tube XLR output. These run alongside the bare-bones chassis of one RCA and one XLR input and a combined RCA/XLR output cards as standard.

The amp is comprehensively controlled through a combination of hot keys and a pair of volume and source selector dials. This is all handled through a blue fluoro display. The preamp does take slightly longer than usual to start (more accurately, boot up) as it needs to run through each card slot to recognise and handshake with a prospective new daughter, and find out what it does for a living. Unless you have a tube stage in the chain, this is still a fast boot. Fortunately, even with a tube amp stage in place, it keeps you entertained while going through the process, by gradually moving from upper to lower case on the word 'initialising'. AVM say this is over in 45 seconds, but it seemed more than a minute in most cases. We went for a fairly limited set of options (although with the valve input), it might benefit someone getting their first rung on the AVM ladder, only to upgrade at a later date.

The SA8.2 also has a power-up diagnostic check, but it kicks in faster because it doesn't have as many options to handshake with, but shares a lot in common with the mighty MA8.2 mono amp. It's capable of taking both balanced and single-ended inputs and can deliver 250W per channel into eight ohms, which doubles perfectly into four ohms and is still going strong by delivering 770W into two ohms. Even old amp-killer Apogeos will not phase this monster (although if you really are into beast loads of the past, the mono version will deliver 1.75kW into two ohms). It can do this because it has a lot of back-room clout; 200,000µF of reservoir capacitance and four transformers inside (two of which are hefty 1kVA designs). And with a damping factor of more than 1,000 and an ability to deliver a constant load of 180A, this is an amplifier that could make a brick wall play tunes given the chance.

These are not the only products in the Ovation range, and Ovation is not the only range in the AVM line-up, but we felt this high-grade pre/power shows just what this brand can do so very, very well.

A magazine like Hi-Fi Plus has to be many things to many people. It needs to be able to deal both with the American ideal of more power is only just enough, and with the British and our innate fear of the Watt; that balanced operation is the only way to achieve true high-end audio, and that single-ended is the right and proper domain of the music lover. In fact, that gives us a mindset not too far removed from the audio demands of mainland Europe, who often don't have truck with any of this kind of nonsense and just enjoy the music however it comes down the pipe. And that's not just our stance; it's patently AVM's way of thinking too.

They didn't need much running in. The two amps had been used fairly extensively in demonstration anyway, so break in was someone else's problem some months prior to the review, and once manhandled out of their crates, they came on song quickly and unassumingly. You see, that's the joy of the AVM range – a distinct lack of obviousness about the presentation. It's an amp pairing that sounds like a big amp when lots of amplifier is needed (like, when you are playing something structurally dense like Bruckner's 7th Symphony, Shostakovich's 5th Symphony or 'Happy' by Pharell Williams... OK, maybe not the last one), but sounds like a lithe little amp when all you need is a bit of poke to drive the speakers (this time 'Happy' by Pharell counts). It's not an especially dynamic presentation and neither is it an overly fast one, that might lend you to think this a very big, or very small amplifier. It just doesn't put its own stamp on the music. And that is extremely hard to come by in an amplifier.

Of course, when you compare the AVM amplifiers to a rival (small or large) you'll discover that it is as dynamic as the best of them, it's just that it places so great an emphasis on neutrality (places and emphasis on not placing an emphasis, you might say) you aren't drawn to a single aspect of the performance. In fact, when it comes to dynamics, 'more' often means 'uncontrolled', a more extended bass line or a more 'liquid' treble means colouration and a more detailed presentation means 'etched'. You'll probably note something negative down about the AVM amps when listening, but when you go back to your own amplifier system, you'll find the root cause of that negativity was it not overstating an aspect of performance that your current amps are overstressing.

These are also some of the least fussy amplifiers around. You'll probably never see them used in cable demonstrations, because they don't highlight the difference between cables. You won't find a massive difference between balanced and single-ended either. Instead, they just get on with the job.

OK, if you look really hard, you notice neither amp is that big on detail extraction or resolution. They are detailed and resolving amplifiers, yes, but stress the musical whole over the detailed elements of the sound. To that end, however, they also tend to gloss over some of the tonal palette that exists in orchestral music in particular, and paint timbre with a broader brush than normal. I also found that the PA8 in particular isn't the kind of preamp that those who go for that upfront and upbeat Naim sound would choose, as it stresses the cohesiveness of musical flow instead of the precision of the musical beat. Once again, that's more of an observation of performance aspects rather than a criticism. It's a top-of-the-line S-Class whisking you to your musical destination in comfort brought about by effortless power, instead of an agile Jaguar F-Type blasting along the musical tracks. But to the guy in the S-Class, 'agile' is just another word for 'twitchy'. It's all horses for courses.

Of the two products, the SA8.2 is the star of the show, but that doesn't mean the PA8 is simply along for the ride. It's just that I can envisage the power amp being used in a larger number of systems being fed by a range of different preamps, while the preamp is most likely going to go in AVM based systems. If that's a failing, it's as much down to the end users than the products themselves.

Technical Specifications

OVATION PA8

Input sensitivity (output voltage 1V):

20 mV – 350 mV (adjustable)

Input sensitivity line RCA: 6,8 k Ω

SNR line, MM, MC (Phono optional):

104 dB(A), 85 dB(A), 75 dB(A)

Frequency range line/Phono (Option): 0Hz->200kHz,30Hz->20kHz

Power supply: 80-260V/50-60 Hz 45 W

Maximum Power consumption Standby: <1 W

Dimensions (WxHxD): 43x10x32.5cm

Weight: 14 kg

Price: From £6,000

OVATION SA8.2

Input sensitivity phono: 1.4V/10k Ω (100W/4 Ω)

Input sensitivity XLR: 1.4V/20k Ω (100W/4 Ω)

Rated power in 8 Ω : >250 Watt

Rated power in 4 Ω : >500 Watt

Rated power in 2 Ω : >750 Watt

Intermodulation 25 W / 4 Ω : < 0.01%

Distortion 25 W / 4 Ω : < 0.005%

SNR 25 W / 4 Ω : > 100 dB(A)

Frequency range: 0.3 Hz - >400 kHz

Damping factor / 8 Ω : > 1000

Power supply: 230 V / 50 Hz / 2000 VA

Power mode without signal: max 150 VA

Stand by: <1 VA

Measurements (WxDxH): 43.5x42x25cm

Weight: 42 kg

Price: £9,000

Manufactured by: AVM GmbH

URL: www.avm-audio.com

Distributed by: C-Tech Audio Ltd

URL: www.c-techaudio.co.uk