Listening #155 ALLNIC T-1800

Art Dudley | Oct 29, 2015

image: https://www.stereophile.com/images/styles/600_wide/public/1115listen.promo_.jpg

Please don't tell her I said this, but lately, my wife has been getting twitchy about my records. Twitchy as in: She wants me to sell them. Or at least some of them. I have only myself to blame. For years, I have shared with her my every joy that came of finding, at a lawn sale or garage sale or on eBay or at a record store whose proprietors "had no idea what this thing is worth," some rare and valuable treasure. And therein lay another facet of my problem: As often as I would rejoice at the music I was poised to enjoy, or the sheer pleasure of acquiring something rare and well made, I would roll, pig-like, in the pleasure of the thing's

potential monetary value. Old Testament–style dark clouds fill the sky outside my window even as I type this.

There are sexist stereotypes, and there are behavioral quirks that manifest in different ways, depending on gender. It is with the latter in mind that I offer this observation: A woman with a practical, frugal nature can withstand hearing the rhetorical question Do you know how much I can get for this thing? only so many times before she demands, Then go get it!

Because I regard my wife and my daughter as my two greatest blessings, with music in a distant but nonetheless deeply appreciated third place, I decided to act, howsoever smally. I set about culling from my collection those records that are light in rotation, and for which I might reasonably expect to get a good price. As it turned out, my appraisals hinged not only on market value, but on whether that value was determined by acclaim for a given record's musical content or by acclaim for the quality of its sound.

And I came to realize, almost by accident: Those records in my collection whose values are determined by their sonic and musical worths are, for me, literally indispensable. For example, I discovered on my classical shelves some original Decca SXLs I'd forgotten were there, and most of whose origins I can't recall. I sat down to play a few, intending only to grade them for possible sale, and wound up staying up half the night. The most stunning of the lot—a wide-band, deep-groove pressing (footnote 1) of Britten's Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings, Op.31, sung by Peter Pears, with the composer conducting the

Boyd Neel String Orchestra (Decca SXL 6110)—required a second listening before I finally trudged off to bed. How could I part with such a thing? I can imagine no Decca SXLs, no Blue Notes, and very few EMI ASD-series records with which one should ever, ever part.

By contrast, about a third of all my RCA Living Stereo discs and all but two of my Mercury Living Presence records are outa here.

But . . . big bass drums!

While a considerable majority of Decca's classical records succeed on the basis of both sound and musical content, there appear to be many RCA releases that fail almost equally in those same two respects. With regard to the former, and while acknowledging the existence, in the Living Stereo series, of some well-balanced, colorful, and spatially very accomplished recordings, at least as many others are opaque and unclear—a few are downright fuzzy—and none delivers the clarity of touch found in the vast majority of Decca ffss records. None.

As far as music is concerned, and despite a roster of artists including some of the finest soloists of their day—violinist Jascha Heifetz chief among them—few purely orchestral recordings in the RCA Living Stereo catalog are worth dying for, owing to a lack of conductors in that label's employ who were artistically distinguished as opposed to merely technically capable. Consult virtually any well-sourced list of the 20th century's greatest conductors and you'll find names associated with Deutsche Grammophon, EMI (including Columbia UK), Columbia, Decca, Philips,

and one or two smaller and comparatively newer labels. But among RCA recording artists, only Arturo Toscanini appears on more than one or two such lists, and even then, with qualifications withholding praise for his artistic point of view. And Toscanini never recorded in stereo, Living or otherwise.

When I was in my 30s, I searched out and bought a fair number of RCA Living Stereo LPs because they'd been praised by audio critics (but far less often by music critics). I readily admit to being impressed with the sound of most but not all of those recordings—even then, I couldn't help wondering how anyone could regard the rag-tag collection The Reiner Sound as a good recording, let alone a great one—until I heard the far better-sounding classical LPs made by Decca and EMI. And as the years went by and I discovered recordings made by Leonard Bernstein, Carlos Kleiber, Rudolf Kempe, Ferenc Fricsay, Sir John Barbirolli, and, above all, Wilhelm Furtwängler . . . well, let's just say it isn't often I feel compelled to turn to the Reiner version of anything, perhaps other than Strauss's Salome excerpts or Bart¢k's Concerto for Orchestra. (And for those times when I am in the mood for Reiner's brand of tightly controlled, highly polished, turn-on-a-dime orchestral sound, George Szell did it better. A lot better.)

But those RCA records, though urged on me by audiophiles, weren't nearly as bad as audiophile recordings. Indeed, for enthusiasts who value spatial performance far more than I do, and who aren't dismayed when pizzicato strings don't sound as though their appearance in the air resulted from any

sort of physical labor, Living Stereo LPs and even CDs are perfectly fine: different strokes, and all that. And as for audiophile recordings, you can rest assured that I have now purged my collection of Dick Schory's Music for Bang Baaroom and Harp (an RCA Living Stereo record—of course) and other such leavings.

Speaking of which: Let me remind you of the ninny who, after being bullied and conned into buying, in 1985, a copy of The Sheffield Track Record, needed almost an entire year before he could admit that, a) its grooves were encoded with some of the worst music ever committed to vinyl, and b) the recording itself wasn't even all that good. Then, in a fit of anger directly proportional to the amount of time spent in self-delusion, this poor fool made a show of trying to fold it in half before stuffing the piece of shit down the garbage chute of his apartment building—only to learn, 30 years later, that surviving copies sell for $119 (footnote 2). On the other hand, destroying a copy of The Sheffield Track Record is likely, for some, to generate $119 worth of pleasure.

But wait: Did I say $119? I did—and that was a single instance, for a sealed copy. Typically, you can find a copy of that rare, limited-edition, grooved turd for less than $40: the price of a couple of cosmopolitans, sans tip, at the St. Regis Hotel bar. On the other hand, original copies of Pathé's Mozart à Paris, by conductor Fernand Oubradous et al, famously reissued by the Electric Recording Company, sell for nearly $12,000; mint original mono copies of The Beatles sometimes break the four-figure barrier; and an original LP copy of Sonny Rollins's debut recording, a copy of which I

recently followed on eBay with silly hope, sold last week for $1328. Why? Because those are LPs filled with great music—LPs that, secondarily, also happen to be good or at least distinctive recordings. The Sheffield Track Record, by contrast, is blandly lame product presented in slightly-better-than-average sound. The majority of RCA Living Stereo records are good-but-not-breathtakingly-great performances of standard-repertoire classical music in sound that is often better than average but still shy of the best.

The image of the hair-shirted, he-man anti-audiophile endures, and I'm sufficiently capable of self-flattery that I have, at times, cultivated such an image for myself. But it enjoys even less justification than I suspected: A surprising number of my most beloved records sound good in spite of themselves. For instance, whenever I want to show someone that I like him or her, I put on Contact High with the Godz (LP, ESP 1036), the 1966 debut by proto-punk band the Godz. Nothing says "I like you, I trust you, I want you to hear something that will really expand your idea of what folk music is all about" than Contact High. The selections on that LP are innocent, charming, sung and played with an almost shocking degree of incompetence—and surprisingly well recorded. This very rare record is apparently most rare in its stereo form, which I own—and intend to keep.

Before my box of for-sale LPs went out the door, I triple-checked it for records I might actually love. I needn't have: It was love-free. To me, it was now just a box of polyvinyl chloride and paper and card stock. To someone else, it may be the stuff of dreams. My

wife and I certainly hope so.

Allnic on the Western Front

I was glad to see, on the cover of our October issue, an audio amplifier designed around an otherwise underappreciated power tube: the reliably luminous 845 directly heated triode. Props to my longtime friend and colleague Herb Reichert for singing the praises of the Line Magnetic LM-518IA integrated amplifier, and for being second to none in his ability to express delight in a pastime too often purged of same. (I'm reminded of the line by songwriter Andy Partridge: "Don't let the loveless ones sell you a world wrapped in gray.")

Listening #155 Page 2

At the same time, let's not become too blasé about our more familiar tubular friends: the 12AX7, the KT88, and the EL34—especially the EL34. That classic pentode tube, introduced in 1954 by Mullard Ltd., has been at the heart of some of my favorite amplifiers, most of which commit the equally counterrevolutionary sin of being push-pull instead of single-ended. How I would hate to wind up in a world in which fondness for push-pull EL34 amplifiers is met with the same scorn as love for Elton John records, some of which are actually pretty good.

Today I'm enjoying a new EL34-based integrated amplifier: the T-1800 ($5900) from Allnic Audio Labs, the Korean manufacturer whose products and name are distinguished by the inclusion of nickel (footnote 3). As with all Allnic amplifiers, the T-1800's proprietary output transformers are wound on cores

rich in that element, but these newest versions have another trick up their sleeves: Each of the multiple secondary windings of these "full engagement" output transformers is always in circuit, regardless of which output terminals are connected to the speakers. Allnic says that's important because an idle secondary winding is a devil's playground for the buildup of parasitic oscillations, which can then reflect back into and thus distort the signal in adjacent windings.

The T-1800 uses two EL34 tubes per channel in Ultralinear mode, to produce 40Wpc. Somewhat surprisingly, given the presence of dual-mono current meters on the front panel and dual-mono toggle switches on the top plate—the positions of the latter determine which of the two tubes per channel is connected to the meter—the T-1800's output section operates in auto-bias mode. According to designer Kang Su Park, the meters and switches are provided to help the user monitor tube wear. The output tubes are driven by one E180CC dual-triode tube per channel, and initial voltage gain for each channel is provided by half of a 12AY7 dual-triode tube.

(Inasmuch as it doesn't provide line-level gain, the T-1800's preamp section is passive.) The 12AY7 is installed in one of Allnic's proprietary Absorb-gel isolation mounts; ordinary sockets are used for the other tubes.

Allnic's new integrated amp offers few user controls. On the rear panel is a hefty toggle switch for selecting between loudspeaker loads of 8 and 4 ohms. (The T-1800 can be ordered with 8 and 4 ohm *or* 16 and 8 ohm settings.) The front panel has only two controls: a pleasantly unyielding volume knob that addresses a 41-step silver-contact rotary attenuator switch, and a source-selection knob that provides electronic switching among five line-level inputs (four pairs of RCA jacks, one pair of XLRs). A compact remote handset duplicates all controls except for the T-1800's rocker-style on/off switch, and adds one control the front panel lacks: a soft-touch mute switch. The line-only Allnic T-1800 has no phono stage, balance control, or mono switch.

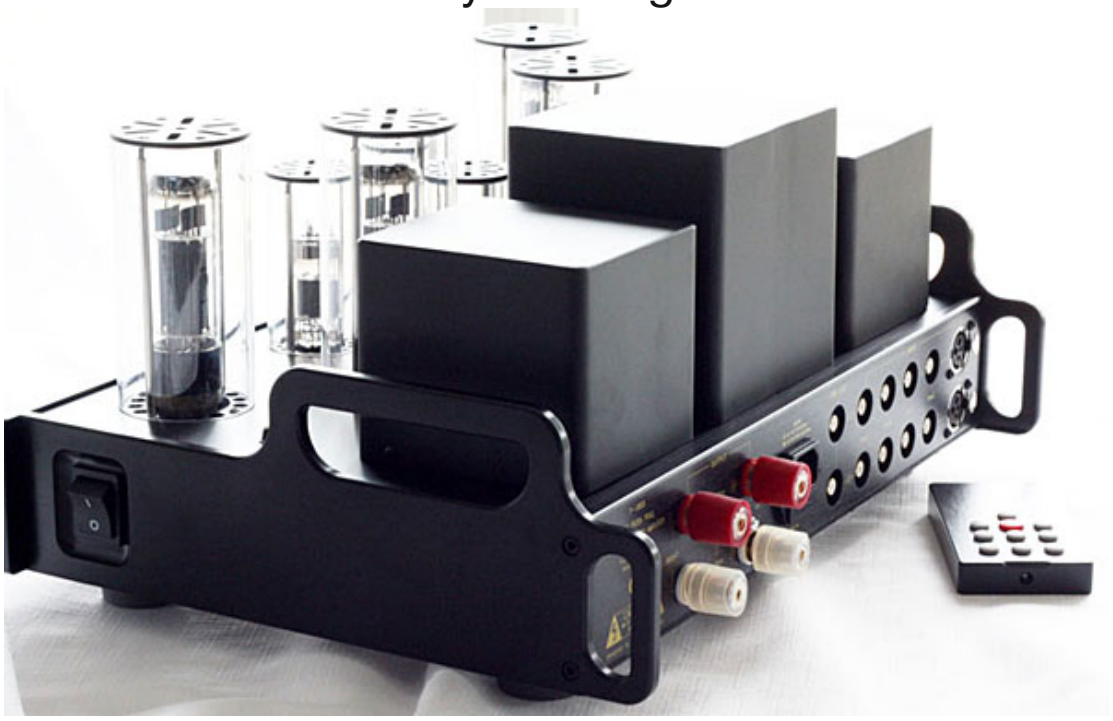
Miscellaneous details: AC rectification in the T-1800 is done with solid-state devices, and the amp's soft-start circuit gradually applies rail voltages only after the tube filaments have had ample warm-up time. The output section uses 6dB of global negative feedback, presumably to minimize distortion and maximize damping factor. Key specifications include a signal/noise ratio of 80dB, a frequency range of 20Hz–20kHz, and an input impedance of 10k ohms. And although it's not specified, the T-1800's overall gain seemed *abundant*.

But . . . a big bass drum!

Auditioned with a borrowed sample of the Shindo Laboratory Aurieges phono preamplifier (see Follow-Up in this issue), the T-1800 was every inch a classic low-power EL34 amp, with just enough of a modern touch to extend its appeal beyond an exclusively vintage-centric fan base. As for the latter quality: Even before I knew that the Allnic's output stage employed negative feedback, its truly excellent low-frequency clarity and control were very much apparent. While listening to a recently acquired original mono copy of the Beatles' *Please Please Me* (LP, Parlophone PMC 1202), I noted that the T-1800 was more explicit than my Shindo Corton-Charlemagne monoblocks—also using two EL34 output tubes per channel, also operated in Ultralinear, but with no global feedback—in its portrayal of Paul McCartney's electric bass lines. And the T-1800 sounded tighter and more in control when reproducing the orchestral bass drum in the introduction of Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, with tenor Nicolai Gedda, and Sir Adrian Boult conducting the New Philharmonia Orchestra and the London Philharmonic and John Aldis Choirs (LP, EMI SLS 987)—although the Shindo amps communicated a superior sense of power and gravitas, notwithstanding their lower output of 25Wpc.

Also in comparison with my Shindo separates, the Allnic integrated had the same abundance of natural textures and well-saturated timbral colors, but presented those qualities with a tonal balance tilted very slightly in the direction of the treble: The T-1800 didn't sound bright or even bright-*ish*, but at the top

of the audioband the T-1800 had a bit more "air" than the Shindo combo, and more explicitly portrayed such things as room sounds, microphone sounds, and tape splices. Both companies' amplifiers were above average at forgiving LP surface noises—an indication of their speed and imperturbability, not of any degree of dullness—and neither allowed hum or noise to intrude on my listening.



Apart from their just-plain-different tonal balances, there was one thing the Allnic integrated did consistently better than the Shindos, and one performance area in which it fell behind. The former was the T-1800's impressive openness and transparency—qualities that, for once, were *not* accompanied by losses of thick timbral colors and textures, or of body and substance in instruments and voices. At least once in past reviews I've drawn a parallel between the strengths I've just described and the effect one sees when using Adobe Photoshop's Levels control to "open up" the middle range of an

image's input levels. (In publishing, that's often a useful way to prepare a photo for clear print reproduction, especially when dealing with a grade of paper that's easily over-inked.) Sonically, the effect is of hearing new information not by dint of brightness, but by removing acoustic shadows that were not heard as such on first listen. And so: Strings became steel strings (or nylon, or silk-and-steel, or brass-wound, or whatever), and voices became distinct vocal personalities, and murk became near or distant walls, and suchlike.

I wish I could add, "and sonic images became large or small"—but I can't, and that was perhaps the T-1800's only sonic shortcoming of note: The amp's sense of scale was very much lacking at the large end of things. Experience leads me to lay that at the doorstep of global feedback, even while acknowledging the very real and perfectly worthy effects of same. It's a tradeoff. Some might think: Feedback eliminates distortion, so if it makes things sound less big, then bigness must be a distortion. In light of the fact that the audio arts have seen damn few technologies that, in reducing one form of distortion, didn't also increase another, howsoever slightly, I can't help seeing the foregoing as faulty reasoning; but even if it isn't, in this house, the badge of DISTORTION LOVER has tended to elicit more smiles than shame.

Anyway, the T-1800's flaws are more than merely outweighed by its strengths: They are overwhelmed. And whereas I feel comfortable attributing the Allnic's shortcomings of scale to its dependence on global

feedback, how can I explain such excellent touch and force from an integrated amp with a passive front end? Not only did the Allnic shine with up-tempo rock, it succeeded at the trickier job of allowing subtler music to sound dramatic and human and alive—as in the Eroica Quartet's fine recording of Mendelssohn's String Quartet 1 (CD, Harmonia Mundi HMU 907245). The entire performance sounded so good, so consistently involving through the Allnic, that I feel guilty singling out this or that passage—although I'll point nonetheless to the stunning sense of touch in the pizzicato notes in the second movement, the startlingly good force in the tutti opening of the fourth movement, and the excellent sense of sheer musical drive throughout. And the entire work benefited from the Allnic's fine tonality: colorful and textured without being cloyingly, exaggeratedly sweet; open and explicit without being light or bright. Really: This disc through this amp made as good a case for CD playback as I've heard in a long time.

I suppose an EL34 amplifier is like a steak dinner, or a day spent fishing, or a drive in the country with the top down: To people who like those sorts of things, every single one is pretty good—but in each category, a few are better than most. And *better than most* is how I feel about the Allnic Audio Labs T-1800 integrated amplifier: It pressed every one of my EL34-loving buttons and never let up.