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JUNE 2010

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# Silver Shadow

After too long in the shade, David Price thinks Vincent's new SV-236MK hybrid tube/transistor integrated amplifier is ready for the limelight...

**W**ell, it does what it says on the tin. Vincent is the name, tube amplifiers are the game. Indeed their name is actually 'Vincent T.A.C.' the latter being an acronym for Tube Amp Company. And if it *still* isn't clear that Vincent like glowing glass bottles, the new SV-236MK has a single 12AX7 valve sitting there behind an unusual window in the upper centre of the fascia, glowing away complete with its own uplighting. Ermm, did they mention they were a tube amp company?

The SV-236MK is the latest incarnation of the company's integrated in its 'TubeLine' range, now costing £1,749. It's a well built, chunky product, designed in Germany and built in China. It has a slickly finished brushed aluminium fascia and neat matching control knobs which resemble those found on classic nineties TEAC electronics. Physically substantial at 430x150x435mm, it weighs 18kg and promises to punch out 150W into eight ohms (250W into half that).

Although I personally think the tube tunnel is a trifle *gauche*, there's no denying it's a distinctive styling

feature and makes the point that it's a hybrid amplifier. I am sure those who'd be immodest enough to describe themselves as connoisseurs of the thermionic valve, might like it, but rather wish it was an 845, or at least a 300B, sitting in that window rather than a piffing little input tube. Worthy the 12AX7 may be, but it's hardly top-shelf material as tubes go!

It's also unusual inasmuch as it has tone controls, which for the benefit of anyone born in or after the nineteen eighties, were devices to alter the tone of the musical signal, usually around 100Hz in the bass and about 10kHz in the treble regions. They were not fitted to any hi-fi amplifiers after about 1982, when someone decided they were uncool. Well, whether they're cool or not is a matter of opinion, but there's an argument to say that they can be useful in some circumstances. Personally, they went untouched for the duration of the review period. Along with these, there's an input selector for the amp's six RCA phono inputs.

Round the back, in addition to all those inputs, there's a pair of RCA phono record outs, and one pair of RCA preamplifier

outputs. Also fitted are chunky binding posts; enough for two pairs of loudspeakers, or a biwired pair. There's also an IEC power input. The casework, fascia and back panel are as solid as you'd expect from a premium priced Japanese product, and the Vincent is certainly thoroughly engineered inside. It sports a DC-coupled MOSFET input stage with two 12AX7s (plus the single one in the window!), a DC servo unit for better power supply of the output stages, a very large shielded toroidal power transformer, dual mono power amp construction, and the SV-236MK sports a new voltage stabilisation circuit for the power supply. Additional 'MK' mods include 'a simpler and improved' circuit layout, bespoke passive components such as German WIMA capacitors.





"a very agreeable combination of barrel chested physical might, seemingly endless reserves of low frequency drive and a truly impressive midband..."

### SOUND QUALITY

Being a hybrid, the critical question the Vincent has to answer is whether it brings the best of both its valve and solid-state worlds, or is simply a pale imitation of either. The intention is obviously the former, and happily I can say that Vincent have largely succeeded. In bringing much of the thump and power of solid-state with a deal of the creaminess and beguiling musicality of tubes, the SV-236MK proves to be an enjoyable and interesting listen in its own right.

If ever there was an album that was designed for this big Vincent, it is Al Jarreau's 1994 'Tenderness'. The dreadful phrase 'dinner jazz' or 'cocktail jazz' might be applicable, but it simply doesn't describe the quality of the musicianship and the love gone into the various cover versions of great pop and jazz standards. It's a great live album, with commensurately stratospheric sonics; it has wonderful atmospheric, inky black silences, chiming pianos, and fulsome bass guitar playing. The miking of the vocals is excellent and the quality of the singers beyond reproach. All of which sets up the SV-236MK's rendition of 'My Favorite Things' a treat; although the song itself is very often at best a fairly insubstantial little ditty, opera soprano Kathleen Battle's treatment takes it to another level, and the Vincent is there to do it justice. Her voice, like ice cut with a dash of sugar, contrasts the creamy, dusky tones of Jarreau's to produce a striking duet, with soaring saxophones, crashing piano cadences

bristling with beautifully carried harmonics and set off with lovely triangle and hi-hat work. The song shows up the SV-236MK to be a very clean performer, in the best traditions of well wrought solid-state. Despite that tube sitting there on show glowing, this amp does *not* sound valve-like; rather it's a fine solid-stater infused with a small dash of tube magic - just enough to tickle the fancy of someone previously confined to switching transistors.

Haircut 100's 'Love Plus One', surely one of the best recorded (and played) pop singles of all time, and a great slice of early eighties 'new jazz' in its own right, again had the Vincent at its very best. It served up a very powerful, muscular bass line that seemed every inch the quoted 150W, a beautifully clean and wide midband with truly unexpected depth and large amount of subtle detail bristling forth, plus a sweet, slightly stylised treble sound which frankly wouldn't have been quite so silky without those three glass bottles. The vividly etched rasp of the trumpets left me in no doubt that I was listening to a transistor amp, along with the lively, slightly scratchy sounding rhythm guitar work; tube amps would never have such speed or attack, but not would they 'laser' themselves in between your eyes in such a bracing way. Yet

there was none of that transistory mush, that sort of all-enveloping 'fug' that makes everything sound as if it was recorded in the same studio and on the same instruments, that solid-state is so often guilty of. Instead, the Vincent provided a Sugden A21 SE-like clear window on the world, just a tad brightly lit in the upper midband when pushed to deliver serious sound levels, but nevertheless bristling with detail, depth and atmosphere.

As well as that delightful clarity, the Vincent has a rhythmic gait the like of which you'd normally only expect from a Naim; it positively bounces along with all the enthusiasm of my cat chasing anything it finds in the garden that's smaller than him. The thick,

sequenced electronic bass of Saint Etienne's 'Urban Clearway' showed how the SV-236MK can pump



vast tracts of current into the loudspeakers whilst remaining tight as can be. The track romped along almost as if on 'fast forward', whilst remaining surprisingly open and accessible; this whole album ('Tiger Bay') can sound very muddy on the wrong equipment. It's not the greatest recording, but such is the Vincent's nature that it didn't obsess on this. Rather, it concentrated its guns on pulling out all the strands of the mix in as fast, dynamic and clean way as it could. Once again, those Roland drum machine hi hats, which can sound ever so slightly coarse, got just the smallest bit of smoothing from the Vincent. Yet the effect was a subtle one; I suspect the solid-state side of the SV-236MK is a bruising, high power transistor jobbie that could easily find itself in PA applications, such is its speed, punch and effortless power. Yet the tubes just take out that last ten percent of 'zing', making for a pleasing hybrid.

This amplifier proved an ideal partner for the sweet, smooth sumptuous sounds of Kate Bush in 'Moving'. Whilst quite deep, fulsome and docile at low levels, push the SV-236MK's loud pedal (as it were) and the amplifier picks up its skirts and runs. It's never bright or hard as such, but there's definitely something of a Jeckyl and Hide aspect to it; at high volumes it's as if this amplifier stands up, takes a deep breath and shouts 'bring it on!', which isn't what you'd expect when listening to its mellow, fulsome tones at lower volumes. All of this is great news for those crashing drum rolls, the Vincent throwing vast amounts of bass thump into the loudspeakers in an utterly effortless way; whereas most tube amplifiers at or near the price have all the heft of - if you pardon the borrowed *Blackadder* expression - an asthmatic ant, the Vincent is unflustered.

From the first breathtaking bass drum strike, just a few bars in, 808 State's 'Nimbus' was a joy. The Vincent

once again showed its unique - and very agreeable combination of barrel chested physical might, seemingly endless reserves of low frequency drive and a truly impressive midband, subtle enough to show up the lovely texture of those classic early eighties keyboards. It also once again reminded me that, despite its earth (and air) moving power, there was real subtlety and poise; it never trips over its own toes even with dense, dark, complex electronica such as this. It never descends into disorder and distortion, showing great poise under pressure.

At the price, it is nigh on impossible to criticise the SV-236MK, unless you're not a fan of the styling. It does so much right, and sounds so close to high end integrations at two or three times the price, that it's churlish to reel out a list of 'if only's. However, for the record, in absolute terms, there's just a touch of hardness to the upper midband, a slight transitory sheen across the presence region which you lose when you start to pay a couple of times as much again. Hearing the Vincent's treatment of a Roland D50 digital keyboard reveals its ever-so-slightly edgy character - in absolute terms, at least.

There's also the merest hint of looseness to the bass, which doesn't quite go on and off like an LED as some truly high end integrations can. You could also ask for more depth, and a slightly more romantic nature; massively enjoyable as it is, this is quite a 'matter of fact' machine. Once again, I must reiterate that this is a brilliant working compromise; not quite perfect but not so far off and at far lower price than most rivals I can think of.

**CONCLUSION**

The Vincent SV-236MK is a bit of an imposter. I liken it to a state-of-the-art V10 F1 racing car covered in a picture of an old Yank V8 driving a GM Torqueflite 'slushbox' automatic transmission; it's not

quite what it appears. Any notions of this being a cosy, Quad II-style blast from the thermionic past soon go up in smoke when you feed it modern music and turn up the volume. Instead, we have a thumping bruiser of a transistor amp with seemingly bottomless reserves of power, great grunt and an insatiable appetite for intense music played at commensurately high volumes. Yet those tubes still infuse just a touch of silk to make the whole package so much more palatable; like the twist of lime in your Bombay Sapphire and Schweppes on ice, it does perplexingly more than it really should.

The final package is a brilliantly judged one. There aren't many sub-£2,000 integrations that could drive some of the best loudspeakers in the world and not disgrace themselves, but I'd put the SV-236MK as one. I wasn't completely convinced by the gimmicky fascia, but one listen and you realise it's merely a distraction; the real surprise is when you turn the music up - then this amplifier shines.



**REFERENCE SYSTEM:**

- dCS Paganini transport/DAC CD player
- Musical Fidelity AMS35i integrated amplifier
- Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

**VERDICT** ●●●●●

Powerful rhythmic sound allied to great midband insight and just a touch of silk from the tubes make this a brilliantly judged mid-price integrated.

**VINCENT SV-236MK** £1,749

MV Audio

+44 (0)1495 791220

www.mvaudio.co.uk

**FOR**

- clarity, speed, insight
- foundation flapping bass
- bubbly musicality
- grippy, powerful nature

**AGAINST**

- superfluous tone controls
- naff valve window

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

The new SV 236 MK produces 144 Watts into 8 Ohms and 256 Watts into 4 Ohms, small increases on the old model we tested in our Nov 06 issue. This is still a powerful amplifier, especially for its modest size. It does, however, house a massive mains transformer and the solid-state output stages are very capable. A high damping factor of 114 suggests the amplifier will maintain a good grip on bass cones, giving tight sounding bass.

Distortion levels are much lower than before, especially at 10kHz, where the MK measured a low 0.03%, compared to 0.25% from the previous model. Also, where third harmonic previously dominated, now the amplifier is consistent in producing second harmonic our analysis shows, irrespective of load, power or frequency; it has a very stable transfer function and this suggests lack of distortion modulation will give a clean sound low on transistor 'colour'.

The amplifier still has high sensitivity, now just 120mV is needed for full output, gain being provided by 12AX7 double triode preamp valves. The LOUD button provides loudness compensation with bass and treble boost, but it is not volume level

dependent, and TONE provides bass boost of +4dB and a little shelf treble boost, again not level dependent. Both are strangely simple facilities for a hi-fi amplifier.

The SV236 MK measures very well and should, with its lowered distortion levels, sound even better than its predecessor. NK

Power (8 / 4)	144 / 256 Watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	8Hz-55kHz
Separation	82dB
Noise	- dB
Distortion	0.02%
Sensitivity	mV
Damping factor	114

