

Absolare Integrated Amplifier

Distillation

Robert Harley

Absolare arrived on the high-end scene in 2012 with two striking products, the Passion preamplifier and Passion 845 power amplifier. Both components took minimalism in circuit design and user operation to an extreme—even eschewing front-panel markings on the preamplifier’s two knobs. In addition, the all-tube circuits were housed in chassis that established an entirely new visual aesthetic in audio equipment, foregoing shiny metal boxes and lots of knobs in favor of rich leathers and simple controls. And with 52W of SET output power, the Passion 845 brought the glories of single-ended triode operation to a relatively wide range of loudspeakers.

I was smitten by the sound of the Passion electronics, both at shows and in my own system. As I wrote in my review in Issue 234, “the overall character of these electronics is gentle, intimate, and emotional, leading to heightened musical expression. It’s the kind of presentation that reveals its beauty not in a quick demo, but during a long session late at night when you find yourself deeply immersed in a voyage of musical discovery.”

Absolare’s new integrated amplifier (simply called the “Integrated”) is an attempt to capture that magic in a single chassis, at a lower price, and with more output power to confer compatibility with a wider range of loudspeakers. To create the Integrated, Absolare combined, in one chassis, the Passion’s preamplifier circuitry with a newly designed 150Wpc solid-state output stage.

The Integrated hews to the Absolare aesthetic, with a narrow and deep chassis, leather-clad exterior, and just two front-panel rotary knobs, neither one marked. The left knob selects between one of four inputs, the right knob adjusts the volume. Two 12AU7 tubes at the front rise above the casework, and the solid-state output stage’s horizontal heatsinks consume the remainder of the chassis top panel. The leather, with contrast stitching, is exquisite. Visitors invariably want to walk up to the Absolare products and touch them; the components exude a warm and welcoming feeling compared with metal-chassis gear. Absolare offers a wide range of leather and stitching colors.

The Integrated can be ordered with any combination of unbalanced and balanced inputs (up to four); my review sample was fitted with two of each. The unbalanced model sells for \$24,750, with the balanced version fetching \$26,500. Units with balanced inputs include a small toggle switch next to the inputs that engages a step-up transformer. This 4:1 transformer allows you to realize the best match between the source’s output level and the vol-



ume control’s limited range. That is, you should engage the transformer for lower-level sources so that the volume control is set about mid-way at a normal listening level. The volume control has a limited range because it is a stepped attenuator with discrete resistors rather than a continuously variable potentiometer. The rear panel also houses two pairs of very-high-quality binding posts, an on/off rocker switch, and an IEC AC input connector. A small slim remote control with three buttons (again, none of them marked) is included.

In place of feet on the chassis bottom, the Integrated has cutouts for accepting the purpose-built “Quatro” isolation devices supplied with the amplifier. The isolation feet are heavy and elaborate, and feature a four-layer machined-aluminum structure designed to dissipate horizontal and vertical resonance. Absolare designs and manufactures these devices, and will soon bring them to market as part of a separate line of isolation products called Stablian. The Quatro

isolation feet’s four independently movable layers in a vertical stack reminded me of the massive earthquake-absorbing structures now being built into skyscrapers in earthquake-prone areas.

Taking a closer look, the Integrated’s aluminum chassis (hidden beneath the leatherwork) is divided internally into separate compartments for the preamplifier stage, power amplifier circuits, and power supplies. Interestingly, the signal connections between these sub-sections aren’t the usual strips of bare wire, but full-fledged interconnects made by Absolare’s sister company, Echole. In fact, all the cabling inside the Integrated is made from Echole’s proprietary mix of silver, gold, and palladium.

Most of the voltage gain is supplied by the 12AU7 tube input and driver stages, with the transistor output stage supplying the current gain. Absolare voraciously scours the globe for tubes and has obtained large supplies of premium NOS types. The amp’s tube circuit is similar to that of the Passion preampli-

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fier, with zero feedback and the tubes configured as mu-followers. The left tube is the input stage, the right tube the driver. It's possible to mix and match tubes between these two stages to realize a particular sound. The solid-state output stage is built around three pairs of bipolar transistors per channel (12 transistors in total) for 150Wpc of output power.

The implementation and build is as exotic and tweaky as it gets. For example, the power transformer's secondary windings are made from Echole's silver/gold/palladium wire. Even the solder is custom, made using an alloy similar to that of the Echole conductors. The coupling capacitors are customized Mundorf Silver/Gold/Oil types. The output binding posts, are made from pure silver, and the RCA sockets are 20u gold-plated tellurium copper. The parts quality is identical to that of the Passion products, which is to say the finest available. Rather than using a potentiometer for a volume control, the Integrated features a custom 48-step discrete series-type attenuator with a CNC machined body and custom resistors. When changing volume from the remote you can hear the stepped function in action as a gentle whirring sound.

The chassis is a 3mm-thick piece of aluminum that is laser-cut, folded, and then welded into the final shape. A CNC-machined outer shell mates with the aluminum inner chassis in a way designed to reduce resonances. Thick interior walls delineate the subsections and provide isolation.

I encourage you to read my review of Absolare's Passion Pre-amplifier and Passion 845 Power Amplifier in Issue 234 for more detail on the company's background and approach. To summarize, and quote from my previous review, "Absolare's approach is to assemble an international team of the best designers, find the highest-grade parts from vendors around the world, pursue absolute minimalism in the signal path, exploit synergies between components, wrap all this up in lavishly made and easy-to-use products, and provide a level of customer service commensurate with that of the world's finest luxury brands."

Absolare very much takes the system approach to audio systems, creating cables through its sister company Echole (established in 2007), building custom furniture in a factory in Turkey that makes high-end furniture for hotels, and devising its own vibration-isolation products. Absolare wanted me to hear the Integrated at its best, with an Echole Limited Edition Series power cord, interconnects, and speaker cables. These are the company's top models, newly introduced in 2017 after two-and-a-half years of development. As I've mentioned, all the Echole cables are made from a custom alloy that incorporates silver, gold, and palladium. Dozens of different alloys were tested, each requiring hundreds of meters of hot extrusion for the evaluations. The Limited Edition cables are extremely thick and heavy; most of the bulk is the conductor, not the dielectric. The cables are heavier and less pliable than most; the solid-core conductor is so thick that if it were any thicker it would be a rod rather than a wire. The cables are also designed for minimum resonance. When they're used as a complete system, the same alloy is in the signal path from the AC wall outlet to the speaker's input terminals. Absolare believes this system approach creates the greatest synergy with all its products. That's one reason why the Integrated features full-

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blown Echole interconnects, speaker cable, and AC power cords inside the chassis rather than pieces of bare wire.

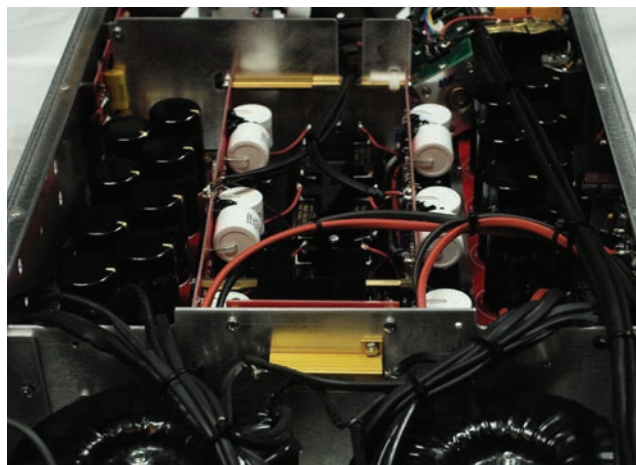
Listening

When I first heard the Absolare Integrated at the Munich show (driving Rockport Altair speakers) it struck me that the amplifier sounded very much like Absolare's Passion pre-amplifier and Passion power amplifiers, products with which I was intimately familiar.

Back in my listening room, driving either Rockport Lyra loudspeakers (briefly) or my long-term reference the Magico Q7 Mk II, the Integrated had all the hallmarks of Absolare. I heard a remarkably similar presentation to that offered by the Passion products, particularly considering the Integrated's solid-state output stage, single chassis, and significantly lower price. I don't know whether the

Integrated was designed to sound as much like the Passion products as possible, or whether the Integrated simply reflects Absolare's sonic aesthetic.

Whatever the reason, the Integrated is characterized by a tremendous sense of body and texture, as though it were a living and breathing entity rather than a mechanical reproduction. This quality derives from its midrange-centric presentation, which is in keeping with the Integrated's heritage derived from its predecessor, the Passion SET amplifiers. Jonathan Valin has written about a system being "top-down" or "bottom-up." That is, a bottom-up presentation has a solid bass foundation, while a top-down sound has more emphasis on the top-end transparency and detail, with less weight and solidity. To expand on that concept, the Absolare Integrated could be characterized as a "midrange-outward" sound. That's not surprising given that the Passion SET amplifier, which is the Integrated's conceptual, visual, and technical antecedent, has a very midrange-centric presentation. Like the Passion 845, the Integrated has a glorious tex-



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ture, body, and harmonic density through the mids that brought instruments rich in those frequencies to the fore. The midband was somewhat forward, but not in the usual sense of appearing toward the front of the soundstage, or of having an exaggerated presence region. Rather, I found my attention drawn to the midrange for this amplifier's extraordinary sense of clarity, combined with warmth and sheer timbral gorgeousness. Heightening the experience, the Integrated's rendering of timbre was utterly liquid and grain-free. Subtle textural details that convey instrumental timbre and musical expression were beautifully conveyed. The Integrated is as close in sound to a pure tube amplifier as I've heard from transistors. Also like a tube amplifier, the Integrated had a wonderful feeling of bloom and "action," with a palpable sense of air expanding around instruments' dynamic envelopes. I can best describe the Integrated's sound, and midrange in particular, by comparing it to the sound of Ben Webster's tenor sax on, say, *Gentle Ben*, or *Souville*—rich, creamy, and sensual.

The previously reviewed Passion 845 SET amplifier had remarkable bass extension, control, and authority for an SET, but understandably didn't plumb the depths the way a big solid-state amp can. That's not the Passion 845's mission in life. But the Integrated marries much of the Passion 845's midrange magic to a more solid and powerful bottom end thanks to the transistor output stage. The Integrated took control over the Magico Q7 Mk II's woofers and provided a tighter rendering with greater pitch precision. The Integrated wasn't quite as adept as the Passion at depicting the density of texture of bowed doublebass, bass clarinet, or bassoon, for examples. Nonetheless, the mid-to-upper bass was more nuanced and filigreed than most solid-state amplifiers, even expensive monoblocks. The midbass region also had a richness, warmth, and bloom that were the antithesis of dry and sterile. However, the Integrated—in keeping with its overall SET-

like character—didn't have quite the extension, slam, and visceral impact of my reference solid-state monoblocks. Although built around a transistor output stage, the Integrated still sounds very much like a tube amp in its midbass warmth, bloom, and emphasis on instrumental body and textural details rather than bottom-end slam.

Similarly, the Integrated had a wonderfully delicate and grain-free treble but wasn't the last word in extension and top-end air. The treble was utterly liquid and refined; there was none of the hash that makes vocal sibilance annoying; cymbals had a delicacy that emphasized the rich lower harmonics rather than top-end sizzle; and saxophone lacked the thinness of tone color that is all too common in solid-state amplifiers. The Integrated is an amplifier that communicates through creating a relaxed, easy-going, and intimate experience rather than bombarding the listener with hyped detail. Some listeners may find the Integrated a bit too polite in the treble. As always, matching an amplifier to the loudspeaker for the greatest musical synergy is vital.

Partway through the review process Absolare sent to me a new set of tubes from a cache that it had just discovered. Oddly, these 1965-vintage NOS tubes were shipped to me from Australia. As good as the Integrated sounded initially, the new tubes were significantly superior in nearly every regard. The palpability in the mids increased; the soundstage was more dimensional, and the music had a greater sense of life. The new tubes had less midbass bloom, which made the pre-

sentation a little leaner, but the low bass extended deeper and with better definition.

Conclusion

Living with the Absolare Integrated fosters a very different relationship between listener and hi-fi system. It's an entirely different aesthetic from the feature-laden component with a brightly lit alphanumeric display, sharp-edged metal casework, and sound that values treble detail at the expense of rich musicality. Instead, I found something tremendously compelling about the utter simplicity of the Integrated's operation, the way it looks like a piece of art rather than a product of industrial engineering, and the warm and fatigue-free listening it offers up. The Integrated's sound is not just tube-like, but SET-like in its lush midrange liquidity and voluptuous warmth. But unlike any SET—even Absolare's own powerful and robust Passion 845—the Integrated will drive a wider range of loudspeakers and deliver deeper and more controlled bass.

Some tube-transistor hybrid amplifiers are a mix of compromises and trade-offs, with the designer attempting to minimize each technology's shortcomings while maximizing its strengths. I see the Absolare Integrated not as a product of compromise, but rather of *distillation*. The company has found a way to bring the magic of its all-tube Passion components to a product that is not only more affordable, but also more flexible because of its ability to drive a wider range of loudspeakers. Give the Integrated a listen; I suspect that many of you will be captured by its many charms, just as I was. **tas**

Specs & Pricing

Absolare Integrated Amplifier

Type: Tube/solid-state hybrid stereo integrated amplifier

Output power: 150Wpc into 8 ohms, 200Wpc into 4 ohms

Inputs: Unbalanced RCA jacks (x4) or balanced XLR jacks (x4), user specified

Tube complement: One each 12AU7

Input impedance: 100k ohms

Attenuator: 48-step resistor network

Dimensions: 15" x 7.9" x 26.4"

Weight: 70.4 lbs.

Price: \$26,500 (balanced); \$24,750 (unbalanced)

Echolle Limited Edition Cables, Interconnects, AC Power Cords

Interconnect: \$19,500 3' pair XLR

Speaker cable: \$23,500 6' pair

Power cord: \$16,000, 6'

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