

# Engström Arne Mk 2 integrated amplifier

Chris Thomas

It was certainly a good start.

As the brushes gently excite and shimmer the cymbals, the bass and piano play a brief, tumbling introductory suggestion and the scene is set. The entire intimacy of the playing and the gentle pace invokes a dark and broody feel with the instruments shining in stark relief against the silence of the expansive acoustic. The piano begins its introspection and the soundstage depth opens up further. Just the drums, the string bass and the rich and wonderfully expressive piano come together forming a perfect trio of musical contemplation. I am listening to 'Solitude' from *The Joni Letters* by the superb Herbie Hancock and I am hearing it

through the Engström Arne Mk 2 integrated amplifier. When I hear Herbie is feeling out the notes and in a contemplative mood then so am I. This amplifier is so often about atmosphere and allowing the power of the music to impose itself upon you through emotional connection. It soon becomes apparent that this is a large part of the beguiling nature of the Arne Mk 2 because this music sounds simply beautiful.

The Arne Mk 2 is a 300B-based tube amplifier and a refined development of the amplifier that we reviewed back in 2020. But, if you could hear it without seeing it, then you might not immediately guess. Because if you think of tube amplifiers as somewhat languid, warm tone-master devices >>





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» that are only occasionally exceptional then the Arne will surprise you. If you give it a mere half-hour to stretch its legs and warm through then it could very well shock you with its musical scope.

### Clean cut

The amplifier is designed and built by Engström in Sweden and the review sample was finished in brilliant white. With its clean-cut lines and half-glass cover it reminded me of a piece of medical equipment. It is a physically substantial piece that really needs to be mounted in some clear air. Output is quoted at 30 watts per channel and operation is truly minimalist in that it offers just a large 48 stepped volume control and one smaller rotary knob for selecting one of its four line inputs. These are a couple of pairs of both balanced and single-ended connections at the rear plus some binding posts/4mm sockets for a single pair of loudspeakers. There is no front panel on/off switch, instead this is found at the rear next to the power input. Most will employ the neat remote control but this operates the volume and mute only. The Arne Mk 2 is based on two pairs of 300B triode tubes. Boyer Audio, the importer are able to supply the amplifier with several different options of 300Bs and these will differ in both performance and price. They installed this one with a quartet of Takatsuki tubes, which are around £1,100 each. The most basic tubes that Boyer

recommend are the Emission Labs EML 300B which cost £1,300 for a set. Between the two are the Elrog ER 300s at £2,700. I never had the chance to compare other makes but Boyer tell me that, once they have experienced what the Takatsukis bring to the party, most customers nod wisely and pay for the musical quality that they provide. It also means that owners won't need to indulge in tube rolling.

It runs hot. In fact for someone used to conventional solid state amplification, it runs very hot and though there is a rather artistic ventilation outlet on the top of the casework, the glass lid covers this as well as the tubes themselves. Perhaps there is some chimney-type airflow design feature that eludes me here but as some of the considerable heat seems to flow from within the chassis section I wonder if the vents might not have been left unobstructed for improved cooling.

### Trimming out

It takes about 30 minutes of running before the Arne Mk 2 trims out while growing faster and a lot tighter, especially through the bass and this continues to develop for a while longer. This impressive speed is one of its core features. The Arne Mk 2 handles music that more conventional tube amplifiers might not be entirely suited to with surprising ease. Heavy rock, played at pace, manic drummers with twin kick drums pounding out a driving rhythm against a





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» murderously relentless bass guitar and a couple of electric guitar shredders? Not too much of a problem for the Arne which laps it up. As a caveat though I imagine that anyone who listens to this music exclusively would go the solid-state route but the Arne Mk 2 does a very respectable job nevertheless. Certainly it's the amplifier's freedom and speed of dynamic movement that is so impressive should you have a general taste for intense instrumental drive leaning you towards a system that can recover as fast as it delivers.

On more circumspect music it soon established itself as one of the most beautiful sounding amplifiers I have ever had at home. Those with large rooms and/or inefficient speakers may look at the 30 watt per channel output and wonder. I get that, but in a smallish listening room through a pair of Wilson Duette 11 speakers and some excellent cabling, sourced by the superb dCS Rossini streaming set-up it was entirely adequate volume wise. More important for me was that it proved quite epic in its stunning ability to bring the music into the room.

Listening to Andrew Marlin's album *The Witching Hour* and the way that the Arne dealt with the combination of the mandolin and the fiddle was joyous. Marlin certainly knows how to put these two instruments together and often uses them in unison to wonderful effect. This is a modern

take on Bluegrass by a thoroughly schooled musician who often grows the languid violin lines out of the much shorter duration of the mandolin notes and the Arne shows you what he is doing by drawing musical pictures in the air between you and the speakers. The tonality and focus is superb and the instrumental placement crazily precise within time and space. As ever the Arne Mk 2 has this wonderful habit of connecting you to the music you like, making it a pure joy.

### Conjuring up atmosphere

Regardless of how simple or complex the music is or how it has been recorded this amplifier gives it to you straight and it thrives on both the busy and the spatial. In fact its sense of the whole recording acoustic is one of the best I have ever heard and its ability to conjure up atmosphere often relies on its slightly eerie ways with soundstage depth. The Wilsons are pretty good at this and though a 30 watt tube amplifier might not be the first thing you might think of as their ideal partner, it worked superbly. I found myself growing more and more intrigued and fascinated by the way the Arne casts its spell so wide and deep, holding the tiniest of threads and details together while remaining incredibly explicit. That's a good word to describe how it goes about its business actually. Tonal colours combine



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

### Engström Arne Mk 2

» with natural articulation to let you right in there, regardless of the style or type of music you fancy listening to. With the possible exception of David Berning's QZ amplifiers I haven't heard this level of precisely expressed detail from a tube amp before.

It has a way with creating soundstages and layering perspectives within them. Instrumental levels are so refined especially with their relationships to each other that you are left with a vista which shows the producer's and mix engineer's hand. The Arne Mk 2 doesn't necessarily create its own sense of space but it is superb at painting a broad picture of each recording. The merest touch of a pan control shows perspective shifts drawn large across your listening space and this is so powerful, especially when voices and instruments come together.

Listening to the desolate, windy openness of Bobby Woods and Les Deux Love Orchestra's *Wagon Train* reminded me of a John Ford western where wagons and John Wayne move against a backdrop of an eternal Monument Valley. Evocative is the word I think and the pure atmosphere this amplifier can create must, in some part, be down to the pure excellence of those Takatsuki tube upgrades. Yes, the amplifier is fast and dynamically impressive but adding its ability to communicate the music through sound visualisations move it on to a whole new level.

#### Faithfulness to pitch

The Arne has a faithfulness to pitch and a feeling of absolute security that film scores and some classical pieces with their often long and languid backdrops rely on as sustained scenic poetry. Against these shifting ambient sands, the movie drama can be writ large and it often comes in the most dynamic interjections. The power with which the Arne Mk 2 can deliver a loose-skinned timpani drum blow to the sound pressure level within the frame and to the senses is an unforgettable part of the experience. Creating an atmosphere is one of its very strongest points and it manages this across a huge swathe of music. It's so thick you can practically scrape it off the walls.

So, if you were imagining that this Engström amplifier was going to be the sort of device that you might be interested in if you listened exclusively to small Jazz combos then I must disillusion you on that one. It is true that it was named after a well-known Swedish jazz musician and it is even more true that it will sound magnificent on that style of music. I have listened to Miles Davis *Nefertiti* through it a few times and found myself lost in admiration with the musicianship. Few amplifiers manage quite the same feeling of closeness to the musician and touch-ability of sound as the Arne Mk 2 majors on. When the playing is vivid, the Arne Mk 2 lets you know. In fact it can often sound quite forward. Fall, my favourite track on the album shows just how much colour, texture and pure delicacy of note-

weight the Arne Mk 2 can show you. This and the pure scaling of the notes will be one of my abiding memories of the amplifier. After my recent streaming experiences I have gone to some lengths to reduce the noise floor of my network and this review has shown me just how rewarding that has been as I have never heard the streamed music in such startling relief and against such silent backdrops. For a great album like *Nefertiti* with its sparse instrumentation where the spaces between phrases are so vital and that wonderful, ultra-cool and sparing style that Miles always excelled at is a vital component. Very, very few musicians are able play exactly what they feel quite like Miles did. This communication level is crucial and has helped no end in making my time with the Arne so musically meaningful and indeed powerful.

#### What an amplifier!

What an amplifier and what a system it helped create! It's easy to just sit and listen to a high-end system for a review and to end up concentrating on its overall resolution and I mean in all its forms. The Engström Arne Mk 2 certainly goes the distance in this respect. Its command of space and time give it the ability to form sonic illusions in front of your ears and make it the ideal companion for those who like to go deep into the music and explore its inner secrets.

Seeking out lots of new music becomes addictive and obviously high-end streaming is the key that unlocks this. Its control of instrumentation be it solo or ensemble and the uncannily natural way it has with the human voice are as notable as the fact that it always has space and headroom to spare. It never sounds hurried or flustered and growing tonally harsh is simply not in its repertoire and this is a large part of the reason why it speaks the language of music so eloquently and with such purpose.

This really is a beautiful sounding amplifier. It's as simple as that. +



#### Technical specifications

**Type** Tube integrated amplifier  
**Power output** 30w per channel  
**Inputs** 2 × SE line inputs (RCA), 2 × Bal. line inputs (XLR)  
**Frq. response** 10Hz–40kHz +/-1dB  
**Tubes** 4 × 300B (options available), 4 × D3a  
**Vol.control** 48-step  
**Remote control** Yes-volume and mute  
**Dimensions** 320 × 450 × 480mm  
**Weight** 38kg  
**Price** £29,500. Various finish and tube options available

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**Manufacturer** Engström  engstromsound.com

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