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# CORPLAND

INTEGRATED VALVE AMPLIFIER CTA405



# Lean, Clean Music Machine... The Copland CTA405 integrated amplifier

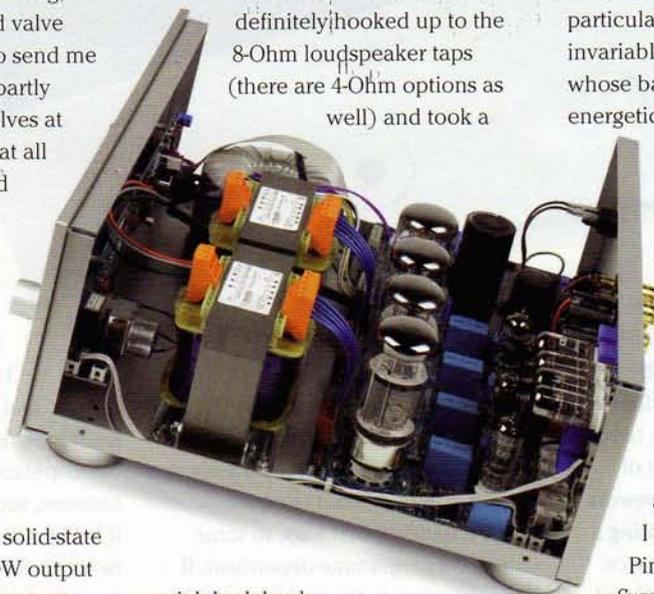
by Steve Dickinson

Actually getting to choose the equipment that comes for review is an unaccustomed luxury, an opportunity to broaden the audio landscape a bit and one I wasn't going to let slip. So, to complement the AMR CD-77 player, with its elevated price-tag, filter-less output option and valve output stages, I asked RG to send me some valve amplification, partly because I've never used valves at home, partly just to see what all the fuss is about. We settled on the Copland CTA405, a substantial, 25Kg, 50-Watt integrated design whose generous specification even includes a moving-magnet phono-stage. It's positioned well towards the 'fuss-free' end of the valve-amp market, requiring no more consideration than a solid-state integrated amp, and the 50W output from the two pairs of KT88 output tubes is sufficient for most modern loudspeakers it might be paired with – it drove my Focal Electra 1027Bes to generous levels without any hint of strain. At £2498 it occupies the same price stratum as my 90 Watt per channel, distinctly solid-state, Accuphase e213 amp (although in this case the phono-stage is extra) so direct comparisons would be illuminating.

Having connected up the amp, a little casual listening was in order. Oddly, the sound was not as coherent and focussed as I had expected.

Imaging, while acceptable, was certainly below the level I'd been led to expect (mainly by urban myth I have to admit), timing was a little vague and the whole, while pleasant, was somewhat less than compelling.

I checked the connections, definitely hooked up to the 8-Ohm loudspeaker taps (there are 4-Ohm options as well) and took a



quick look back through the manual. "Blah, blah, yadda yadda, phase inverting output, aha!" So, if you're a Copland CTA405 owner, apparently, red is the new black. Having thus reversed the connections at the speaker terminals, the amplifier was quickly revealed to be significantly more capable in all the above.

Unfortunately for me the arrival of the Copland also coincided with the departure of two sofas from the listening room (for re-upholstering) with all the resultant side-effects on the acoustics that one might expect.

It did make the room considerably livelier and I'll admit to some concern in my mind that all these valves might constitute too much of a good thing; indeed, there were occasions when the Copland's somewhat looser style, threatened to unbalance matters, particularly in the bass, though this invariably tended to happen on tracks whose bass is already a little on the energetic side. In those, it has to be said the Accuphase has a tighter grip. Conversely, the Copland's freer, airier approach complemented the wonderful tonal colours of the AMR player, sometimes to startlingly impressive effect. One such, which brought about something of a turning point in this assessment, came when

I put on an old favourite, Pink Martini's first album, *Symphatique*. One track in particular, a reworking of the old Doris Day number 'Que sera sera' uses some strange and unsettling arrangements, distinctly sour harmonies and curious percussion, to most disturbing effect. If you remember the first time you saw The Joker in *Batman* or discovered how sinister a clown face could be in the hands of Stanley Kubrick, you'll appreciate just how deeply unsettling the juxtaposition of opposing themes can be. I have to say, the AMR/Copland combination wrought more sheer, chilling, ►

► sinister portent out of that song than any other combination I've played it through. The particular strength of both these pieces of equipment lies in their ability to dig deep into the tonal subtleties of the music and rarely have I heard such atmosphere conjured from my system.

To an extent, this was bearing out my preconceptions, with the valve output stages of both the AMR and the Copland delivering significantly more than I'm used to in terms of tonal colour, subtlety, finesse and atmosphere. What I found more interesting, however, were the areas where my expectations were being challenged. The Copland neither looks like, nor sounds like the regular or more traditional interpretation of a valve amplifier. The freshly-scrubbed Scandinavian looks are tastefully understated and the valves, hidden discreetly away inside the box, betray their presence merely by a hint of gentle glow from inside the casework (and a torrent of heat necessitating a good few inches of breathing space above, it should be said). The sound is neither sentimentally mellow, nor flabby. Instead it is incisive, insightful and quite invigoratingly dynamic – an advertisement for fresh air and clean living, Danish-style, perhaps.

Happily the sofas reappeared before my, all too brief, spell with the Copland came to an end and, room acoustics restored to normal, some form of qualitative comparisons were possible. In all honesty, any bass bloom which might be apparent is pretty benign: unless you have particularly wayward loudspeakers, or a rather lively room, it is unlikely

to present any problems. Indeed had our sofas not disappeared for a couple of weeks, the bass would hardly have merited singling out for comment in this way. Having thus drawn attention to it, I feel honour-bound to redress the balance: the Copland might lack the ultimate levels of low-frequency resolution and impact that a powerful solid-state



amplifier achieves, but it acquits itself with honour nevertheless, contributing a freshness and a liquid fluency that similarly-priced transistor amps are hard-pressed to equal.

It is a trade-off that may, to some extent, be programme-dependent. If your tastes run to the more bombastic end of the canon, you might find the Copland wanting, not necessarily in sheer volume, but perhaps in its ultimate degree of control. But if you favour a more nuanced approach, then the Copland certainly delivers; simple, really.

Having thus whetted my appetite, the Copland departed all too soon. If this be the world of valves, then it is a world I'd like to explore some more. I'm not completely sold on the notion that valves are the one true musical solution and in truth I don't expect to be. There is

enough in the world of transistors that I haven't found in this system, elements of propulsiveness, drive, timing and drama that have, so far, eluded me via the valve solution, to make me crave a 'best of both' set up. Conversely transistors, certainly at this price level, concede plenty in terms of atmosphere, subtlety and sheer loveliness to their bottled counterparts. What I wasn't expecting was the fluidity and presence that

seems to go hand in hand with glowing bottles – although perhaps I should have expected that, given the familiar impact of alcohol. Indeed, there is much in the AMR/Copland system that would keep a metalhead happy, something I didn't think I'd be saying when I set out.

Neither of these solutions, valve or solid-state, delivers everything I want. Nor, at this price, can I expect them to, so I'll keep looking. But I'm also aware that the Copland was selected in part because, sonically and operationally, it bridges the divide between these two technologies, thus somewhat lessening the shock of the new. Well, I think I might be ready for my close-up now, Mr G. ▶+

Price: £2498

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