

# Refinement and Finesse

## The Octave V-40SE

By Jeff Dorgay



Just when you think the standard push-pull tube amplifier has been done to death, something comes along to redefine the genre. In the best Bauhaus minimalist tradition, the Octave V-40SE amplifier is a true treasure, with a few interesting twists on what has come before.

Available in silver or black, our test amplifier arrived in silver, which adds to the understated style of the piece and should be at home in any décor. Though a substantial tube cage is provided to pass worldwide safety standards, it begs to be removed so that you can see the glowing power tubes inside. Even with the cage in place, the tops of the driver tubes can be seen toward the front panel. Fit and finish are exceptional, the controls have a solid feel, and the casework is flawless.

Though this might not be as much of a hot button for you as it is for me, I was highly impressed with the excellent instruction manual. Even a complete novice will have no problem setting up the amplifier and biasing the tubes, thanks to its variable bias adjustments on the front panel and accurate LED biasing indicators. The low bias range will handle the EL34, KT66 or 6L6 tubes, while the high range works with the 6550, KT88, KT90 and KT100 tubes.



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The V-40SE uses one 12AX7 (ECC 83) and one 6922 (ECC 88) tube to drive a combination of power tubes, with a minimum (10db) of negative feedback. The amplifier is rated at 40 watts per channel with EL34 output tubes. According to designer Andreas Hoffmann, the amplifier puts out "slightly more power, about 5 percent" with the KT88 tubes. Interestingly, Octave also offers a Big Box or a Super Big Box, which are large capacitor banks to increase the power supply capacity of the amplifier. Hoffman said that these offer more clarity to the presentation and about 20 percent more dynamic power (with the Super Big Box).

Though I'm giving away the conclusion of the review at the beginning, what makes the Octave amplifier so special is the level of refinement offered at a price point that is not much higher than what you'd expect to pay for more mid-level separates. This \$4,900 integrated

amplifier easily holds its own with separates I've heard that cost quite a bit more. The only downside to the equation is that it is only 40 watts per channel, although for many, that will be more than enough. If you have speakers that are in the 90-93 db range of sensitivity, you'll be surprised with how well the Octave V-40SE can drive them.

We will have a follow-up review later this year when the Super Big Box arrives to compare the difference. The Big Box is an additional \$1,200 and the Super is \$3,500. This is much like the modular approach taken by Naim in regards to power-supply design; I'm in favor of a product with an upgrade path. Should you become smitten with the V-40 SE but desire an upgrade in the future, one of these power-supply upgrades might give you exactly what you need without parting with the sound you already like, or forcing you to sell the product at a loss.

Going beyond the traditional soft-start circuitry, the V-40SE uses an analog processor that controls a soft start of the mains supply as well as the high voltage system. This also manages the overload protection of the output and driver stages. This processor manages the switchable "Ecomode" that keeps standby power consumption to only 20 watts, but it minimizes warm-up time upon power up. When in this mode, the amplifier will switch into standby if no signal is detected for five minutes or more. When listening for an extended period, Ecomode can be switched off, which can be handy when going on vacation to completely power down the amplifier.

### Let's Get Started

The V40SE is a snap to set up. It should only take about 10 minutes to unpack, plug the tubes in and bias them up. By switching the input selector to the Bias mode, the LED indicators become available to adjust to your choice of output tube. As with any vacuum-tube power amplifier, it's a good idea to check the bias adjustment on a new set of tubes fairly often at the beginning of their life. Once a week for the first month, then after they settle in, perhaps every couple of months just to be safe.

Octave includes a nice remote that can be programmed to work with your TV, DVD player and cable box, which is an excellent attempt at reducing "remote clutter" and there are five high-level inputs on the rear panel. There is also an H/T pass-through as well as a fixed output, should you still have an analog recorder. A nice touch, considering the resurgence of reel-to-reel tape. There is also a variable output, should you have speakers that require bi-amplification or use a powered subwoofer.

Almost all of my listening was done with the Naim HDX music server (with PS555 power supply), and for someone wanting a compact yet high-performance, all-digital system, these two components made for a very synergistic combination. *(continued)*



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A few other CD players at different price points were used with excellent results. Toward the end of the review when I was encouraged by the high level of playback quality I was hearing, I switched to some analog playback via the Naim Superline (with HighCap2 power supply) phono preamplifier, Rega P9 turntable/Dynavec-tor XV-1s cartridge combination.

The entire system was cabled with a combination of Audioquest Sky and Colorado interconnects, Colorado speaker cable and Shunyata Python CX power cords. A Running Springs Haley took care of power conditioning; though this was one of the quietest tube amplifiers I've heard in a long time, it still benefited from plugging it in to the Haley, resulting in an even quieter background.

**Your Choice of Sound**

While most would expect the amplifier to have a somewhat warmer, more fluid midrange character with the EL34 tubes, with the KT88's having more extension and dynamics, the difference between the two tubes was minimal. Both sets of supplied tubes were the "winged" SEC Russian tubes. Thanks to the ease in which bias can be reset, I was able to easily rebias and optimize the system to the speakers I used.

The Harbeth's definitely benefited from the extra top-end punch of the KT88's, while the GamuT and Dynaudio speakers were more to my liking with the EL-34's. The good news is that this makes it easy to fine-tune the V-40SE to what you prefer.

For the fanatical tube lover, there are definitely some NOS variations that could offer a different perspective, but these are very expensive. I did not get a chance to sample any vintage 6550's, but I did have a set of the EAT KT88's (full review in next issue) that, while expensive at \$1,500 for a matched quad, took the performance of the Octave one more click ahead of the stock tubes in terms of bass extension and even more clarity in the highs.

The other 99 percent of you will be thrilled with the performance provided by the stock tubes.

**A Strong Performer**

As I mentioned at the beginning of the review, the strongest suit of the Octave amplifier is its level of resolution and refinement. I used it primarily with the Harbeth Monitor 40.1's, a pair of Dynaudio Confidence C4's and the GamuT S-7's. All high-quality, five-figure speakers. From the moment I turned on the V-40 SE, I never felt like I was listening to a \$5,000 amplifier. I've owned enough separates in this price range that I feel confident saying that it sounds much more musical than any combination of \$2,500 preamplifier and amplifier that I've heard in recent memory.

Though the midrange magic possessed by all great tube amplifiers is here in spades, the V-40SE delivers great refinement at both ends of the frequency spectrum, which is a rarity with all but the most expensive tube gear. The only moderately powered tube amplifier that I've ever heard with this kind of bass control is my BAT VK-55SE, and it costs \$6,000. (And you still need a suitable preamp. Adding the matching VK-31SE to the mix adds another \$6,000 to the price total.) All of the Supreme Beings of Leisure catalog has

very deep, synth bass beats, but their current release, *11i*, outdoes the first two records in the grunt department. This was the first disc that really gave me a good look at the capabilities of this amplifier.

Usually when listening to a lower-powered tube amplifier, I just give up the idea of hearing any major bass weight with this music. But the Octave took me by surprise when I cued up my favorite track, "I'll be Good," and all of the lowest bits of the tone were still there. This amplifier definitely has big bass. Also impressive was the Octave's ability to unravel very dense music. Even though there are no acoustic instruments at all on *11i*, it is a densely recorded record, and when played on lesser equipment, it is easily mistaken for a compressed recording. With the Octave, I had no problem discerning the multiple layers of information being presented.

When listening to "Too Proud" from Mighty Sam McClain's *Give it up to Love* disc, I could hear that the bass line is deep and controlled, while McClain's vocal stays put just slightly left to center, even at high volume, while the Hammond solo just floats behind the speakers, larger than life. Of course, solo vocals are out of the park, with tons of texture; this amplifier definitely has a "reach out and touch it" quality that is seductive. *(continued)*

FEATURE

Tonality is fantastic, with just a smidge of body that really shines on acoustic instruments, especially piano, acoustic guitar and violin. Best of all, this is an amplifier that is up to playing some heavy rock, too. Thanks to the gentle compression of tube amplifiers, when pushed hard they get to a point where turning the volume control any further in the clockwise direction no longer results in an increase in volume. The music just flattens out. Whether I was playing Jimi Hendrix or the Scorpions, this understated little tube amplifier would blast a lot louder before compression kicked in, a better quality than I thought a 40-watt amplifier could deliver. I can't wait to hear the Super Black Box.

I used a wide range of speakers during the test period, ranging in price and degree of difficulty to drive. The owner's

manual mentioned that the V-40SE has no problem driving speakers as low as 2 ohms without problem, so it begged for the MartinLogan challenge. The CLX is notoriously difficult for most tube amplifiers to drive due to its impedance dropping to .75 ohms at 20khz. Many of the tube amplifiers I've tried with it made the speakers sound like they had a blanket over them, with severely rolled off highs.

The Octave amplifier passed this test with ease, and I was amazed to see that it would even drive my Magnepan 1.6's to adequate levels. I couldn't listen to VanHalen at brain-damage levels, but acoustic and vocal music played at more reasonable levels was very yummy.

**No Negatives**

While my favorite audio conspiracy theorists always crave negativity in

product reviews, I can find no faults with the Octave V-40SE. It is elegantly designed, sounds like an amplifier easily costing 50 percent more and is easy to use. It even has a great remote and instruction manual. That I spent most of my time listening to speakers in the \$20,000 to \$40,000 price range, and didn't feel like anything was out of place, speaks volumes about the amplifier.

If you are a fan of tube-integrated amplifiers, I can't suggest the Octave V-40SE highly enough. Even if you suspect that you might need more than 40 watts per channel, I'd give it a thorough listen; you might come away from the demo as pleasantly surprised as I was. Highly recommended. ●

**The Octave V-40SE**  
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FEATURE

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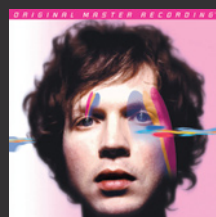
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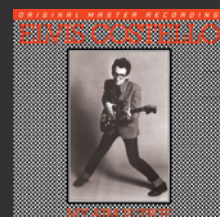
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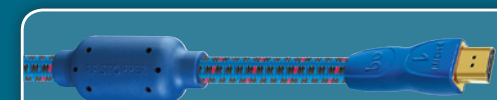
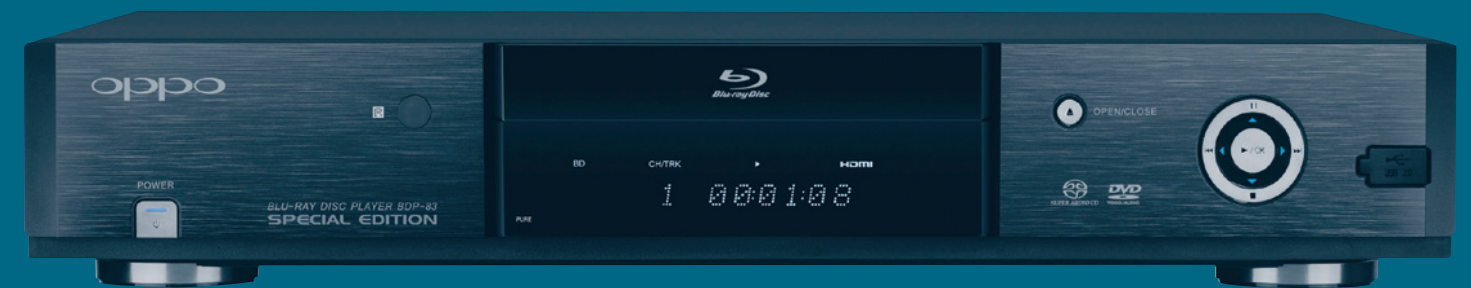
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