

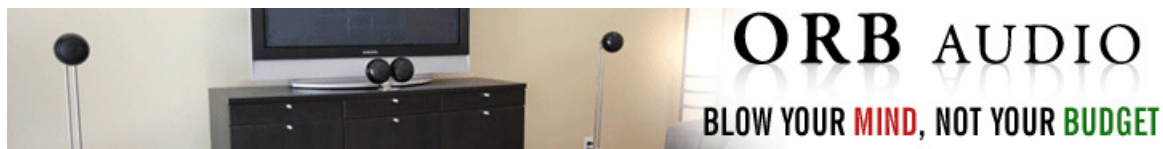


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## AMC CVT 3030 Integrated Amp Reviewed



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Name the best-selling 'audiophile' budget integrated amplifier of all time. The NAD 3020, right? Even if it isn't -- I wouldn't be surprised if it was outsold by some piece of junk from one of the Japanese majors, but I did say 'audiophile -- the NAD 3020 brings a smile to most hi-fi nuts' faces because it raised the standards at entry level. Imagine if one of the key figures behind its success started all over again with the same formula for the 1990s.

But using valves.

Cynics would argue that you can't turn any valve-driven thing into a mass-market proposition. But Malcolm Blockley -- for it is he -- feels otherwise. And he's put his money where his mouth is by producing the AMC ('Another Malcolm Conquest') CVT 3030. It's a sly little bugger, too, looking for all the world like a modern 30W integrated amplifier designed to woo paranoid punters and suggestible reviewers. It could say Rotel, Marantz, Pioneer or -- yes -- NAD on the fascia and none would be the wiser. But it doesn't. It says AMC (Again, Malcolm's Company). And it's a godsend for impoverished tube wannabees.

You're looking at a black-finish (white is optional), 430x112x290mm (WHD) box. At the front, bass, treble, volume, a true tape monitor and rotary source switches. At the back, gold-plated five-way binding posts. So far, it's standard formula, bar the recessed centre section which could be adjudged as a mere styling fillip. Then the details cause some head-scratching, even before you've lifted the lid.

Take, for example, the CD-Direct switch. It shuts off the speakers in headphone mode, or chooses between 'Normal' and 'Direct', the latter bypassing the tone controls. No big deal. Plenty of Oriental amps offer this. Then you notice that there's no balance control to bypass. What the designer did was choose the only sensible alternative: the volume control is ganged for left and right.

Still not impressed? Okay, leave the front panel after noting that even the headphone socket is auric-hued. Swing 'round the back. All of the sockets have been caressed by Midas, as have the three pairs of speaker terminals. Three pairs? Yes. This amp gives you the choice between separate 4 and 8 ohm connections. Closer inspection shows a phono section. Not adjustable, but then 47k Ohms is OK by me. But off with the lid.

Designer Peter Bath, whose long history in audio includes a stint with AR, squeezed in everything he could, resulting in a small box which weighs mere grams under 12kg. That's chunky stuff compared to the featherweights masquerading as penurious audiophile fodder. But lest you think that crammed innards mean hellish servicing, note that Malcolm Blockley learned his lessons after years with the NAD3020. That amp made a lot of people rich, but I'll bet that most of the benefactors were service engineers. Anyway, the CVT 3030 has a modular interior, right down to the tube installation, which I'll get to in a moment. Lots of computer cables and snap-fit connectors, daughter boards and sufficient space to swing a spanner.

The bulk of the interior is occupied by a whacking great mains transformer flanked by a brace of output transformers. These, it turns out, are hand-built by AMC's (And Malcolm Continued) American division in California, because the company wasn't happy with the pricing of outside companies. And, as you'll see, price has been an overriding concern. So read the rest of this while asking yourself, is this gonna be a cost vs sound trade-off?

All of the components are top-grade including (and I can't believe Blockley managed it) two pairs of bona fide, German-made Siemens EL34s for output duties. I didn't know that there were any left on earth, let alone quantities sufficient to satisfy a maker who intends to sell a few thousand of these suckers every month. But Siemens tubes or not, Blockley has no intention tube breakdowns adding to the collection of ulcers he harvested as the head of the late, lamented Hi-Fi Markets. For both sonic and servicing reasons, there are no valve bases. I repeat, NO VALVE BASES. The tubes are soldered directly to small daughter boards. If a tube goes, your dealer removes two screws, slides out the old board and slips in a new one, sporting a fresh pair of matched tubes. And Blockley -- ever clever -- has pointed out that this removes a connection from the circuit, all good, politically correct thinking.

(I don't want to suggest that Blockley is a salivating audiophile rather than a marketing genius. The removable boards also mean that the CVT 3030 can be converted to an all-MOSFET design using 1000V MOSFETS and will be marketed in that form alongside the glow-in-the-dark version. This will satisfy the pussies and wimps among you who can't bear the thought of tubes because of dumb-ass solid-state conditioning.)

Slip out the tubes and what do you see? I couldn't believe it, but the price includes a pair of whisper-quiet, top quality extractor fans. So the CVT 3030 runs cool, cooler than any Class-A solid state amplifier even though the CVT 3030 is pure Class-A throughout. Yes, kiddies, this baby makes all the right, politically correct noises, eh?

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