

Engström • Monica Preamplifier and Lars Mono Amplifiers

by Roy Gregory | May 10, 2018

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Two, two, twenty, ten times ten times ten, and 68,750. Then there's two, zero, zero, one, six, three, two, another two and 50,000. Reduce the Engström Monica preamp and Lars mono amps to mere numbers and that's what you end up with. Convert that to features and you have a pair of mono amplifiers, each with a pair of 300B output tubes, perched atop a 10" cubic chassis. The twin-chassis Monica offers no digital capability or phono stage -- just six line inputs, three of which are balanced, and two pairs each of balanced and single-ended outputs, along with a single, dual-concentric control for source select and level.

Those big numbers at the end? Oh, they'd be the prices -- in euros! Which pretty much sums up just how ridiculous it is to understand any high-end audio component in terms of its physical properties or feature count. Even so, the Engström products present a jarring discontinuity between price and physical presence. They are neither big nor, outwardly at least, particularly clever. But what they do -- what makes them high end and justifies those prices -- is perform. Boy, do these amps perform. In a field where performance really is the only justification for the prices being charged, there's actually something rather (if slightly bizarrely) refreshing about the Engströms' prosaic appearance and matter-of-fact approach. The longer I've lived with them -- and I've lived with them for a good, long time -- the more I've come to like the simple, polished, no-nonsense face they present to the world, not least because it seems to say, "Go on... go on. Play me. You know I'm not going to impress anybody by just sitting here." And ain't that the truth.

The Engström products look decidedly different -- stylish or odd depending on your point of view and just how conservative you are when it comes to aesthetics. The Lars amps are essentially 10" cubes with the tubes housed in the top plate, an arrangement that stretches their proportions upwards and then reinforces that impression with a pair of plate-glass housings that add physical (if ephemeral) bulk and a chimney effect to help maintain a constant operating temperature. They also protect both the tubes and any inquisitive fingers that might explore them. In a review context, the glasswork makes the amps bigger, heavier and demanding of far more careful handling, so I tended to use the chassis naked and actually came to admire the compact dimensions and clean looks -- as well as a footprint that allows two amps to stand side by side on a single large shelf. In classic Scandinavian tradition, the chassis walls are built from a single piece of laminated wood, a corresponding chromed metal plate providing the top, rear and bottom surfaces -- and a stark visual contrast with the piano-black lacquer of the front and side panels. Cylindrical chromed feet support both the chassis and one half of the glass casing, the other half being bolted to spacers on the back panel. All switches and connections are around the back, leaving the frontal aspect crisp and clean.

The Monica is a two-box tube preamp, with the power supply and control circuitry housed in one chassis, the audio circuits in the other. This increasingly common arrangement is to be found in many of the better preamps around, perhaps most obviously the VTL TL-7.5 III, offering the benefit of isolating the signal path from all of the AC circuitry. Like the Lars, Monica is a fully balanced, zero-feedback circuit. The twin chassis have piano-black fascias and chrome casework, but look a little closer and you'll see that each aluminum front panel curves through 90 degrees and extends down the left-hand side of the box, the top-right corner also being rounded off to mimic the curve in the one-piece chromed-metal top and side plate. These aesthetic cues obviously mimic the construction of the power amps -- the more so if the amps are run naked -- binding the units together stylistically and visually. The front of the power supply chassis carries the chromed, low-profile, dual-concentric volume/source select control and a small LED readout that shows the source selected (numerically -- no fancy labeling software here) and the level set. The volume and a mute function are controllable via an Apple app. The preamp's three balanced and three single-ended inputs, two sets of balanced and two sets of single-ended outputs, are arranged in left and right-channel blocks that reflect the unit's dual-mono construction. The single-ended inputs are each provided with an independent ground-lift switch, a sensible noise-reduction option in any preamp, but especially so in one that's likely to find itself used with high-efficiency speakers.

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Just as the Monica offers up a few surprises, so does the Lars monoblock. The single-ended and

balanced inputs and 4-, 8- and 16-ohm output taps are pretty standard stuff, although in this case the output impedances are actually derived from parallel (rather than open) windings. Not so common are the ground-lift switch, a -8dB gain switch and a rotary control for the three transformer taps, allowing you to optimize impedance matching without making and breaking cable connections. The gain switch (the amp can be set to provide 26 or 18dB of overall gain) and ground-lift again reflect the fact that these amps might well find their way into high-sensitivity setups, where spurious noise can be a serious problem. The use of WBT NextGen RCAs is an encouraging sight, reinforcing Engström's claims that they exhaustively select all internal and external componentry. Less welcome is the rhodium plating on the WBT output terminals; it might match the chrome casework, but experience suggests that the gold-plated versions sound better.

Internally, the Monica uses just a single 12AX7/ECC83 and a 6080WC in its power supply, with four E182CC or 5687WA tubes making up the audio circuit. Both the preamp and the power amps are transformer-coupled. The power amps each carry a single 6188 and pairs of 6V6GT, GZ34 and 300B output tubes, reflecting the balanced and tube-rectified topology. The output tubes are KR Audio 300B-XLS (although the ones shown in the images are from Emission Labs) -- and therein lies a tale. You would think that a 300B is a 300B is a 300B. Isn't that the whole point of design parameters, spec sheets and electrical equivalence? Well, yes and no. Increasingly, tube manufacturers have been playing with classic tube designs, using modern materials and techniques to improve performance and especially, power output. Companies like Emission Labs and KR Audio offer a range of 300B-compatible designs, tubes that can be run at classic 300B operating voltages or at higher voltages for increased power. KR actually offers three 300B variants. Even their "standard" 300B offers a maximum plate voltage of 550V (as opposed to 450V on classic tubes) and a 50- rather than 40-watt plate dissipation, equating to a 12-watt maximum output, rather than the 9 or 10 watts of the original 300B. The KR 300B-XLS takes things a whole lot further, with a 600V plate voltage, 30% higher plate current, 70-watt plate dissipation and a claimed maximum output capability of 24 watts!

A classic push-pull 300B amp will be rated at 18-20 watts output -- and that's what you'll get from the Lars if you use standard 300B tubes. Using the 300B-XLS allows Engström to rate the Lars at 36 watts. That's quite a boost, and while there's a very real difference between on-paper watts and real-world power, the Lars is an astonishingly capable amplifier (given its rated output), able to handle quite surprising loudspeaker loads, the sort of loudspeakers that you'd never normally associate with low-powered triode amps. That's something they have in common with both the Border Patrol P20 and the Lamm ML2.2 monoblocks, and I strongly suspect that it has as much or more to do with power-supply topology and the output transformers than it does with raw power rating. But, as we will see, whatever the reason, the Engström amplifiers have proved to be far more versatile than their appearance suggests.

One way to approach amplifier design is to establish the size of the signal and engineer to accommodate it. Another is to understand the nature of the signal and first attempt to preserve it before building outward to embrace as much of the demand as possible. Of course, things are never quite as simple as that, but it's a construct that neatly sums up the dichotomy presented by, on one hand, the VTL Siegfried II and, on the other, the Engström Lars, both amplifiers with credible claims to class leadership. Which rather underlines the fact that the audio cat apparently has as many skins as it has lives and, more important, that no one approach guarantees success. Instead, designers need to exploit the strengths of their chosen path and buttress the weaknesses. In the case of a low-powered design like the Lars, that means preserving the linearity and power transfer of the output devices while also generating as much useable power as possible -- with the emphasis being firmly on the word "useable." With a limited maximum power output, even using the KR tubes, that means spending a lot of time (and money) on the power supply and output transformer, ensuring that every watt counts, irrespective of the frequency or bandwidth of the signal.

What's more, and as I've already suggested, with output devices as simple as the 300B, the quality of the components and circuitry standing behind them is brutally exposed. Engström, like many other manufacturers, claims exhaustive selection of components throughout their products, a claim I'm minded to accept purely on the evidence of performance. If the components in these amps weren't carefully selected, you'd know all about it -- which brings us directly to the point: Having said that the Lars competes with or betters the best other amps of its type, what makes this amp's performance special -- and just how special is it?

But time first for one more aside. I keep talking about the 300B and the power amps; what of the Monica line stage? It's an interesting question because the answer is unusual. I'll talk about the Monica in isolation later, but for now let's just say that I've rarely heard a preamp-and-power-amp combination that is so musically contiguous, that sound so darned alike. I've heard plenty of

complementary combinations, products that dovetail together to superior effect, the strengths of one masking the weaknesses of the other and vice versa, or one simply adding more of a necessary attribute to balance the overall performance. But having lived with the Lars for some considerable time and across many, many systems before the Monica arrived, I was intimately familiar with its characteristics. Then along came the preamp, and it attached seamlessly to the amplifiers, exhibiting exactly the same overall musical nature. The Lars never sounded as Lars-like as it did with the Monica. In my experience, only the (decidedly distinctive) DNM products have ever possessed such a strongly implemented pattern of musical virtues, strengths and weaknesses that extend equally across preamp and power amp.

Listen to the Engström amplifiers and you'll be struck by an immediate sense of rightness, of ease, of relaxation. Music is unforced, natural and communicative, engaging and expressive without ever being pushy, edgy or aggressive -- not unless it's meant to be. You relax, you listen and you engage, drawn in by the performance. Recognizing that quality is easy and almost instant. Understanding where it comes from -- that's a longer process, because it's not about what these amps *do* -- it's about what they *don't do*.

In the musical shorthand that so often informs (or infects) reviews, it's common to refer to components as *additive* or *subtractive*. Certainly, it's a notion that can help define colorations or harmonic stripping, but it also misses or obscures the essential mechanism at work. Either of these aberrations is a distortion, but *distortion* is also a value-laden word with specific associations. Instead, I'd call them *disturbances*. At first glance, that word might seem like an odd choice, but think about music, think about what separates music from noise. That quality is *pattern*, defined in terms of pitch and time. To appreciate the shape and sense of a piece is to navigate that pattern; to appreciate the individual performer's influence on the whole (be it a soloist or simply one of the orchestra or band) is to understand where that performer shapes and stretches that pattern -- and whether or not it breaks.

To really communicate on a musical level, any system needs first to capture and reproduce that pattern, with all its subtleties, twists and inner relationships. Lost information, added or misplaced energy, timing errors -- all impact the clarity of the pattern, creating a disturbance that obscures and distorts its sense and our understanding. That's why I think in terms of disturbance, a concept that makes the achievement of the Engström electronics considerably easier to understand, because what these amps do is pass signal (at least a large part of the signal) with less disturbance than any other amps I've used.

In many, musically significant ways, the Lars and Monica are the very antithesis of the original Linn/Naim pace, rhythm and timing -- PRAT -- approach to musical reproduction, a system philosophy that contained the performance and imposed its own rhythmic logic and rigid grid on proceedings, a musical and expressive straitjacket that turned toes to metronomes and rhythmic flexibility to march time. Like sugar in tea, it was all about familiarity and palatability, the additive eliminating subtlety and layers like a steamroller compresses tarmac.

Both Linn and especially Naim have come a long, long way from those early days of audio and retail hegemony, but the contrast to the rhythmic and expressive freedom exhibited by the Engström electronics is still stark and remains relevant. When it comes to rhythm and tempo, perspective and space, the Engström amplifiers don't just allow the performers to play at their own pace, the performance to set its own agenda, by building outwards from the core musical components -- they make it a given. Rather than starting with the whole and then trying to drill down into the detail to perceive the pattern, they start with that pattern and then clothe it in layers of textural, spatial and harmonic information. It's a fundamental difference in approach and presentation, an entirely different mechanism, and one that informs every aspect of the amplifiers, their performance, their strengths and their weaknesses.

Dwell on that for a moment and it doesn't take long to realize its profound implications. If the Engströms are transparent to the pattern and sense of the performance, then they will also be transparent to the recording itself. Once you've identified the way in which these products work, it also quickly becomes apparent that this *modus operandi* is significantly more apparent the smaller the piece you listen to. Why? Because smaller ensembles require less complex and convoluted recording rigs -- and those simpler setups introduce less disturbance. Likewise, older recordings are also less likely to deploy massive numbers of mikes, channels and effects to achieve their ends.

During the recording of the Carreras/Te Kanewa *West Side Story* [Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft 415 253-1], producer Hanno Rinke tells conductor Leonard Bernstein not to worry about a sonic anomaly he's hearing on playback because "It can be fixed in the mix." Sadly, Hanno and a lot of other

recording engineers were overconfident in their skills, as becomes only too apparent when you examine their work through the looking glass of the Engström amps. It's not that you can only listen to simple, small-scale recordings on the Lars and Monica, just that you really get to hear their benefits, broadening the gap between the almost "they are here" credibility of the best, small acoustic recordings and larger-scale, mass-market offerings. In the same way, the qualitative gap between CD and vinyl becomes a gaping chasm. Don't get me wrong -- the Engström amps sound great on CD, but when you play records, those special intimate performances really come to life.

Given the implications of all that, and given that the Monica line stage is named for the late, great Monica Zetterlund, it should come as no surprise that the Engströms, both audio designer Lars and his industrial-designer nephew, Timo, are jazz fans. Any audio electronics that excel on small-group acoustic recordings are just crying out to be fed the jazz canon, while the music itself is all about pattern and variation, evolution and recapitulation, the very musical vocabulary in which the Engström amps excel. With the LP of Coltrane's *My Favorite Things* [Atlantic 1361], I've never heard its simple genius laid quite so elegantly bare, while listening to "Lush Life" (from *Lush Life* [DCC/Prestige 7188/LPZ-2032]), I've never before enjoyed such clarity of purpose or such a direct musical connection. The piping, reedy textures of Coltrane's sax are immediate, breathy and natural, while Paul Chambers' bass lines -- bowed or plucked -- have a clear sense of pitch and direction, pace and impulse. The switch from ballad to double time is an effortless and utterly fluid change of gear, while Trane's elongated lines are beautifully shaped, his evolutions clear. Clarity and separation were exceptional despite the mono recording, with tonality and depth differentiation effortlessly identifying each instrument. When Donald Byrd's sparky, quicksilver trumpet solo shoots out, the playing is fast yet relaxed and unhurried, never jumbled or flustered, so that when he drops back into the ballad tempo for the finale, the transition, once again flows with a natural expressive grace, a simple extension of what flowed before.

That level of relaxed intimacy and rhythmic dexterity makes for a captivating listening experience that pulls you into and *through* the track's evolutions, captured by its natural sense of progress and musical momentum. The track might be familiar, but this is a new, brighter, more colorful and more exhilarating journey. Even the dense and difficult *A Love Supreme* [Impulse! A-77], an album I've always struggled with, takes on a new clarity and shape, more easily followed and tracked. Normally, I get lost around half way through side one, but with the Engströms doing the heavy lifting, I was -- perhaps for the first time -- able to not just listen but start to appreciate what this music is really about.

Interestingly, early stereo jazz, with its often hard right-left separation, is just as successful. The miking might disturb the spatial integrity, but the otherwise simple recording still delivers the musical goods, while sensitively executed modern recordings can be spectacular. Kit Downes' *Tricko* [Coup Perdu CPLP003] juxtaposes his crisp piano against the contrasting textures and longer notes of Lucy Railton's cello, with occasional ambient embellishments. The Engströms give the way those textures combine a glorious clarity and impact, whether the cello's accents are longer bowed notes or the sharper attack of plucked interjections. Even with music this sparse, it commands your attention, the system dropping away from the performance before you.

And what the Engström amps do for jazz they do for pop and classical too, always making the most of what's on offer rather than discarding what isn't up to scratch. They thrive on carefully produced studio pop, preserving tonal shadings, textures and timing cues that (ironically) so often evade 'higher resolution' systems. Just listen to Tony Levin's closing bass solo on "Don't Give Up" (Peter Gabriel's *So* [Realworld PGLPR5X], the double 45rpm, half-speed remastered LP); the notes aren't just perfectly paced and pitched, they have shape and a sense of direction, attack and decay. Gabriel's vocals have a natural presence and immediacy, as does Kate Bush's chorus work, while the instrumentation and playing is beautifully blended by the deft production work, a great song elevated higher by good work in the studio.

So far I've concerned myself with describing -- well, okay, *wallowing in* -- what the Engströms mono amps do well. Musically speaking, the quality of the ingredients shines through. But how far can they stretch and at what point do they overreach. In part the answer to that question depends on the system. Having used the Lars at length with the Living Voice Vox Olympian system, I can say with certainty that in that (admittedly esoteric) context, they never struggled for power. In fact, of all the amps I tried with the Vox Olympian system, they were by far my favorites, their clarity and innate grasp of musical structure for me easily eclipsing the Kondo Gaku-Oh with which the speakers were developed and are so often, so convincingly demonstrated. With both amps on hand, there was no question which of the two offered the greater musical insight as well as the most musically engaging and satisfying performances. But despite their elevated asking price of these amps, most Engström

owners won't be aspiring to ownership of full-range horns, and one of the things that makes these electronics so interesting is their ability to work with far more conventional loudspeaker loads. Visit hi-fi shows and, as often as not, you'll find Engström exhibiting with the likes of Marten or Vivid, purveyors of three- or four-way cabinet speakers with sensitivity hovering around the 90dB mark.

I spent a lot of time listening to the Lars/Monica combination with both the Wilson Benesch Resolution and the impressive new Raidho XT5 (perhaps the best-balanced floorstander that company has ever produced). These speakers may not be the obvious choice for a sub 40-watt amplifier, but then they also have something in common with both the Vivid and Marten designs. All four are low-loss devices, with low-storage-signature cabinets and if they run the gamut of different, high-tech driver approaches, they all manage to preserve musical energy, one way or another. With both the Raidho and the Wilson Benesch designs, the Lars was more than happy -- up to a point. Go too big or too hard and the soundstage started to collapse and congeal, with dynamic compression shutting down musical and tonal contrasts. Play Gabriel's "Don't Give Up" on the XT5 and it is presented with presence, scale, separation and authority -- both rhythmic and low-frequency -- as already described. But let the album run into the dense, musical maelstrom of "That Voice Again" and in the space of the gap between two tracks you have shifted the system from consummate control to flirting with the edge of its comfort zone. Quite where you cross that line depends on the nature and the level of the program material, and it's not as simple as *big is bad*. Looking to investigate this very question, I assembled a selection of Shostakovitch 5th Symphonies, music that moves from the softly haunting to the truly monumental, via every stage in between. In each case, the massive crescendos could and generally would tip the system over the edge, but the onset of distress and the nature of collapse varied significantly with performance and, perhaps most interestingly, with provenance.

All told, I selected four performances and five discs: in chronological order they were Previn and the LSO [RCA SB-6551], LP 1966, and [RCA 74321 24212], CD 1995; Berglund and the Bournemouth S.O. [EMI SLS 5044], LP 1976; Haitink and the Concertgebouw [Decca 478 3174], CD 1981); and Ashkenazy and the Philharmonia [Signum SIGCD135], CD 2008. It made for a fascinating exercise, both in terms of the different interpretations and performances and also the different presentations.

Concentrating on the explosive fourth movement, I'll start with Haitink and his refreshingly measured and straightforward reading. Although the playing and direction are clear, the scale and energy demanded of the system foreshortens the depth and limits the dynamic range and musical impact. Compare this to Previn on CD and the sheer verve and power in the LSO's performance deliver greater presence, order and range, without the clipped crescendos of the Decca disc. The bass drum and double basses have more air and texture, but, above all, the music has a more defined and discernible shape and sense of purpose. This preservation of pattern is all the more impressive given that Previn rattles through the movement in nine and a half minutes, compared to Haitink's 10:34. Now contrast the impressive body, color and musical impact that Previn achieves, with the Philharmonia under Ashkenazy's baton. At 10:22 playing time, Ashkenazy's tempo is only a little quicker than Haitink's, yet musically the results are rushed and jumbled, the rapid, energetic phrases with their rousing theme tumbling over each other as the performance loses all semblance of shape, all sense of cresting, successive peaks. Previn's reading, captured over four decades before the Ashkenazy enjoys both an analog master and, one assumes, a significantly less complex recording chain, both things that stand it in good stead, yet it is still surprising not only how much more music it delivers but how much better that music survives its passage through the system. Where both the Decca and the Signum discs expose the ultimate power limitations of the amplifiers, the crescendos on the Previn are more impressive and impactful and also delivered with less obvious constraint.

If the benefits of the analog original are really that apparent, how about resorting to LP? Comparing the Previn performance on LP to the CD version shows the same yawning chasm in quality that I've come to expect. The LP offers a deeper, broader and far more dimensional soundstage, richer colors, greater presence and a far greater dynamic range. It's not so much that the LP goes louder, but it delivers more concentrated energy to greater musical effect. Comparing it to the Berglund recording again highlights just how clearly these amps differentiate between performers and performances. Berglund is hardly a shrinking violet, as witnessed by his EMI/BSO Sibelius cycle, but in this repertoire the Bournemouth simply can't match the discipline and the resulting concentrated power and expressive contrast generated by the LSO, power that is essential to this piece.

That is a crucial observation when it comes to understanding these amps and their behavior under load. It's not as simple as, *Can they meet the dynamic demands of the piece?* Instead, it's more a question of how well they maintain their sense of pattern and musical whole as levels and complexity rise. That, in turn, depends to a large extent on the presence of those qualities in the recording to start with. Or to put it another way, the better the recording, the bigger they'll go -- which is far from the

normal case. Clean, organized dynamic demands are met with aplomb: it's more confused and jumbled signals that fall apart under pressure. No, the Lars won't deliver Previn's vision at full chat without a hint of strain. Nor will they deliver the absolute dimensional stability and low-end authority of an amp like the VTL Siegfried II. But what they will do is capture the *frisson* of tension that makes the performance so dramatic and carry that thread through the towering demands of the crescendos. The soundstage draws in and instruments can step forward. Intra-instrumental space gets congested, but the shape and phrasing, the pattern and purpose is maintained throughout. These are not amps for a diet of non-stop symphonic blockbusters; their considerable strengths lie at the more intimate and intricate end of the musical spectrum. But I never cease to be amazed by how capable they are when you ask them to roll up their sleeves and shovel some serious coal. As with any modestly powered amp, speaker matching is going to be crucial to the overall performance envelope, with sensitivity playing a large part in that equation. The Lars is no powerhouse, but the range of options available for a given musical demand will be far wider with the Lars than any of the other low-powered amps discussed here.

Turning to the Monica used in isolation, I was initially frustrated and a little disappointed. Using its balanced outputs to drive the VTL S-400 II and feeding it from the Wadax Pre 1 Ultimate DAC or Kuzma Stabi M via the Connoisseur phono stage, it lacked the immediacy, attack and texture of the Connoisseur 4.2 line stage, the rock-like stability and dynamic authority of the VTL TL-7.5 III. Instead, it sounded rounded and softened, beguilingly warm and richly hued, but lacking that reach-out-and-touch quality that both the Connoisseur and the VTL possess.

It took a while to realize that what I was hearing was the same set of attributes I'd heard from the Lars monoblocks, but they were entering the system further upstream. In search of the Monica's essential nature, I'd started out by playing small and intimate tracks, not realizing that I'd almost taken a step too far in that direction. You don't get much more immediate and intimate than the stark clarity of Janis Ian's "Some People's Lives" (from the *Breaking Silence* LP [Analogue productions APP 027]), but what a track like this does is expose the Monica's lack of ultimate immediacy without giving it any complexity to work on. Let the album run and the title track soon redresses the balance. It opens with a hushed vocal that is progressively expanded, double track on double track, line on line, into a virtual chorus. Listening through the Monica, I certainly missed the absolute immediacy, the almost ghostly intimacy of that opening vocal, but what happened next was remarkable, two voices appearing either side of the lead vocal, then two more and then another two, to create a spread of seven voices in all, all cloned from the lead. This was something I've never heard as explicitly before, yet the Monica revealed the studio artifice without so much as a flourish, with the sort of easy nonchalance that makes it even more impressive. The slab-sided opening crescendo, the chopped and changing rhythms, the shifts in dynamic density followed with an unerring sense of place and purpose, making musical sense of a track that all too often sounds more like sonic fireworks.

This was pattern and perspective, all over again. The relaxed, unforced sense of pace brought its own quality of unhurried clarity to phrasing and arrangements, purpose and direction to performances, whether it was Don Henley singing Jackson Browne or Barbirolli conducting Sibelius. Listening with the S-400 II, there was an almost tidal continuity -- ebb and flow to music, a smooth sense of poised progression and substance, founded on the rich tonal palette and natural harmonic weight. This is a sound that reflects the irresistible power and shape of the ocean swell rather than the ripples or spray on its surface. It's the polar opposite of the microdynamic resolution, texture and intimacy that are the Connoisseur's forte; it lacks the absolute stability and planted authority of the VTL. Instead it offers a more motive, more fluid presentation that fastens on the overall line and shape rather than the notes and the gaps between them.

Yet, I'd heard none of that big-boned, sweeping tendency from the Monica in combination with the Lars -- as reverting to the Engström amps quickly demonstrated. Which is when I started thinking about gain. Using the S-400 II, I was running the Monica's volume control at around -27 or -30dB. There's wasn't much that I could do with the phono stage, but the Wadax offers variable output. Winding down the output level of the Pre 1 by 25dB and compensating on the Monica, the benefit was immediately obvious, with the system gaining in agility and immediacy. All right -- this didn't turn the Monica into a Connoisseur, but nor did it rob it of that sense of shape, flow and substance that make for such compelling listening. Whether it was string texture on the Kleiber Beethoven 7th Symphony (VPO [DGG SACD 471 6302]) or the vivacity and sheer adventure of Kopatchinskaja's Tzigane on *Deux* (with Polina Leschenko [Alpha-Classics 387]) that sense of pattern was paired with instrumental texture and a new agility that brought performances to life. Now it was easy to hear why Patricia Kopatchinskaja is considered one of the most exciting violinists around -- and why Kleiber's Beethoven is still revered today, more than 40 years after it was recorded.

Drafting in the Wadia S7i CD player proved the point, albeit at the cost of reduced performance from the player itself, down to the decreased bit depth of its digital-domain level control -- and there's the rub. The Monica is an exceptional preamp, capable of bringing shape and order to the most difficult music, the murkiest recordings, but its performance is system and gain dependent. To give of its (considerable) best, you need to use it with sources and power amps that match its gain structure, which helps explain those input gain switches on the back of the Lars. What's more, if that means adjusting the output level of the source components or the overall gain of the power amps, you need to ensure that those adjustments don't impose their own sonic limitations. But if your system could do with an injection of shape and color, purpose and poise, then the Monica is well worth investigating. If it's a good fit with the equipment already in place, the results could be exceptional. Which brings us back to the best fit of all -- Engström's matching power amps.

As impressive as these products are individually -- and both the Lars and Monica are capable of bringing something extra, even to really good systems -- there's no escaping that together their whole is greater than the sum of the parts, especially in a system built around them, or one that plays to their strengths. In that respect, the Engströms are no different to the similarly hair-shirt (and similarly exceptional) Connoisseurs, products that always work better in tandem than in isolation. But what makes the Engströms really special is that, used together, they offer the musical benefits so often claimed for SET amplification, without overdosing on the downsides -- the softened, rounded masking that renders music overly polite and ultimately innocuous. More powerful, more temporally accurate and sure-footed, with far greater musical clarity and purpose than the competition, the Engströms are also far more versatile, bringing those triode benefits to a wider range of systems -- at a price.

Which brings us full circle, back to those numbers that opened this review. Definitely distinctive in appearance, Monica and Lars are also compact and, no matter how beautifully finished or put together, there's no escaping the simple fact that they are monstrously expensive -- expensive enough that as I suggested at the start of this review, there's only one way to justify the cost -- and that's performance. Every time I look at these products, inside or out, the numbers just don't add up: I can't begin to explain why they cost as much as they do -- at least not in material terms. But then I listen to them again and those concerns just seem to evaporate. Even then, at this price, to make them a sensible purchase they need to do at least one musically important thing better than anything else. It should be obvious from the preceding description that the Engströms tick that box pretty emphatically. I also mentioned earlier that the Lars monoblocks were head and shoulders above other amps I used with the Vox Olympians, a telling observation not because the Living Voice speakers are horn-loaded, but because of their sheer quality, company in which the Engström amps are demonstrably comfortable. They were equally at home with other exceptional partnering products, further underlining their pedigree.

Judge this book by its 300B cover and you could be in for a major surprise. These may not be the electronics solution for every system, but they will work in far more systems than you might expect, bringing with them something as musical as it is magical. At a combined cost of almost €120,000 they are not products for every man, but if you are in the fortunate position that you can afford them, they might just be the products for you. ☺

Prices: Monica, €50,000; Lars, €68,750 per pair.

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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Can less still be considered more when it comes to power output?

When is a small amplifier too small? It's an interesting question and one that's far from simple to answer, not least because that answer will be system and, loudspeaker dependent, but will also vary with an individual listener's experience and priorities. Midrange performance should be a given with small amps (although *should* and *is* are a long way apart). It's when you start expecting high-frequency extension and low-frequency quality to match that things get way, way more difficult. Even given speakers of extraordinary efficiency, it seems that there's still a minimum threshold for power delivery if you want to achieve genuinely high-end sound, which, for this listener at least, demands

full-bandwidth performance. It's one of the reasons that, despite the fact that I like low-powered amps and have owned and lived with several such beasts, I've never bought into the whole SET thing. As always, there's an honorable exception to that rule, but as we'll see, that exception actually ticks quite a few other boxes instead.

Over the years I've owned biamped DNM PA1 (30W) and Jadis JA30 (20W) monoblocks. I've also used and admired the Mark Levinson ML2 (25W), the Border Patrol P20 (20Wpc), the Kondo Gaku-Oh (20W) and last, but by no means least, the Lamm ML 2.1 (18W), all amplifiers capable of genuine, high-end results. There have been others, but this extremely short list contains the ones that have stuck around, physically and/or mentally.

The first thing that stands out is the consistent power outputs -- around 20 watts for tube designs, 30 for solid state. What isn't immediately apparent is that there are a number of other similarities. All of these amps enjoy unusually substantial, and heavily regulated power supplies. Both the Border Patrol and the Kondo employ 300B output tubes and both they and the JA30 are push-pull designs. The Lamm is, of course, the only single-ended design here, although aside from the Border Patrol, it probably has a more substantial power supply and takes regulation more seriously than any of the others. The conclusion seems to be that, as far as I'm concerned, any tube amp looking to convince is likely going to be push-pull, offer at least 20 watts of useable output power and possess a power supply of the sort of size normally found on far more powerful designs.

That doesn't automatically exclude single-ended operation, and there are a number of large, high-output triode tubes available (the 211 and 845 being the most common), but none of those tubes are audio-specific designs, and whilst they may make a 20W SET a possibility, I've never heard one, or a parallel single-ended design that I've liked enough to want to live with. It's interesting that the Lamm eschews those cult tubes in favor of the 6C33C, but then the ML 2.1 seems to be unusual in almost every respect.

So, with a single pair of push-pull 300B-XLSs delivering well in excess of 20 well-regulated watts, the Lars has found favor, perhaps not surprisingly. On paper at least, it ticks all of my boxes. What is surprising is the extent of that favor. But then, if anybody doubts the enduring appeal of low-powered amplifier designs, he need only listen to the Lars to discover just what the words *expressive range* really mean. Even so, to qualify as a convincing amplifier, it needs to extend that capability well beyond the broad midband -- which is the other thing that the Lars and the other amps listed here have in common.

-Roy Gregory

Associated Equipment

Analog: Kuzma Stabi M turntable with 4Point tonearm, Grand Prix Audio Monaco v2.0 turntable with Kuzma 4Point 14 tonearm, AMG Giro turntable with 9W2 tonearm; Allnic Puritas and Puritas Mono, Clearaudio Accurate and Goldfinger Statement, EMT JSD P6.0, Fuuga, Kuzma CAR-50, Lyra Atlas, Etna, Dorian and Dorian Mono cartridges; DS Audio DS-W1 cartridge with matching equalizer; Stillpoints Ultra LP Isolator record weight; Connoisseur 4.2 PLE and Tom Evans Master Groove phono stages; DS Audio Cartridge Energizer.

Digital: Neadio Origine S2 CD player, CEC TL-5 CD transport, Wadax Pre 1 Ultimate DAC.

Preamplifiers: Connoisseur 4.2 LE, Kondo KSL-M77, VTL TL-6.5 Series II Signature and TL-7.5 Series III Reference.

Power amplifiers: Berning Quadrature Z, VTL Siegfried Series III Reference monoblocks; VTL S-400 Series II Signature stereo amp.

Integrated amplifier: Mark Levinson No.585.

Speakers: Living Voice Vox Olympian/Vox Elysian system, Raidho XT5, Wilson Audio Alexx and two Thor's Hammer subwoofers, Wilson Benesch Cardinal and Resolution with and without Torus Bass Generators.

Cables: Complete looms of Nordost Odin or Valhalla 2, or Crystal Cable Absolute Dream from AC socket to speaker terminals. Power distribution was via Quantum Qb8s or Crystal Cable Power Strip Diamonds, with a mix of Quantum Qx2 and Qx4 power purifiers and Qv2 AC harmonizers. CAD Ground

Control and Nordost Qkore grounding systems.

Supports: Harmonic Resolution Systems RXR, Hutter Racktime or Quadraspire SVT Bamboo racks. These are used with Nordost SortKone or HRS Nimbus equipment couplers and damping plates. Cables are elevated on HECC Panda Feet.

Acoustic treatments: As well as the broadband absorption placed behind the listening seat, I employ a combination of RPG Skyline and LeadingEdge D Panel and Flat Panel microperforated acoustic devices.

Accessories: Essential accessories include the SmarTractor protractor, a USB microscope (so I can see what I'm doing, not for attempting to measure stylus rake angle) and Aestetix cartridge demagnetizer, a precision spirit level and laser, a really long tape measure and plenty of low-tack masking tape. I also make extensive use of the Furutech anti-static and demagnetizing devices and the VPI Typhoon record-cleaning machine. The Dr. Feikert PlatterSpeed app has to be the best-ever case of digital aiding analog.

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