

The Audio Beat

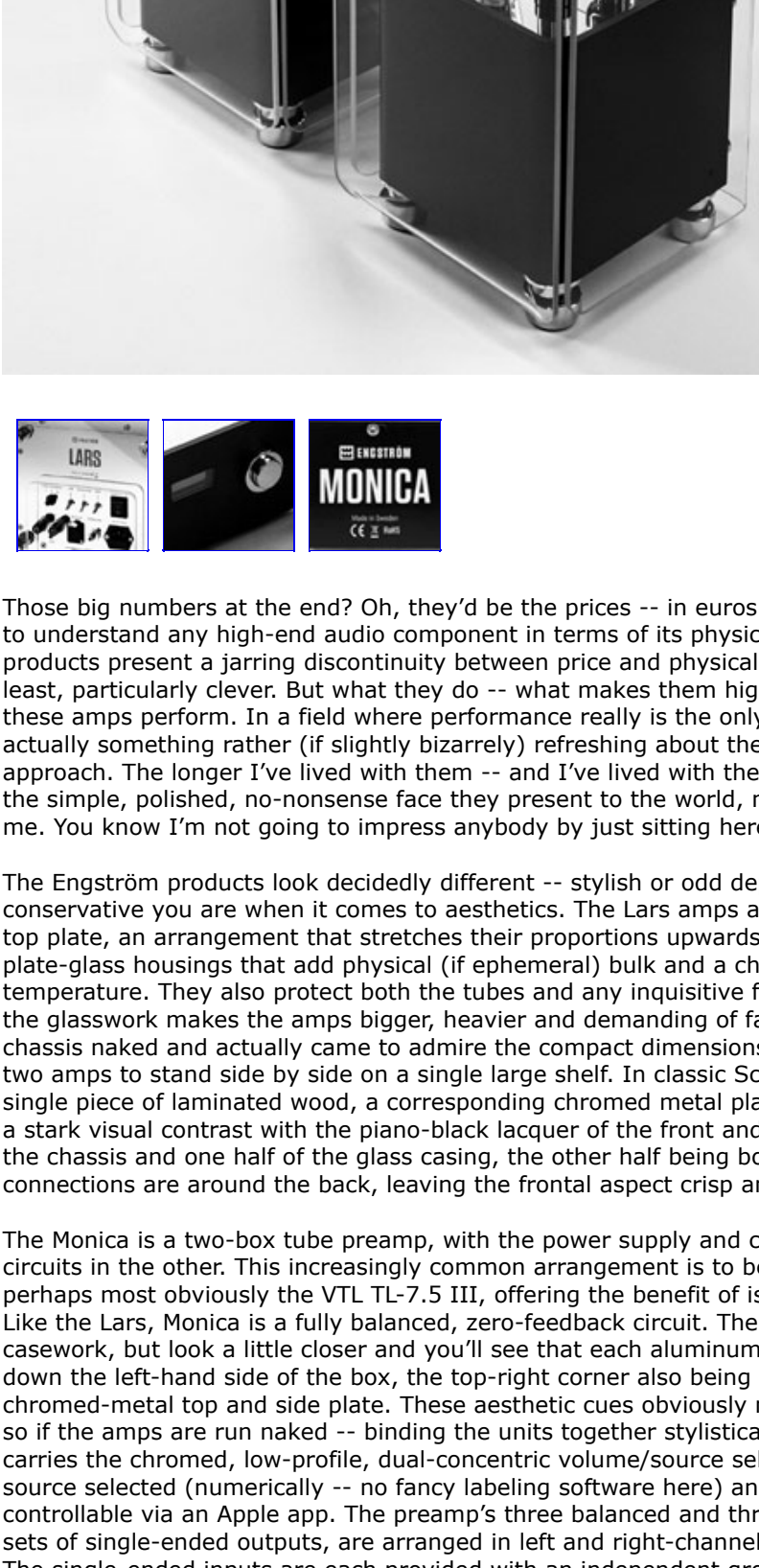
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Engström • Monica Preamp and Lars Mono Amplifiers

... both the Lars and Monica are capable of bringing something extra, even to really good systems."

by [Box Greener](#) | May 10, 2018

Two, two, twenty, ten times ten times ten, and 68,750. Then there's two, zero, zero, one, one, six, three, two, another two and 50,000. Reduce the Engström Monica preamp and the 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.



Prices: Monica, €50,000; Lars, €68,750 per pair.
Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

Engström
S:t Petri Kyrkogata 10
SE-222 21 Lund
Sweden
+46 (0)733 70 51 51
www.engstromsound.com

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 circuitry 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 took a little closer and you'll see that each individual 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, round-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.

Just as the Monica offers up a few surprises, so does the Lars monoblock. The single-ended and balanced inputs add 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 sign, reinforcing Engström's claims that they exhaustively select all internal and external components. 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 6080W in its power supply, with four E182CC or 5687BWA tubes making up the audio circuit. Both the preamp and the power amps are transformer-coupled. The power amps each carry a single 6J88 and pairs of 6V6G7, 6Z54 and 300B output tubes, reflecting the balanced and tube-rectified topology. The outputs from the 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 equations? 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-watt 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 300B tube 300B amp will be rated at 18-20 watts output -- and that's what you'll get from the Lars if you use standard push-pull. 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 ML.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 -- what 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 informs) reviews, it's common to refer to components as *additive* or *subtractive*. Certainly, it's a notion that helps to help define colors or harmonic colors, but it also misrepresents 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 nature 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 -- around 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 flexibility that turned toes to motoronomes and rhythmic straightjacket to march time. Like sugar in tea, it was what about familiarity and palatability, the additive immunizing subtlety and layers like a steamroller compresses terms.

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 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 outward 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 intricate 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 Kanawa *West Side Story* [Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft 415 255-1], 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 credibility, broadening the gap between the almost "they are here" breedability 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 Coletrane'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/PPZ-2032]), I've never before enjoyed this 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 unobtrusive change of gear, while Treane's "Don't Give Up" on the XTS and it presented with precise clarity and clarity of the pattern, the Engström amps excel. Clarity and differentiation were exceptional despite the mono recording, with instrument and depth differentiation effortlessly identifying each tonality. 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 -- perhaps one, but with the Engströms doing the heavy lifting, I was -- side by side 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 mixing 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* [Cup Perdu CPLP003] juxtaposes his crisp piano against the contrasting textures and longer notes of Lucy Ralinton'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 drawing away from 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 the good work in the studio.

So far I've been content with describing -- well, okay, *wallowing in* -- what the Engström mono amps do well. Musical speakers, and the quality of the listening room, and how far can they stretch -- at that 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 strugled for power. In fact, of all the amps I tried with the Vox Olympus 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 it shows and that, as electronics so interesting is their ability to work with far more conventional loudspeaker loads. Vint hi-fi makes them, or even 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 Neobid X15 (perhaps the best-balanced floorstander that company has ever produced). These speakers will 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-capacitance 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 Radio 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 tone and tonal contrasts. Play Gounod's "Don't Give Up" on the XTS and it's presented with precise clarity and clarity of the pattern, the Engström amps excel. Clarity and differentiation were exceptional despite the mono recording, with instrument and depth differentiation effortlessly identifying each tonality. 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.

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 Bourne-mouth 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 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 line and double basses have more air and texture, but, despite all, the music has a muted immediacy and discernible clarity of the pattern. This preservative of 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 just compelling listening. Whether it was string texture on the Kleiber Beethoven 7th Symphony (VPO [DGG SACD 471 302]) or the vivacity and sheer adventure of Kopatchinskaja's Tzigane on a Decca (with Polina Leschenko [Alpha-Classica 387]) that sense of pattern was paired with instrumental texture and a new quality that brought performances to life. None of it was as hearty as 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 Wadiaz S7I CD player proved the point, albeit at the cost of reduced performance from the player itself, down to the degraded 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, your 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 overdoing 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 the most 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 heard and shoulders above other amps I used with the Vox Olympus, a telling observation not because the Living Voice speakers are horn-based, but because I used their best 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 to 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.

Associated Equipment

Analogue: 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; Alnic Puritas and Puritas Mono, Clearaudio Accurate and Goldfinger Statement, EMT JSD P6.0, Fuuga, Kuzma CAR-50, Lyra Atlas, Etna, Dorlan and Dorlan HDS card decks; DS Audio HD6 (4th cartridge), cartridges with matching equalizer; Sforzotto Ultra L1 Absolute record weight; Connoisseur 4.2 PLE and Tom Evans Master Groove phono stages; DS Audio Cartridge Energizer.

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

Pre amplifiers: Connoisseur 4.2 LE, Kondo KSL-M77, VTL TL-7.5 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 XT15, Wilson Audio Alexx and two Thor's Hammer subwoofers, Wilson Benesch Cardinal and Resolution with and without Torus Bass Generators.

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

Supports: Harmonic Resolution Systems RXR, Hutter Racktime or Quadramps SVT Bamboo racks. These are used with Nordost Sortkone or HRS Nimbus amplifier 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 Leading Edge D Panel and Flat Panel microperforated acoustic devices.

Accessories: Essential accessories include the SmaartProX Protractor, a USB microscope (so I can see what I'm doing, not for attempting to measure Styxus rake angle) and Aesthetix 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 Turnover record-cleaning machine. The Dr. Feikert PlatterSpeed app has to be the best-ever case of digital aiding analog.