

Vincent SV-236 Hybrid Integrated Amplifier

Achtung! A Killer Integrated from Germany



The Vincent SV-236 arrived in a battered cardboard box with worn packaging that offered no clue as to what lay within—a gleaming brushed-aluminum integrated amplifier whose looks, features and performance belie its \$1795 suggested retail price.

One of several new Vincent models that debuted at the 2005 Consumer Electronics Show, the SV-236 is a hybrid integrated dual-triode pre-amp mated to a solid state power amp, a design approach long proven to deliver the best of both worlds—the warm harmonic richness of tubes and the dynamic authority of solid state. Just say "no" to the heat and reliability problems of output tubes and the weight of output transformers.

Externally, the Vincent is a beauty—elegantly designed and nicely crafted, silver throughout except for the black rear panel. Upfront are four large, easy-to-use knobs, three self-explanatory function buttons (POWER, TONE, LOUD), and six input indicators.

The sides of the unit are thin-vened heat sinks, all perfectly polished—no sharp edges anywhere, unlike many more expensive amps.

In the center of the thick faceplate is an amber-lit round window, through

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which is visible one of the tubes. The amber light can be dimmed or brightened in four steps via a DIMMER button on the slim metal remote control. The input select and volume are the only functions that are duplicated on the remote and on the front panel. The remote has a MUTE button that the

front panel lacks; the LOUD and TONE controls can be engaged only via the front panel. A tiny red LED embedded in the amp's motorized volume control blinks when pressing volume up or down on the remote and when the amp is muted.

The back panel on the SV-236 has six pairs of gold-plated RCA input jacks (unbalanced), two pairs of line-level outputs (rec out and pre out, but no tape monitor input and no power amp input), and four pairs of heavy-duty gold-plated five-way binding posts—two pairs for each channel, for easy bi-wiring. There's no phono input—for that you need an external phono stage. In the lower center of the back panel is a receptacle for an industry standard 15A IEC power cord. The receptacle has an inboard AC fuse holder with a 10A fuse.

The interior of the amp is equally well thought-out, with separate shielded compartments for power transformer (a "low noise" 5kV unit), pre-

amp, motorized volume control, and power output stages. The circuit layout is spare, with high-quality parts, including a pair of compact 63V/10,000uF power supply capacitors on each output board, matched sets of complimentary output transistors (flat-pack 2SC 33519/ 2SA 1386), and poly caps in critical positions. The tone controls are passive, with all related components mounted on a separate board.

Careful circuit layout and parts selection, combined with extensive internal shielding and what must be a superb grounding scheme, make the Vincent very quiet. Even with the volume control wide open, there was little residual noise. The manufacturer specifies signal:noise ratio at 90dB.

Out-of-the-Box Performer

The Vincent went into action right out of the box. I plugged it straight into the wall (no power conditioning) with the supplied AC cord and connected a 16' pair of Nordost SPM Reference bi-wire speaker cables to my Montana loudspeakers, a larger, custom-made version of the company's esteemed EPS model. My on-hand sources included a Marantz DVD-910 DVD player, an older California Audio Labs Icon CD player, and a modified Denon DVD-2900 universal player. I used Vincent's supplied interconnect (maker unknown) as well as Kimber Silver Streak and a 2 meter pair of Nordost Quattro Fil.

What was immediately most apparent was the Vincent's ability to produce deep, powerful, authoritative bass. No bigger than a budget-priced A/V receiver, the Vincent SV-236 is a serious powerhouse. The seemingly bottomless bottom end had me plowing through my CD collection for bass-heavy favorites—Patti Smith's superb cover of Prince's "When Doves Cry," on *Land*, her two-disc retrospective [Arista Records], Kitty Margolis' jazzy treatment of "Money" on *Left Coast Life* [Mad-Kat Records], Pink's awesome hit "There You Go" from *Can't Take Me Home* [Laface/Arista], or Chuck Prophet's seductive "You Did" from his recent *Age of Miracles* [New West

Records]. The Vincent/SPM/Montana combo was a winner in the bass department—no subwoofer needed.

But should you be so inclined, the Vincent's "pre out" jacks are ideal for feeding an active subwoofer. So configured, my James 10 SG provided plenty of low-end reinforcement with the Montanas. It's important to have the right amount and the right quality of bass reinforcement—music without a strong foundation feels as insubstantial as a house built on stilts, as unsatisfying as a meal of cotton candy.

The James sub was of more value in support of a pair of Silverline SR-11 mini-monitors, by nature unable to render low bass unaided, but otherwise lovely performers. On 30" metal stands, and well out into the room, the Silverlines, driven by the Vincent, sang like Ferarri-red songbirds. Great amps should be capable not only of powerful, visceral bass, but of great delicacy, too. Bernadette Peters was right there in the room. "Cupid," "Blackbird," and "Hills of Shiloh/Faithless Love" on her CD *I'll Be Your Baby Tonight* [EMI] were rendered with all the shimmering detail one would expect from excellent hi-fi gear—airiness and image stability in equal measure. Kathleen Battle's live performance of the Gershwin classic "Summertime" from *Kathleen Battle at Carnegie Hall* [Deutsche Grammophon] is perhaps the ultimate test of audio delicacy, one in which the Vincent scored a perfect 10.

When it comes to hi-fi, I trust my own judgment—I've been messing about with audio for a very long time—but I also value the opinions of colleagues. Part of my agenda with the SV-236 was to hear it with other speakers and auxiliary gear in another location.

The Buddy Test

I therefore leaned on my buddy Marc, a seasoned audiophile with an eclectic taste in music, to spend an evening with the Vincent driving some of his speakers. We had pounded the pavement in Las Vegas at CES this past January, but both of us had somehow missed the Vincent products. He's got

a world-class home theater—Legacy Whispers powered by Halo JC-1 amplifiers upfront and James S-103 speakers in the rear, for example.

For this audition we "turned around backwards," facing the opposite way we usually would for movies and music, and used the James as a stereo pair, pulled out into the room and fed from the Vincent via the same SPM Reference, but using the two-channel output from his Denon DVD-

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5900 as a source. We listened to some of the same material I had tried at home—Chuck Prophet was as prophetic over the James as he had been over the Montanas, with similar bowels-of-the-earth bass. We also listened to several two-channel SACDs—Aimee Mann, Patricia Barber, and Elton John. All of them proved worthy—the Mann for its densely orchestrated production, the Barber for its dark moodiness, and Elton John primarily for the placement of instruments in the soundstage. The SV-236 never failed to deliver no matter what task we gave it.

Marc mentioned that the Vincent seemed capable of "almost surround-like imaging" even though it's a basic two-channel amp. Like me, he was taken by its sheer effortless power and musicality. Not wishing to contaminate the experiment with any notion of value—there is way too much "label drinking" in hi-fi circles—I hadn't mentioned anything about the Vincent's price.

After an evening of listening, he called it an impressive piece of gear.

"How much? Four or five grand?" he asked. "Guess again," I replied. "Try eighteen hundred bucks." Silence, then, "That puts it in an entirely different light . . . Wow."

The Vincent SV-236 is very much state-of-the-art, but in some respects is also an old-school integrated. The tone controls, for example, let you easily correct for bass-shy speakers or overly-bright rooms or recordings-tasks that audiophiles often approach through ornate experimentation with cables and room treatments and component synergy. The inclusion of tone controls will make some purists sniff, but so what? Somewhere along the way audiophiles got this bizarre, misguided notion that recordings were perfect and that including tone controls in amplifiers somehow besmirched

their perfection. It's beyond ridiculous.

The object of the game shouldn't be about going broke in the pursuit of some abstract Holy Grail of Hi-fi. It should be about enjoying the widest variety of music with the greatest degree of enjoyment at the lowest possible cost. By that measure, the Vincent SV-236 is a winner. If you're looking for long-term musical satisfaction, real-world versatility, and compatibility with almost every loudspeaker on the planet at a price that won't put you in debt for the next five years, the Vincent is for you.

SPECIFICATIONS

Vincent SV-236 Hybrid Integrated Vacuum Tube Amplifier
Power output: 100Wpc/8 ohms; 200 Wpc/4 ohms

Inputs: six analog (RCA)
Outputs: two analog (1 Rec Out, 1 Pre Out, via RCA); two pairs, speaker tap (5-way binding posts)
Dimensions: 17" x 5.5" x 17"
Weight: 44 lbs.

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

Q-USA

462 N Baldwin St,
Madison, WI 53703
(608) 237-1726
www.q-usa.com
Price: \$1795

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Marantz DVD-910, Denon DVD-2900, Denon DVD-5900, California Audio Labs Icon, Montana loudspeakers, Nordost SPM Reference bi-wire speaker cables

The advertisement is set against a solid black background. At the top right, the 'NU FORCE' logo is displayed in a white, stylized, spaced-out font. In the center, a white line graph shows a frequency response curve. The graph is labeled '10-100kHz' at the top and '3-1b' at the bottom. The curve starts at a low level, rises to a peak, and then gradually declines. Below the graph, a testimonial in white text reads: "Hail to a new star in the hi-fi firmament! May the NuForce be with you." Jim Saxon, Soundstage.com. At the bottom left, the email address 'salesteam@nuforce.com' is written in white.