

KING OF THE JUNGLE?

Jon Marks warms his hands and ears over Monarchy Audio's SM-70 class A transistor power amp.

Anyone who's felt the bite of the hi-fi bug over the last two decades can't fail to have noticed that more than a few changes have taken place. Back in the Seventies, when distortion was the prime audio evil and plenty of power the be all and end all, designers who stuck up for inefficient class A operation would have been looked at as if they were from another planet. Those who uttered the words "feedback" and "small amounts" probably would have been torched at the stake. What with the current popularity of valves and single-ended operation, now it's the turn of companies like Monarchy Audio and their SM-70 amp to have the last laugh.

There may be no 'tubes' within the SM-70's black-anodised exterior but the single pair of output transistors in each channel puts out enough heat to give milk-bottle triodes like the 211 a real run for their money. Where the circuitry again harks back to days thermionic is in Monarchy's claim that this is a zero-feedback design. By their own admission, though, around individual stages there is local feedback (rather than the more common global type, which is taken from the output back to the input).

It's on the rear panel that you'll find two more of the SM-70's distinguishing features, a balanced input and the Stereo/Mono switch. Flick the latter up and you can plug your XLR into what the company says is then a 70watt monobloc. Only having the one in for review, we were unable to investigate the Monarchy in mono; instead it met up with a variety of loudspeakers as a 40watt stereo chassis.

The first line-up consisted of a Pioneer DV-505 DVD player chomping on standard CD as well as 24/96 recordings, pre-amps from DPA (modified 50S) and Aiwa (an

old C50) and Magneplanar's SMGa panel 'speakers. Cabling came from QED and DNM.

Having turned off the central heating I powered up the SM-70 and let it warm the room for half an hour before letting rip with the music.

Decks and drums and rock and roll (for this is it written on the album) from the Propellerheads

bounced along happily, the Monarchy sounding surprisingly refined for a sub-£600 item. This album is far smoother and clearer than many of the Dance genre, a fact emphasised by the rich, polished midrange and treble which the SM-70, like so many class A devices, possesses in abundance. The bass might not have had the same wallop as the more expensive X-A200s which had previously driven the Maggies, but that's no sin considering these loudspeakers prefer the plentiful watts and amps usually provided by class AB.

In the search for subtlety I reached for Tori Amos' Boys For Pele. With their close miking of vocals and harpsichord, the tracks on this CD can frequently come across as sharp and bright. No fear of either with the SM-70, which avoided offending sensitive ears with its lush rendition. However, where powers from Audio Analogue and Musical Fidelity steer away from sibilance without a loss of transparency, with these 'speakers the Monarchy took a more trans-Atlantic route to the same goal by softening transients and veiling finer details.

Returning to World Towers, the SM-70 had another bite at the



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cherry. Teac's P-30 transport fed Monarchy's own Model 18B DAC (which can be bought along with an SM-70 for £895 instead of £1200 prior to Christmas), its volume control permitting direct connection into the amp. Through the Jamos and Musical Technology PM15s (both lighter loads than the SMGas) the results were more promising - there was a punchier, more up-beat energy to the SM-70 and an insight enhanced by the addition of Sonic-Link's mains cable (reviewed on p39). Now orchestral pieces and Blues wafted free of the confines of loudspeaker cabinets to fill out a more realistic sound stage.

No power amp which sells for less than £1000 has an easy time of it these days, what with such fierce competition for the contents of audiophiles' wallets. At £475 Audio Analogue's Bellini is a class leader and there are pretenders to the throne from Crimson Electric and Musical Fidelity too. Nonetheless, if you have loudspeakers which go light on the Amperes and favour the treble a touch, the SM-70 with its genuinely outstanding build, monobloc upgradability and civilised sound is definitely worth a demonstration.

WORLD VERDICT



The Monarchy is a smooth, warm amp most at home with 'speakers that are easy to drive.