

Affordable\$\$Audio

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Vista Audio i84 Integrated Amplifier

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Specifications

Stereo Push-Pull Integrated Amplifier
 Power: 15Wpc
 Class AB operation
 with extended class A
 (0-8W in pure class A)
 Bandwidth: 15Hz-30kHz
 Inputs: CD, Tuner, Aux.
 Outputs: 4 and 8 ohm
 Input sensitivity: 1.0Vpk
 Tubes: 2xECC83S, 4x EL84
 Toroidal transformers
 Gold plated terminals
 Stainless steel chassis
 Dimensions: 14in W x 12in D x 6in H
 Weight: 16lbs
www.vista-audio.com
 Component Retail: \$729.00
 Made in Serbia



A few years ago; all I knew of tubes was that they were something popular among people my father's age. Whenever I mentioned tubes to an older music lover, they would often speak fondly of the experience as if reciting stories of old love. Yet as with most things in life, true appreciation and understanding can only come with experience. My first experience arrived in the form of a Dynakit ST-35. What followed then was an awakening of sort. In just a matter of moments, I understood those wide smiles and distant stares. Never before had I felt so engaged with the music. It had more than just a pretty sound – it had soul – it had life! Maybe those old guys weren't crazy after all. I was smitten.

Over the course of two years, I've ended up with half a dozen or so highly acclaimed tube amps. While many had appeal, their over-all performance always struck me as lack luster. Usually I found more of what I was looking for in class A transistors. Perhaps it was a matter of synergy – or maybe my tastes had changed? I didn't know – but as time went on I became more and more convinced that in order to get great sound out of new tube gear, you had better be prepared to shell out some major coin ; something I've never been in the right position to do.

It was a notion that changed not long after I received a request from Vista Audio to review their brand-new \$729 15wpc tube integrated amplifier. To be honest, my first reaction was "great – another fly by night operation selling China-fi" I've already heard these types of products before. Been there, done that. Still, everyone deserves a chance. I gave Vista a call, and after a long and pleasant conversation, I agreed to take in the amp. Little did I know that it was the beginning of something inspiring.



From Serbia, with love

The heart and soul of Vista Audio rests in the small Eastern European country of Serbia. While their base of operations is located in Ridgewood, NY - it is just outside of Belgrade where all their products are hand assembled by a small group of dedicated folks. One of the very first questions I asked Boris Sasic, founder and owner of Vista Audio is; "Why Serbia"? He replied;

"I am originally from Serbia and have spent some time working in the industry there, so it was very easy for me to establish a supply chain and organize manufacturing. I was able to partner with Trafomatic, a com-

pany that makes good quality custom transformers. Labor rates are higher than in the far east, but the quality of materials (most from Western Europe) and workmanship is exceptional."

By trade, Boris is an electrical engineer with over 17 years of professional experience. His day to day routine consists of designing switching power supplies, mosfets, and class D amplifiers. Like most audiophiles, he got into the hobby from a very young age. In fact, it is his older cousin who he blames not only for sparking an interest in hi-fi, but for also turning him on to low powered valves. "Once you get "taste" tube gear, it's hard to go back". I couldn't agree more!

When Boris listened to the many tube amplifiers circulating through the American market – he was struck by how expensive and under performing most were. He then established Vista Audio with the primary goal of delivering a product with true high end performance that is within comfortable reach of most consumers. His first attempt came in the form of a low powered SET amplifier kit. It was soon realized however, that the American market, consisting largely of multi-driver speakers with complex crossovers and boasting only modest efficiency – needed a bit more juice. After hitting the drawing board again, he came up with a small 15wpc vacuum tube integrated dubbed the i84 – the very first production product to bear the Vista audio name. While 15wpc hardly qualifies as being a powerhouse, in most applications, it'll do.

The i84 – Specs n' Stuff

When the i84 arrived at my doorstep, I couldn't help but look down, smile and mutter; "That's it"? I knew coming into this review that the piece was going to be quite unsubstantial in size. After-all, it measured only 14"w x 12"d x 6"h and hit the scales at a respectable 17lbs. The packaging itself was well done, neatly arranged and very adequate to ensure a safe journey from point A to point B. I was also impressed with the set of white gloves that were thrown in to help keep your amplifier free of fingerprints. It's a small yet very nice touch that seems to say "we care". Pulling the i84 out of the box, I met with an attractive mirror like stainless steel chassis complimented by black side caps and aluminum casing around the transformers. The amp, while positively 'cute' in size – is a fingerprint and dust magnet, not to mention it being particularly unfriendly towards camera lenses. Ah well, at least it

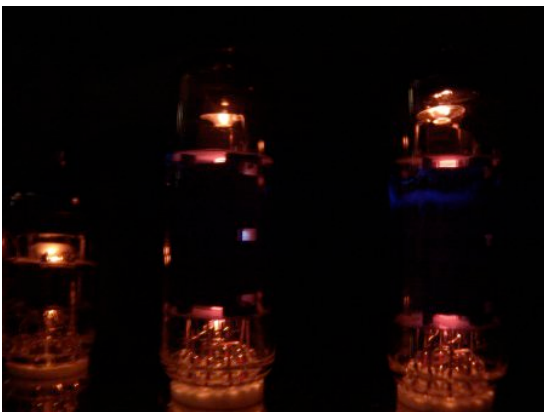
wasn't as difficult to photo as the piano-gloss Sapphire XL. But back on track here – I was also very impressed with the user manual – which was very informative, organized, and easy to read. Absolutely perfect for first time tube owners!

Originally, the i84 was designed to deliver 10 watts of pure class A power. It turns out however, that the majority of Vista Audio customers are folks buying their very first tube component. Since output power was a concern, the decision was made to up the ante to 15 per channel to help push your average speaker along. So instead of pushing out 10 watts per channel in class A, the revised i84 now pushes the first 8 watts in class A operation before switching to A/B. This allows you to enjoy that special class A sound without drastically reducing the tubes lifespan.

The i84 is a straight forward push/pull design using the popular compliment of four EI84 power tubes in conjunction with two ECC83/12AX7 signal tubes. Not only do these tubes sound great together – but they are easy to find and inexpensive to replace, making it perfectly ideal for tube swapping. Designed with ease of use and low maintenance in mind, the i84 is self biasing. Forget about having to take out the voltmeter and match each pot within tight tolerances every time you want to swap output tubes – that's already taken care of. You can literally just plug and play.

While the amp is not of the non-negative feedback variety, its sensitivity is low enough to where electrical hum and noise is virtually eliminated. Over-sized toroidal transformers potted in high density epoxy enclosed deep within aluminum casing not only helps the unit sound better, it also helps remove mechanical vibrations and drastically reduce aging. Despite being a tube amp, the THD is rated in at shockingly low 0.5% with a usable frequency bandwidth that stretches from 15hz all the way to 30khz.

On the back you will find an array of three inputs complimented by very high quality binding posts with the standard 4/8 ohm taps. The i84 also uses an IEC, which enables you to experiment with after-market power cords. Even though the unit lacks a volume controlled output for a sub-woofer; Boris is willing to convert one of the already existing inputs if you require some extra love down low.



The Sound

I used the i84 in my primary system, replacing the Red Wine Audio Signature 30 that I've recently acquired for review. Only similar in terms of size, the Signature 30 uses an entirely different topology using tripath transistors outputting 30 watts from a pure battery power. The Signature 30, already known for being a tremendous value, doubles in retail over the i84. I was afraid this was going to be a brutal affair for the little tube integrated. Surprisingly, that was not the case.

The most stand-out virtue of the i84 is how utterly quiet it is. Many tube amplifiers, both budget and cost no object pieces

suffer from audible noises that can be heard through a speakers tweeters (or high frequency panels). The i84 is the very first tube amplifier I've heard which eliminated that undesirable and often distracting crud. And when I mean silent – I mean zero feedback even with my ears up against the tweeter. In all truth, there have been only two components that managed to pull off the same stunt; the Red Wine Audio Signature 30 and the H20 Signature 150. Both of em' 'chip' amplifiers. Yet here I am getting the same attribute from a compact tube amplifier priced well beneath the 1k mark. Brilliant!

I love acoustic guitar. One of my favorite pieces of music comes from master finger stylist musician, Alex De Grassi. His unique arrangements and interpretations of music convey a natural essence flow full of articulation, precision, dynamics, with the right amount of hang that leaves me glued to my chair in complete admiration. After I worked through a few albums, I was starting to get a good feel for the little integrated. It became instantly clear that the Vista piece was able to deliver a more open and tonally fuller sound than the Red Wine Audio Signature 30 – which by direct comparison took on more of a “matter of fact” approach. The ability of the Vista to transfer the energy of vocals and acoustic instruments without undermining detail, transparency, and accuracy was exceptional – something I've never heard in any affordable tube amp. Somehow the Vista i84 was able to lock in the ability to convey every musical event I ran through at it. Percussion had adrenaline pumping intensity, the relaxing sounds of running water rendered a sense of physical space, instead of just leaving you with a blank palette for you to fill in with your imagination. Within the confines of power limitations, the i84 was able to pull off the largest set of criteria I have for any piece of hi-fi-; the ability to transfer the energy of the music and make it a something memorable, something real.

As I began going through my relatively diverse range of music, the character of the Vista Audio i84 quickly established itself as that oh so often talked about bridge between solid state and tube. As I listen, I am reminded of the phrase “jack of all trades, master of none”. Here was a low powered vacuum tube integrated capable of the great speed, balance, control, and transparency of solid state with the rich, full and engaging sound of valves. I've owned a lot of pieces that supposed were able to pull off this trick, but this is the first to have actually done so to my own personal satisfaction. From hard rock to jazz - from opera to folk to electronic – I just could not find any genre of music that the i84 had problems with.



There are no cheap parlor tricks to the i84's high end. While polite, it is not purposely rolled off in effort to create a relaxing and non-offensive sound. Instead, the highs are very detailed and prominent

sporting exceptional air and ambience. It's neither laid back, nor aggressive. It's simply there, being whatever the recording happens to be.

The mid-range is classic vacuum tube. There is all the dimension and warmth you could ever need. Prior to break-in, I found the mid-range slightly over-done; bordering on distracting when taken to higher volumes. Thankfully, this issue was drastically reduced once I cooked in the amplifier for roughly 60 hours.

One of the highlights of this i84 rests within its very impressive bass performance. Usually inexpensive tube products suffer from two polar opposite problems; either you have too much bass resulting in a bloated and slow sound – or you have virtually none at all, leaving you to ponder “where’s the cream filling!” The i84 falls within neither of those camps. Instead, the bass is surprisingly quick and tout – capable of hitting hard while spicing things up with top notch tone.

While I approached this review intending to evaluate the i84 based off the merits of its own design with stock tubes and power-cord; I could not help but throw a little something to the mix. Boris ended up sending me a power cable from a small up-start company in Canada called Audio limits. I plugged their \$60 Shield 3.1 cord into the system – and thus far I’ve had little desire to pull it out. While I encountered no earth shattering heightened levels of performance, I did notice one distinct and welcome benefit; a notable improvement to the Vista’s sound-stage – one of the few areas I left just a tad more to be desired.

The Compromise

For weeks now, I’ve made an honest effort to pick apart the i84. The few things I had down in my notes were either scratched off after break in, or snubbed off because the shortcomings were so petty for an amplifier in this price range. Ok, so its sound-stage didn’t extend far beyond and behind the speakers. Although adequately wide, it could not match the huge encompassing sound-stage of the Signature 30. It also was not as transparent as the Sig30 nor was it able to retrieve micro-dynamics as well. The upper mid-range also sounded a bit leaner than a number of class A amplifiers I’ve owned in the past. Yet, taking into consideration the price and topology of the i84, these are all omissible sins. Aside from lacking a remote and a pair of outputs for a sub, the only real caveat I have left to hone in on is power.

Dynamic peaks always present a challenge for low powered amplifiers, and while its 15 watts provided more than enough current for my casual listening sessions – it just wasn’t enough for the times I wanted to crank up the volume. Tilt-ing the volume towards the amps limits resulted in a very flat and indistinct sound. Going any higher would send it straight into audible clipping. Unfortunately I was never able to secure a more efficient pair of speakers, leaving me to believe there is still some hidden potential that I’ve yet to crack open.



My Final Word

The Vista Audio i84 is a persuasive music making machine; able to deliver all the rich elements of scale and timbre while remaining as controlled and coherent as many top-shelf solid state amps. Its silence is close to the famous Red Wine Signature 30 – a feat I thought no affordable valve amp could possibly pull off – until now. Between its ergonomically friendly stature, ease of use and ultra



low cost – I cannot help but give Boris my compliments for pricing his integrated well below what the market would really bear for a unit of its caliber.

Over-all, life in affordable hi-fi has never been better. Even a kid working a summer job can afford to bring home a high performance stereo system and still have spending cash left over. The funny thing about this whole situation is how humble Boris is about the i84; never once giving me inclination that I should expect to hear anything special. In fact, most of his customers are not seasoned tube fanatics but are instead completely new to tubes! Yet here I am, giving this unassuming piece a full five-star recommendation to both new and veteran

audiophiles alike. Eventually, there will be many products that will compete directly with the Vista Audio i84 integrated, but for now it remains comfortably far ahead of anything I've experienced in its range. Whoever steps up to the plate is going to have a hell of a task ahead of them if they want to beat this thing. Even though the year is still young, the i84 has become my highlight of 2007.

Review Equipment:

Arcam Diva 62 ; E-MU 1212M

Red Wine Audio Signature 30

Totem Acoustic Sttaf

Cables: Totem Acoustic Sinew interconnect ; Totem Acoustic "Tres" speaker cable, Zu Cable "birth" power cable ; Audio Limits Shield 3.1 power cable

Room Treatments: Eighth Nerve "Adapt" Triangles x2 ; GIK Acoustics 242 Panels x3

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