



Backwater bosses

AVM now enjoys an international reputation for its very handsome audio components, which impress through superbly solid engineering and an extremely neutral sound. No great surprise! What is there in Malsch to distract the engineers from their work?

Author: Stefan Schickedanz

Do you know Malsch near Karlsruhe? Looked at from the state capital of Stuttgart, you could be of the opinion that nothing that need bother you has happened there for ages. Even looking up Malsch in Wikipedia provides no exciting information. From a cosmopolitan perspective, then, you need not concern yourself for long with this community of 15,000 souls and can quickly forget it again. Unless, that is, you're a high-end enthusiast! Then you can't help but notice that being produced in this backwater of Baden-Württemberg are audio components that are every bit a match for much-travelled appliances from the USA and England. And yet there is still one thing that AVM lacks: the company, which was formed around 25 years ago, simply lacks an exciting story. The guys in Malsch seek to produce premium technology and top-class sound. But what manufacturer would not make that assertion? What is lacking is a quirk, a crankiness, a loud, in-your-face character. Or at least some cool stories behind the products. You can't even accuse AVM of not having fancy ideas. In several product ranges the company recently began fitting tubes, no less. Yet no one there lets themselves get carried away into making clear statements, such as, for instance, that tubes are the only truth. On the contrary, in some cases customers are free to choose as they wish between a transistor or a hybrid variant.

That makes dealing with the brand in a way stress free and relaxed, but it doesn't make writing about the products any easier at all. My colleagues over at

"stereoplay" evidently found things much the same, as they tested the Ovation PA8 pre-amp and Ovation MA 8 monoblocks some 18 months ago. Tester Hannes Maier set off full pelt with a flying start into his extremely sober story. Then it immediately got very technical.

For emotional high end fans that may not necessarily be particularly thrilling, but it does underline AVM's very matter-of-fact approach.

All the same, the men in Malsch have discovered their penchant for experimentation, as the pre-amp and the CD8T CD player brought along for support appear in the output stage with a tube section. The team led by Günther Mania and Udo Besser is seeking here not so much to advance into new spheres, as it is to take previous virtues and add a cherry on the top - a sweet cherry to be precise. After all, some people used to find the sound of the excellently made gems from Malsch as sober as the firm's public image. But now the tubes are abetting glowing adoration.

And this natural taste enhancer works. Above all on me. For "Audio" I had already dealt with a few of the smaller range's tube devices and was very taken by the added flair, which was not bought through any soft filter effects. The expectations, therefore, were high as I fired up the four-part chain. Once again I admired the display, a kind of touch of regional humour: during the tube circuits' warm-up period the corresponding message appears on the pre-amp and CD player displays. Step by step the lower case writing switches to upper case.

Anyone who would like to watch the tubes during this process, can catch more

in-depth insights through a glass panel in the robust metal tops. As AVM goes, such voyeurism is certainly a very daring design step to take. Otherwise everything is as straight, functional and, despite all the sophistication, as discrete as a businessman in a suit.

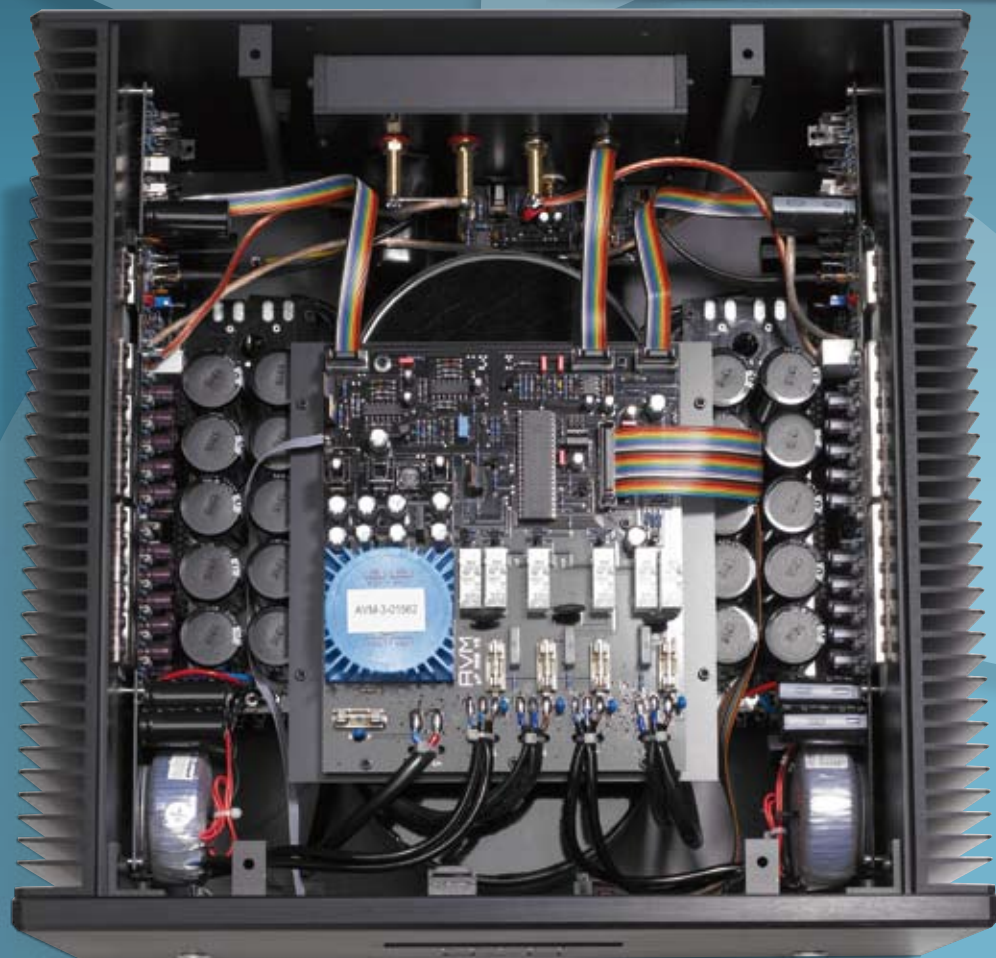
AVM lets materials do the talking. And to a substantial degree to do so via touch. Each made from one solid piece, the bearing-mounted rotary knobs on the PA8 for source selection and volume control sit in the hand with an unmatched richness and even the remote control is made of metal. Only on one point did the designers stray from the 'form follows function' principle: the labelling of the numerous buttons - which are likewise made of metal - has been engraved into the safe-like front panel, which like the entire housing is made of thick aluminium. On the black housing version especially it is impossible in indirect light to make out anything at all. They might just as well have left them off altogether.

Regardless of a matter-of-fact approach, the designers can hardly have expected that AVM customers would enjoy their music under garish neon lights. We don't even have such conditions in our listening room, which led to some unprintable cursing. That, however, was to remain the sole point of criticism, let me say right away. As consolation there are many fine features, including a top level of specification. Anyone, for instance, who wants to enhance the D/A conversion of their sources using a high-quality DAC with 192kHz and 24 bits is spoiled for choice. Both the CD8T and the pre-amp are fitted / can be fitted with multiple digital inputs. In the case of the

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Slot Machine: In the rear half of the cabinet, there's room for up to ten expansion modules. In slot number two sits a line stage with two twin triodes AVM 803T - a custom makeup from Czech tube specialists JJ. They are deliberately mounted upside down, with the green PCBs facing upwards to help create a thermally stable environment.



So much beauty for just one channel: The MA8.2 is a bridge amplifier with individual supplies for each signal half. Thus, we find two 1000 VA toroids and electrolytics with a total capacity of 400,000 pF in each monobloc. The input stages have their own small toroids at the front left and right corners. The blue transformer on the top board powers the standby and control circuitry.

PA8 it is left up to the owner whether they order such a module. The player has seven digital inputs as standard: 2 x USB (1 x 192/24 asynchronous, 1 x 48/24 with no driver), 2 x SPDIF coaxial, 2 x SPDIF optical, AES/ EBU).

The digital module for the PA8 also includes a USB input that needs no special driver to process 16 bits / 48kHz. With driver it accepts even up to 24 bits / 192 KHz. However, traditional analogue is also possible. Built on a modular basis, the pre-amp has ten slots. One of these can be used to house a serious phono module for MM and MC systems. Or an FM tuner. Anyone opting for these top Ovation range components can individualise their chain to a high degree.

Even the pre-amp's tube insert is an option costing around €2,000. The standard base unit, however, is no slouch itself. The inputs' switching falls to double-contact relays, which disconnect the signal, mass included, in order to close the back door as well to any interactions between them. The balancing and buffering of the signal is excellently looked after by high-class OPAs from semiconductor specialists Burr Brown. The tube output stage has aficionados in raptures. There an ECC 83 double triode per channel accepts the signal, which has been interconnected in a somewhat different way to normal in order to achieve a better shielding between cathode and anode to bring about less interaction. That is perhaps precisely the secret behind the extremely clear sound, which has its own niche between homely tube sound and the sober tone of a transistor. Inside this pre-amp are so many technical delights that I could carry on writing about them forever. For instance, about the extremely expensive Muses modules from JRC, a Japanese studio equipment supplier. But then you really might come to think at some point that this magnificent AVM chain is just something for engineers or overly intellectual nerds.

Furthermore the clever features on the CD player and the monoblocks also deserve some praise. In the CD8T AVM uses a tube module with two symmetrically operated 6H30s. However, a very



The monoblocs can draw enormous amounts of current and can profit audibly from good aftermarket power cords.

material key to the impressive performance comes at the very start of the signal path: what doesn't get read out from the drive cannot then be rescued by wonderful output circuitry. Therefore AVM uses a pure, Sanyo-based CD drive. It forgoes any hasty reading using multiple speed and avoids the transmission of any housing vibrations to the sampling mechanism by doing without the usual drawer. Incidentally, it's worth noting, too, that the slot drive looks really great.

Playful types may choose between two digital filters: smooth or sharp, which relates not to the acoustic character, but to the filter characteristics. Just right for grown-ups, on the other hand, and also fitted with a blue TFT display is the Ovation MA8.2 power amp, the mono version of the SA8.2 stereo power amp. Bulging muscles are called for here whenever the 42-kilogram unit needs moving to where it is due to be used. The touchstone for body builders is a picture of an amplifier: heat sinks in the side walls milled from solid metal, a central double transformer with 2 x 1,000 watts in a shielded chamber and the shortest of paths between the filter capacitors grouped next to it on both sides and the power amp blocks placed on the two side walls with their total of especially rapid-impulse FETs. The capacitor reservoir consists of 20 buffer capacitors on each side, which come from a good home: they bear the name Roederstein. In addition to the large transformers in

the steel chamber, located behind the front panel are two small ring core transformers, which merely have to supply the driver stages. This is joined by a fifth mini transformer, which serves the input and protective circuits as well as the automatic switch-on system controlled by signal or trigger. Using less than 0.5 watts, the giant is thus a dwarf in terms of power consumption when in standby.

The MK2 version of the MA8 does, however, blow somewhat more current when in use, as its class A working range has been extended into even higher output regions for the sake of greater signal purity.

Anyone not familiar with AVM might immediately get excited about two particular features during the listening test. The united tube output stages of CD8T and PA8 do not lead to any kind of obtrusive tube aroma in the pure transistor sound, meticulously tuned to the highest level of neutrality. And not even the two amps' combined nigh-on 100 output transistors, through which the signal makes its way to the two loudspeakers, filter out any minute details. Delivering almost 800 watts per channel at two ohms, the chain sounds vibrantly direct and very, very three-dimensional. Anyone closing their eyes in the listening room invariably succumbed to the illusion that Elvis Costello, or a grand piano or a string ensemble was right in front of them. Or at least the compelling impression was created that the amp in question was a purist little amp with short signal >



The Transformers: An abundance of power supplies in the CD8T helps avoid interference between the different circuit areas. The two transformers on the left serve as supplies for the disc drive and control circuitry. The DAC and the tube output stage feed on the other two toroids.

paths - in terms of the directness. In terms of the power, which contributed to the immense microdynamics and practically breathtaking macrodynamics, it seemed more like a PA. The result: seldom was infernally loud less infernal - subjectively seen. We could turn it up as much as we wanted and it never sounded strained or aggressive. How loud you actually had it could only be told from the volume meter, if you joined in the applause on a live recording or if a colleague said something to you. But they were largely struck dumb by the way in which with this chain from the German countryside all hell is proverbially let loose. Measured by the rousing, live-like performance the individual components have not even ended up being expensive, especially in comparison to pricey US units. Considering this ludicrous dynamic range and razor-sharp spatial mapping the mighty monos in particular could be regarded as a bargain, especially in terms of the price per kilo! But what ultimately make the matter hellishly expensive are all the trappings. To be on the safe side, plan in a detached house, as I'm sure your lawyer is not that good that you'll get

away with a semi or a flat. That's not to say that with the AVM delegation you can't listen to your music in a wonderfully quiet and nuanced way. However, for that there are also other options. These masterpieces of Swabian engineering art have earned the right to run free in a style befitting of the race, in short to play loudly.

When we dealt with components individually within the competitive environment it transpired - not surprisingly - that all followed the same tuning philosophy. But also that the pre-amp is largely responsible for the short, dry and relatively inconspicuous bass. Overall the developers were in any case evidently less concerned with rocking the world at the upper or lower end of the frequency scale, than with adding life to the mid-range frequencies. Anyone who likes things direct and gripping can become addicted and/or grow old with this system. Anyone who likes things sweet and full in the bass and kick bass range and warm and wonderfully soft in the high frequencies will probably feel with this foursome like a fan of limousines in a taut, two-seater sports car. <



Audition CD

Elvis Costello
„My Flame Burns Blue“

An ideal CD for this highly dynamic system. The live recording with the Metropol Orkest shows all shades of natural sound and a lot of atmosphere, including the return of the real Elvis.



The Autor

Stefan Schickedanz

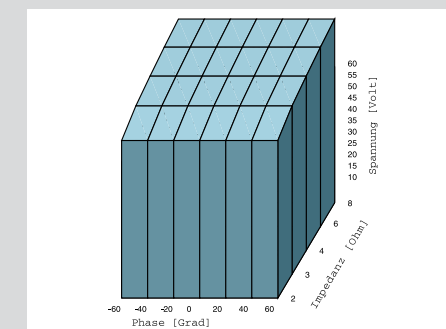
Likes to live in Stuttgart which is geographically close, but culturally very different from AVMs home in Baden. Since a noise-sensitive person has moved into a neighboring apartment, Stefan likes to go to the AUDIOphile listening room to rock out - which he definitely did with the AVMs.

AVM Ovation PA8, MA8.2 und CD8T

List price:
9.000 Euro (CD8T)
8.500 Euro (PA8 w/ tube output)
21.800 Euro (MA8.2, pair)
Warranty: 3 years
Weight: 16/14/42 kg
Dimensions (W x H x D):
43 x 10 x 32,5cm (CD8T, PA8)
42 x 25 x 43,5 cm (MA8.2)
Oberflächen: Aluminium silver oder black anodised

Distribution:
AVM GmbH
Gutenbergstraße 4
76316 Malsch
Telefon:+49 72 46 / 42 85
Internet: avm-audio.com

Power cube

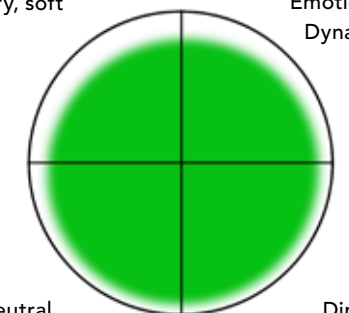


Most impressive: The AVM MA8.2 delivers ruler-flat frequency response, almost nonexistent distortion and loads of power that stretch the limits of our „cube“ diagram (voltage vs. impedance vs. phase shift). Continuous power output @1k: 730/1257W into 8/4Ω, and more than 2kW into 2Ω.

AUDIOphile Character

Effortless, airy, soft

Gripping Emotional Dynamic



Neutral, authentic

Direct, high resolution

AUDIOphile Potential



AUDIOphile Advice

Investing in this system gives you complete and absolute freedom in your speaker choice and a very neutral, controlled yet highly musical sound.