

Nic Poulson makes no bones about the design. He said the 900 pre-amp uses basic, classic circuitry chosen for simplicity, ease of construction and cost — the same philosophy which put Croft on the map over a decade ago

SUPPLIER
 Trilogy Audio Systems,
 72 Shooters Hill Road, London SE3 7BG
 Tel 0181-856 2499

Think of it as a reflection of the times in which we live: Trilogy, which makes some of this country's most honest valve pre-/power combinations, has followed its first group of products — pre-amps and power amps in the 'entry level high end' price sector — with a new range of cost-cutters. The first product to follow in the wake of the 900-series mercury-chrome-finished upscale line is the 900 pre-amplifier, and it's a tonic for those who need to keep an eye on the price. And if it succeeds, there's more to follow.

Nic Poulson makes no bones about the design. He said the 900 uses basic, classic circuitry chosen for simplicity, ease of construction and cost — the same philosophy which put Croft on the map over a decade ago. And as Poulson is a fastidious type, his concerns are reflected in the ultra-clean appearance, tidy interior and superb construction. How he met the sub-£500 price point was simple: he left out the frills and eschewed any needless over-engineering. You can actually regard the 900 pre-amp as a sterling example of audio minimalism which doesn't resort to auto-flagellation.

Unbelievably, there are no important omissions (you can, if you so desire, lead a full life without a balance control), and yet there are a couple of luxurious surprises. Your £499 still gets you a proper, smooth-acting ALPS pot

for level control, a pair of nicely weighted and positive rotary controls for source selection and record-out facility, a decent on/off toggle switch and a red LED power-on indicator. A nice touch is the 40-second flashing sequence at switch-on, the blinking telling you that the circuits are stabilising and that a muting circuit has been activated to prevent any thumps from reaching the outputs. The finish used on the front panel is the same sort of fine-grained satin black that graces far dearer components; Poulson managed to avoid using mere paint — a certified giveaway of humble pricing in the specialist sector.

Around the back, all the RCA socketry is gold-plated, a stout earthing post has been fitted and a fused IEC socket accepts the mains power. Unscrew the lid and the interior is immaculate if sparsely furnished. This, though, is the result of Trilogy wisely settling on a standard case size for the whole of this range, conceived to include some interesting sister components I'll tell you about shortly, some of which might use more of the available interior space. The dimensions are 430x82x330mm (whd), so it will stack nicely with other products, too, provided you place the 900 on the very top for ventilation.

Inside, a single circuit board bisects the unit lengthwise; it's fixed to a metal truss which also

strengthens the enclosure and isolates the back panel socketry, the mains connector and the mains transformer from the primary pre-amp circuitry. Hardwiring connects the sockets to the selectors and back to the board, and it's so neat as to border on the obsessive. The PCB is mounted on the face of the crosspiece, positioned toward the fascia.

Fitted horizontally to the PCB are three ECC83s, two for the active RIAA stage and one for the line stage. Those craving designer labels within will have to look elsewhere, unless RS components have suddenly attained a level of cachet of which I knew not, while the tubes themselves are (probably deliberately) free of impressive logos. But the proof remains in the listening.

Yes, I did mention that Nic had managed to include a phono stage in the price and it's a good 'un. With 43dB of gain, it had no problem mating with high-output and even some medium-output moving-coils, and at no time did it seem incapable of handling the dynamics of even the toughest of the new breed of super LPs. It's quiet, too, something of a minor miracle given the prosaic nature of the tubes themselves. Which proves yet again that it's not what you use but how you use it. Other specs include 15dB of gain for the line stage, 50k ohm input impedance, 1.4V RMS



CHEAP TUBES

*Forgo the famous
 'mercury' chrome finish
 and you can have
 Trilogy's valve magic at
 a bargain price*

by **KEN KESSLER**

output voltage with 30V maximum output, an output impedance of less than 1k ohm and bandwidth of 5Hz-100kHz. The line section accepts two sources plus tape, and the record out selector has a mute position to isolate it when you're not recording.

However much the Trilogy 900 may be a result of serious penny-pinching, practice suggests otherwise. OK, so it didn't meet the mildly quirky demands of the Unison Research Smart 845, but it sounded divine driving the VAC 80/80 and GRAAFiti 50/50 power amps, the former a circa-\$3000 US product and the latter a bargain from Italy of pretty much the same price as the VAC. With shame I confess that I



had no genuinely inexpensive all-valve power amps (say, under £500) to hand other than those of the vintage persuasion, so I did all of my listening with power amps costing the same as four 900s.

It's a smooth operator, silky without going soft and dynamic without any hints of aggression. Above all, it has tonal consistency, sounding 'of a whole' primarily because the signal path is relatively direct. And the 900 has character, Poulson dialling in mild euphony which acts as a fatigue-fighter. Maybe the use of humble components prevents products at this price level from attaining the almost academic detail retrieval and neutrality demanded of components with £2k-plus stickers. And yet the 900 is so quiet and, yes, transparent that the self-effacing treble which creates its identity never worries the listener with any thoughts of sonic loss. If anything, the 900 so perfectly illustrates the idea that a product reflects the personality of the designer that all you have to do is meet Nic at a hi-fi show and you'll know just how the 900 sounds. Whether it has a penchant for big motorcycles I don't know.

A tour de force which seems like a modern equivalent of the original Croft Micro in price and appeal, the 900 is so good at its job that, after a decent demonstration, you probably won't even bother auditioning any of its all-tube rivals, few of which present serious challenges. But unlike the funky and

Unscrew the lid and the interior is immaculate if sparsely furnished. This, though, is the result of Trilogy wisely settling on a standard case size for the whole of this range, conceived to include some interesting sister components

lovable Micro, the 900 doesn't seem as if it were something cobbled together with parts scavenged from a battlefield. The Trilogy certainly sounds and even looks like something costing much more. But the real attraction is its role as the heart of a system which can be built up from a full range of all-tube products. These will match it building-block style for easy upgrading in affordable steps to full-functionality without limit. Indeed, there are some 'black boxes' on the cards which have no affordable equivalents in the current marketplace.

Poulson doesn't want this budget range to conflict with the dearer, existing Trilogy models. Which explains why, out of concern for the consumer, he went to great lengths to indicate that at some point, the adding of module after module will reach a point where the consumer should simply opt for one of the dearer, full-function units. But that doesn't answer the needs or practices of those who have to buy their systems in stages, so the market for the cost-effective, modular approach will always be there [see box].

And Poulson certainly doesn't want to repeat the actions of other companies which promised myriad modules, only to kill the ranges

midway through projects while leaving their customers in the lurch. If these 'extras' do eventually appear, and they match the 900's performance and value for money, then Trilogy could alter radically the sceptics' perceptions of tube gear ownership and its alleged hardships. Maybe Nic should license the name 'Lego'. ↗

IN THE PIPELINE

First out will be the 904 phono-only pre-amp at £399 as an alternative to the 900, followed by the one I can't wait to grab: the forthcoming combination balancer/inverter. This device will convert a single-ended product to balanced mode (great for matching single-ended pre-amps to balanced power amps) and vice versa for using balanced-output-only sources or pre-amps with single-ended pre-amps or power amps. And it can do both simultaneously, as well as offering phase inversion and possibly a bridging facility. Also in the works is an all-tube headphone amp, and — if demand warrants it — there might be a top-grade mains distribution unit. And there might also be a hybrid power amp in a double height version of the standard case. The possibilities are endless, and I can envisage a surround sound decoder, a D/A converter, a tape switching unit and more... but that stuff is way down the line.