

Partnerships are a funny business, as much in hi-fi as in real life. Some are all wine and roses for donkey's years, others end in acrimonious divorces. Some come together only fitfully. Trilogy's valve 902 pre-amplifier (£1600) and 958 monoblocks (£3000 per pair) are a case in point. You can ring the changes as often as a Hollywood star getting quickie divorces in Reno, but nothing ever seems quite as good as the original marriage of the two.

And if there was a prize for living happily in trigamy then the Trilogy along with LS3/5As and AB-1 subwoofers would carry it away as well.

Not that the relationship is altogether PC and egalitarian. The better half of this couple is definitely the 902 pre-amplifier, well stocked with quality components, a few inches of wire, and, in the line-level only version, a fair amount of fresh air reserved for an optional £200 phono stage. In 'mercury' (highly polished chrome, to thee and me) this proved to be a real surprise. Not being a dyed-in-the-wool valve nut, I'm not normally wildly keen on valve pre-amplifiers. My list of acceptable pre-amps that glow in the night would barely take up \$5-worth of even a Californian divorce lawyer's time. But the 902 enters the lists that include the superb Conrad-Johnson PV10 and Cary's SLP90.

It possesses that prime knack of conveying total lucidity without attention-grabbing tailoring. The Argo ASMF recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* is an old warhorse, but with the Trilogies in line it held a couple of unexpected surprises. The first was the 'Kingsway Hall rumble' which quite unexpectedly sounded more underground and less rumble. Less trivial, but just as startling, was the delicate clarity of every bar of the chamber organ continuo, which usually is barely distinguishable from the cellos and double-basses. There were inklings of something special happening, reinforced, by of all things, 'Speed Kills' from Ten Years After. This begins with a spectacular steam engine puffing from left to right.

Years ago, Bill Beard drew crowds at hi-fi shows with his big amps and Allison speakers. Star turn was a steam engine recording, shunting and puffing through the room for all the



# BROUGHT TO TRILOGY

*A high class new British valve amp combination  
faces the music this month*

by ERIC BRAITHWAITE



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world as though the hotel had transported itself decades back in time to Kings Cross when trains were hand-built by craftsmen — rather like the Trilogies, really. Sad case I may be, admitting to still having a few Argo Transacords, but the sheer scale of that puffer train at the start of the Ten Years After was like nothing I've heard since Bill Beard's days. Now back to music before the letterbox is jammed with subscription offers to *Steam Classics*, trips along the Settle and Carlisle line and the like.

Honegger's *Pacific 231*, by the way, going entirely off the rails for a

moment, was a disappointment, but that does not destroy the thesis that the 902 has a lot going for it. The Decca SXL recording has never been a success, with a muddiness about the hall ambience that came over with dismayingly accuracy, as did so many recordings over several days. And this is where we become embroiled in the mysteries of marriages between amplifiers and speakers made in heaven and in hell.

For half the listening period, the Trilogy pre/power amplifiers were wired up to KEF Signature LS3/5As atop Rogers AB-1 subwoofers. As a friend said approvingly after a lengthy jazz

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listening session, 'I could live with this.' What anyone could live with was the breathtaking plangency of Miles Davis's trumpet, even on the otherwise nasty CBS Digital Master. Even the obvious mucking about in the re-mixing, let alone the LS3/5A's well-known little failings, simply could not detract from the purity of tone and the phrasing. Punt in a classic recording, and the 902/958 provoked the speakers into a near-complete disappearing act, leaving nothing behind but the implementation of notes on the score, musical personality and the location.

The Trilogy pairing has a knack of sounding extremely expansive, though not, perhaps, as deep as others. Even in some Chandos recordings, which portray a very large, deep acoustic (even if the orchestra is then distant for some tastes) there were very sharply defined individual players and the layout always appeared more broad than deep.

Gary Moore's playing on *After Hours* was raunchy enough, with a very rhythmical bass, though his voice is usually projected more forwardly. Elsewhere it was very reminiscent of the Cary pre-amp with saxes from Bill Bruford's *Earthworks* or on John Scofield's albums having the same

poignant plangency as Miles's trumpet. This was the best hi-fi representation of a vibrating reed and air issuing out of the bell I can remember.

Switching to ESL-63s and a Michell Argo HR pre-amp, it was a shock to find that percussion sounded 'more like biscuit tins than a drumkit' in the words of one listener.

That is cruel, but while on one recording the drummer and his kit were evidently and obviously recorded quite apart from the band in a sound booth, giving high marks for accuracy-to-master-tape again, at the same time the drumming sounded too small-scale, elegant but emasculated through the Quad 63s.

There was more of the cramped sound booth than the dynamics of the percussionist. Some American amplifiers have this super-smooth, laid-back, refined elegance, but it is often on the borderline of wimpishness.

Returning to the all-Trilogy setup, the mid-band and upper bass became rather more muscular. There was also little lacking in the top, though some recordings, like the EMI 'Philadelphia Sound' had a slightly uncomfortable glassiness on violins. As always with the

best valve amplifiers, there was the undeniable sense of the sound of real acoustic instruments, whether Casals's cello or Rob Wasserman's bass. However good the transistor competition, they almost always retain an electronic 'recorded' element. It is a matter of freedom between the notes that are played, of flowing harmonics, and this the Trilogy pre-amplifier and, slightly less, the monoblocks, have a-plenty.

We are somewhat over four-and-a-half grand here, hence the niggling. While the pre-amplifier is pretty well beyond reproach in its delivery of clean clear-cut sounds and gives detail enough for scrimshaw work, the power amplifiers cut the cress rather than the mustard. Relationships are full of compromises; nonetheless, the Trilogy pre- and powers together represent a good run for the mostly American high-end competition. Like the Registrar always says, with increasing optimism never borne out by trends, this one is forever: but it is essential the power amps be tried out with a variety of speakers. That relationship is a touchy one and makes the difference between a long happy marriage and a swift visit to the divorce court. ✓

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