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■ **Jazz:** Frank Lowe and Eugene Chadbourne, Sun Ra, Verve reissues

■ **Audiophile:** Kodo drummers, Steely Dan, Sting, Tina Turner, Louis and Ella, Sarah Vaughan

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Trilogy's dream tubes

One of Britain's best designers offers no compromise, no expense-spared vision of what valve amplification could and should be.

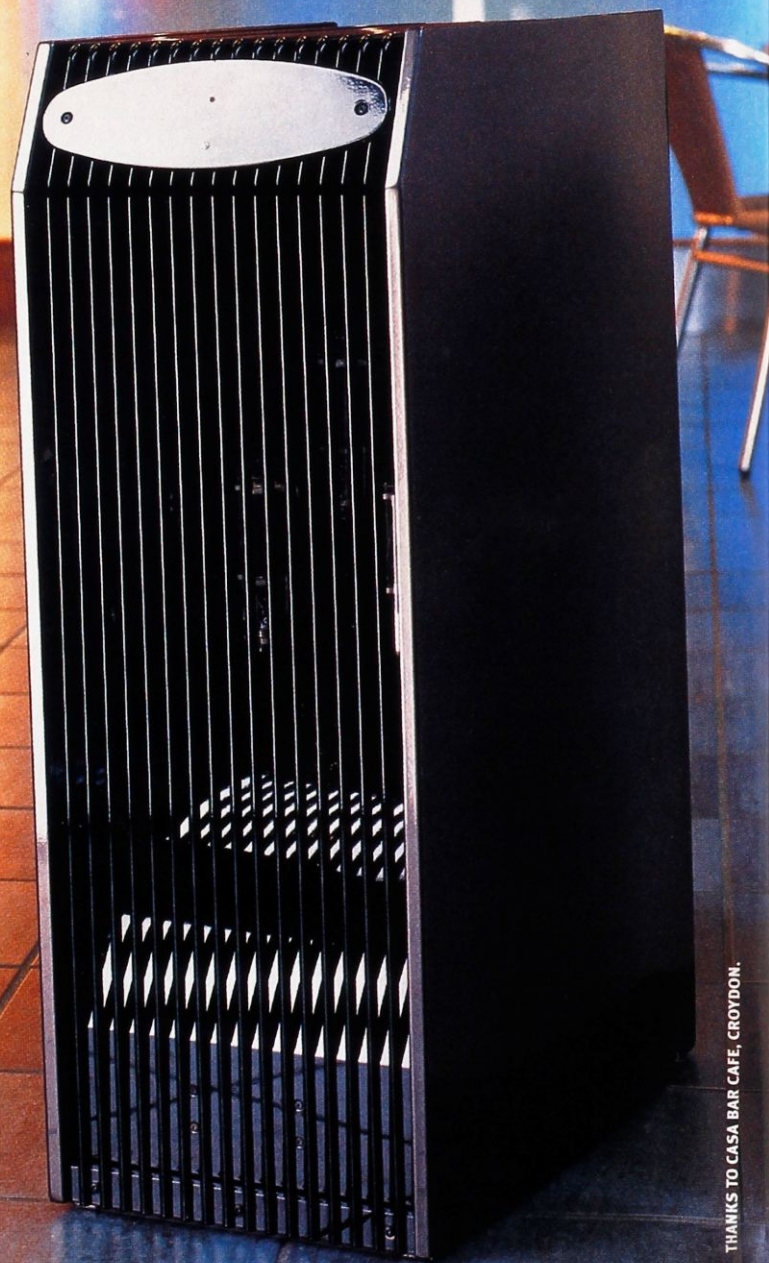
Here's Trilogy's dream come true...

WORDS BY KESSLER PICTURES: ROGER PHILLIPS, TONY PETCH

Price	£35,000/pair
Supplier	Trilogy Audio Ltd
Contact	0208 856 2499

Every time I grow angry with the innate British hatred of success and high achievement, along comes a product to remind me that the UK still cuts it when luxury goods are involved. Thus, the supreme irony of the British not approving of nor buying the stuff is their knowing how to make it, from Bristol motorcars to Folio Society editions. And so, up pops Linn's CD12, Chord's SPM12000, the new EAR Yoshino amps and others with justifiable five-figure price tags. The latest in that fold is Trilogy, formerly known for sensibly-priced valve amplifiers.

No, make that 'under-priced', because Nic Poulsen is so British that it hurts — hell, he's even ex-BBC — and high pricing is anathema to him. You can see the inner turmoil, Nic probably losing sleep at night, but the reality is this: Trilogy's assault on the state of the art in valve amps, the RC211 monoblocks, can't be



priced at less than £35,000 per pair because of the cost of the labour and materials and standard profit margins (and VAT).

Just as Chord has invested in the kind of metalwork you'd expect to be wrapped around nuclear waste for millennial storage, Trilogy has opted for entirely custom-made casework. And I haven't even seen final details like the production badge or the coned feet. Most noticeable — the unit's trademark — is the fixed cage arrangement. Starting at the upper edge of the back panel (above the lifting handle cut-outs!), flowing toward the front to form the top, angling downward and then folded to the vertical is a series of steel rods finished in gloss black/deep charcoal... hard to tell which, because it's one of those modern paints with a life of its own. Forming a rigid, protective cage allowing you to see the valves and tell-tale LEDs, the rods are spaced sufficiently far enough apart to allow an idiot to drop in small objects. Nothing hot or lethal can be touched, unless, that is, you have an appendage no more than a quarter-inch in diameter and 18in long.

In its form alone, at 318x800x559mm (whd) minus the feet, it is imposing and impressive; the styling, though, moves from the architectural and functional into the aesthetically pleasing with the fitting of the side panels. Running from top to bottom, they add slight curvature and can be finished in 'over one hundred thousand colours'; Trilogy is also looking into making them from solid timber to match any wooden speakers. Heh, heh: let's see 'em match the red Guarneris. In charcoal, they looked great next to the Wilson WATT Puppy System 6; coincidentally, each amp is roughly the size of a Puppy. The thought that you could order them in exactly the same finish as the Wilsons put me into what-if-I-won-the-lottery mode. I'd be ordering red Wilsons to match a Ferrari 360 Modena, so Trilogy would be looking at Rosso Corsa colour swatches for me.

Arranged in the back near the top are XLR balanced and RCA phono single-ended inputs, a toggle to switch between them, and another to mute the unit if it's on and you're making connections. Why not just switch it off? Because this baby doesn't just have to warm up; it has to settle down for a good hour. Lower down are big multi-way speaker terminals and IEC mains input, with the hard-to-reach primary on/off rocker; this you leave on at all times.

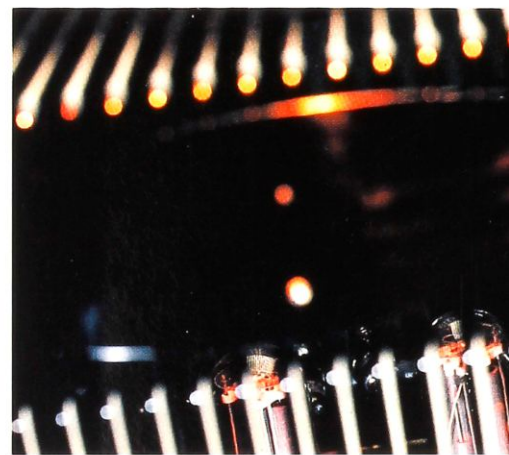
If a lucky owner positions the RC211 in an awkward spot and can't access the back panel rocker, he's no need to worry. Mounted within the badge are a tiny push button and a blue

LED. Press the button, and the LED starts to flash. You've just turned the amp on for real. Note, then, that leaving the on/off rocker at the back in the 'on' position doesn't put the unit into conventional standby; nothing is idling, or pre-warmed for quick action. The little button is simply a remotely positioned main on/off so you don't have to reach around the back; the main switch is located down below because it needed to be near the mains input. Better still, the amp can be remotely turned on by an external low-voltage source from a pre-amp, such as the forthcoming mate from Trilogy, or from most modern pre-amps conceived for multi-room or A/V installations.

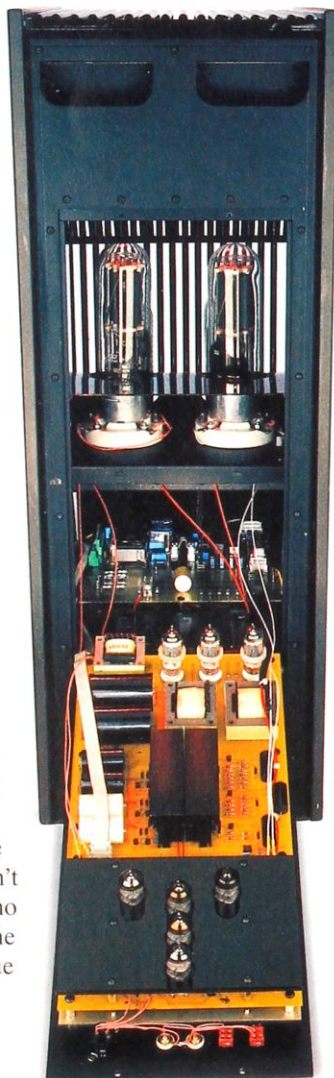
At the lower front are two rows of four blue LEDs, half of which stay on even when you have only the rear power active. Switch on 'for real', and all of them light up, monitoring bias activity. Getting them to flicker along with the music means cranking it up a bit: this amp barely flexes a muscle most of the time because there's just so much power on tap. Poulsen rates it at a *minimum* of 200W. Twist his arm and he'll add 50 more, but he prefers to err on the side of caution.

Before you ask 'Why?', I already grumbled about the size and weight (estimated at 150lb). He said that it simply couldn't be made any smaller, save for maybe knocking off an inch or two of height. In addition to housing the complex innards and overkill power supply, the bulk addresses optimum layout for the signal wiring, design for long life, servicing concerns and weight stability. This last makes it bottom-heavy; you *will* see the deliverymen fighting with each other not to have to carry the bottom end.

Proud and glowing in the middle section are four of my favourite output valves (tied with 845s): 211 triodes in a parallel push-pull arrangement. They're driven by five ECC88 valves in Trilogy's proprietary driver stage, and the inputs are true balanced or single-ended. A 'judicious amount' of differential feedback is used from the output transformer primaries to the high bandwidth driver stage; there is no overall feedback. The driver stage is mounted on the hinged, near-vertical rear panel and has its own large mains transformer. Three EZ81 rectifiers provide power for three high performance discrete regulated supplies, which are only a few inches away 'from where the clean power is required.' A massive, low impedance, 200 Joule main HT

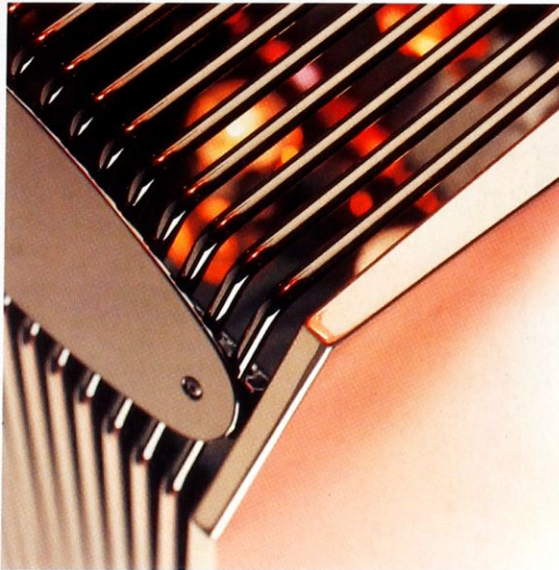


Those huge 211s can be seen glowing through the 'grille'. The rods are close enough together to meet any safety requirements



The rear panel hinges down for easy access: here you can see the array of five ECC88s used in the driver stage and the set of three EZ81 rectifier valves

Trilogy will supply the RC211 in virtually any paint finish required. Completing the 'cage' are the elegant sideplates, which in future will also be available to order in wood 🔄



supply with polypropylene storage capacitors is sited 'a few inches away from the destination of the output transformer'. (No electrolytic capacitors are used except for the supervisory electronics.) This supply also has its own dedicated mains transformer; two further transformers supply the 211 filaments and the protection, standby and supervisory electronics.

All supplies are sequentially turned on and off and are filtered and current in-rush protected; this process is indicated at switch-on by the sequential flashing of the blue LED at the top of the amplifier. Bias indicators and adjusters are provided for each of the four 211 output valves on the front panel, and a circuit monitors current in the 211s and shuts down the amplifier if too much current flows.

Driving the Watt Puppy System 6 — a likely candidate given the price band — the RC211 was driven in balanced mode by the Krell KPS25sc CD player/preamp. For analogue sources, a Revox G36 tape deck and SME 10 turntable with Series V arm and Lyra cartridge into a Musical Fidelity X-Phono were used. Wiring consisted of Harmonix speaker cables and Transparent Ultra interconnect.

Unsurprisingly, Poulsen and his crew stuck around while we waited for the amp to settle into its groove; after an initial burst to make sure it was working, we left it for a half-hour before listening critically. And, yes, you could hear it improve with each passing quarter hour; Poulsen was right about a one hour minimum. They hung around as I dug out disc after disc, all of us marvelling at delights such as Willie DeVille's 'Assassin Of Love', assorted Howard Tate tracks and more. It's one of those rare components that not only avoids causing listener fatigue, it inspires sessions well into the wee hours. It was rediscovery after rediscovery, exploited best by what I thought were familiar-to-the-point-of-cliché Beatles records.

Hand-claps on 'Eight Days A Week' — sharp and crisp and sounding human. Spacious, *true* stereo on 'I Want To Hold Your Hand', the guitar-work showing that Harrison was a genius at the age of 20. Massed strings on 'Eleanor Rigby', clean bass throughout. And

the percussion! A pox on those who ever undervalued Ringo Starr. But what was the Trilogy doing that I hadn't already heard a few thousand times before?

It took but moments to realise that the Trilogy delivered the most realistic and well-extended bass I've ever heard, regardless of the amplifier's output devices. While not quite as tight and fully damped as, say, that of Krell's FPB300, it matches that and every other amp in my experience in all other lower-octave duties. What's so noteworthy, though, is that the bass is never overpowering, never overwhelming. OK, so my room, though small, is a resonance-free zone, and it acts like a giant mechanical earth. How, then, do I explain that other amplifiers have exhibited loose, undisciplined lower registers in the same conditions?

Next up is the sense of scale, with more than one observer dazzled by the image height and stage depth. As is appropriate for an amp with the RC211's physical attributes, the sound is grand in the finest sense, large and room-filling and therefore able to convince you that you just may be hearing the real thing. But the magic, the properties of this amplifier's behaviour which could prise thirty-five K out of my pocket if I had it is the midband on up. Having used it for a quick, nervous burst with LS3/5As, which don't even give you a glimpse of what the RC211 does down below, I was still able to experience vocals and treble clarity and transient attack up there with the finest.

Thus, what the Trilogy delivered was a coherence and an of-a-oneness I don't think I've ever tasted before. It was like listening afresh to familiar material, from favoured Persuasions recordings (each voice in a space of its own) to Alison Krauss (her voice never sounding clearer) to mono Louis Prima. And that even had Poulsen and Co asking for a catalogue number.

I am loath to say what I truly believe about the Trilogy RC211 because all of us, on both sides of the word processor, have heard all of the superlatives and hype, and are by now such sharp, cynical consumerists that we would be sceptical even of a sales pitch by Albert Schweitzer. Besides, I've had it up to my balding pate with whining letters from readers who simply can't accept that some people like to read about high-end gear even if they can't afford it (including myself), let alone tolerate the existence of those who *can* afford it. But what can I do, if not speak my mind? So here it is: at present, it tells me that I've just experienced what may be the very best amplifier I've ever used. And, whether anybody likes it or not, it's English. 🇬🇧

THE TECHNOLOGY

Each RC211 monoblock contains no fewer than four huge 211 output tubes. And that robust lower half contains a huge, 'exceptionally linear' output transformer designed and manufactured in house. Nic points out that 'the transformer design is totally unique and is hand-wound at an average speed below 1cm per second. Over 1km of wire is utilised, and we designed it to have minimal phase shift and very low current densities. This and its sheer size provide ultra low level resolution with rich harmonics while making absolutely no concessions on timing and drive capability'.