

# VALVE & VINYL

APRIL 1993

## TRILOGY

A BRITISH TUBE  
BREAKTHROUGH?

## TUBE PRE-AMPS

SEVEN MODELS REVIEWED

## TRIODES RULE

THE SILVER NIGHT

## INTEGRATED AMPS

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# TRILOGY turns on

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**B**rave are the new. Whatever the syntax of that opener, I've gotta hand it to anyone with the *chutzpah* to start a new hi-fi company during the Great Economic Downturn of the 1990s. And I have even more admiration for those who dare to say it with tubes. Trilogy Audio Systems is one of the latest to join the ranks of the masochists, but I've a sneaking suspicion that they'll last the course.

The designer is young Nic Poulson. I first made his acquaintance when he was involved with the ill-fated Foundation tube pre-amp. Striking out on his own, Nic has approached the challenge of answering his call in a manner so cautious and calculated that I don't see how the venture can fail, current economic conditions notwithstanding. And I just love purist hi-fi tamed by a sense of sanity.

Examine, if you will, the catalogue, ambitious enough to provide a multi-product range but small enough to suggest that the promises are within the company's capabilities. The list consists, at present, of a pre-amp available in line-only format or with a phono section which can be added internally; to match there is a stereo power amplifier and a monoblock version. That's it. And the company has no intention of running before it can walk, although two products are mooted for release later this year.

Trilogy's 901 is a line-only pre-amp, retailing for £625. Add £200 and you have the phono'd 901; the price for the module remains the same whether you purchase the pre-amp ready for vinyl or add phono at a later stage. There's only one option, and that's finish. The 901 comes

standard in black, but you can have it finished in 'mercury', an alternative to chrome so gorgeous you'll wonder why black ever became popular.

Measuring 430×85×340mm (whd), the 901 is sized to sit with most other components. It features only on/off, volume, source select and record out facility for five line-level inputs plus phono, which is all that you really need if you're part-purist. The controls have a nice feel suggesting dependable build quality, while the mercury coating reinforces the notion that you're playing with a hi-fi product made by a German camera firm. At the back it's all gold-plated phonos. Inside, the 901 is powered by a pair of ECC88 double triodes for line duties, while the phono section adds a pair each of ECC81s and ECC83s. The design uses no negative feedback and provides 19dB of gain. FETs are used for regulation, while the circuit is assembled with ERO polypropylene caps and close-tolerance metal film resistors throughout. Cornered, Nic will admit that he favours the tried and tested, so don't lift the lid expecting circuitry from Mars.

The benefits of this conservatism? In the few weeks I had the Trilogy kit I experienced nothing I could classify as naughty behaviour. No sparks, buzzes, hums, hiss – *nada*. Peace. Security. Silences when appropriate . . . even when using the phono input with its 41dB of gain. (It's a 47k-ohm input, by the way, and ideal for most medium output moving-coils.) I said Nic was sane. Maybe 'down to earth' and 'realistic' are better terms. Whatever, he spared me the taurean faeces and let the product do the talking. And it spoke like a student of Henry Higgins.





TRILGY

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So, too, the 948 monoblock power amp. Rated at 100W and taking up only 195×470mm (w×d) floor space, the 948 comes as standard with the mercury finish and a black cage to keep the cretinous away from the pretty glowing bottles. The 948s look like five grand's worth of gear, though the pair will set you back only £2499. What you get per channel, besides a finish to die for, is a quartet of GE 6550As, an ECC88 and a pair of ECC81s, perfectly finished E-core mains and output transformers from Apex in Devon, five-way binding posts, a solid on-off toggle and a dream of a bias arrangement.

Switch on and you see a row of four red LEDs glowing amidst the valves. Sit back for around a minute and they reach equal levels of illumination. That's it. Next to each tube is a hole in which you insert the screwdriver supplied with the unit. If the bias is out, you just trim the screws for equal illumination. Nic plonked the units on the floor, straight from an automobile journey. I fired 'em up and didn't have to touch a thing, the bias settings having survived a trip down the M2 with ease. Parts and build quality match the 901, so here's a pair of tube amps you can switch on without having to leap immediately behind a policeman's riot shield.

The lack of drama, welcomed *chez* Kessler after a month of unprintable catastrophes, prepared me for the sound itself. Like the designer, the Trilogy components are fastidious, polite. They do exactly what they're meant to do, but I suppose that the more macho among you – the kind who think that diving off a cliff in Acapulco is for wimps – might be disappointed that they don't require any switch-on rituals or asbestos matting. They need little in the way of tweaking, although they do benefit from such add-ons as tube dampers, proper siting and cable matching. That may sound like a contradiction but let me assure you: straight out of the packaging the Trilogy system works well enough to keep you from rushing for your Pandora's box.

Maybe that's because Nic has addressed the finer points in the design itself. Tube microphony was minimal, the aforementioned tube dampers offering less of an improvement than I've heard with other valve units of far flimsier construction. And even though the amps weigh so little – 6kg perhaps? – the lack of mass doesn't affect the solidity. All I did (entirely out of habit) was site them on Sorbothane feet.

The pre-amp is neutral enough to make source matching a doddle, and I could recognise each component I tried – CD players from CAL to

Krell to Marantz and cartridges from Koetsu to Lyra to Transfiguration – with ease. Though audibly less transparent, precise or coherent than the substantially dearer Krell KRC, the 901 possesses such top-to-bottom consistency that all sources were treated equally. Any tailoring performed at the source end therefore depends on the choice of speakers at the other end, the 901 not really giving a damn one way or the other about what signals it's fed. The only caveat concerns the phono section – doesn't it always? – which works best with cartridges on the lean side.

I quickly learned that the amps are not in the animal category, the 100W having to be coaxed out of the tubes because they're run conservatively to extend valve life. The 948s would drive the Sonus Faber Extremas almost to useful levels, but ran out of steam when it came time to bang head. In my sensibly sized listening room, I could just about live with the Trilogy/Sonus Faber package. Much better results came from less hungry, more sensitive designs like the awesome JBL L1, my cherished LS3/5As, TDL 0.5s and the like.

But don't think for a minute that these amps are gutless. Matched with a speaker of the easy school, the 948s will rock with the best. The politeness and delicacy mentioned above refers to sound quality, especially treble regions so sweet and tube-y that the 948s are just what the doctor ordered to salvage the sound of metal domes. With sensitive speakers, the 948s kicked into gear with high-slam epics like 'Assassin of Love', the metal and rap excess of the *California Man* soundtrack and even my fave Sousa stompers. It's all down to matching and accommodation. Any turkey can undermine an amplifier by mating it with too-hungry a speaker. The obligation, no, the responsibility of the reviewer or retailer is to use an amp with a sympathetic load.

And it's worth finding the right speakers because the Trilogy amps do what all modern tube amps should do. They juggle a glorious, tactile, 3D midband and treble region with bass just dry enough to keep you from reaching for the Gas-X. The real skill is in the weave, finding a point to introduce the dryness without intruding into the midband. The LS3/5As aren't quite rich enough down below to reveal this characteristic, but the JBLs and TDLs certainly are, and you can play an onanistic parlour game trying to spot the join. Monomaniacal as I am about vocals, I had to go out of my way to find recordings that contained enough bottom octave energy to test this characteristic. I'm pleased to report

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that even the bass layering on the *Theme From Shaft*, the Fenderising on various C&W sets and the thunderous nature of soundtrack spectaculars couldn't expose the transition point.

The same held true for the upper mid-to-treble transition, where the Trilogy system has to swing from rich and warm vocals to treble that avoids edge *without turning too soft*. The key may be the silky, liquid sound that provides the system's character from the mid-bass right through to the upper limits. Part of you will swear that this is a vintage tube amp with a *circa* '93 price tag, but the other part will point out that it's mush free and that the edges have definition and the transients have snap and it's transparent enough to satisfy modern tastes. It's something you expect of C-J or ARC – but from a British package at just over 3k?

What really sold me on the Trilogy system, having accepted the power vs. sound quality compromise, is the soundstaging and what goes on within the playing arena. It's not so much that the Trilogy offers absolute size – I could name a dozen 'bigger sounding' packages – so much as it opens its doors wider than a car dealer during a recession. Height reproduction is convincing enough to pass the LEDR test, while front-to-back-depth stops just short of the miraculous. There are near-holographic images in front of you, no crowding or smearing or obscuring of details. Instrument location is precise and solid, if not exactly superglued. Best of all is the lack of texturing between the performers; you really must audition this with massed voices to experience the effect with undeniable results. Those who like to zoom in on individual performers are gonna love this; get your King's Singers discs out of their jewel boxes.

Picking apart the performance aspect by aspect suggests more than you might actually hear because it is, by its very nature, a case of highlighting and therefore exaggerating specifics. And that contradicts everything which is good about the Trilogy system. Its main strength is its coherence, the kind of integrity that overshadows or even overcompensates for minor weaknesses. In this case, it allows you to forget the lack of unbridled grunt (which you deal with through speaker selection), the lack of drama and the lack of artificiality – which so many demand of hi-fi, despite what the purists preach. I just hope it isn't so low key as to be ignored. Because I firmly believe that Trilogy Audio Systems may be offering some of the most honest hi-fi this country has ever produced.

**Ken Kessler**

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