



Pathos Classic One Hybrid Integrated Amp

by Chris Thomas

As someone firmly used to solid-state amplification for the past twenty something years, the arrival of the Pathos Classic One integrated amplifier was a somewhat interesting proposition. I have no ideological leaning toward solid-state amplification at all. It just turned out that way. Most of my previous experience with valve equipment has in fact been good, though I haven't really felt the full force of any of the modern day examples which those in the know tell me are a lot better than their predecessors. Over the years I have had very, very few reliability problems with the solid-state amplifiers I have both owned and reviewed. But almost every time I use a valve amplifier there are concerns and this usually takes the form of noise or channel imbalance of some kind or another. In fact, just a couple of years ago I was rather enjoying the thermionic delights of a chunky integrated valve amp, drowning in its warmth but impressed with its resolution, when I began to hear what sounded like a steam train in the distance on the right channel. Suspecting that this was not in Elgar's original score I contacted the manufacturer. "Oh it's just a valve", he said. "Valve amplifiers are like that". Really! What a nuisance. And this is the very thing that puts many of use off the whole idea of valve amplification. We like the rich tonality and the naturalness of the sound, but do those of us interested in something other than classical music or 3-piece soft jazz combos want to listen to an amplifier because it reminds us of our Dad's old radiogram? Are valve amplifiers really

still like that? Are they fast and dynamic enough to separate Billy Cobham's twin bass drums or are they all soft leading edges, harmonic warmth, nostalgia and replacement valves? The Pathos Classic One is unable to give all the answers to all the above questions, as it is a valve/solid state hybrid design with a valve front end and a solid state driver section. But, it's a start.

Pathos was founded in 1994 in the ancient Italian city of Vicenza and their amplifiers have always been visually stylish, as is most Italian equipment. The Classic One is no exception. It certainly looks a stunning little piece of audio sculpture and for such a compact component combines



real musical punch with convenience and versatility. This is in fact its second version, which shows several improvements over its predecessor. It now has an output of 70 watts per channel into 8 ohms and can even be mono bridged to give 135 watts. It has a full compliment of 5 inputs, including one pair of balanced XLRs and features a 100 step motorised volume control with a red front panel readout. This is remotely operated, along with input selection, by a very cute and straightforward wood and chrome 4-button handset. Speaker

connections are to the rear of the black acrylic top panel that sits on a shiny chromed chassis. The tubes used in the pre-amplifier section are Sovtek (6922-ECC 8625) devices and sit under twin chromed grids, while the solid-state output section, which runs quite hot, is obscured from view by a cage between the bright red capacitors and the shining transformer.

With my Naim CDS 3 as a source I hooked the Classic One into the back of the excitingly different Eben X-Centrics which, by this time, I knew to be potentially ruinous to lesser amplifiers and then gave it a half hour to come up to cooking temperature before having a listen. I have to be honest here and say that I was not expecting great things. No prejudgement of the Pathos but rather that I had been listening to the Ebens with Tom Evans' Vibe and Pulse with a Hovland Radia power amp and in the solid-state world things don't get a whole lot better than that. In fact I was not expecting to use the X-Centrics for the Pathos review at all, figuring that a cheaper and 'easier' speaker would be needed. But I was wrong and quite amazed at what I was hearing. Straight away it was clear that the Ebens presented no great challenge for the Classic One at all. In fact you could almost believe that they were made for each other. The clarity and dynamic freedom in the treble was what first grabbed me and in particular the whole shape and depth of cymbal work. The impact of the stick-work and the way the metal fleshes out with energy and vibrates and shimmers ►

► the air around it was really superb and played straight into the hands of the X-Centrics quite exceptional tweeter and in fact really gave me a view of the capabilities of the Ebens that I hadn't had before. It wasn't as fast and didn't have the same speed of attack or leading edge resolution as I had grown used to but, despite having its own way of doing things, the X-Centric imposes very little of itself over the musical character of its driving amplifier, so it really lets the Pathos sing.

Though I am not an amplifier designer I imagine that the hybrid marriage between valve and solid-state must throw up all sorts of problems when it comes to rhythmic and timing issues whether they be electronic or subjective. If so, then the designers have done an excellent job with the Classic One. I am comfortable with amplifiers that are slower than I am used to but I feel distinctly uneasy when an amp is out of time with itself so the bass drags the music back, robbing it of motion and impetus. The Pathos feels rhythmically on the ball from top to bottom. There is a little softness and rounding of edge definition in the bass, but tonally it is commendable and so is its ability to start and stop. It's not exactly a boogie machine and I doubt it's the amp for you if you are exclusively exploring the outer regions of heavy metal, but it is no better or worse than a number of solid-state designs in this regard either.

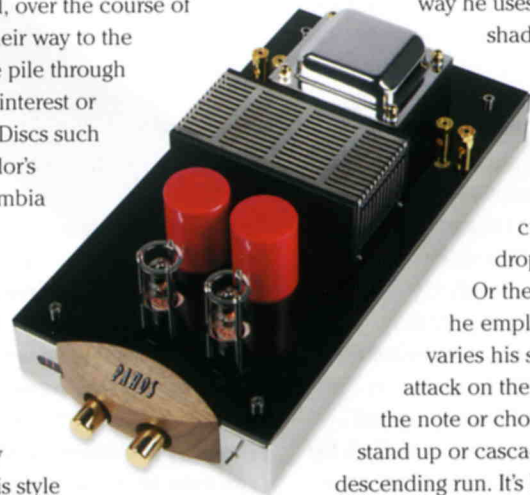
After a couple of days I had completely forgotten that the Pathos was half of a valve amplifier and had stopped listening to it as such. By this time I was beginning to appreciate its excellent volume control that enables one to set the level precisely, and its performance at low levels where it still sounds involving and full bodied. Its power is probably enough for me but I did find that when pushed hard it lost

a bit of its reserve though, at these levels, the room will have its say. But it is easy to forgive this amplifier most things when you spend a while exploring your music collection and



this thing is so undemanding to listen to that you may find, as I did, that sessions can go for longer than usual. I even ended up listening to discs that had, over the course of time found their way to the bottom of the pile through boredom, disinterest or indifference. Discs such as Martin Taylor's *Niteline* (Columbia 5033212), a generally unsuccessful attempt to widen Martins audience by electronicallyfunking up his style and making him more hip, although the ginger beard might be a serious stumbling block. I think Taylor is a truly great player and if proof were needed, listen to *Hymne a L'amour* where he shows just what gifts a great jazz guitarist needs in his armoury. First there is his sound which the

Classic One opens up beautifully. It's sweet, but not fat, bloated and inexpressive with all the tone switched off at the guitar volume pot like George Benson is currently using. Here Taylor has the perfect blend of the warmth of the guitar body and the thinner high end so his phrasing still has clarity and pitch coherence. And then there is his technique, which, as the Pathos shows, is totally brilliant, as it has to be when you are left to carry the whole tune, that's the melody and the chord sequence, yourself. Add to this the numerous passing chords and embellishments and on many systems, as the notes fire out you wonder if he hasn't got three hands. But what is so impressive about the Pathos is the character, shape, presence and tonal energy of the instrument and the person playing it. Close your eyes and you can see his hands and fingers working the strings on the fretboard and hear the subtle way he uses the natural



shading and dynamics of the instrument to drop the volume and create another drop of tension.

Or the techniques he employs as he varies his speed and attack on the string, voicing the note or chord, making it stand up or cascading into a descending run. It's beautiful stuff and the Pathos is in its element here as it goes about its business in a very relaxed yet focussed way.

Likewise on vocals, which I found to be the most seductive area of the amplifier's character. Driving the Ebens I was stunned with the 3 dimensional quality of the voice and the sense ►

of naturalness and would say that in this area alone it has a closer link to real life than all but the very, very best solid-state designs I have heard. As I listened through Boz Scaggs, Gillian Welch, Alison Krauss and Ike Willis I was struck by that extra sense of reality and emotion that the Pathos seemed able to produce. Quite simply, it does this by sounding dynamically unrestrained and both unprocessed and uncompressed. There is no flattening of perspectives and the sense of a real person singing into a microphone is palpable. And it is more than a little disconcerting to realise that, with the Ebens, this little thing does a far better job in this area than just about any solid-state amplifier that I have heard, with the absolute exception of the Connoisseur pre-amplifier, which does a better job than anything else, full stop.

When I bought the JM Labs Micro-Utopias into the equation I was expecting great things as, up to now, I would have considered the

asked serious rhythmic questions. Now I know from experience that the Micros can sound much, much better than this so I'm forced to concede that this combination just doesn't work and there's a warning sign with regard to system synergy if ever I saw one. Because at the price of £1325 the Pathos Classic One could be



considered a real life bargain, if you use it with the right speaker. And as the right speaker cannot be predicted through paper specifications, you're going to have to take advice from your dealer and listen for yourself. In the interests of fairness I should also add that, toward the end of the review, I received a Nordost Shiva mains lead which I promptly pressed into use with the Classic One and I have to say that, for £200, this is a very worthwhile improvement and well worth consideration.

For me, the Pathos has opened a small door and allowed me a view of a different way of doing things.

I thought I would be disappointed by any amplifier that was noticeably slower than a Naim or Spectral or any that had a less than iron-like grip of the bass, but in fact I really enjoyed my time with the Classic One. Once I had grown used to how different it was from what I am used to, I really began to appreciate its

strengths. For me and my solid-state history it provides an alternative, relaxed and colourful view of the world that is very thought provoking and I discovered a lot about the intricate series of threads that binds music together that I either hadn't heard, or had overlooked before. And there were no dodgy valves, hums, buzzes or accompanying sound effects of failing components to report either. Think of it as a very reasonably priced but great little amplifier that just happens to incorporate valves and give it a listen. I think you might be surprised. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hybrid stereo integrated amplifier.
Pre-amp section:	2x Sovtek 6922.
Power section:	Solid-state Class A/AB
Power output:	2 x 70 watts @ 8 ohms 135 watts-bridged mono
Inputs:	5, including one balanced XLR
S/N ratio:	90dB
Input impedance:	100 Kohm.
Dimensions (WxHxD):	150x230x450mm
Weight:	16 kg
Price:	£1350

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Micros an easier proposition than the Ebens. But no, even with that quite amazing tweeter, the little Pathos never quite managed to whip the speaker into shape in the same way it had done with the X-Centrics. In fact it sounded more than a little lightweight and even confused at times, especially when