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The Big Mc' is Back

McIntosh re-introduces the legendary MC275

REVIEWS

McIntosh
valve power amp

Yamaha
digital sound projector

Quad
subwoofer

Classic
valve amplifier

Aaron
subwoofer



Q. What's the easiest way to upgrade your AV system?

A. Simple . . . (see pages 48 and 49)



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audition

equipment review

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McIntosh MC275 Valve Power Amplifier

Hi-fi is largely a hobby of technological innovation. For this reason, there are very few all time, legendary, pieces of equipment, whose performance would stack up in any age. Original Quad ESL electrostatic loudspeakers has its fans, as does the Linn Sondek I suppose, but even that most venerated of turntables has gone through many updates over the years. As a general rule, constant research and development means that today's must-have piece of audio equipment will be superseded in the years to

come. The McIntosh MC275 power amplifier is however, without a shadow of a doubt, an all time, hi-fi legend.

Originally produced from May 1961 through to July 1973, the MC275 enjoyed one of the longest model runs in hi-fi history. But by the early seventies, McIntosh, decided to cease production of valve amplifiers altogether and instead embrace transistor designs along with the rest of the industry. The MC275 was thus the last of a line of McIntosh valve amplifiers that stretched back to the 50W-2 of 1949. One of the first transistor designs McIntosh produced was the MC50 monobloc, an original pair of which I have used in my own system for several years. But a strange thing happened with the phasing out of the MC275 for its more powerful and supposedly superior transistor replacements. Demand for original McIntosh valve amplifiers didn't go away. Asian audiophiles were the first to seek out vintage tube gear, arguing they had a life-like sound and presentation that transistor designs had never fully captured. Interest spread to Europe and the USA, where new valve amplifier companies sprung up to cater for the growing demand. Interest in original equipment never went away, and by the end of the eighties had grown to the point that a mint condition used MC275 often fetched up to eight times its original purchase price. In recognition of the interest in its former valve designs,

This power amplifier heralds the rebirth of a true hi-fi legend

By Michael O'Connor

Vital Statistics

Dimensions:

419 x 209 x 304mm

Weight:

30.5kg

Price:

\$5,299

Distributor:

Castel Electronics Pty Ltd
1-21 Beaufort Street
Preston. VIC 3072

Telephone:

(03) 9484 3788 or 1300 733 962

Facsimile:

(03) 9480 3868

Website:

www.mcintosh.net.au



McIntosh re-released the MC275 as a limited edition in 1993. The 4,500 units sold out before any stock reached stores. Demand persisted in the ensuing years, with diehards prepared to part with large sums of money for decent examples. Reasoning it could no longer afford to ignore this strong interest in its older designs, McIntosh has now made the decision to permanently reintroduce the MC275 to its amplifier line-up.

So what's so special? Simply put, this is one of the most famous high-end amplifiers ever made. By the time the MC275 was introduced in May 1961, McIntosh Laboratories of Binghamton, New York was already established as one of the key high-end manufacturers of the day, battling with the likes of Marantz, Harman-Kardon and a few others. But while its competitors fell into the hands of new owners who were happy to trade on name alone, McIntosh has maintained its reputation for performance, solidity, dependability and customer service; a reputation which is unrivalled to this day.

When the MC275 arrived at my home, it required no less than two men to lift its 30kg+ weight inside. Once there and removed from the double boxing it travels in, it was obvious that if this was one of the

most famous amps ever made, then it also had to be one of the most beautiful. It's a study in chrome, glass and black gloss paint. The massive power and output transistors at the back of the amp appear monolithic while the gothic *McIntosh* typeface along the front is wonderfully iconic. But there is no doubting that the stars of this visual performance are the vacuum tube valves themselves. The KT-88s are each roughly the size of a light bulb and glow a warm red. At night, with the lights switched off, the valves illuminate the whole amp. Real soul stirring stuff. Apparently you can substitute the supplied KT-88s with 6550 valves if you want, but I don't know how tempted I would be to do this. The KT-88 has an excellent reputation. Still, changing an amplifier's sound by using different valves is one of the attractions of owning a valve amplifier in the first place. When was the last time you heard of anyone altering an amplifier's sound by changing its transistors?

You probably won't be surprised to hear that construction of the amplifier isn't exactly as it was back in 1961. Methods have progressed since then and so has the MC275. For instance, McIntosh is now able to use just one large circuit board instead of the multitude of boards and connectors

that were previously used. All of the tubes plug straight into the single board. The tube sockets themselves are made of ceramic for the first time with gold connecting pins. The size of the transformers has been increased, which has boosted voltage from 450V, up to 490V. Power in turn has also been increased. Although still rated as a 75 watt amplifier, McIntosh claim it is now more like 95 watts per channel. Bridging the amplifier into mono boosts this up to 150 watts.

Externally, additions such as gold plated balanced inputs and an on/off switch for the first time are concessions to the modern world. Otherwise everything else is more or less as it was 40 years ago. There are a pair of gold plated unbalanced inputs whose sensitivity can be adjusted via black knobs, which in turn can function as volume controls. You can hence run a CD player straight into it without the need for a separate preamplifier. Connection of speaker cable is via a binding strip, which has taps for 4, 8 or 16 ohm speakers. I was already familiar with this type of connector from my own MC50s but for the uninitiated, they may come as something as surprise. They're not the easiest things to use frankly and really only allow use of bare cable or the thinnest of spade connectors.

Technotalk

Product Type:

Stereo valve power amplifier

Valve Types:

3 x 12AX7

4 x 12AT7

4 x KT-88/6550

Power Output:

Minimum 75 watts

(4, 8 or 16 ohm loads)

150 watts mono bridged

(2, 4 or 8 ohm loads)

Input Sensitivity:

1.2V unbalanced, 2.5V balanced

Frequency Response:

20Hz-20kHz

Signal To Noise Ratio:

100dB ('A' weighted)

Total Harmonic Distortion:

0.5%

Input Connection Methods:

4mm gold plated unbalanced RCA

Balanced XLR

Technotalk specifications and recommended retail prices are supplied by the manufacturer

“Just what is it about the sound of valves? Well, if you haven’t heard a valve amplifier before, it’s a little hard to describe, but it can probably best be summed up as truth of timbre or colour.”

After switching the amp on, the valves take about an hour to fully warm up, after which you’re ready to rock. You can forget about any experiences you may have had with laid back and recessed valve amplifiers. Even most solid-state amps sound weak or wimpy when compared to the Mc’. It has a tremendous amount of dynamic drive. It punches out music in a lively, exciting way. Big, beefy and ballsy – quintessentially American some might say. On *Celebrity Skin* by Hole, it was all thrusting guitars and smashing drums. Courtney Love’s yearning voice flies over the top with flailing passion. On *Underground*, by Thelonious Monk, each syncopated expression of the keyboard is brought right out of the speakers to the listening position. But it’s not just with jazz or rock. Classical music too benefits from this added power or thrust. There’s more of a foundation on symphonic pieces. Cellos sound more exciting on string quartets. All of this dynamic drive is fine, but the good news is that it is not at the expense of midrange and treble sweetness or overall transparency. The amps are smooth and sweet, with superior resolution and detail. Compared with some amps however, the sound is, in sound staging terms, a little forward rather than back.

What else? Well there is of course that undeniable sheen the valves loan the whole experience. Just what is it about the sound of valves? Well, if you haven’t heard a valve amplifier before, it’s a little hard to describe, but it can probably best be summed up as truth of timbre or colour. On *A Love Supreme* by John Coltrane, the sound of the tenor saxophone has this beautiful reedy sound. There is somehow more air or space around it and the other instruments. In short, it just somehow sounds more real. With *Whisper Not* by Ella Fitzgerald, the jazz diva’s alto sounds more human and accessible than it does with most transistor amps. The voice appears to float out of the Legend Kantu 4 loudspeakers rather than march straight at me. It sounds magnificent, but it’s worth noting that it doesn’t have the otherworldly imaging that some valve amps exhibit with instruments that appear to emerge from 15 metres behind the speakers. Instead it has a more even presentation, if a little forward.

At \$5,299 I guess it isn’t cheap, but the price is high partly because of the Russian made KT-88 output tubes. These valves cost McIntosh more than \$200 a pop – that’s over \$800 per MC275. Of course McIntosh has to pass along the cost but I am told they haven’t marked them up. They make their margin on the amp itself, not the tubes. And just a note on the tubes, there are three different types and you have to install them yourself. This is no major problem as they plug straight into the sockets, but follow the instructions closely to ensure you insert the right tube into the right socket. Get this wrong and the amp won’t work. But once set up - wow!

Just imagine for a moment that Ford Australia reissued the Falcon GTHO or if Leica brought back the M-2. This is a classic piece of audio equipment intended for lovers of music. **AVL**

Ancillary Equipment: Naim CD 5 CD player, Naim Flatcap 2 power supply, Legend Kantu 4 loudspeakers

Opinion

The ‘Opinion’ expressed here is that of the reviewer, summarised in the form of a 5-star rating system, and should be considered as an integral part of the full contents of this **Audition Equipment Review**. As such, each category should be judged on its own merits and not necessarily used as a comparison with other equipment reviews in this, or other editions of **Audio & Video Lifestyle** magazine.

★ Shocker
★★ Average
★★★ Good
★★★★ Excellent
★★★★★ Perfection

“Originally produced from May 1961 through to July 1973, the MC275 enjoyed one of the longest model runs in hi-fi history.”

Performance

★★★★★

Build Quality

★★★★★

Compatibility

★★★

Value For Money

★★★★