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EAT KT-88

If you believe upmarket tubes merely bring differences rather than improvements in sound these Czech KT-88s will make you think again



EAT Valve KT-88 Diamond

PRICE £288/matched pair

Having been well and truly educated by manufacturers like Croft and AudioValve, I am loath to enter the 'premium valve' fray. Both have shown that intelligent design can more than compensate for tube variation and quality.

Conversely, I can't rule out upscale replacement tubes, having long ago experienced matched pairs, brand-vs-brand quality, military spec over civilian grades and other pursuits. And I hate to admit that you can hear differences, and they are *not* subtle. The problem is that simply replacing stock tubes with something of the hot-rodged variety won't necessarily yield an improvement.

So now along comes a Czech operation with the ludicrous name of EAT. (EAT is an acronym for European Audio Team.) And while they exhibit

Considering that most 100W/ch, KT-88-equipped amps in my experience use four per channel, then EAT is being conservative; most users are unlikely to hammer these to 100W per pair.

Because I have been using the PrimaLuna Prologue Two as my budget reference amp, and as PrimaLuna shares UK distribution with EAT in the UK, I asked the importer to set up a Prologue Two with a matched quartet of EAT KT-88s. This would enable me to warm-up both amps simultaneously. It was as close to A/B testing as possible. Speakers consisted of PMC DB1+, Rogers LS3a, Rogers LS3/5A and – ulp! – Sonus Faber Guarneri.

It took, oh, all of two seconds to justify their existence, even in an amp costing a mere £999 – or only £400 more than the set of valves on its own. I know, there's nothing rational about stuffing £600's worth of glass into an amp £1 shy of a grand...or is there? Even though the measurements

EAT Valve Type KT-88 specification

Amplification factor 4; Heater voltage 6.3V;
Filament current 1.6A; Grid voltage -55V;
Transconductance 12mA/V; Plate voltage 250V;
Plate current 162mA; Plate dissipation 40.5W;

especially on vocals such as Joss Stone's or Aimee Mann's, was to increase intimacy by strengthening the sensation of the singer being in the room. This benefit also revealed its worth with cluttered recordings. The extra clarity and openness make it much easier to focus on a detail – especially low-level ones typically masked or overwhelmed by louder sounds. And yet there was never any sensation of listening to disembodied sounds in a single playing field.

Then there's the attack-and-decay capabilities of the EATs. They're quick – almost ridiculously so. Put on a disc by any virtuoso known for rapid plucking or fingering – from manic guitarists to a young Louis Armstrong or Louis Prima. No muddle, no delays, no upsetting the timing.

Imagine: if £600's worth of EATs can turn the £999 PrimaLuna into a reasonable facsimile of a £3000 amp, what will they do for an aged but beloved Mac 275? An elderly Audio Research amp? Any tired Jadis? What we have here, my friends, is the valve amp equivalent of Viagra. ■

Ken Kessler

Supplier

Absolute Sounds
020 8971 3909
www.absolutesounds.com

Hi-FiNews verdict

Premium products at a premium price, and standards of production show where the money goes. But it's performance that counts, and the KT-88s astonish, offering gains in weight, midband clarity and speed.

It took, oh, all of two seconds to justify their existence, even in an amp costing a mere £999

Swiss rather than Eastern European standards of production and presentation they also exhibit Swiss pricing. To me, £140 for a KT-88, £288 for a matched pair and £599 for a matched quartet is somehow lunatic when eBay shows unused, boxed GEC KT-88s for £56 each. So such *schadenfreude* I could enjoy if the EATs were crap. But they're not. In fact, they're sensational.

EAT says that its KT-88 Diamond (the company also manufactures 300Bs, 6550s and other popular tubes) were conceived to operate securely as replacements in situations as demanding as 100W from a pair of valves in Class AB1 operation.

indicate no gain in power, the sound is somehow more robust, giving an impression of increased wattage. The bottom end was transformed from already-credible performance to something I'd associate with, say, £2500's worth of Audio Research: convincing weight, palpable mass. The treble was cleaner, faster and still without the sort of edge that causes fatigue. But the real gains were in the midband.

Indisputably amazing though the PrimaLuna is, the EATs cranked it up another notch. A *big* notch. They peeled away a layer of texturing, akin to removing an extra speaker grille. The net effect,