

## Real-World Sonics

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<b>Products in this article:</b>	<a href="#">V-60 Integrated Amplifier</a>
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*Vincent Audio V-60 Integrated Amplifier*

I'm not an ideologue on the issue of solid-state versus vacuum tubes. No allegiances whatsoever. But I recognize that tube components possess a special appeal—particularly to audiophiles who crave greater involvement in the sport. Charting tube life, rebiasing, swapping output tubes from one former Eastern Bloc country or another are big parts of the color and enthusiasm users bring to high-end audio. The truth is, the Vincent V-60 is not that kind of tubed amp. Even Vincent admits that it's been designed for reliability and longevity. It doesn't ask to be coddled and it ain't finicky. You simply turn it on and it goes. In a word, my kind of integrated amplifier.

Visually the V-60 is unique in the Vincent lineup. Rather than being housed in the familiar enclosed box that defines most high-end electronics, the V-60 looks almost soaring and architectural with polished vertical columns rising from its steel-and-aluminum-clad chassis, a transparent and illuminated acrylic front panel, and a pagoda-inspired top plate—a virtual shrine to the golden age of tube power. In order to replace or check tubes, you have to remove four burly aluminum knobs at each corner of the heavily vented top panel (each knob has an ultra-thin nylon washer to protect the brushed-metal surface). The V-60 outputs 60Wpc

thanks to eight Russian-made 6CA7 power tubes. These are versions of the classic EL-34 pentode but with greater power reserves, according to Vincent Audio. The 6CA7s are augmented by a pair of 6CG7 while the preamp stage uses a pair of 6922s—again all Russian-made. The output transformers and the toroidal power transformer are robust—isolated within a lined and shielded casing. A unique, hands-free, fully automated biasing system maintains optimal operating voltages and current control, and is constantly compensating for the age of each tube. There are four selectable inputs along with four- and eight-ohm speaker taps. The binding posts and tube sockets are plated in gold. A small aluminum-clad remote control handles volume and mute functions.

For many, tubes and transistors still represent competing versions of reality—the former lush and romantic, the latter cold and analytical. Although these views have been largely discredited by current designs, a shred of truth remains. The V-60, however, presents no such quandary in this regard. Except for the heat factor which is, oy, very real, the V-60 is not, in the textbook sense, immediately recognizable as a vacuum tube integrated amp. I found no exaggerated frequency humps, dips, or imbalances that could redefine a familiar piece of music. Its tonal balance does lean toward a darker richer character in the midrange, but this counts as a plus for me. The amp has the requisite bloom in the lower mids but it's not an unreserved romantic. The treble is extended and unstressed. Its resolution of the decay of bass information is superior, as is its individuation of notes. In order to glean the most from the music's wide dynamic envelope in the lower octaves the user will need to show some sensitivity to speaker-matching, but that's to be expected. There's a sense of harmonic information being lightly rolled off in comparison to a high-caliber solid-state amp, but this is mostly in head-to-head comparisons and is quickly factored in and forgotten. In transient behavior, the amp is a bit laid-back—Bill Cunliffe's grand piano on *Live at Bernie's* [Groove Note] was neither as tight nor as aggressive on attacks, as if the felt hammers of his instrument were a bit thicker.

Sonically a couple of key things resonated with me immediately. The first is the V-60's midrange musicality. Its timbre and inner detail held me transfixed in my seat. I can't count the number of times I've heard Elton John's "Indian Sunset" (SACD and LP), but the distinctions between the loose acoustic bass and tight electric bass were never as well-defined as they were through the Vincent. And on *Madman Across The Water*, the amp showed a willowy delicacy retrieving the gentle splash of a ride cymbal on the iconic title track. Similarly during Jennifer Warnes' duet with Max Carl on "Somewhere, Somebody" from the new Cisco remastering of Warnes' *The Hunter*, Carl's vocal—set back and slightly in the shadow of Warnes' lead—had more convincing presence; even at its lower volume level, it became a virtual physical object, replete with weight and dimension.

The midrange, from the tiniest interior detail to the most extroverted dynamics, is authoritative, substantial, and almost Technicolored in its saturation. It captures acoustic timbres, harmonics, and textures in a way that is nothing less than breathtaking. Anne-Sophie Mutter's violin on the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto [DG SACD] was sweetly aggressive with high resolution of Mutter's well-rosined bow—aspects necessary to the accurate experience of this instrument. The low-level *legato* lines were so fluidly laced together they became exemplars of the concept of continuousness.

The second key aspect of the V-60's sound was the quality of the soundstage it created. It was not just a broadly dimensional stage, it was also virtually unbroken—there were no hotspots or dead zones. Rather, the stage was one continuous platform. But it went beyond that. The Vincent transformed the soundstage into a more immersive, semi-wrap-around arena. Instrumentalists and singers didn't stand so much in isolation from the venue; they inhabited it. It created a more organic, integrated relationship between musicians and the acoustic of the venue—a quality that distinguished it from my solid-state rig's propensity to separate images in a more clinical and, frankly, graceless manner.

Yet for the V-60, there was an occasional eccentricity. On soprano Anna Netrebko's most extended high notes throughout *Sempre Libera* [DG], the V-60 seemed to thrust even more air and harmonic energy into the hall. This was an occasion where the hall did not seem as specifically connected to the voice, an overlaid coloration that made me long for the more rigid precision of a solid-state amp, even if the trade-off was a bit more hard-hearted. So, while I'm convinced of the V-60 treble competence, it's still not quite the *ne plus ultra* in this region.

Generally however, pitting the V-60 against solid-state revealed more similarities than differences. During "Alone Together" from *Something Cool* [Telarc], a ruthlessly revealing track with just acoustic bass and Tierney Sutton's playful vocal, there's no protective blanket of complex instrumentation and sophisticated mixing to cover up flaws. While my solid-state reference possessed the edge in sheer, off-the-line transient speed—that spring-loaded *right now* quality—from both bass and vocalist, the Vincent V-60 defined the air of the recording venue differently. That air was thicker, as if more humid and slightly more enveloping. With solid-state, Sutton's vocal was presented with more heavily drawn image boundaries. The V-60 softens these edges. Both permit great extension on the standup bass, but the V-60 has a real ripeness that to me speaks more authentically—and this in spite of the additional dynamic slam and control of the solid-state gear, where every bass note is almost too perfectly defined. The less rigid interpretation of the V-60 somehow seems more akin to the real world in comparison.

In the final analysis, performance trumps topology and types of output devices. The Vincent is the rare kind of integrated amp—a tube amp, no less—that even the most unshakable solid-state fan will recognize as something musically very special. I did. Whichever side of the argument you stand on, once you experience the Vincent, the most strongly held convictions begin to waver. The V-60 is a tube amp that even a solid-state fan could love.

## **SPECS & PRICING**

### ***Vincent Audio V-60 Integrated Amplifier***

**PowerOutput:** 60Wpc

**Inputs:** Four RCA

**Outputs:** One RCA (rec out)

**Dimensions:**17.7" x 8.4" x 16.5"

**Weight:** 75 lbs.

**Price:** \$4995

#### **ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**

Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V tonearm; Clearaudio Maestro Wood; JR Transrotor Phono II; Esoteric X-05; Pass Labs INT-150; Sonics Amerigo, ATC SCM20-2, PMC DBli; Tara Labs RSC2 Air, Synergistic Tesla Apex, Nordost Baldur; Synergistic Tesla, Wireworld Silver Electra & Kimber Palladian power cords