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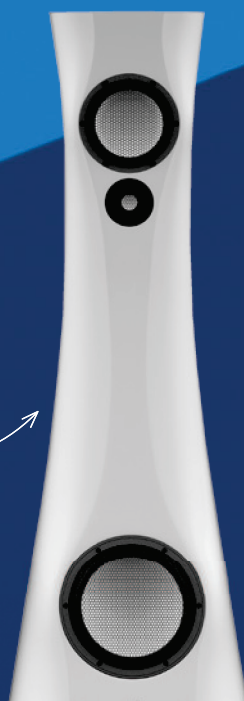
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Jadis DA88S MkII Integrated Amplifier

Magnifique!

By Jacob Heilbrunn

Photography by Dennis Burnett





I'll be the first to admit that I was more than a little dubious after uncrating and surveying the Jadis DA88S MkII integrated amplifier.

Sure, Jadis is a storied brand known for its hand-wound transformers, and it has more than a few audiophile worshippers. But I must confess that I was a mite skeptical about whether this integrated amp could really deliver the goods. My reservations went along something like these lines: Integrated amp, not separates; fairly inexpensive, as high-end audio products go; a mere 60 watts of output power; a lightweight; and so on. Skepticism, in other words, abounded. Still I was determined to give this piece of Gallic electronics a fair shake. So I plugged in a CD featuring the British trumpeter John Wallace performing Gabrieli and hit play on the dCS Vivaldi.

Every preconception that I had was laid waste within a few seconds as I listened to an integrated amplifier that wasn't merely good—it was spectacular. I knew that the Wilson XLF loudspeakers are fairly easy to drive, but the Jadis demonstrated a dynamic alacrity and vividness and prowess—a *puissance*, to use the wonderful French term—that placed it in the very

top echelon of audio equipment regardless of price. There was no syrupy sound here—just superb dimensionality, iron grip, and unrelenting drive. The jump factor of the Jadis is off the charts. Put otherwise, it sounds as stunning as it looks.

One of the reasons that the DA88S looks so striking, apart from its metal work, is that it displays its input and output tubes so prominently. The version that I received was loaded for bear with the imposing KT120 tube, a more prodigious version of

the venerable 6550, that has come on strong in recent years. The input tubes are 12ax7 and 12au7s. The 12ax7 is often considered to be somewhat dark in sound, but I heard no hint of this in the Jadis. The unit is simplicity itself to operate. All that is required to get it up and running is to unscrew the bolts holding down a black protective cage and insert the tubes. The owner's manual states that you should always keep the cage on, but I didn't. It's visually more pleasurable to see the glowing tubes without a barrier.

As far as the tubes are concerned, the Jadis requires no further user intervention. The unit is self-biasing. Its only other controls are a volume knob, an input selector, and (gasp!) a balance control, something that many audiophiles frown on but that my friend and fellow TAS reviewer Anthony Cordesman considers a vital part of an audio system, because of room anomalies (not to mention that it's pretty much impossible to get a phono cartridge to output precisely the same voltage from each channel). Measure it and you're more than likely to find a discrepancy, however minute. I should also state upfront that, though I've seen reports of reliability problems with Jadis equipment in the past, there



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were absolutely no hiccups in my system. It truly was plug 'n' play, though you're better off waiting at least an hour for the tubes to warm up fully to attain everything that this unit has to offer.

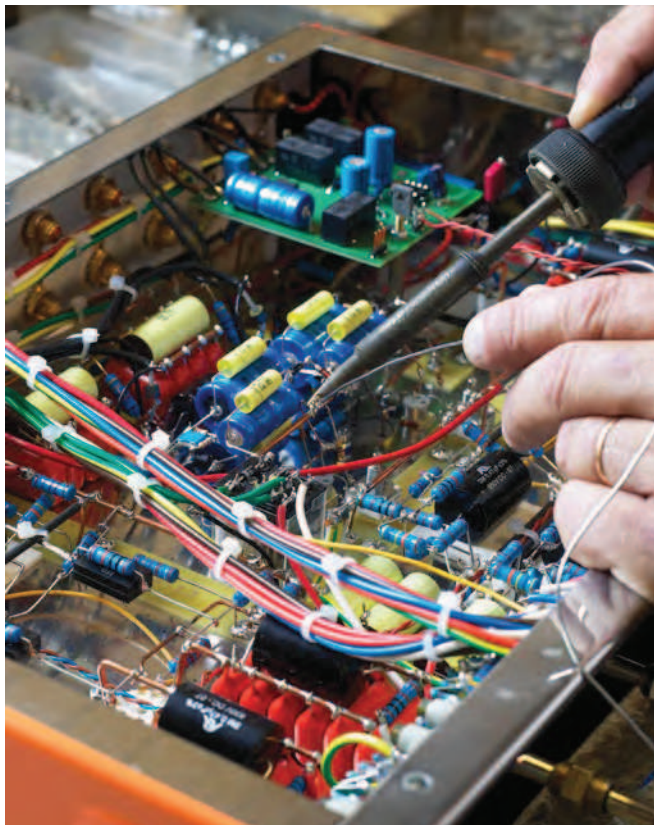
One of the first things you notice about a revealing system is a sense of flow—a sense of the almost microscopic nuances that transform a musical passage from rote reproduction into a singing line. On a Carlos Kleiber live recording of the Vienna Philharmonic performing Strauss waltzes in the Musikverein, this once more came vividly home to me. Probably no orchestra in the world has this sense of pacing more in its bones than the Vienna players. The Jadis delivered those tiny details with truly stupefying fidelity, at a level that I would hitherto never have credited to an integrated amplifier. On the venerable *Radetzky* March, for example, the crispness of the trumpets, the precision of the cymbals, and the sheer exuberance of the waltz were fully realized by the Jadis. The Jadis discriminated between the *pianissimo* and *fortissimo* passages with sovereign ease. It was hard not to be swept along by the martial zest of the whole thing, particularly when you could hear the audience enthusiastically clapping in the background.

The firecracker speed of the amplifier was fully on display in the waltzes. I never really got over it. Consider the aforementioned John Wallace CD. What was so striking about it, apart from the tremendous presence of the brass choirs, was the wonderful tonal fidelity with which the Jadis captured the rapid antiphonal effects. On a number of passages in Gabrieli's Sonata XVIII the brass players are engaging in what's known as double-tonguing. It is a way of deploying the tongue behind the teeth to interrupt the airflow as rapidly as possible, allowing gifted brass performers to play much more quickly. Done right it can even have a machine gun-like effect. Suffice it to



say, that the Jadis nailed such passages. There was no hint of blurring, smearing, or elision. This quality also endowed accented notes with a crystal-clear, explosive pop when the trumpeters were performing particularly dramatic passages.

Why am I emphasizing this? Simple. The common rap on tube gear is that while it may capture harmonic richness, it tends to round off notes and sound a little sluggish. Not here. My sense is that the Jadis' dynamism allows it to transcend such shortcomings. On the Christian McBride Trio's album *Out Here*, for example, the Jadis delivered every cymbal swish with great clarity while



Clockwise from top left of this page: Jadis components are built with point-to-point wiring and hand-soldering. The company winds its own transformers. The Jadis listening room. Applying the final touches.

Jadis DA88S MkII Integrated Amplifier

maintaining the bass and piano in proper proportion. Which leads to another fundamental asset of the Jadis—its soundstaging. Whether it's an orchestra or a jazz trio, I was consistently impressed by the ease with which the performers could be located in space. I'm a sucker for soundstaging and don't agree with those reviewers who pooh-pooh the claim that pinpoint imaging doesn't exist in real life—a defensive assertion that auditors of Magnepan loudspeakers sometimes make (a recent example being my TAS colleague Don Saltzman's review of the 20.7 loudspeaker). In my view, instrumental images *are* precisely focused in life. Go listen to a symphony, close your eyes, and you'll know darn well exactly where that trumpet is located. What's more you'll be able to hear the relative positions of all the instruments vis-à-vis each other. No amount of huffing and puffing about dynamic driver loudspeakers providing an artificially precise form of imaging is going to convince me otherwise.

Another myth that the Jadis helps to dispel, particularly remarkable in light of its fairly low power rating, is that tube amplifiers can't properly reproduce bass. While the Jadis does not produce the very deepest notes, it excels at delivering prodigious and harmonically rich bass that has a propulsive quality. The sumptuousness of the Jadis, the drive, has to be heard to be believed—and frankly, until now I would have disbelieved anyone who claimed that a 60-watt integrated amplifier could output this kind of power in the nether regions. It isn't simply or merely that the Jadis has punch, though it has that in spades (Christian McBride's bass plucks are so defined, nimble, and robust that you can pretty much see his fingers moving in space). It's that the bass has a rolling quality to it, one that suffuses a listening space. Here the virtues of tubes come to the fore, as the decays seem to linger on forever. This quality endows the piano for example with a grandeur and resolve that are transfixing. On Leonard Cohen's new album *Popular Problems*, for instance, the piano chords have resounding sustain. Ditto for the drum whacks on the sublime "Big Noise From Winnetka" from the CD *Count Basie Remembered* from the New York Allstars. Everything that makes the Jadis such a standout is present on this cut—the drums situated way in back, the granular level of detail, and the seemingly unlimited crescendos. Rimshots simply have to be heard to be believed.

Does the Jadis have a higher noise floor than solid-state units? Sure it does. But its tonal saturation means that you really shouldn't be missing any details, at least not in my experience. Like the best tube amplifiers, the DA88S seems to add a little extra dollop to the notes, literally amplifying, for lack of a better word,



the tiny details that do so much to add a sense of verisimilitude to a stereo system. Consider a recent Harmonia Mundi CD by the Freiburg baroque orchestra, one of the best in the world, featuring Andreas Staier playing Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's harpsichord concertos. It's quite a filigreed recording, not the blockbuster type that you might hear with a full-out Beethoven or Mahler symphony. The Jadis deftly laid out the orchestra, layer after layer. I had no sense that any details were being obscured or lost. Quite the contrary.

If I've dwelled on the speed and power of the Jadis, it's because this unit does such a convincing job of banishing many of the prejudices and reservations that a number of audiophiles harbor about tubed equipment. I could start picking nits—the sound is not quite as grainless or ethereal as the vastly more expensive Ypsilon gear in my listening room—but that would be totally beside the point. This integrated amplifier will more than likely prompt you to abandon any lingering snobbish thoughts you might be harboring about equipment that isn't stratospherically priced. It offers great performance for any amount of money, delivering the whole package—a coherent, thoroughly thought-out sound. Indeed, as you might expect from its previous efforts, the Jadis has a beautiful tone color, a limpidity, a gracefulness, and tenderness. But what makes the DA88S so distinctive is that it builds on these traditional strengths to offer an amplifier that is so palpably powerful, vivid, and authoritative that listening to it can become an utterly engrossing experience. So it was for me.

SPECS & PRICING

Tube complement: Eight power tubes, two ECC83/12AX7, three ECC82/12AU7
Bandwidth: 10Hz to 29kHz
Power: 60W Class A
Inputs: Five
Outputs: Line, two speaker (for bi-wiring)
Dimensions: 50 x 40 x 22cm
Weight: 40 kg
Price: \$14,495

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT
Continuum Caliburn turntable with two Cobra tonearms, Lyra Atlas and Miyajima Zero mono cartridges, dCS Vivaldi CD/SACD playback system, Ypsilon PST-100, MK II (silver) preamplifier, Ypsilon SET 100 Ultimate and Balanced Audio Technology Rex II monoblock amplifiers, Transparent Opus and Nordost Valhalla 2 cabling, Stillpoints Ultra 5 isolation footers and Audio Desk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner

