



TRAFOMATIC AUDIO KAIVALYA 2ND OPINION

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



SERBIA

Reviewer: Marja & Henk

Financial Interests: click [here](#)

Sources: PS Audio PWT; PS Audio PWD; Dr. Feickert Blackbird/Zu DL-103;

Streaming sources: Foobar2000; XXHighEnd; iTunes

Preamp/integrated/power: Tri TRV EQ3SE phonostage; Audio Note Meishu with WE 300B (or AVVT, JJ, KR Audio 300B output tubes); Yarland FV 34 CIISA; Qables iQube V1; Devialet D-Premier; *Qables iQube V2*; *Qables iQube V3* [in for review]

Speakers: Avantgarde Acoustic Duo Omega; Arcadian Audio Pnoe; Vaessen Aquarius;

Cables: complete loom of ASI LiveLine cables; full loom of Crystal Cable cables; Nanotec Golden Strada #79 nano 3; Nanotec Golden Strada #79; Nanotec Golden Strada #201

Power line conditioning: Omtec Power Controllers; PS Audio Powerplant Premier; PS Audio Humbuster III; *Isotek Syncro* [in for review]

Equipment racks: ASI amplifier and TT shelf

Sundry accessories: Furutech DeMag; ClearAudio Double Matrix; Nanotec Nespa #1; Exact Audio Copy software; iPod; wood, brass, ceramic and aluminum cones and pyramids; Shakti Stones; Manley Skipjack

Room treatment: Acoustic System International resonators, sugar cubes, diffusers

Room size: ca 7 x 5m with a ceiling height of 3.50m, brick walls and concrete floor downstairs, ca. 14.50 x 7.50m with a ceiling height of 3.50m, brick walls, wooden flooring upstairs.

Price of review item: €5.500/pr direct from Trafomatic Audio



We were very intrigued by the Kaivalya project when we first read about it. For those who missed out, the full story is [here](#). In brief, Srajan had been looking for a special tube amplifier to complete his stash of amplifiers on endless review rotation. He was *not* looking for the full-bodied sound of a 300B based design nor for the rippling muscle of a KT88. What he was after was more the long-distance runner's toned type of physique. Enter the EL84. As the market is short on high-quality versions of such amplifiers, Srajan commissioned Trafomatic Audio's Sasa Cokic to design and build him one.

In the end the white Kaivalya monoblocks with solid-state rectification, one ECC82 driver, interstage transformer coupling and four EL84 in class A push/pull configuration emerged from this request. The EL84 has seen itself neglected by (too) many audiophiles for its small size, low price and allegedly concomitant meager performance. As a result it's mostly budget-priced amplifiers primarily from China which sport this tube. That's somewhat incredible as in fact the EL84 is a full relative of the direct-heated triode family - the same family 'designers' make use of for their outrageously priced 300B contraptions where gilded knobs are often more important than sound quality.



A pair of Kaivalyas flanks the Vilobhas for size reference

When Srajan received the finished product he was a happy reviewer. Not only had he acquired a very special pair of power amplifiers, he had inadvertently helped make these amps available to anyone else interested. That's because Trafomatic subsequently made the Kaivalya part of their regular product line. With a wrinkle that is.



While the white Kaivalyas have since spawned equally white stable mates which are available through the existing Trafomatic dealer network [Experience 2 integrated to left], they themselves are sold only direct from the Serbian factory. This keeps the retail price more attractive. [This is true also for the absolutely massive 75TL Vilobha monos above which we previewed [here](#) - Ed].

Due to Srajan's report and his personal enthusiasm for the Kaivalya—it's a sort of baby to him even if it's only a brain spawn since Sasa did all the real work—we'd wondered for some time what the Serbian amplifier would sound like in our high-efficiency crib. After all this amp had seen itself used in the single-driver 100dB Voxativ Ampeggio review in these pages not only to the satisfaction of the writer but also the manufacturer of the speakers who had demonstrated with that combination at a subsequent show.



Dealer-sold new Reference One preamp



Fast forward to the Milan show last year. Trafomatic was present by way of Italian importer Salvo Giardina of Audio Point Italia and the Serbian contingent of Sasa and his partner Mica. We had some nice and interesting conversations with the gang and asked them to listen to the Arcadian Audio Pnoe single-driver AER MD3B giant horns we own and which were also at the show. After an impromptu audition Sasa suggested we should have a home trial with the same Kaivalya/Pnoe combination in Holland.



With that stored somewhere in the backs of our minds, we visited a Dutch hifi show in Utrecht a few months later. Exhibiting there was Hans Kortebach of Musical Affairs in cooperation with Renaissance Audio of Bergen/Norway and Norwegian Trafomatic importer Moiz.

The norsemens Roald Mikkelsen and Mutjaba Hussein had brought a pair of Kaivalyas with them to drive Hans' PHY-based speakers. When we visited their exhibit, another amplifier was playing and it was not convenient to switch in the Trafomatic monos just then. We thus had to wait for another opportunity to hear the amps ourselves.

That opportunity arose sooner than expected. Mutjaba offered us to have the Kaivalya delivered to our door right after the show so we could listen to them at our own pace and with our own speakers. This very generous offer we accepted without a second thought. It was Hans Kortebach who delivered the pair of amplifiers shortly after the show and he would take care of returning them to Norway in due time.



So there we finally were with a pair of long-anticipated EL84 push/pull pentode or *PPP* amplifiers in gleaming white. The lacquer was a great match for our all-white Pnoe horns.

To further match the amps' silver top plates we used the silver/grey removable trim rings around the AER drivers whilst the amps' amber standby LEDs especially at night came close to the drivers' yellowish paper cone. Goodbye to matte black 'pro' looks.

Much to our surprise the boxes the amps arrived in contained not only the Russian tubes Sasa has picked to suit his circuit but also four boxes with matched pairs of prime Psvane EL84 and two Psvane ECC82. This unexpected bonus promised some serious tube rolling.



Starting with the Russian tubes we connected the amplifiers to the 16 Ω Pnoe and on the inputs directly to the PS Audio PWD DAC's output with its digital attenuation. As an aside, this attenuation works fine for 16-24bit source material as the attenuation is performed by a 32bit Wolfson chip leaving at *least* 8 bits of headroom before sound quality is compromised and most the time 16 bits for standard Redbook material. Hence no additional preamp was needed.

The first listening night we noticed the warm glow of the amber standby LEDs and the silent transition to active duty by means of the frontal knob which also switches in the upfiring white LEDs to back light the Plexi screen. Prior to the Kaivalyas we had played the Pnoe without preamp as well but at the time with the Hypex Ncore 1200 power amps which pleased us with their lack of coloration, distortion and thus 'signature'. That was our reference.

To get a feel for the Serbians we went through a whole range of musical styles, from simple to complex and light to heavy. Rated at 25wpc into 8 Ω —in our case the 16 Ω load meant ca. 12wpc into a high 100dB sensitivity—they were more than sufficient to produce a realistic image on both size and sound pressure.



In one of his reviews Srajan mentioned the piece "Promenade" by a trio formed around pianist Vassili Tsabropoulous with cello and percussion [Melos, ECM]. This Greek pianist is a leading proponent of what we call the *arpeggio mafia*, hence the addition of two extra musicians on this particular track raised the bar significantly. Where the same track on Vassili's previous solo album

makes any system sound 'great' as there is only one note played at a time (just like *Brothers in Arms* by Dire Straits) the trio version is far more interesting.

Next to the warm and closely miked con-arco cello, percussionist U.T. Ghandi at certain points hits a tiny bell that rings on and on after that piercing initial hit. At least when the Ncore amps were on duty. With the Kaivalyas the decay was noticeably shorter and soon overruled by the piano.



The speed of these amplifiers was abundantly evident during lightning-fast guitar licks from the Rosenberg trio or Romane. When acoustic guitar was swapped for the electric variety, the EL84s did not hide that it was them which basically created the electric guitar sound we know today. Blues Rock is certainly a strong point of the Kaivalyas.

From there it was a small step to rediscover some Shakti recordings in our music drawers. Ingenious and fast tabla, mridangam and ghatam rhythms layered on and under John McLaughlin's eccentric 13-string acoustic guitar mimicking a sitar combined with a jazzy violin made us aware that we had left these recordings unplayed for too long.

The Kaivalya in our big room and with our large single-driver horns produced a sound that was not to be confused with a tube-like typical 2A3 or 300B sound. There *was* character however.

That is best described as fast, clean and solid. In our case the output transformers coupled directly to the voice coils of the speakers without any crossover electronics to provide full control and steer the drivers with ease. Bass was thus perky and one strong point of PPP designs—*slam*—was abundant. When we altered the setup and moved the Kaivalya to the Avantgarde Duo, the Serbians were discharged of full duty for the lower range.

Below 270Hz now was the domain of the self-powered woofers. Still presenting a 16 Ω load, the volume could now be turned down a few clicks because of the extreme sensitivity of these hornspeakers.



Compared to the Pnoe the Germans are more forward and far less forgiving of any harshness in the signal path. We used the same front end to drive the white amplifiers to get a fair comparison. With the Duo in the chain some recordings with a lot of brass exhibited some hard edges. This we also found with flamenco vocals. Female voices got just a bit of an edge - not much but once noticed it kept returning.

The combination of Kaivalyas with the slightly more conventional vented 3-way Vaessen Aquarius worked out fine. In this setup the amplifiers had to work far harder but handled themselves very well. The 30cm carbon woofers have proven to be cranky things for some amps. For the Kaivalyas this was no problem and they beautifully showed who was boss and in control of the woofers' movements. At higher SPLs we had to give in way before the hardware ran out of steam and there *still* was plenty of untapped headroom.



If this were all, we would say that the Kaivalya is one of the most non-tubey tube amplifiers that provides great sound, excellent speaker control and good looks for a very sharp price. But now we opened the four red Psvane boxes. Each contained a measurement card bearing the name of Grant Fidelity which is not only a distributor for high-quality *Chi-Fi* in North America but also ships to Europe. The matched pairs of EL84-T looked high quality with their gilded pins and felt reassuringly solid but how would they sound compared to the Russians? We had to be patient because the tubes had thus far endured only a few hours of playing time. Psvane suggests 75 to 100 hours to really get them going. We followed that advice and had the Kaivalya play at a very low volume for a few days. When show time was at hand, the difference to the ‘Russian sound’ was very clear. There was the same slam, quick impulse response to musical cues and solid soundscape but all with an extra. The impulse behavior was tighter and with a slightly fuller body as though now there was more mass behind the attack and the volts delivered had a higher charge. Compared to the Russians, tone was more polished around the edges and went down with a smoother finish. It is very likely that these Chinese tubes are less microphonic in character.

Rolling valves in the Kaivalyas did not change their overall sound. The already strong points simply got better still. Individual voices in large ensembles were easier to distinguish. With the *Cantate Domino* CD—after all these years that gets a bit boring but most people know it well—the choir grew a more profound notion of a group of *individuals* who each give away their presence by being ever so slightly out of pace with the others. With the Russian tubes the choir was more solidly glued together as one monolithic whole.



What we had noticed with the combination of Kaivalya and Avantgarde Duo—the presence of an edge now and then—had completely vanished with these Chinese tubes. Brass now was as clean as can be all the way up into Cuban trumpet turf, crashing cymbals faded endlessly into oblivion and female flamenco voices kept a clear throat.



Other types of music led to the same conclusion. The Psvane tubes were an extremely fortuitous match for the Kaivalyas and raised these amplifiers to an even higher level. If you are looking for a valve amp that doesn't go on advertising itself with the usual "hey, hear me out, I'm a tube

amplifier"; that is true to the musical signal at its input; and won't break the bank initially or later when tubes need to be replaced... then the Kaivalya is your first choice. If you are using highly sensitive loudspeakers that demand the utmost silence from their amplifiers... again the Kaivalya is your first choice. And if the looks weren't sharp already, the new black only makes the choice that much easier.

Marja & Henk

Publisher's comment: Marja & Henk's finding on the Psvane tubes mirrors my experience with their 6SN7 aka CV181T described [here](#). If to that we add David Kan's enthusiasm over Psvane's 12AX7 in his Tri kit amp [review](#), it appears this upscale Chinese brand might offer consistently high performance across their various tube types to rewrite expectations for Sino valves. - *Ed*.

Quality of packing: Excellent and reusable many times

Condition of component received: Primo.

Quality of owner's manual: N/A.

Website comments: Place that order

Pricing: Relative to build quality, innovative transformer design, parts and sound quality, this is a shining example in a world of overpriced amps which aren't as good.

Human interactions: Unique cooperation between Serbia, Norway and Holland just for the love of it.

Final remark: It is more than worthwhile to invest in a set of Psvane tubes to replace the stock Russian tubes.