

EQUIPMENT REVIEW



He ain't heavy – the Lavardin IS integrated amplifier

By Steve Dickinson

The IS is the entry-level integrated amplifier in Lavardin's range. Its modest (for a transistor amp) 45W per channel output, four inputs and minimalist styling, means it lacks a certain something, on paper. The dainty, folded aluminium casework and simple anodised front plate are smart and functional, rather than eye-catching. It costs near as dammit £2,000 and doesn't even get a blue LED. It would be easy to overlook, or dismiss as overpriced. Which would be rather silly, as the Lavardin IS is also, in my opinion, something of a high-end bargain.

From the moment it starts working, there is something very right about the way the Lavardin goes about its business. In fact, some minor reservations aside, I'd almost characterise it as a lack of wrongness. Many amplifiers in this price bracket play to particular strengths, which often as not offset other areas of performance that fail to keep pace. Thus, you end up choosing your amp to suit your personal priorities. The Lavardin is quite unusual in that it has an all round competence which is, in my experience, rarely seen at the price. We've discussed Lavardin's 'memory distortion' concept in these pages before, and I don't intend to revisit it here, but whatever it is, it unquestionably makes Lavardin amplifiers a bit special.

The IS has an uncommon degree of clarity, agility and deftness, an ability to follow a line of music, no matter how fast, or complex. This means it can

turn its hand to most things, rather well, and it seems made for jazz or complex modern music. Joanna Macgregor's rendering of a Nancarrow player-piano piece is offered with all the minute variations in rhythm and metre in their proper place, so the way the parts ebb and flow with respect to each other is, if not necessarily a doddle to follow, then certainly presented in a lucid and insightful way. You can quite easily tell that the timing mismatches are deliberate, not simply flaws in the performance.

It's not perfect. Being French, I suppose, the manufacturer likes to find subtle and amusing ways to confound the user, and ▶

► Lavardin has chosen to eschew any form of channel labelling on the rear panel. So you have to hope it has followed the usual conventions in positioning the speaker terminals. As it's not followed the usual convention for the inputs, this is something of a leap of faith. There are no L/R labels at all, and the manual is resolutely silent on the subject. So it's not clear whether they've declined to follow the, obviously bourgeois, convention of putting the right channel input under the left, or elected to ignore the input convention of using red for right and black for left. When first hooked-up, mine sounded odd. A left/right channel check revealed that I'd got the speaker connections transposed; or perhaps it was the inputs I'd swapped. Who, apart from an existentialist philosopher, can really say? Either way, a quick furkle around the speaker cable binding posts and a minute later all was well. Of course, with the benefit of hindsight I could have just hooked up one channel at a time, but where's the fun in that?

Confronted with a mere 45W it's tempting to reach straight for the volume control and examine available loudness levels. That output can be limiting, with solo

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piano lacking a little power in the bottom octaves, for example; even in quieter passages the sense of mass in the instrument is rarely more than hinted at. That said, it'll rock loudly enough with most loudspeakers and do it without falling apart: the bass in Seal's 'Killer' drives hard enough and the other parts keep their place in a deep acoustic space, where some amps, when pressed, tend to splash the vocals out across the soundstage, or lose the plot in a variety of amusing, if not entirely pleasing, ways. Big orchestral or choral climaxes come across cleanly and without blaring out at the listener. Dvorák's New World Symphony was full of life, drama and grandeur, without any real sense of restraint or holding-back. The modest output will restrict the sort of levels ultimately achievable. For the Dvorák I'd liken it to listening to a performance by a slightly smaller orchestra, in a slightly more distant seat, but it was still ►



► indisputably the first team who were playing, not the reserves. Current-hungry or inefficient loudspeakers might be best avoided if realistic levels are required: I used it with Focal 1028Bes and Raidho S2.0 floorstanders (both of which are reasonably efficient and present straightforward loads) and achieved some pretty special results.

On paper, the Lavardin's 45W output isn't too far removed from my regular Albarrys' 60W, but the Albarrys have a ludicrously over-specced power supply which does give them a spine of steel. They stand fast when others wilt, and so it was here. Leonard Cohen's 'Take this Waltz' had a very pleasing lilt, and sense of sway and forward motion, so the waltz element was nicely portrayed by the Lavardin. As were the layers of intrigue and interest; all very Cohen-esque and satisfying. Turned up, Cohen's head just seemed to get bigger and bigger within the same soundstage, something that happens less obviously with grippier amps, so there are practical limits to the Lavardin's levels of control. That said, a little courage with the volume knob (usable for a goodly proportion of the dial, not just the usual 8-11 o'clock) gives plenty of usable power and energy and, in fairness, it is only when pushed quite hard that the modest output becomes noticeable, but in many ways that misses the point...

What separates the Lavardin from the crowd is the way it plays quietly; back off the volume and the amp manages to maintain the music's dynamic range, keeping things interesting and entertaining. Dynamic expression and musical nuances are not suppressed, just rendered in scale. The IS exhibits all the Lavardin house specialities, digging deep into the music and giving you the performance, regardless of level. Yes, it is ultimately limited by the power output – and its more expensive (albeit scarcely more powerful) siblings do fare a little better under pressure – but what the Lavardin IS will do, which many more powerful amps won't, is get you energised and enthusiastic about the music without relying on sheer volume to do so. If you have neighbours, or family, who don't appreciate concert-hall levels in a domestic setting, the little Lavardin will give you the music you crave, without having to pin you back in your seat

There is a hint of chalky, dusty overlay to the IS sound. It's nothing I'd want to describe as grain – Lavardin doesn't really do grain – rather there is an almost subliminal flattening in ultimate levels of detail and colour. Despite the amp's undisputed speed and agility, the subtlest of inflections are slightly glossed-over or averaged-out. This should be kept in context, mind you, and these comments must be taken in an absolute sense, compared to amps of considerably greater stature – and price. Against its peers, the Lavardin stands proud, and when it's at its best it can make anything else it's likely to go up against sound clumsy and gauche. 'Mourning Grace', from Patricia Barber's *Café Blue* retains the ethereal feel of the vocals above the relentless bombast of the bass and percussion, something few other £2000 amps manage with any real, er, grace. Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel* had that numinous quality which can sometimes be airbrushed out by amps which sound pretty and sweet, but lack the Lavardin's depth and sophistication. Similarly, powerful-but-blunt amps tend to fare badly with Arvo Pärt because he doesn't trade in mass and volume, but delicacy and subtlety. For the money, I can't think of an amp that does delicate or subtle better than the Lavardin IS.

Interestingly, a quick comparison with the (£3,000) IS Reference version shows that the slight tendency to flatten detail is much less apparent in the dearer amp and, given the extra funds, the IS Ref is definitely to be preferred. But at around the £2,000 mark, the IS has little serious competition. The lack of wrongness I alluded to at the beginning of this review, the honest-to-goodness rendering of the signal, irrespective of level, is the Lavardin's single greatest attribute. It is beautiful when the music is beautiful, but it doesn't invent that beauty by overlaying a saccharine sweetness or an airbrushed niceness, it just tells it as it is. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Stereo integrated amplifier

Power Output: 45 watts RMS per channel, 8 Ohms

Max. 95 watts per channel, 2 Ohms

Inputs: 4 x line level

Factory option: phono input

Input Sensitivity: Line level - 330mV

Total harmonic distortion: 0.005% at max. output

Output: 1 pair loudspeakers

Factory option: line output

Dimensions (W x H x D): 430 x 80 x 340mm

Weight: 6.5 kg

Available finishes: Black

Remote Control: No

Price: £1999.00

Phono input add £439.00

Manufacturer: Lavardin Technologies, France

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