



FOCUS AUDIO LISZT PRELUDE

This Canadian company has been around for years, but has been known exclusively as a maker of high-end loudspeakers. One of its bookshelf-sized speakers, the FS688, appeared on the cover of *UHF* No. 68. Its glossy finish was as notable as its sound, and Focus has been catering to audiophiles who love beautiful things.

It's a long step from making speakers, even great ones, to building expensive tube amplifiers, and Focus Audio is not a huge company. Make no mistake, the Liszt Prelude (the smaller of the two Focus amplifiers, the other being the Liszt Sonata) is not some imported product rebadged with a Canadian name. The amplifier was designed and built in Canada.

Designer Kam Leung appears to have selected several elements from the classical era of tube amplifiers. The cathode-coupled phaser inverter stage that precedes the output stage and the push-pull EL34 output circuit are, I

suspect, from the era of the Williamson amplifier, 1947 on. There is nothing wrong with that, because some of the world's best tube amplifiers were built around that circuit topology, and many still are. Even so, this classic circuit offers possibilities for refinements.

As in most modern amplifiers, the output stage operates in class AB, which means that the two output tubes, which amplify respectively the positive and negative halves of the signal wave, overlap considerably. Indeed, the circuit operates in pure class A over much of its 32 watts. Because the circuit is self-biasing, you can change either of the output tubes without needing to make circuit adjustments. That's a major advantage over amplifiers that require either test instruments or even a service call each time you change a tube.

A good deal of thought has been put into the power supply. Focus says the gigantic parallel capacitor that is typically used at the input to the DC filter section has such a large charging current

that it generates large amounts of high-frequency noise, and it may even overload the power transformer. Focus uses a relatively small capacitor, a Mundorf film unit with a 30 microFarad rating, a fraction of the usual rating that can go as high as 500 μ F. The power supply also includes a series choke (a large inductor) rather than the resistor that would cost a great deal less. The second filter capacitor is also smaller than usual.

We would add that the power supply noise phenomenon is well known, and better designers use other techniques to deal with it. At high frequency, the usual large filter capacitor has both resistance and inductance, and no longer behaves like a pure capacitor. The usual technique is to place a smaller capacitor in parallel to the big one, to short out the noise.

The amplifier is beautifully finished, with a case and chassis of silver-anodized aluminum. The front panel is spartan, with two knobs that seems undersized considering the mass of the amplifier,



flanking the green LED readout. The knobs carry no calibration marks, and need none. The knob on the left controls volume, not with the usual variable potentiometer, but by sending digital commands to an array of fixed resistors (they're on the blue panel on the right of the amplifier, as seen from the rear). The knob on the right selects among the four inputs. The readout shows input selected (C1, C2, etc.) when it's appropriate, and volume level the rest of the time. The vibration feet are from E.A.R.

There is of course a remote control, but unexpectedly it does not bear the Focus Audio logo. It is in fact the same remote that you get with an Apple TV. The buttons around the central circle control input and volume. The *play* button mutes the sound, while the *menu* button turns the LED panel off. The functions have not been labelled, but there are so few buttons that it takes less than a minute to figure them out. There is a serious down side, however. If you own an Apple TV, and if it's in the same system as the Liszt Prelude, expect the unexpected when you push a button.

Three of the inputs are unbalanced, accessible through the usual coaxial jacks. The fourth is balanced, and is connected via XLR connectors. Although

the Liszt Prelude is an integrated amplifier, you can bypass the built-in pre-amplifier and use it as a power amplifier. There are both balanced and unbalanced direct inputs.

The connectors at the rear appear to be of very good quality, staying satisfyingly tight even with handling of the cables. We were, however, less than happy with the configuration of the output posts. There are four sets, with separate pairs for the 4 ohm and 8 ohm settings. They are identified only by tiny labels, without even the usual color strips to distinguish the positive from the negative posts. You might assume that, as in nearly all amplifiers, the positive post in each pair is toward the outside of the amplifier. You would be wrong.

The Liszt Prelude is the lower-priced of the two Focus Audio models. A much more expensive (\$12,000) version, the Liszt Sonata, uses even more

expensive parts, including double-C core output transformers, with higher inductance, requiring fewer windings of wire.

We ran the amplifier for close to two weeks, connected to our 8 ohm dummy load, using an Apple Airport Express as a source. We then prepared the listening test. For the reason already mentioned, the amplifier was placed on the floor, not on a cabinet shelf. It was compared to our Omega system's amplification duo, the Moon P-8 preamplifier and W-8 power amplifier.

We connected our Reference 3a Suprema II speakers to the (correct) 4 ohm taps. Though the amplifier never sounds underpowered, we tried both output taps and determined that we needed every watt it could produce in order to get the best from it.

First up was the overture to Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Aristophanic Suite* (Reference Recordings RM-2508). This 45 rpm album, like other recent Reference classical albums, provides a level of realism you can't get without buying tickets.

We had set the volume so that it seemed about the same as that



obtained with our reference amplifier, but — as sometimes happens — what seems like the same volume somehow no longer seems quite loud enough. Another 4 dB (according to the amplifier's readout), and we very much liked what we heard.

A large orchestra is used on this recording, including the full string section that so many music systems have difficulty reproducing. The amplifier handled them with ease, without the edginess we feared. Yet the smoothness did not come at the expense of detail or the separation of the orchestral instruments. Albert thought the sound stage might be slightly narrower, but both Toby and Gerard commented favorably on the spaciousness of the sound. "I liked the strong rhythm," said Gerard, "and the dynamic tension of the music is well maintained."

Was the bottom end slightly leaner than with our own amplifier? Yes, but the difference was minor. "I didn't find it useful to compare," said Albert.

There would be plenty of bottom end on our second recording, *Take the 'A' Train* from the Ray Brown Trio's album *Soular Energy*. Brown's bass has depth and power, but there's lots more going on too.

We were pretty sure that the bass would be less thunderous, and it was, but that wasn't all bad news. Albert actually preferred a little less weight to the instrument, finding that the trio (Gene Harris on piano and Gerryck King on drums are the other two members) hung together better. Toby agreed. "The energy at the bottom end didn't make me jump," he said. "The bass notes have more harmonic content. You can sense the instrument's wood body as well as the sound of the very low strings. That may or may not be typical of tubes, but in any case I liked it."

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Focus Audio Liszt Prelude

Price: C\$7,800

Size (WDH): 44 x 41 x 18.5 cm

Claimed power: 32 watts/channel

Inputs: 3 unbalanced, one balanced

Most liked: Near-reference level for a price.

Least liked: Confusing rear panel configuration, unlabeled remote.

Verdict: Classic layout, modern sound.

Harris's piano is sometimes a little problematic, especially once he gets to the higher notes, becoming tinkly and somewhat harsh. That character is not on the recording itself, though, and with this amplifier the notes sounded light and natural. All the instruments were wonderfully rhythmic, too, and the music drew us in.

Another Reference Recordings LP was next, Doug MacLeod's *There's a Time* (RR-2507). We selected one of our favorite songs (though we have several), *Dub's Talkin' Religion Blues*. This piece is at once spare and delightfully realistic, captured on the sound stage of George Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic. There's a lot of humor and irony in MacLeod's delivery as he questions a Christian fundamentalist on his beliefs.

The sound was different with the Focus Audio amplifier. Albert found this version neither better nor worse, with an attractive guitar sound and words that were at once clear and rich. "I wouldn't change our reference," said Albert, "but I liked what I heard."

So did Toby. "I liked the subtle harmonics, which gave MacLeod's voice more character. That gave me more insight into the expression of the song, such as the incredulity concerning the

CROSSTALK

I have to say that this amplifier came as a surprise. Focus Audio has long made speakers that were as good-looking as they were good-sounding, but what did it know about amplification?

Quite a lot, it turns out.

The Liszt Prelude has plenty of headroom, which means you never become aware that the tubes are likely to run out of breath. Control of the bottom end is excellent, and there's no harshness or fog at the top end.

And one more thing: it doesn't *sound* like a tube amplifier. Nor should it. What you hear sounds like music, and that's exactly what you want.

—Gerard Rejskind

Someone asked me recently if I thought tube amps were better in their glory days than they are today. I tried to explain the

difference between aiming for *ni-fi* (as in nice-fidelity) and constantly striving for *bi-fi*. He nodded politely, but had he listened to his music through this amplifier, he would have witnessed the evidence immediately.

No explanation is needed when we hear such a good example of the constant improvements that tubes and Focus Audio's design provide today, in order to recreate the full impact and the elusive subtleties of the musical performance.

The glory days are *now*.

—Albert Simon

An audiophile acquaintance tells me that when he does a comparative test like *UHF's*, he always prefers the piece of gear tested last. Not me—I like everything!

Well, this time I did, anyway. The reference amplification was all detail, clarity and

limitless power, the Focus Audio Liszt Prelude was lightness, finesse and speed, along with a dash of richness in the harmonics and something palpable in the sonic image of Ray Brown's double bass.

But it hardly makes sense to compare the two amps, given the price spread between them. The Liszt Prelude provided lots of information: a sense of fingers touching and pulling the strings of the double bass, a harmonic richness and wonderful articulation on Doug MacLeod's voice, a subtle clarity in the dark low register of Jennifer Warnes. Although there wasn't anything like the bass "jump" of the reference, on a few low notes by Ray Brown the low end was enchantingly rich and detailed.

This is an amp with great finesse over the whole range.

—Toby Earp

story of Jonah. The pun on ‘evolution’ worked too. MacLeod had a palpable presence, and I could hear faint echoes from the distant walls of the recording space.”

Once again, the bottom end was a little lighter than with our own reference amplifier, but none of us thought that was anything close to a dealbreaker.

We ended the listening session with the limited-edition LP re-release of Jennifer Warnes’ *Famous Blue Raincoat*. We selected *Joan of Arc*, a song on which Warnes is joined by none other than Leonard Cohen himself.

Here again, there was a little less bottom end, but the song came through so wonderfully well that we were little tempted to make comparisons. “I was mesmerized by a small increase in the amount of detail,” said Toby. “I liked Jennifer’s lower tones, and I thought there was better separation on the doubled voices. The song drew me in.”

Albert found the whole song somewhat lighter in weight, including Cohen’s distinctively low-pitched voice, but he enjoyed the overall effect.

There is of course a huge difference between the power available from the Focus Audio amplifier and our Moon W-8, which by comparison has almost unlimited energy. We’re comparing a kilowatt (the W-8’s output into a 4 ohm load) with the Liszt Prelude’s combined 64 watts. “But that’s of secondary importance,” said Gerard, “or perhaps even tertiary importance.”

We were pleased and even somewhat surprised by the performance of the Liszt Prelude. Though Focus Audio has been making speakers for a long time, this is its first try at an electronic product. It has delivered praiseworthy performance, with judicious use of quality parts and classic design techniques. What comes out does not sound like vacuum-tube sound, but like music. This has been done at what is, all things considered, a reasonable price.

We don’t mean that the Liszt Prelude is an economy product. It is, however, a music lovers’ delight, and it could even be the last amplifier you ever need. Keep it in tubes and keep the remote in fresh batteries, and it will go on delighting you.



POWER, MORE POWER

Loudspeakers are, for the most part, becoming more and more efficient. A typical modern speaker has four to eight times the sensitivity of 1960’s-era acoustic-suspension speakers such as the AR-2. Despite that, power amplifiers are becoming more and more powerful. Why?

Remember what a “muscle amplifier” once looked like?



That’s a Heathkit W-5M, popular in the 50’s and 60’s. A lot of audiophiles owned them because, well, they were *kits*, and therefore relatively inexpensive. What’s more, the W-5M was *powerful*, far more powerful than those puny 5 and 10-watt amplifiers that were then common.

The W-5M’s power? Just 25 watts, provided by a pair of KT66 output tubes. And remember it was mono, so that amplifier needed to fill the room all by itself. And it did.

Still, just as American car manufacturers engaged in a horsepower race, hi-fi companies worked to get all the juice they could from a pair of tubes, and sometimes *two* pairs of tubes. Power crept to 40 watts, then 60, sometimes 80. Some amplifiers used arrays of tubes to deliver hundreds of watts or even more. Once the power transistor arrived, the sky was the limit. Want more power? Just add more transistors.

That turned out not to be an unalloyed advantage. Power is nice, but so is transparency. Unless output transistors were perfectly matched (and good luck with that), adding more of them often made the sound opaque and poorly detailed. Ironically enough, you *needed* the extra power in order to play louder, because you couldn’t hear everything at lower levels. Some audiophiles found themselves spending large amounts of money for 1,000-watt amplifiers. Some of these monsters were actually advertised as “leasebreakers,” and it’s easy to guess why. Turning one on could blow a fuse.

Since then, the pendulum has begun to swing the other way. First there were “class A” amplifiers, whose output tubes and transistors were biased so that each complementary set ran all the time, wasting energy but avoiding a common form of distortion. Then there were single-ended amplifiers, which used a single tube or transistor instead of the common push-pull complementary pair. That’s a trade-off: more distortion at high level, less distortion at low level, where an amplifier plays most of the time. Some expensive single-ended amplifiers have power output of 10 watts, sometimes less.

Is that enough? Remember that power is a logarithmic value. If you double your power, you are increasing the volume level by just a tiny 3 dB. We suggest shopping for performance, not raw power.