

AVA AMPLIFIER REVIEW

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BACKGROUND

The Twin Cities in Minnesota are home to some great audio companies. Best known among them are probably Audio Research, Magnepan, and Bel Canto, but there are a few other, smaller firms as well that turn out high quality audio kit. Audio by Van Alstine must be ranked among them. Frank Van Alstine started out in the audio biz in 1967, selling Dynakits (remember those?) that he built and sold as constructed kits, then began modifying and improving the Dynaco designs in significant ways. From there he went on to designing and selling his own designs.

I have owned gear by AVA, in one form or another and in one system or other, for 42 years. Over that time it's always been my experience that Frank Van Alstine's gear is some of the best audio electronics out there for anything near their price points and often far above them. It's always been an easy and safe recommendation to audiophiles I talk to – or even non-audiophiles – who know they want good sound but are reluctant to take out a second mortgage to get it.

Frank was good enough to place two new monoblock amplifiers into my custody for two weeks for purposes of this review. They are designated as DVA M225's, for the logical reason that they produce 225 WPC. These amps **are not yet released**. AVA is waiting on engraved front panels, being produced in Italy, and hopes to be able to make them available next month. This is therefore the first, exclusive review of a new AVA product – you read it here first! (Which makes me regret that I am one of the least technically knowledgeable guys who has ever attempted to write an audio review. You have been warned.)

WHAT WE HAVE HERE...

...is almost new territory for AVA – a SET (single ended transistor) monoblock, which Van Alstine says he and staff have developed as a result of AVA's work with SET's in their other amps. As monoblocks they are of course totally discrete, and their performance – as I will discuss – presents a strong argument for discrete signal paths.

The amps are small but hefty, 8 ¾" wide by 11" deep by 4" high including the feet, and weighing in at 16 pounds each. The two I had are final versions on the inside, not prototypes, but the faceplate in the final version will be nicer.



The final front panel will be nicer than this one...

The front panel's only feature is the power on and off button, with a small blue indicator light that lights up when the unit is powered on. There are NO standard RCA inputs on these amps, only a single XLR jack. Connections on the rear panel can be a bit tight for comfort, as the XLR jack is placed directly above and close to the standard speaker binding posts. Swapping back and forth between amplifiers was a bit of a hassle, but a relatively minor one. If I had thought to fit banana plugs to my speaker cables instead just utilizing their spade lugs it would have been a lot easier.



Pricing has not been finalized for these amps, but Frank is confident that they will come in under \$2000 apiece.

LISTENING

After running the amps in for a few hours – a process AVA says is actually unnecessary – I began serious listening. I was able to spend a good amount of time with them in my primary system in my home in Minnesota. This not being a professional review I won't bore you with descriptions of all the music I listened to, but it was of a wide variety – pop/rock, folk, jazz, classical, and even (dare I admit it?) country. I switched between LP's and CD's.

My first impression was of openness, transparency, and a wider soundstage than I was expecting. As I listened over time these perceptions were reinforced. All of the music was there and well balanced; the highs, the mids, and the lows. There was no digital etch, haze, or hardness that some gear imparts to the higher frequencies, which my electrostatic speakers would be quick to reveal. The midrange was balanced and defined, not over-emphasized but with a good sense of presence. The low end may not have *quite* the... ah, heft of some solid-state designs, but it is not lacking – the bass is indeed all there, but may not flap your pants legs. (My electrostatic speakers don't exactly plumb the depths themselves but I have 12" subwoofers that do, and *will* rattle the windows if called upon to do so.) Macro and microdynamics are reproduced as well as the source and preamp that provide them.

The sound of the M225's presents a strong argument for the virtues and benefits for fully discrete amplification. It is my sense from the audio magazines and internet sources that I follow that more and more high-end manufacturers are designing in this way. The separation rendered here, which is admittedly dependent upon the whole chain of reproduction, is superb. But I have to focus on what I will suggest is the most noticeable attribute of these amps: the incredible soundstage they put out.

I have heard a great many systems over the years, but the majority of them – despite what stellar qualities they might have possessed – did not produce a noticeable "out of the box" sound, that rare "disappearing act" that impresses me whenever I hear it. Of the few that did, I have never heard anything like this that I could or would attribute primarily to the amplifier. Granted, my CLX speakers are not boxed, cone speakers, but still, what I heard with the M225's was different from than that from any other amplifier in my experience.

Often while I'm listening I do other things – work on my record or CD collections or perhaps write on my laptop. As I did that when the M225's were in service, my attention was *often* involuntarily hijacked and pulled into the music and an appreciation of what I was hearing. It was open, transparent, and expansive – the soundstage I was hearing is the best I can recall having heard, certainly ever in my own home, wide and defined. The end of my music room became a virtual stage, with music seeming to just appear, not to come from the speakers. To call it holographic might be overstating it, but... maybe not. The M225's are truly soundstage champions!

A thought occurred to me as I was listening to female vocals (it happened to be Norah Jones at the time, though I listened to several); Is this an "accurate," "realistic" sound-stage that I was experiencing? It might not qualify as rendering an "absolute sound" in the judgement of a professional reviewer. However as much as I appreciate a system that reproduces sonics that seek to get close to recreating the experience of a live performance or to the artists' vision of their music, I was enjoying the presentation so much that I decided that, hey – I didn't care!

The differences between CD and LP sound were audible with the M225's. CD sound was good, with the clarity and dynamics that well-produced CD's can provide. LP's were more... organic in presentation, with more of the sense of musical flow and emotion being conveyed. (Guess which format I prefer.)

So given that no amp is "perfect" in every way for every body, what is there to criticize about the M225's? I must confess to being mostly a "tube" guy in terms of my audio preferences, and I would have appreciated just bit more bloom, a bit more evident decay on some of the notes. And the "body," the physical presence of the sound, while pretty damn good, was not as physical as it could be (see following Comparison).

If you like the warm, solid but softer sound of amps like MBL, McIntosh, Yamaha or the like, you will want to look elsewhere than the M225's. Or if you prefer the analytical, carved-out sound of the highest-end solid-state kit like D'Agostino, Constellation, Levinson and others, this also might not be your cup of audio tea. As I have learned over – ahem – many years, high fidelity reproduction is subjective in perception and varies according to personal taste – "different strokes" and all that. But I will say that the M225's, like all AVA gear, are *about the music*, and they deliver a sound which can – depending of course on the source and the other components – make you forget that you are listening through electronics.

A BRIEF COMPARISON

Were it not for the pandemic I would have enjoyed bringing the two M225's to friends' homes to check them out in different systems, or at the very least invited audiophile friends over to lend their ears and provide input. I was limited to asking non-audiophile family members for their impressions, and comparing the amps to the "reference" models I have in my current system. Though it was a bit of a hassle swapping amps back and forth, it was most worthwhile to do.

What I have are two Pass Labs X260.8 monoblock amps. These are current models in the Pass line, rated at 260 WPC each. Both the AVA and Pass amps are fully solid-state, both are monoblocks, and though the power of the AVA is less they are both over 200 wpc. Differences include their size, weight, and price, the Pass being significantly greater in all those categories.

The Pass Lab amps are very large, heavy beasts that weigh 88 lbs each, more than 5 times the weight of the M225's. Almost in accordance with that relative size, the sound they render is very present, very solid and palpable, moreso than the M225's. They are

very good truth-tellers and render every aspect of the sound that is fed into them. The AVA M225's presented sound that was more airy and transparent, with that soundstage to die for.

THE BOTTOM LINE

While I might *personally* prefer a *touch* more tube-like warmth/bloom to the sound, the AVA M225's are great amplifiers. Imaging, staging, and transparency are excellent. If they have any contenders for best sound and value for their cost, I have not come across them. (Caveat: Yes, I know, I can't have heard all the amplifiers out there, but I have heard hundreds of them over the years.) And, pardon my ongoing rave, that soundstage is just really impressive. I can't imagine anything close to their projected price-point that would come close to attaining what these amps can do — but then, I've always thought that about AVA gear.

My basic thoughts re AVA equipment remain what they have been for many years now; You ain't gonna beat it for the money.

A FINAL OBSERVATION

The day before I was to return the M225's to AVA I went through the hassle of taking them out of my system and reconnecting my Pass X260.8's. I powered the system back up and listened for a bit. It was a good, impressive sound, but... I discovered that I really missed that amazing soundstage. I thought the heck with it, and went back in and reconnected the AVA's. I only had 2-3 more hours I could listen with them, but it was worth it.

AND A TEASER

Van Alstine shared with me that a new digital preamp is in the works from AVA, and is planned for release simultaneously with or soon after the M225's. It is being designed to mate well with the M225's, and will have discrete circuitry, accept 5 digital sources, use XLR outputs, and will feature – get this – a touch-screen display. So – stay tuned! Tuned where? At the AVA website (<https://avahifi.com>) or the Audio by Van Alstine site on Audio Circle (<https://www.audiocircle.com/index.php>).

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

- Audio Research Ref 6 preamp
- Oppo 205, modified by Exemplar Audio
- Denon DP-65 turntable with Graham Phantom arm & Sumiko Blackbird MC cart
- PS Audio Stellar phono preamp
- Pass Labs X260.8 monoblock amps
- Martin Logan CLX electrostatic speakers
- Martin Logan Balanced Force 212 subwoofers
- Cabling – various Nordost and Kubala Sosna