



Blue Aura's new V40 amplifier combines the warm sound of valves with the convenience of Bluetooth connectivity. Jon Myles is captivated.

# Glowing Aura

Bluetooth connectivity is becoming a popular feature on an increasing number of hi-fi components. Portable loudspeakers, digital audio players, headphones, one-box music systems, amplifiers and even pre-amps from a variety of manufacturers now feature it as a major selling point.

It isn't hard to see why. Sound quality has improved markedly since the early days of the technology - and with aptX it approaches that of CD. And the ability to stream direct

from a laptop, mobile 'phone, tablet or desktop computer is hard to beat in terms of convenience.

Last year Cambridgeshire-based Blue Aura even extended the concept to a pair of slim floorstanding Bluetooth loudspeakers in the shape of their £599 X40 model - which proved so good they garnered a Five Globes rating in our June 2015 edition.

Now the company has come up with something equally as innovative with the Blackline V40 - a hybrid valve/transistor amplifier priced at £449 and featuring an in-built DAC.

Bluetooth connectivity plus USB and analogue RCA inputs.

It's a deliciously elegant design. Small and svelte at 148mm x 264mm x 215mm (H/W/D) and weighing in at just 3.5kg this won't demand much space on your rack, shelf or desktop.

But it will draw your eye to it, thanks to the input valves at the front. These consist of two 12AU7/ECC82 tubes plus a 6e2 magic-eye indicator valve to show volume level (more of which later).

Behind sit two small transformers for the signal and power amplifying circuits while internally the V40



Two 12AU7/ECC82 input valves plus a 6e2 magic-eye indicator valve provide a lovely glowing show - and sound rather good as well. Grab handles also make the Blue Aura easy to manoeuvre - although it is not particularly heavy.

design employs a bridged class A/B integrated circuit for the output - which taken together helps explain its small proportions.

The front fascia has two rotary dials for volume and source select, and these controls are replicated on a credit card-sized remote control. Inputs on the rear consist of a single set of unbalanced RCA's, a micro-USB mini-jack plus a socket for attaching the (supplied) Bluetooth antenna.

There's also a sub-woofer out option plus the speaker connections which accept both spades and banana plugs.

Blue Aura claims a power output of 30 Watts per channel but we measured significantly less - at 10 Watts into 4 Ohms and 15 Watts into 8 Ohms (see Measured Performance for full details). So this isn't a massively powerful unit - but should have enough to drive most moderately efficient loudspeakers.

And while it may be small its design makes it look significantly more expensive than the price tag would suggest - with nice touches such as a metallic top plate, grab handles and a curved Perspex valve cover adding an air of quality to the whole package.

The 6e2 magic-eye valve is also lovely, although its volume control indicator is rather erratic - never looking completely accurate.

## SOUND QUALITY

For first listening I connected the V40 to a pair of Quadral Aurum Megan VIII standmounts. These are fairly neutral, natural-sounding loudspeakers which are adept at revealing the nature of source components.

And they immediately showed the Blue Aura has a wonderfully rich, bouncy and infectious nature to its sound.

On ESG's 'You're No Good' from their 'A South Bronx Story' CD the bass was wonderfully propulsive while vocals had a warmth and vibrancy to them. It's the sort of sound that simply sets your feet tapping from the off.

Switching to Lady GaGa's 'Monster' I got the same impression. The electronic intro is deep with just the right amount of echo to it and when the percussion track cuts in, it does it with force. GaGa's vocals were also distinct and clear with no sign of edge or harshness. To put it simply, the little V40 knows how to play a tune and its sense of warmth

soundstage does start to collapse in on itself while a slight edge creeps into the sound. But, that's being critical, because for its price the V40 does an admirable job.

Moving on to Bluetooth with Patti Smith's 'Free Money' played via an iPhone 6 Plus the guitar notes were crisp, but more importantly the Blue Aura doesn't miss a beat as the pace of the track shifts markedly forward halfway through. Some amplifiers can miss the drama of this change of tempo but the V40 tracks it well.

If there's any disappointment with the unit it comes from the USB input which is restricted to 16bit/48kHz maximum so high-resolution files are not an option. That's a shame as I have a feeling the overall sound of

"The Blue Aura has a wonderfully rich, bouncy and infectious nature to its sound... it simply knows how to play a tune"

complements the Quadral's slightly dry character to make a potent system.

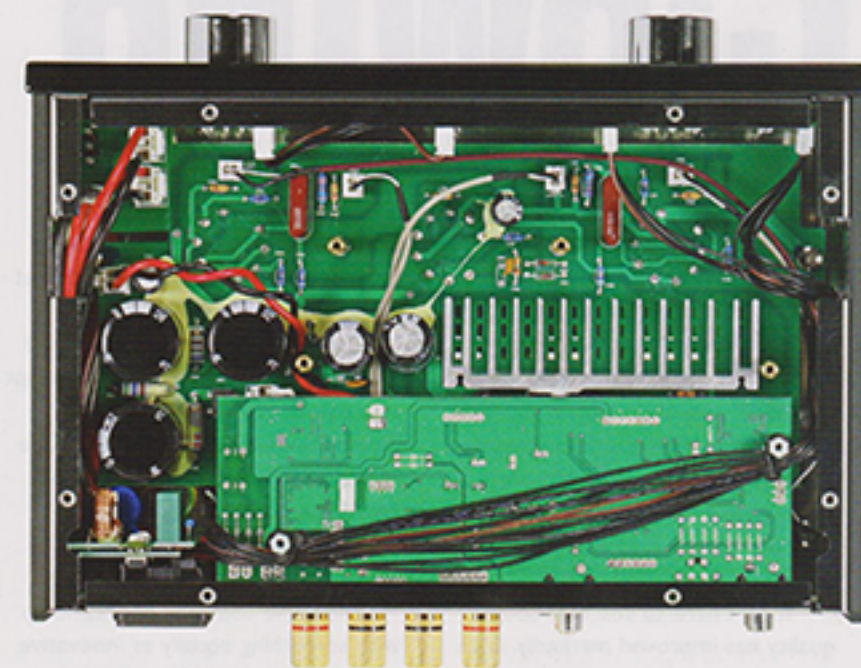
Indeed, very potent on Acoustic Ladyland's 'Last Chance Disco' where there was some sure-footed assurance to the drums/bass/saxophone combination.

What I would have liked here, ideally however, was just a little more power. Turning the volume up the

v40 is more than good enough to show the benefits of higher bit-rate files.

Then again, that's not really the point of the Blue Aura. It doesn't claim to be a cutting-edge hi-fi DAC.

But what it does do is combine valve warmth with decent solid-state output in a compact chassis that includes Bluetooth connectivity - and all for the price of just £449.



Underneath, the Blue Aura has neat internal wiring, demonstrating good overall quality of construction.



RCA inputs plus a Bluetooth aerial, USB in for computer audio and a 3.5mm auxiliary socket give the Blue Aura a decent range of connectivity. There's also a sub-woofer out for those who require it.

Pair it with the right loudspeakers and you have a bargain combination on your hands.

Which is exactly what I found when listening to the Blue Aura through a pair of the excellent £299 Tannoy Eclipse 3 floorstanders (see review Hi-Fi World June 2016).

Here is quite a potent combination. At a total cost of £750 you have a lovely little valve amplifier and a pair of budget but superb speakers that work very well together.

Pairing these together I couldn't help but think that here is what hi-fi can deliver at a reasonable price. The

saxophone on David Bowie's 'Drive In Saturday' just sounded fulsome and driven, the guitar sprang from

the loudspeakers while drums had slam.

It's not perfect in terms of absolute detail and see-through clarity - but, boy, is it enjoyable and something that makes you forget the absolute hi-fi necessities and concentrate on the enjoyment.

## CONCLUSION

The new Blue Aura V40 is a potent package. It has a lovely valve warmth combined with good dynamic punch and the added versatility of Bluetooth input. Pair it with good loudspeakers and it will deliver a really satisfying performance.

## MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Blue Aura V40 amplifier produced 10 Watts into 8 Ohms and 15 Watts into 4 Ohms, from what is a solid-state amplifier fronted by preamp valves. The EM-84 (6e2) magic eye indicator, a lovely touch, does not fully close at max volume however.

Distortion levels were well under control, measuring 0.1% in the midband and around 0.2% at high frequencies, inevitably crossover with extended harmonic structure as our analysis shows, but this is a fair result all the

same, especially at the price. Budget Class D amplifiers can be gruesome in this test, producing 1% distortion or more, but the V40 avoids this problem, by avoiding Class D and using A/B.

Input sensitivity at the RCA socket input measured 0.9V - relatively insensitive. However, modern sources such as digital players commonly produce 1-2V so it is enough, if not for old tuners etc that produced 0.3V.

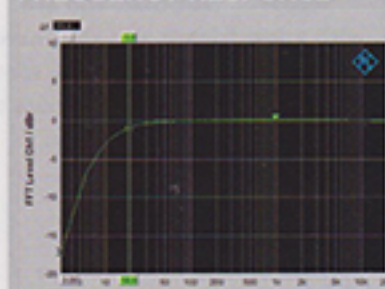
Noise was low at -95dB and frequency response wide, but sharply rolled off below 20Hz by a distinctive high performance subsonic filter very deliberately engineered in it appears. It will prevent overload from warps when playing LP from an external phono stage.

The USB DAC is decidedly budget, offering 44.1kHz and 48kHz sample rate conversion only, from 16bit alone when used in conjunction with a MacBook Pro. Dynamic range measured a mediocre 94dB, -8dB below the 102dB possible for CD, and distortion was 0.8% at -60dB where 0.2% is usual from CD.

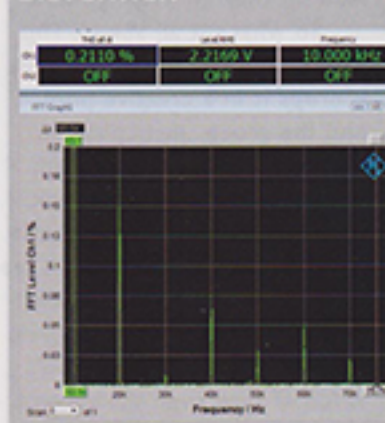
The Blue Aura V40 avoids the sins of cheap Class D to give a good hi-fi performance. Only its USB input is a tad challenged by today's 24bit standards. NK

Power 10watts  
Frequency response 20Hz-80kHz  
Separation 98dB  
Noise -95dB  
Distortion 0.2%  
Sensitivity 900mV

## FREQUENCY RESPONSE



## DISTORTION



BLUE AURA  
BLACKLINE V40  
£449

OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VALUE - keenly priced.

## VERDICT

A superb little amplifier that allies eye-catching design to versatile connectivity and toe-tapping sound.

## FOR

- valve input stage
- compact chassis
- rich, warm sound
- Bluetooth
- low price

## AGAINST

- No high-res via USB

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