

Consonance Cyber 880A (£2895)

This 30W Chinese valve amp sounds best with sensitive speakers and simple programme material; it also helps recordings with extreme 'digititis'

Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Opera Audio, the Beijing-based manufacturer of Consonance products, obviously loves the sound of valve amplifiers.

Nevertheless it clearly appreciates that audio enthusiasts come in all shapes and sizes, with varying tastes and systems. In the Consonance portfolio there is something for everyone, including a range of solid-state amplifiers and CD players, as well as a bewildering array of valve amps covering varying design alternatives. And many of these products are not without industrial design flair: the Cyber 880 and 211/845 monoblock power amps, for example, look like works of modern art.

With the Cyber 880 power amplifier, depending on system matching and personal taste you can choose either a 2x100W-rated ultra-linear version employing eight 6550 output valves, or this recently-introduced 880A version rated at 2x30W with its complement of two 12BH7 and three ECC82 valves plus four 2A3 power triodes in push-pull configuration per channel. Each has the same chassis and cosmetics; both are priced at £2895. The 2A3 version clearly is suited to more sensitive speakers given its lower power capability. (Allium Audio, the UK distributor for Consonance lists 18 specialist dealers across the country who doubtless can advise on the most appropriate model to choose depending on system ancillaries.)

To my eyes the styling of this Cyber 880A is perhaps comparatively a little staid, although in a modern setting I could imagine it looking modestly chic. The clean lines and light cherry wood adornment to the silver metallic casework make the amp a curious combination of both retro and modernly minimalist in appearance – if not in

weight: you'll need a sturdy shelf or rack to accommodate its 35kg.

The Cyber 880A's aluminum front panel and silver chassis sport a pleasing lacquered finish, as does the protective valve cage. When the cage is removed a series of recessed slot screws is exposed, for adjusting the bias current for each output valve. I felt the yellow-green illumination of the bias meter clashed somewhat with the bright blue LED on the fascia's solitary power on/off button, but it's hardly a concern.

At the rear is simply a pair of single-end RCA input sockets and chunky speaker binding posts. Output matching taps are provided for both 4ohm and 8ohm loudspeakers.

PROS AND CONS OF VALVES

Ardent fans of valve amplification will listen to nothing else, citing a kind of 'harmonic correctness' and midrange magic that they say eludes solid-state amplifiers. The most 'pure' of the valve breed – the low-powered, single-ended

triode type that eschews negative feedback – can sound both fast and open. The best of the breed sound razor sharp, fast and sweet, whilst 'breathing' effortlessly through the lower midrange and down on into the lowest registers. Subjectively this helps to create a fabulous sense of three-dimensionality to a system's soundstage. It also helps one endure congested, 'tizzy', over-produced recordings that might otherwise be judged intolerable.

Owning efficient loudspeakers is a prerequisite of living with such amplifiers, so this precludes the option for many listeners. There's a cost implication too, as tubes will need replacing from time to time. Moreover in really large, transparent systems with loudspeakers that attempt to deliver infra-bass, many valve amps will simply let go, failing to maintain precision.

PLAUSIBLE DIMENSIONS

It would be a cliché to describe the sound of the Cyber 880A as 'lush and

RIGHT: Removing the protective cage reveals the illuminated bias indicator; recessed trim pots on the amp's top plate are accessed with a small screwdriver to adjust the bias current to each of the eight 2A3 output valves





sweet', but given simply-recorded female voice with piano accompaniment that's rather how it delivers. The bittersweet 'The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress' by the late Radka Toneff [*Fairytales*, Odin CD-03] was both intimate and easy on the ear, the shimmering reverberation tails of the piano notes decaying to silence in eerie fashion while Toneff's enchanting voice sounded delicate and her intonation was beautifully exposed. It's a pity this jazz classic has now been deleted and is difficult to find, as the straightforward, pure recording is fabulous and the '880A took me right into the recording space.

This amplifier sounded equally at ease with a digital recording of Joe Jackson on vinyl, the three-sided *Big World* album of 1986 [A&M JWA 3]. Despite the 'dry' balance of this live set the instruments were set out in a believable sound stage with plausible three-dimensionality, the weight and punch of the bass and drums in the track 'Right and Wrong' demonstrating that you certainly can rock with a modestly-powered valve

amplifier. What the amplifier fails to deliver, however, is the lightning-fast transient attack I have heard from lower-powered single-ended triode designs, this push-pull 880A sounding a touch softened around the edges. It may take some nastiness away from recordings that display too much 'digititus', as *Big World* does for sure, but it also robs the music of vitality when such 'smoothing' is not what's wanted.

CASE IN POINT

Bob Ezrin's cavernous production on Peter Gabriel's eponymous first solo album proved a case in point. Always a difficult LP to reproduce satisfactorily due to its wide dynamic range; a Japanese pressing on quiet vinyl is nonetheless a prized possession in my record collection [Polystar/Charisma 20S-100]. While the timpani and brass of the London Symphony Orchestra

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ABOVE: The Consonance Cyber 880 comes in a 100W version employing 6550 output pentodes or this 30W version that utilises four 2A3 power triodes per channel

sounded powerful and majestic on 'Down The Dolce Vita', the bristling guitar break by Steve Hunter on 'Waiting For The Big One' lacked the bite and aggression that I'm accustomed to. Yes, the aforementioned cavernous

scale and depth of the soundstage of this album was depicted in glorious fashion, but the slight blurring of transient information made

the production difficult to hear into fully.

Nevertheless the sense of ease of music-making is undeniably alluring. While the infectious rhythm section of Sly 'n' Robbie on Joe Cocker's *Sheffield Steel* [Island ILPS 9700] might have lacked the nth degree of bottom end control and precision, the '880A, as with so many valve amplifiers, renders bags of detail that is neither etched nor fatiguing. The gritty rasp of Cocker's vocal was robust, powerful and emotive while sibilance in the recording was sufficiently reduced to make for a wholly engaging listen, start to finish.

Audiophiles entrenched in the solid-state camp typically characterise valve amps as sounding rolled-off in the frequency extremes, with soft highs and mushy lows. Yet such sweeping generalisations rarely apply when

LISTENING TO OPERA

If you subscribe to the notion that the enduring popularity of the valve amplifier can be attributed to the plethora of affordable models now coming from China, then the Opera Audio company of Beijing might justifiably take some of the credit. It was founded by Eric Shi Hui Liu in 1994, and the company's history is a common tale of an engineer making tube amps for himself as a hobby, before biting the bullet and deciding to set up a proper business venture. A decade-and-a-half later, Opera Audio has more than 50 employees and its Consonance brand name is known in more than 30 countries. Opera Audio is also the Chinese distributor of Well Tempered and Dynavector. It manufactures a considerable range of both solid-state and valve amplifiers, CD players, turntables and tonearms, with Eric Liu still creating all the designs himself.

VALVE POWER AMPLIFIER



ABOVE: Just one set of single-ended RCA input sockets is provided, along with speaker terminals offering 4 and 8ohm taps from the amplifier's output transformer

a power amp is partnered with appropriately sensitive speakers – and with my easy-to-drive Townshend Sir Galahads the Cyber 880A could never be accused of sounding overtly soft, syrupy or coloured. But it was more enchanting with simple, audiophile recordings than with big rock productions.

SIMPLE PLEASURES

Eric Bibb's 'I Want Jesus to Walk With Me' from *Spirit & The Blues* [Opus 3, SACD 19421], an 'unplugged' performance if ever there was one, sounded utterly divine; you could hear with no difficulty how well Opus 3's single-point coincident-pair microphone technique had captured the direct and reverberant sound of acoustic guitar and voice in the venue. (Look at the small print in the sleeve notes, and you'll see that Opus 3's recording engineers have used mostly tube electronics in their recording chain!)

Where the Cyber 880A failed to thrill to such an extent was with a full-on 'blast' of stadium rock from Foreigner, for example. 1981's *Foreigner 4* album was remastered for DVD-Audio in 2001 [Atlantic/Rhino 8122743669], bonus tracks including a couple of modern 24-bit/96kHz recordings of the band 'almost unplugged' that are simply sensational in resolution and dynamics.

As with so many modern rock recordings, these tracks are a little bright, too, and the '880A did nothing to disguise the fact, so there's not the obvious softening

of middle-to-high frequencies of which the amp might be accused. However, it did soften the dynamic impact of very low bass notes on 'Juke Box Hero' where it sounded a bit bogged down, the bass synthesizer line robbed of the snap that would otherwise enable it to drive the song.

Listening to Antal Dorati and the London Symphony Orchestra's 1959 Mercury recording of Stravinsky's *The Firebird* ballet [reissued as an SACD hybrid, 470 643-2] showed luscious texture and presence to winds and strings, even in the more dissonant, densely orchestrated passages.

Using loudspeakers that are not over-ambitious in trying to deliver significant acoustic output below 50Hz will be the key to audio bliss with the Consonance Cyber 880A, as it is certainly capable of delivering music in spades. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

There's little to dislike about the Cyber 880A and much to enjoy – even if this is not an amplifier for all seasons. With simple recordings it creates a beautiful sound portrait that rarely fails to enthrall, while with dense recordings it can sound open and engaging. Avoid the largest of floorstanding loudspeakers that may show the amplifier's tendency to lose grip at very low frequencies and relish instead its lush and sweet midband.

Sound Quality: 70%

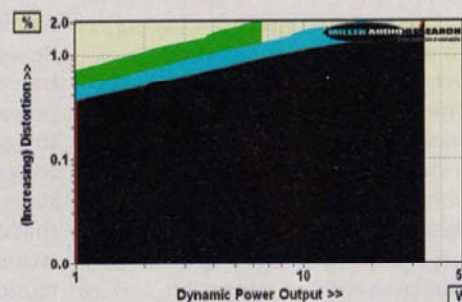


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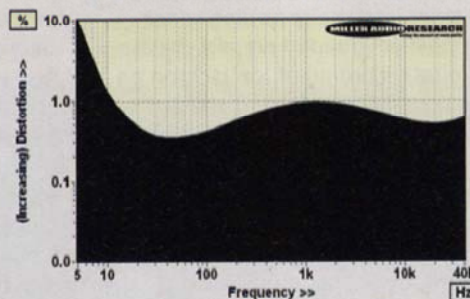
Regardless of configuration, Opera's combination of four 2A3 triodes per channel was never going to amount to a bottomless pit of power. At 28-29W per channel into 8/4ohm (via 8/4ohm taps) the Cyber 880A very nearly meets its 30W specification, up to a distortion limit of 2%, and exceeds this under dynamic conditions [see Graph 1, below]. Power consumption is between 200-210W regardless of load or output.

Sensitive speakers are as important for the Cyber 880A as the Quad II Classic Integrated amp reviewed last month, though the overall system response of the '880A is more greatly influenced by the speaker's impedance trend thanks to its 20hm output. Speakers with a falling treble impedance will have a more rolled-off response and vice-versa, a default 4ohm load realising a drop of -2dB/20kHz via the 4ohm tap.

There's another key difference between the Quad and the Cyber 880A, aside from design architecture, and that's the quality of its valve matching. Manual bias adjust notwithstanding, it's not uncommon to discover stereo valve products whose performance varies quite considerably between channels, and so it is here. The left channel S/N ratio is just 67dB versus 79dB on the right (A-wtd, re. 0dBW) although distortion is lower through the left at 0.7-1.1% from 20Hz-20kHz [see Graph 2, below] versus 1.1-1.6% through the right. Distortion on both channels lifts to ~10% at a subsonic 5Hz (5W/8ohm) as the output transformers saturate. Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for the Opera Audio/Consonance Cyber 880A by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads



ABOVE: Distortion versus extended frequency (5W/8ohm, 5Hz-40kHz). Transformer core saturation causes distortion to climb quickly at very low freqs.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<2% THD, 8/4ohm)	28W / 28W
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	34W / 33W / 19W / 7W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	1.95-2.1ohm (4ohm tap)
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	-0.1 to -1.95dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/30W)	191mV / 1040mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/30W)	78.9dB / 93.7dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz)	0.75-1.08%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	204W / 211W
Dimensions (WHD)	430x190x450mm