

Golden Dragon

Tube Rings by Duende Criatura

Tube dampers: an ever present in the tweeker's armoury, but one with a distinctly chequered past. Who can forget those Sorbothane damping rings that melted over time and slithered down the tube to contaminate the pins and sockets? Indeed, tube damping seems to have been an open invitation to every audio inventor out there, each looking to invent a better mouse trap. Why? Because the mechanical damping of tubes delivers a clearly audible advantage. It only takes a quick AB comparison to convince even the most sceptical of listeners, and if it's your baby / invention / device doing the damping then it's hard to resist the conclusion that a grateful audio world is going to beat a path to your door. But you couldn't be more wrong.

There are a number of problems with damping valves, not the least of which is the relatively small number of people who actually run valve amplification. (you can forget guitarists, perhaps the biggest potential market, on the basis that they actually WANT distortion!) But the next problem is consistency. It's easy to make a damping device that works short-term. It's harder to maintain that effect over a period of months or years. Finally, there are the practical issues of size and cost. Most thermionic amplifiers use enough tubes and pack them tightly enough together that anything bulky or expensive becomes self-defeating.

To date, i've only found two valve dampers that actually deliver sonically and in terms of longevity. One is the Sicomin damper, a small composite sleeve that fits over preamp valves like

ECC83s (or EL84 output tubes - but they're the exception). It certainly works and goes on working. The problem is that they're not cheap and as far as I'm aware they only come in the smaller diameter. This lack of definite knowledge is the other problem. I got mine some ten years ago. I don't know if they come in larger sizes or not, or if they're even still available.

My other success story is the Pearl Valve Cooler, a metal concertina sleeve that clamps over your valve, held in place with a rubber O ring. These are claimed to mechanically damp



your tube (in which regard they are spectacularly successful) and increase its life span by allowing it to run cooler (on which subject I have no evidence). The problems with the Pearl were simple. Standing out a centimeter or more from the circumference of the valve, actually fitting them was a problem in many cases. The company suggested that in tight installations you could actually dispense with the O ring and interleave the fins of the coolers, almost like the teeth of cogs. Unfortunately, devoid of the clamping ring the coolers simply rattled against the valve, actually



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making the sound worse. The other issue was the rubber O rings themselves: The heat from the valves caused them to break thus leaving you with an unclamped damper. This made regular inspection and replacement essential, which was a real pain if you are talking about an enclosed chassis or pre-amp. Nevertheless, if you could put up with the hassle then the Pearls were the best show in town, and they're still available from Moth Market.

However, trawling round the Frankfurt show this year, I came across a new damper, stunning in its simplicity,

dramatic in its effect. Manufactured by Duende Criatura in Holland, and named simply Tube Rings, these are Teflon hoops that are slit so that they can be expanded so that they can be fit over a valve bottle. There's a groove around the outside and this locates a titanium C spring to provide the necessary clamping tension. They are manufactured in eight standard sizes and fitting is simplicity itself.

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Review: HI-FI+ magazine (Issue 28)
by Roy Gregory

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You just slide the ring over the top of the tube and position it level with the top-plate of the internal metalwork.

Once in place they stay put, and recent substitution of brand new samples for ones that have been in use for a good six months produced no identifiable difference in effect, which bodes well for longevity. Indeed, the only real limitation on their use is that the valves involved must have parallel sides.

In use, the benefits of the Tube Rings are sonically on par with the Pearls (although without any cooling benefits). You get crisper and greater dynamic range, a blacker background, better focus, deeper and more powerful bass. In fact, all the things you'd expect from a good valve damper. But it's the magnitude of the differences that really impresses. You'll not be straining to hear them and they are both musically significant and hi-fi relevant. The sheer increase in clarity and separation makes it far easier to hear

exactly what is going on within the music, while the increased dynamic range, control and discrimination make performances much more expressive, involving and realistic. Even CB, a notorious sceptic when it comes to such devices, was left open-mouthed with surprise when I demonstrated their effect on the audiopax amps. Not bad for such a simple, cheap and trouble free tweak I think you'll agree.

Anybody with a tube amp, especially an open chassis model should investigate these plain looking little rings immediately. The fact that you'll probably be getting them mail order means that you can try them safe in the knowledge that you can return them if unconvinced, but



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somehow, I think you'll be keeping them once you hear the effects. They're now considered essential as far as I'm concerned, and bring new meaning to the term 'simply the best'

Review featured in Hi-Fi+ magazine Issue 28

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Golden Dragon Tube Rings by Duende Criatura are available from:
PM Components Ltd, Unit A, Jenkins Dale Industrial Estate, Chatham, Kent ME4 5RD
Tel +44 (0) 1634 848500 Fax +44 (0) 1634 848676 - www.pmcomponents.com