

the Stereo Times

The Complete Audiophile Magazine

The Lavardin IT Integrated Amplifier The End of Artistic Distortion



The direct experience of a great work of art has long struck me as one of the most profound and desirable human experiences. There is something magical and deeply mysterious about the process. We are dimly aware, in our workaday lives, that Beethoven's *5th Symphony*, the paintings of Turner, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, or Coltrane's *Alabama* are out there right now, objectively real. But until we make the connection, until we encounter these works with our deepest and most intense being, they remain phantoms. Exactly how and why we make the connection to a work of art remains somewhat mysterious. Certainly there is the notion of timing, of encountering a given work at the exact right time in our lives, be it age, the particularity of circumstance, or the priming charge of emotional or spiritual receptivity. What is clear is that Art can speak directly to us, can shake us to our foundations. There *is* an art to experiencing Art, and we as audio enthusiasts all hope, I would think, to become at least *craftsmen* at it. Still, the experience of being grabbed by a great artistic work, out of the blue, spontaneously, and without seeming pre-conditions or training, remains somehow the most affecting, the most pure. It is, after all, how we first experienced Art when young. For most of us, it's how we became music lovers.

Equally intriguing is why we can fail to connect with certain works of art, why being exposed to some of them leaves us flat and unmoved. Because our access to works of art is often indirect - accessed through a medium - it seems obvious that the medium must

be supremely free of distortion if it is to allow the artistic merit and message of the work of art to be communicated. Moreover, it must not distort the inherent specific artistic techniques and elements of the art form with which the medium deals. Thus I have long followed the principle that the worst crime an audio system can commit is to blur, distort, or compromise the art of the music: I rate hi-fi gear purely on its artistic merits.

There is a degree of obvious common sense about this criterion. What is the point of listening to polyrhythmic music on a system which cannot differentiate all the rhythmic patterns being played? Why listen to intensely passionate and emotional singers like Aretha Franklin or Joe Cocker on a cold and unemotional system? Why listen to Bach on a system that cannot reveal the complexity of the musical lines? And why listen to Mozart on a system that cannot communicate his pure joy and exuberance? If we are to truly connect with and experience the art of music, we need gear that is truly faithful to all aspects of that art.

The Lavardin IT integrated amplifier produces the least artistic distortion of any amplifier I've ever heard in the 36 years I've been involved with audio. It offers unparalleled understanding and insight into every kind of music, regardless of that music's ultimate merit. It completely eliminates any barriers to the musical message caused by the amplification process, opening the listener to the true quality of the music. The music simply *appears*, naked and direct. The IT is a rare and exceptional achievement.

Priced at \$7495, the Lavardin IT integrated amplifier looks simple and unassuming in appearance, looking (and weighing) much like any regular, well-built power amplifier. Rated at 50 watts per channel, the amp has the ability to drive any normal loudspeaker to room filling levels. Front panel cosmetics are simple and straightforward – a power switch, 4 inputs selected manually from a large input switch, and volume controlled by an equally large and tactile volume control. It takes all of 30 seconds to become completely acclimated to the Lavardin's operation.

Over the years varieties of system-building strategies have been advocated. The dumbest of these was the advice to spend most of one's money on the loudspeaker, the erroneous assumption being that CD players, turntables, and amplifiers all sounded the same. Most of the truly awful Hi-Fi systems I've heard were based on this strategy. The old Linn approach – buy the best front-end you can – proved far more practically successful, even if one used a \$200 amp and \$200 a pair speakers. After listening to the Lavardin IT integrated amp, however, I'm convinced that the most rational, logical, and effective approach is to build one's system around this superb amplifier.

The IT is remarkably un-neurotic: it doesn't need to be burned-in for 6 months or placed 'just so' on a convoluted isolation platform to work correctly. Its only demand is that time-coherent cabling be used, which in most cases will mean some form of solid-core design. I casually first played the IT with the rogue's gallery of loudspeakers that have accumulated, somewhat accidentally, in my abode.



Mating a \$7500 integrated amplifier to \$289 or \$400 a pair loudspeakers might seem insane, but there was method in my madness. Take for example the Celestion F30 loudspeakers (photo left). Part of the new Celestion "design-it-in-England, manufacture-it-in-China" regime, the \$400 F30, when coupled with conventional amplifiers, sounds like a sorry ghost of the grand old Celestion tradition. An upper-midrange/low-treble peak, which I had assumed was a sonic result of the metal tweeter resonance point, ruined an otherwise fairly decent speaker, resulting in my storing it in a back room waiting, like Godot, for some unlikely future multi-channel application.

To say that its performance with the Lavardin IT was transmogrified is a supreme understatement. The peaky treble was gone, transformed into an extended and artful accuracy and delicacy. The bass articulation and bandwidth flowered, the speaker took on an articulate rhythmic suavety that it had never showed signs of previously. The resolution increased to where a casual listener actually thought the speaker cost \$10,000. Only a slight compression at higher volumes belied the speaker's design limits and humbler pricing.

It was the same with the other rogue speakers I tried the IT with. In each case it was clear that even humble speakers had abilities that conventional amplifiers just couldn't reveal. The IT was also clear about each speaker's inherent flaws and limits. You could hear the phase aberrations of a pair of old Infinity's 3-way crossovers, and directly experience and understand why truly excellent 3-way designs are so hard to implement. Conversely, the Robin Marshall-designed Spendor 2040 (photo right), with its simple crossover – essentially just a capacitor to keep bass frequencies out of the tweeter – revealed its coherent timbral abilities to the utmost. Two budget mini-speakers, the old Celestion 3 MKII and Rega's R1, set up for near-field listening in a small room, provided a hallucinatory sound stage to match the deep musical communication of the Lavardin. Unfortunately, performance with my long-time reference speaker, the Sound Lab Dynastat, was only so-so. But then only tube amplifiers with superb output transformers have been consistently compatible with its awkward load of capacitive electrostatic panels and dynamic woofer. The simple truth is that the better the speaker (and of course, the source) the better the Lavardin IT sounds, taking on near-magical neutrality, subtlety, resolution, and clarity.



I have reviewed the IT's smaller brother, the IS Reference (see: [here](#)), and found that coupled with a pair of truly excellent speakers (like anything from Harbeth or Rega, for examples) one would find no reason for ever leaving one's listening room, so compelling and so direct is the Lavardin way with communicating the heart, soul, and message of the music. The IT handily outperforms the IS Reference: it is more detailed, more subtle, and more coherent. Especially, the IT eliminates the slight loss of bass drive and Boogie Factor that was the only limitation I found with its lower powered sibling. The IT's way with bass is truly revelatory, not only in bandwidth, drive, and dynamics, but in fully revealing the rhythmic patterns of bass instruments and their interaction.

The function of a really good Hi-Fi system is, at heart, hermeneutic: it brings to understanding the meaning of the music by fully articulating what is being played. A great system will also reveal *how* and *why* the music is played. Hi-Fi gear designed to produce musical values must excel at revealing the architecture of the music - showing clearly its constituent structure and how the elements of that structure interact. The IT does this with a clarity that is unequalled. Vastly improving on some tube gear's tendency to only do justice to the midrange, or on other gear of the past that concentrated on the mid-bass/treble areas, the Lavardin IT reveals what's going on in all the areas of musical interest. One can follow the most complex vocal harmonies, percussion work, and convoluted rhythmic bass patterns with transparent ease, not only within each tonal range, but also related to the entire larger pattern of the music. Each instrument is equally clearly reproduced.

The IT's superior reproduction of the architecture of the music is in no way abstract or over-intellectualized: it is matched by an equally exceptional way with revealing the quality and feeling of the playing. The artistic techniques of virtuoso musicians from all types of music are immediate to the ear. The Lavardin IT is that rare amplifier that combines architectural clarity with the utmost grace and subtlety, all backed by an unflappable sense of power and ease. It is enormously fun and emotionally stimulating to

listen to.

I keep a batch of about 25 albums (most are also duplicated on CD) on hand for testing specific musical demands for the gear I review. They cover all genres of music. Listening to these test records can become somewhat perfunctory, almost a rote exercise, with lesser gear. With the IT however, listening became the intense experience it should be. The IT passed all the technical demands that these records are chosen to represent with masterful ease. Moreover IT was impossible to listen to passively: the artistic message of the music overcame any attempt at detached listening. I was consistently moved to the aesthetic depths.

Jean Christophe Crozel, the designer of the Lavardin amplifiers, has painstakingly focused on the elimination of "memory distortion," the tendency of electronic circuits to leave ghost-like traces after the signal ends. Mated with the high speed of the Lavardin solid-state circuits, the Crozel designs produce an effortless and neutral clarity across the sonic bandwidth that sets a new standard. A signal that starts and stops exactly with the music can't help but reveal the timing aspect of the music in a superior and coherent fashion. Sound and music are inherently based on timing – indeed are functions of time – and judging Hi-Fi gear from this perspective has proven more fruitful for me than the conventional EE perspective or the confused metaphors of Audiophile description. The proof is in the listening: after listening to the Lavardin, other high-quality amps sound confusing and incoherent, obviously distorting the artistic message of the music.



The Lavardin IT works with all types of music, but is with the most difficult music that its strengths are most obvious. Listeners of Jazz and Classical music will no longer have to puzzle about the artistic merit of a performance or composition. The IT lays it all out. I was pleased to discover that the IT's supreme performance was not limited to LP playback: CD was reproduced in a musically compelling manner that almost transcended its compromised inherent limits regarding time and phase. Listening, however, to an Origin Live Aurora MKII turntable mated with the Origin Live Conqueror tonearm and The Cartridge Man MusicMaker Classic phono cartridge was easily the most exalted aesthetic experience I've ever had listening to recorded music.

In short I have no criticism of the Lavardin IT: It is a truly great amplifier and the standard by which all other amps must be judged. Because Crozel got it right the first time (12 years of research, testing, and development preceded the IT's appearance) the amp is already a classic, unchanged in over 10 years of production. While the price of the IT at \$7495 is not pocket-change cheap, it still is a bargain when considered over the long term. This is an amplifier one keeps, a true final destination product. Congratulations to Jean Christophe Crozel for creating a truly great music-making amplifier, one that is completely artistically faithful. My recommendation for our award

for Most Wanted Product of the Year? Obviously. But more so: Most Wanted Product of my Lifetime.

Paul Szabady



Specifications:

Inputs: 4 on gold plated high quality cinch connector

Input impedance: 10Kohms

Input sensibility: 330 millivolts

Line output: none phono input: none

Input selection: sealed relays, ground & signal

Relay contact gold, silver, palladium alloy

Output power: 2x48W RMS on 8 Ohms

Output impedance: nominal 8 Ohms

Harmonic distortion: 0.001% @ max output

Technology: Lavardin Technologies Design High Speed and low Memory Distortion

Solid State Circuits

Size: (mm) H 135 L 430 D 340

Finish: Black anodised and painted

non magnetic high-grade aluminum

Weight: 12 Kg net (25 lbs) per unit

Power consumption: 45 watts idle ; 400 watts maximum

AWG

Single Crystal Copper with Single Crystal IEC plug

Manufacturer:

Lavardin Technologies

Website: <http://www.lavardin.com>