

# Boutique

Absolare Passion Preamplifier and Passion  
845 Single-Ended-Triode Power Amplifier

Robert Harley





vintage New Old Stock (NOS) units. My review sample was fitted with NOS 6SN7s from 1943, for example.

This over-the-top dedication to the buying and ownership experience would mean nothing if the circuits were not designed and executed with a commensurate level of commitment. I can report that the Passion preamplifier and Passion 845 power amplifier are designed and built as though they were cost-no-object products. Every single component inside them has been chosen from the best vendors around the world. The Italian output transformers—crucial in a single-ended power amplifier—are designed specifically for the amplifier and wound with high-purity 7N copper. The custom gold-plated tube sockets are handmade in Japan by Yamamoto. Internal wiring is Echole Obsession Signature (Echole is Absolare's sister company). And it's not just the parts that are international; in its quest to make statement-level products, Absolare put together a global design group, including the venerated Japanese single-end-triode artisan Noriyasu Komuro.

In a nutshell, Absolare's approach is to assemble an international team of the best engineers, find the highest-grade parts from vendors around the world, pursue absolute minimalism in the signal path, exploit synergies between components, wrap all this up in lavishly made and easy-to-use designs, and provide a

The term "boutique" as applied to an audio product or company is almost always pejorative. That's because the industry has seen so many companies produce ultra-high-end-looking products aimed at the very wealthy that offer mediocre performance at best—"all show and no go." Boutique products are cynical in that their purveyors are not interested in sound quality, but rather in exploiting a lucrative market.

But imagine a high-end company that combines the very highest musical, technical, and aesthetic values with the luxury looks and buyer appeal of the world's finest boutique brands.

That convergence is realized in the form of a relatively new firm called Absolare. To give you an idea of how dedicated Absolare is to satisfying its customers, consider that you can order its gorgeous leather-clad Passion preamplifier and Passion 845 single-ended-triode power amplifiers in a wide range of premium leathers. Rather than selecting the leather from looking at the color on a computer screen, Absolare sends you large swatches of the actual leather. If you can't decide between colors Absolare will build the product's entire leather-clad panels in up to eight colors (and four stitch colors) and ship them to your home so that you can live with the samples before choosing one.

And to keep that leather in perfect condition, Absolare supplies not just a generic leather-care kit, but a state-of-the-art system from Swissvax, including museum-grade leather conditioner.

There's more. If you are considering buying Absolare's acoustic panels and equipment stands, the company will create computer renderings of the entire system and merge those renderings with photographs of your room and your existing associated equipment so that you can see how the finished system will look. The company will set up the system in your home and help you choose just the right tubes. And speaking of tubes, Absolare has scoured the world for the finest vacuum tubes and has purchased large supplies of what it considers the best, including some rare

The Passion amps and preamp are boutique products in the best sense of those words. Their sound is world-class.

level of customer service commensurate with that of the world's finest luxury brands.

Absolare also builds equipment racks, amplifier stands, and acoustic panels. The stands and racks are made from very thin layers of African rosewood bonded with a glue developed specifically for these stands. The type of wood, number of layers, bonding technique, and adhesive were chosen for their resonant properties. Each piece of furniture is finished in a palisander veneer for aesthetics. The equipment stands are built in a Turkish factory that makes furniture for the world's most exclusive luxury hotels. My review system was supplied with two amplifier stands

shaped like inverted and truncated pyramids; the preamplifier stand has the same form factor but upside-down. The three stands thus nest into each other when the preamplifier is flanked

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by the pair of power amplifiers, conveying the impression of one continuous system. The stands' craftsmanship is first-rate.

The review system also included Echole's top-of-the-line Obsession Signature interconnects and loudspeaker cables. Echole spent several years developing the metallurgy in these cables, reportedly auditioning more than 90 different combinations of metals before deciding on a mixture of silver, gold, and palladium. Even different formulations of solder were auditioned until Echole had created its own solder that incorporates the metals in the conductors. The cables are fitted with an anti-resonant device machined from a solid aluminum block. The device can be moved along the cable length for fine tuning. The RCA connectors are custom-made by Oyadie from palladium coated in silver. Absolare also supplied me with its Obsession Signature AC power cords, which feature this same exotic mix of metals. The Absolare-branded AC power conditioner (not part of my review system) was developed by Jack Bybee, and incorporates his proprietary technologies.

This comprehensive approach reflects Absolare's belief that audio components that have been engineered to work together synergistically as a complete system will outperform a collection of individual products. In fact, Absolare can supply an entire audio system except sources and loudspeakers.

Absolare is the brainchild of Kerem Kucukaslan, a Turkish native who attended college and later worked in the U.S. He coordinates the company from Istanbul, but the products are manufactured in New Hampshire. In an industry full of passionate individuals pursuing an aesthetic vision, few have the dedication and intensity of Kerem Kucukaslan. That vision is realized in the products reviewed here, which exude a very different "vibe" than just about any other components I've reviewed. From their unusual form factor, to the leather-clad chassis, to the ultra-simple operation and the absence of even front-panel markings, the Passion preamplifier and 845 power amplifier engender a different relationship between the user and the hi-fi system. It is a music-reproduction system stripped down to its most basic function. If you want a preamplifier with six balanced and six unbalanced inputs, gain offset on each input, theater-pass-through modes, a front-panel display showing nameable inputs, and an iPod dock, Absolare isn't for you. The products are not inexpensive at \$27,500 for the preamplifier and \$41,250 for a pair of power amplifiers, but based on their build-quality, the parts inside, and the sound I consider them eminently reasonably priced.

#### Description

The preamplifier and power amplifiers are minimalist in the extreme, both in operation and in circuitry. The all-tube, single-ended preamplifier has just two unmarked front-panel knobs: volume and input selection. The four inputs and dual outputs are all unbalanced on RCA jacks. Remote control is optional. The preamplifier's form factor is unusual; the rectangular chassis is deeper than it is wide. The circuit's two 12AU7 tubes are recessed in a well on the chassis top. As noted, this top panel is clad in gorgeous leather, as is the bottom panel.



## SPECS & PRICING

### PASSION PREAMPLIFIER

**Type:** All-tube, single-ended  
**Tube complement:** 2x 12AU7/  
 ECC82 or E80CC dual triodes  
**Inputs:** 4 in RCA and XLR  
 models; 2 RCA and 2 XLR in  
 RCA/XLR model  
**Outputs:** 2 RCA or 2 XLR; 1  
 RCA and 1 XLR in RCA/XLR  
 model  
**Bandwidth:** 20Hz-20kHz  
 +/-0.2dB  
**Input impedance:** RCA model,  
 100k ohms; XLR model, 10k  
 ohms  
**Volume control:** 48-steps with  
 discrete resistors  
**Gain:** 18dB  
**Dimensions:** 15" x 5.8" x 20.7"  
**Weight:** 46 lbs.  
**Price:** RCA, \$27,500; balanced  
 (XLR or RCA/XLR), \$31,000;  
 remote control, \$1700

### PASSION SINGLE-ENDED POWER AMPLIFIER

**Architecture:** Single-ended  
**Output power:** 52W  
**Tube complement:** 2x 6SN7  
 input and driver; 2x 845  
 output (in parallel)  
**Inputs:** 1 single-ended on RCA  
 (XLR optional)  
**Outputs:** 8-ohm and 4-ohm  
 transformer taps  
**Input impedance:** 75k ohms  
**Bandwidth:** 20Hz-20kHz +/-  
 1.0 dB  
**Dimensions:** 15" x 11.7" x 25.5"  
**Weight:** 93 lbs. each  
**Price:** RCA model, \$41,250/  
 pr.; balanced XLR model,  
 \$45,500/pr.; optional remote  
 control, \$1700

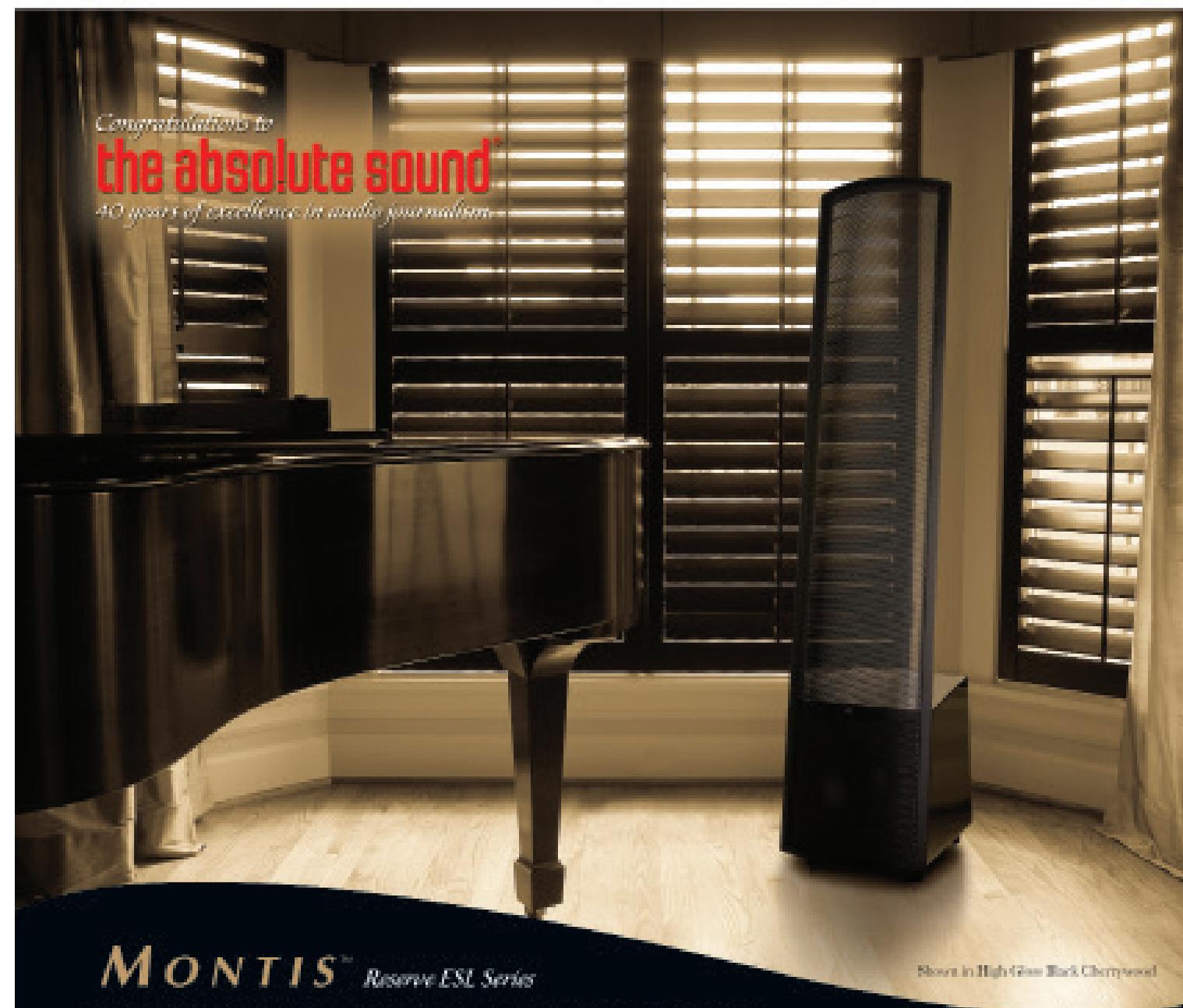
### ABSOLARE

40 Pemberton Road  
 Nashua, NH 03063  
 absolare.com

### ASSOCIATED COMPONENTS

**Digital sources:** dCS Vivaldi  
 system (transport, upsampler,  
 clock, DAC); Berkeley Audio  
 Design Alpha DAC Series 2;  
 iMac server with Berkeley  
 Alpha USB interface, MacBook  
 Pro; Pure Music and Audivana  
 playback software  
**Analog source:** Basis  
 Inspiration turntable with  
 Basis Vector 4 tonearm, Air  
 Tight PC-1 Supreme cartridge;  
 Simaudio Moon 810LP  
 phonostage  
**AC conditioning and cords:**  
 Shunyata Triton and Talos,  
 Audience aR6TS conditioners;  
 Echole Obsession Signature,  
 Shunyata Zitron Anaconda and  
 Audience Au24 AC cords  
**Cables:** Echole Obsession  
 Signature interconnects  
 and AC cords; MIT MA-X  
 SHD loudspeaker cables;  
 AudioQuest Wild AES/EBU,  
 AudioQuest EagleEye BNC  
 clock cables, AudioQuest  
 Diamond USB, WireWorld  
 Platinum Starlight USB  
**Equipment Racks:** Stillpoints,  
 Absolare amplifier and  
 preamplifier furniture  
**Acoustics:** ASC 16" Full-Round  
 Tube Traps, 10" Tower Traps  
**Accessories:** VPI 16.5 record-  
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 Fidelity record brush, cleaning  
 fluid, stylus cleaner

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The 12AU7s are configured as mu-followers, but with fewer accompanying resistors than traditional mu-follower circuits. The preamplifier can provide a whopping 18dB of gain. The audio circuit is isolated from the power supply in a subchassis with 3mm-thick walls. Sources are selected from the front-panel rotary knob (again, it is unmarked), but the signal routing occurs on the back panel next to the jacks. Similarly, the 48-step, gold-plated, Japanese-made, rotary volume knob adjusts the level right at the gain circuit, keeping the signal path as short as possible. The input is direct-coupled, and the output capacitor-coupled. If you order the Passion preamplifier with balanced inputs and outputs, the inputs and outputs are transformer-coupled. There are no circuit boards inside; all wiring is point-to-point with the conductors from Echole's Obsession Signature interconnects, and all solder joints are made with the custom blend of gold, silver, and palladium within the solder. The RCA jacks are made from tellurium copper with a gold-plating.

The power amplifier, designed by Noriyasu Komuro, is a single-ended triode design with parallel 845 output tubes producing 52W. A design goal was to bring the magic of low-powered SET amplifiers to a product that could drive a wide range of real-world loudspeakers without compromising dynamics, playback level, or bass definition. Separate 8-ohm and 4-ohm transformer taps are provided on silver-plated copper binding posts. Although you may use a range of 845 output tubes, Absolare recommends (and supplies with the amplifier) matched quartets made by Elrog.

The input and driver tubes are 6SN7 types, but here you have a wide selection of tubes. The 6SN7 tubes supplied as standard are custom-selected NOS Russian military types. Absolare can supply a wide range of other tubes, including rare vintage models such as Tungsoles and Sylvania's from the 1940s. They have found the new-production Sylvania tubes to be outstanding as well. My review samples were fitted with Tungsol NOS tubes made for the U.S. Navy in 1943. Still in their original boxes, they looked like they had remained untouched for the past 70 years.

The input is directly coupled (once again, the balanced version is transformer-coupled), and the signal path is wired with Echole Obsession Signature wire. The power section is wired with 7N-purity copper wire. The tube sockets are made from Teflon to reduce vibration, and feature gold-plated contacts. As with the Passion preamplifier, the RCA jacks are gold-plated tellurium copper; point-to-point wiring is used throughout; and all solder joints are formed with the special silver/gold/palladium silver solder.

The chassis construction is unusual. A single sheet of 3mm-thick aluminum is laser-cut, folded into the chassis shape, and then welded to form the chassis. The circuit is mounted on the 14mm-thick (almost half an inch) aluminum top plate. The signal capacitors as well as the power-supply reservoir capacitors are mounted on this thick top plate to minimize vibration. This aluminum structure is clad in two CNC-machined outer shells made from MDF, which are then wrapped in gorgeous German automotive leather. The preamplifier and power amplifier are supplied with custom-made four-layer machined aluminum feet.

### Listening

I've heard the Passion preamplifier and 845 single-ended-triode power amplifiers in three systems in the past year. The first time was in Absolare's own system in Istanbul, where I spent about two hours in the sweet spot with my own reference tracks. I also heard the electronics briefly at T.H.E. Show during CES last January driving Rockport Altairs, one of my two favorite loudspeakers (the other is the Magico Q7). As good as the Altairs sounded at my home when I reviewed them (Issue 214), they were even better at the show. That's saying something because shows are notoriously difficult environments.

But it was listening to the Magico Q7 driven by the Passion preamplifier and Passion 845 power amplifier for the past four months that convinced me that these Absolare products are some of the most musical and involving electronics I've heard. The Q7 has a sensitivity of 94dB and is fairly easy to drive—a perfect match for the amplifier's 52W. In fact, I never felt as though I encountered the amplifier's output or dynamic limitations; the system plays cleanly at any volume level, and handles dynamic swings with aplomb. It may seem odd to begin praising a single-ended-triode amplifier for its robust output power and dynamic verve (traditionally SET weaknesses), but the Passion 845 belies the stereotypes about SET designs. This is an amplifier with seemingly unfettered dynamic contrasts along with a robust and full bottom-end. Judging from the bass control, bottom-end extension, and dynamics, you wouldn't think that you were listening to an SET design.

In this regard, the Absolare is very much like the Lamm ML2.2 I reviewed in Issue 230. That 18W SET, priced nearly identically to the Absolare at \$37,290, has surprising bass extension and control for an 18W amp. When the Lamm is operated within its power limitations, it has slightly deeper and better-defined bass than the Absolare—which is saying a lot in itself. But turn up the volume and the Absolare pulls away, courtesy of its much more robust output power. Orchestral climaxes are reproduced with greater authority, and kick drum in rock has greater impact. In fact, the Passion 845's 52W sounded like a powerhouse driving the Q7s. This is an SET that will drive a very wide range of loudspeakers without the traditional limitations of the genre.

These virtues, unusual in an SET, are combined with all the glories of an ultra-minimalist single-ended-triode design. For starters, the system's reproduction of timbre is staggering in its realism—about as good as that of the Lamm ML2.2, an amplifier that in my view is the world reference in reproducing instrumental texture and tone color. Timbres are richly portrayed, with a density of color and warmth that makes even the best solid-state sound very slightly mechanical or artificial. The Absolare electronics totally lack any synthetic patina, instead rendering instruments and voices with a natural and organic quality. It's the kind of sound that as soon as the music starts playing just seems "right"—you don't have to consciously overlook the system's lack of timbral realism to enjoy the music. The Absolare electronics have a directness and realism that conveys a more convincing illusion of live instruments. I noticed this on John

The advertisement features a dark background with the Audioarts logo at the top right. On the left, two Trinity Preamp and Trinity Phono units are shown, connected to a pair of tall, white Zellaton Reference speakers. On the right, three CH Precision components are stacked: a D1 cd/sacd player, a C1 DAC/PRE, and an A1 Amplifier. The text 'Audioarts' is in a large, white, sans-serif font. The product names are in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. The address and contact information are at the bottom right.

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Pattitucci's bowed bass playing on the SACD *Speak Low* (with Hank Jones and Jack DeJohnette); the Absolare electronics rendered the instrument as a large wooden body resonating in three-dimensional space rather than as a cardboard cutout.

The overall character of these electronics is gentle, intimate, and emotional, leading to heightened musical expressiveness. It's the kind of presentation that reveals its beauty not in a quick demo, but during a long session late at night when you find yourself deeply immersed in a voyage of musical discovery. These electronics reproduce musical detail in a way that is subtle rather than overt, yet paradoxically they manage to convey more such information—the mechanism by which an instrument makes sound, the nuances of phrasing, subtleties of dynamic expression, and the interplay between musicians. I had many wonderful musical epiphanies, even with familiar recordings. On the track "Tin Tin Deo" from *Art Pepper Meets the Rhythm Section* [Analogue Productions LP] I had never quite appreciated the genius of Red Garland's syncopated comping behind Pepper's melodic playing until I heard this record through the Absolare. These electronics lay bare layers upon layers of musical expression, creating an intense sense of involvement. In fact, these electronics redefined for me the idea that an audio presentation can be highly detailed musically without sounding highly detailed sonically. It doesn't take exaggerated leading-edge transients, brightness, or etch to convey real musical

detail. Those sonic qualities get in the way of communicating the kind of musical expression I'm talking about. The Absolare electronics speak more to the heart than to the ear.

Part of this ability to reveal musical expression is due to these electronics' ability to separate instrumental lines rather than congeal them. But part is also owed to the Absolare's special ability to convey rhythms and nuances of dynamic expression, not in the macro sense of slam, but rather in the rhythmic intricacies of great drummers like Jack DeJohnette, Joe Morello, or Lenny White. On the recent double-CD release *Forever* (much of it acoustic trio work with Chick Corea, Stanley Clark, and Lenny White), White's characteristic behind-the-beat style is heightened and more musically "intelligible."

The Absolare's treble is extremely clean, delicate, and just a little on the soft side. It's not as extended, resolved, or open as the Constellation Centaur monoblocks, for example (the Constellation's strong suit), but the Absolare's treble has a certain beauty all its own. The Absolare electronics don't impose an electronic sheen over the treble, allowing them to reproduce the inner detail of shimmering cymbals with lifelike realism. String tone is beyond gorgeous; to hear massed violins with no trace of artificial edge is revelatory. The Absolare electronics don't achieve this smoothness and ease via a syrupy, overly romantic, or colored rendering. The magic is in presenting high frequencies as they sound in life—without a metallic or synthetic edge.

The Lamm ML2.2 is similarly clean and beautiful in the treble, but with just a bit more top-octave air and openness than the Absolare.

As you might expect from a minimalist, pure single-ended-triode signal path, the Absolare's midrange is glorious in timbre, tone color, liquidity, and freedom from grain. It's not just the timbral qualities that make these electronics special, but also the startling sense of directness through the midband. It's as though "something" has been removed between you and the music, laying bare both the sound itself and the musical meaning behind that sound. As wonderful as some solid-state electronics are, they just don't have the visceral immediacy that makes the music seem as though it is being contemporaneously created. Every audiophile should experience this level of midrange transparency and directness at least once.

In the ability to portray a large sense of space, of instruments within that space and the distance between them, and the overall impression of hearing a lifelike three-dimensional rendering, the Absolare electronics are exceptional—perhaps the best I've heard. The soundstage is beautifully resolved, with a tremendous sense of bloom and space between instrumental images. Depth is also outstanding, although I didn't quite hear the same degree of top-octave openness and extension that I hear with some other electronics. Significantly, the Absolare's soundstage isn't big and bloomy on all recordings, but rather changes dramatically

among recordings.

**Conclusion**

The Absolare Passion preamplifier and Passion 845 single-ended-triode amplifiers are not just superb examples of their genre; they also bring the manifold virtues of single-ended-triode amplification to a wider range of loudspeakers. Those virtues include a directness of expression, immediacy, and musical involvement that are world-class. They not only excel within the niche of a tubed preamplifier and SET power amplifier, but transcend that niche by delivering plenty of output power and outstanding dynamics and bass control. Consequently, they are much more practical in the real world than most SETs.

Their ultra-minimalist orientation will appeal to some listeners more than others. The features and facilities are limited, but for many the simplicity of operation and purity of the signal will outweigh these shortcomings. There will be no questions, however, about their extraordinary build-quality, exotic parts, and the lavishly luxurious feel conferred by their leather-clad chassis. They exude a completely different aesthetic that you'll either relate to or not.

The aptly named Absolare Passion preamplifier and Passion 845 single-ended-triode amplifiers may be a little hard to find, but are worth searching for. They are truly boutique products in the best sense of those words. **tas**

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