











## Power Amplifier Viva Audio Solista

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### A SEPARATE REALITY

**THE FAMOUS BOOK BY CARLOS CASTANEDA ON HIS SECOND APPRENTICESHIP WITH THE MEXICAN SHAMAN JUAN MATUS IS MAINLY ABOUT HOW DON JUAN TAUGHT HIM TO SEE. CASTANEDA HAD TO GO WELL BEYOND THE LIMITS OF HIS HITHERTO VALID LEARNT UNDERSTANDING OF REALITY. IT WAS THE SAME FOR ME AS I SET ABOUT FAMILIARISING MYSELF WITH THE VIVA AUDIO SOLISTA.**

There was a time when I believed myself to be a general connoisseur of the music scene, I went to loads of concerts, bought stacks of vinyl records and read innumerable magazines. Then CD hit the market, and finally our world view was revolutionized by the Internet. Some 20 years later I was sat in the “Süd-stadt” bar in Munich, freshly-pulled beer and a currywurst and fries in front of me, flicking through the “Intro” music mag. The open air concert season was almost upon us and I wondered whether perhaps I ought to check out a festival or two. Straight up: apart from a couple of headline acts, I had never heard of 90% of the bands. For a while that really frustrated me. But then I realized it was really exciting – so much new stuff to discover, just like the music itself. Just as I began to think that everything





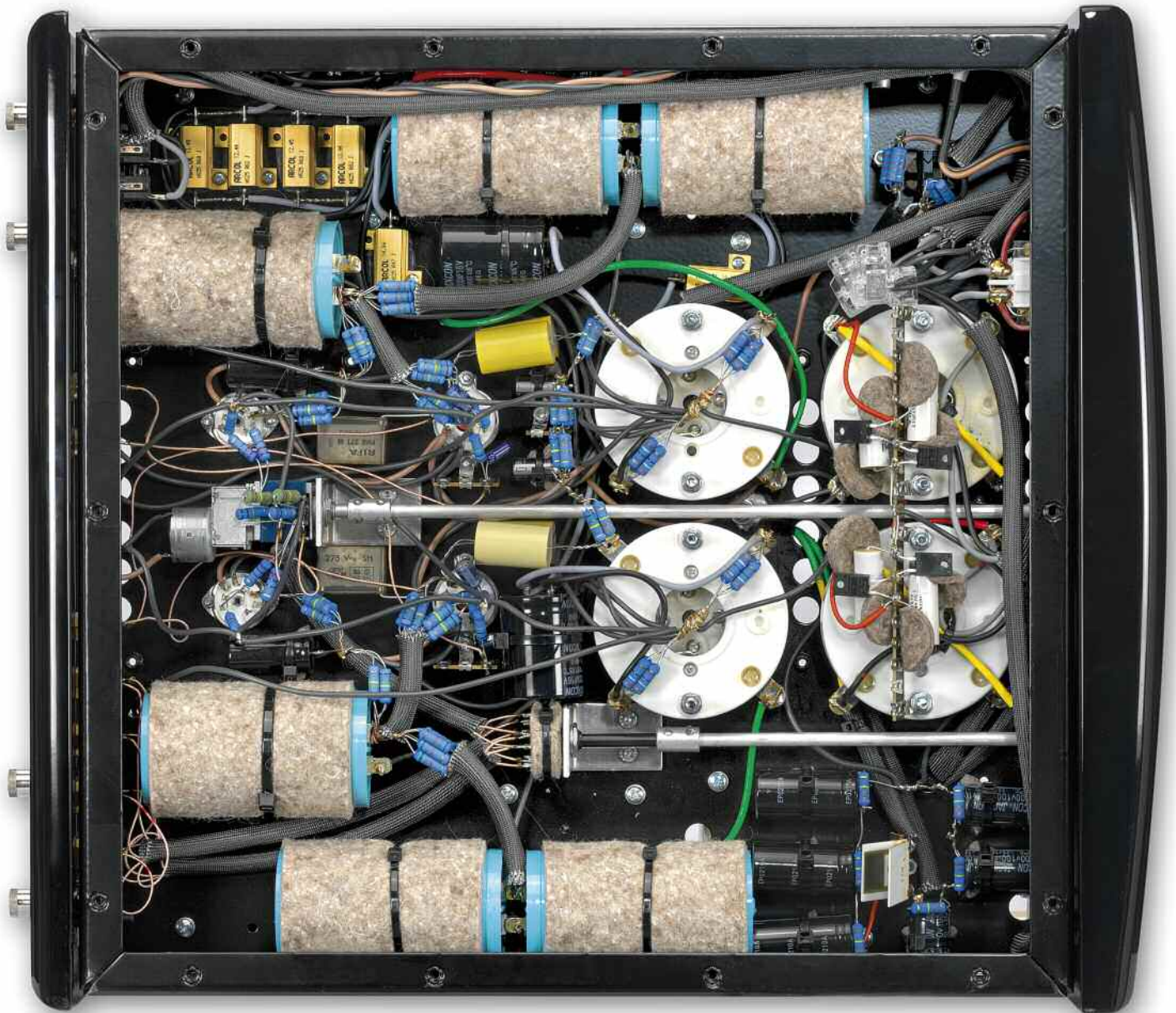
had already been composed, sung or played, a new band entered the programme who could extract something new, unmistakable, unique from the seemingly same old formula. And at the same time, as soon as you heard them, you had the feeling they'd actually always been there.

Could there be, alongside my own reality, a second, a third, and who knows how many other realities? Very likely. However the fact that the extravagantly designed and unusually built Solista integrated valve amp from Viva Audio triggers such thoughts in me is rather unusual. Particularly as until recently I'd never even heard of the company, despite them having been in existence for almost 20 years. The fact that Viva Audio is only now becoming

known to the German-speaking public we may deem an audiophile sin of omission and have the distributors, Ibex Audio, to thank for this late premiere. Internationally it's a completely different story. As far back as 1998, the (sadly now late) Harry Pearson of "The Absolute Sound" gave the Viva Aurora monoblocs his highest rating and wrote "The least colored, speaker to speaker, of the single-ended amplifiers I've heard".

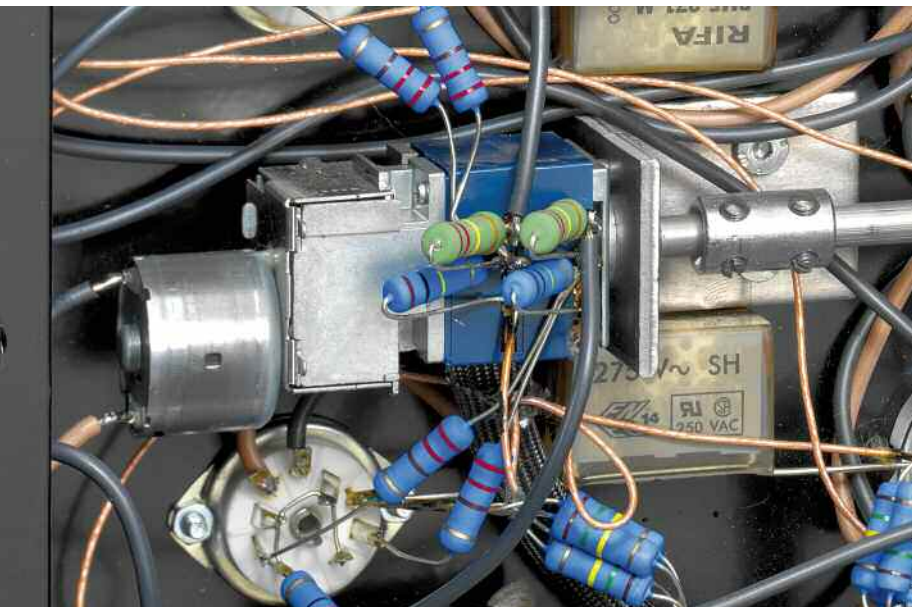


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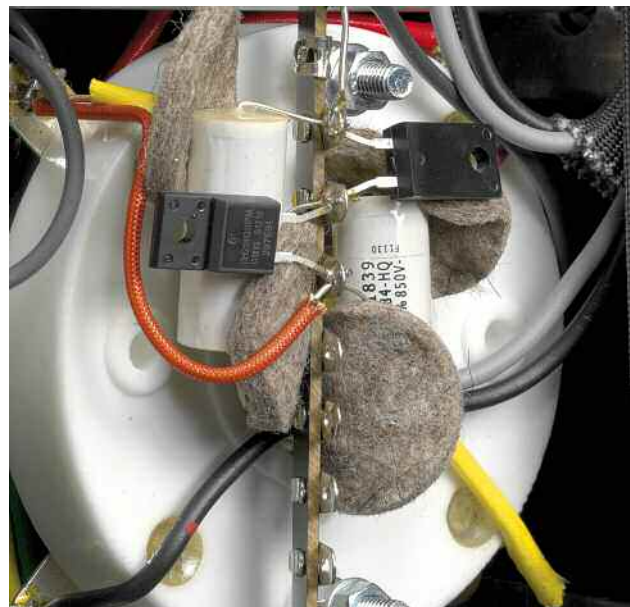
Have you ever seen such a layout before? I certainly haven't. Felt damped electrolytics and smaller capacitors, unexciting but very carefully chosen combinations of components. This, combined with the factory's own transformers, gives a mix that makes an uncoloured highly involving sound possible





Motor-driven Alps potentiometers, copper Litz cable, Teflon-insulated signal cables, decent resistors. Again – it's all in the mix

Viva Audio is a manufacturing business from the Vicenza region; an area of northern Italy so richly studded with great audio firms: high end workshops such as Sonus Faber, Mastersound and Diapason are to be found here. Proprietor and Chief Designer Amedeo Schembri and his brother Giampetro founded Viva Audio in 1996 out of a love of music – and we'll soon see how this apparent cliché really does apply here. Like so many tinkers, Amedeo began building amplifiers and speakers in his teens using any bits and bobs he could lay his hands on, alongside working in recording studios. At 26 years of age, he first kitted out a sound studio with components he had developed himself. He spent much time in the studios and there he learnt precisely how instruments – particularly unamplified ones – actually sound, which had a profound influence on the tonal tuning of his equipment. For Amedeo the decision to go this pragmatic, non-academic way was quite deliberate, in order to protect his creativity from being constrained by traditional philosophy. He may surround himself with engineers, but ultimately it is he who undertakes the final tonal adjustment of his apparatus. To refine

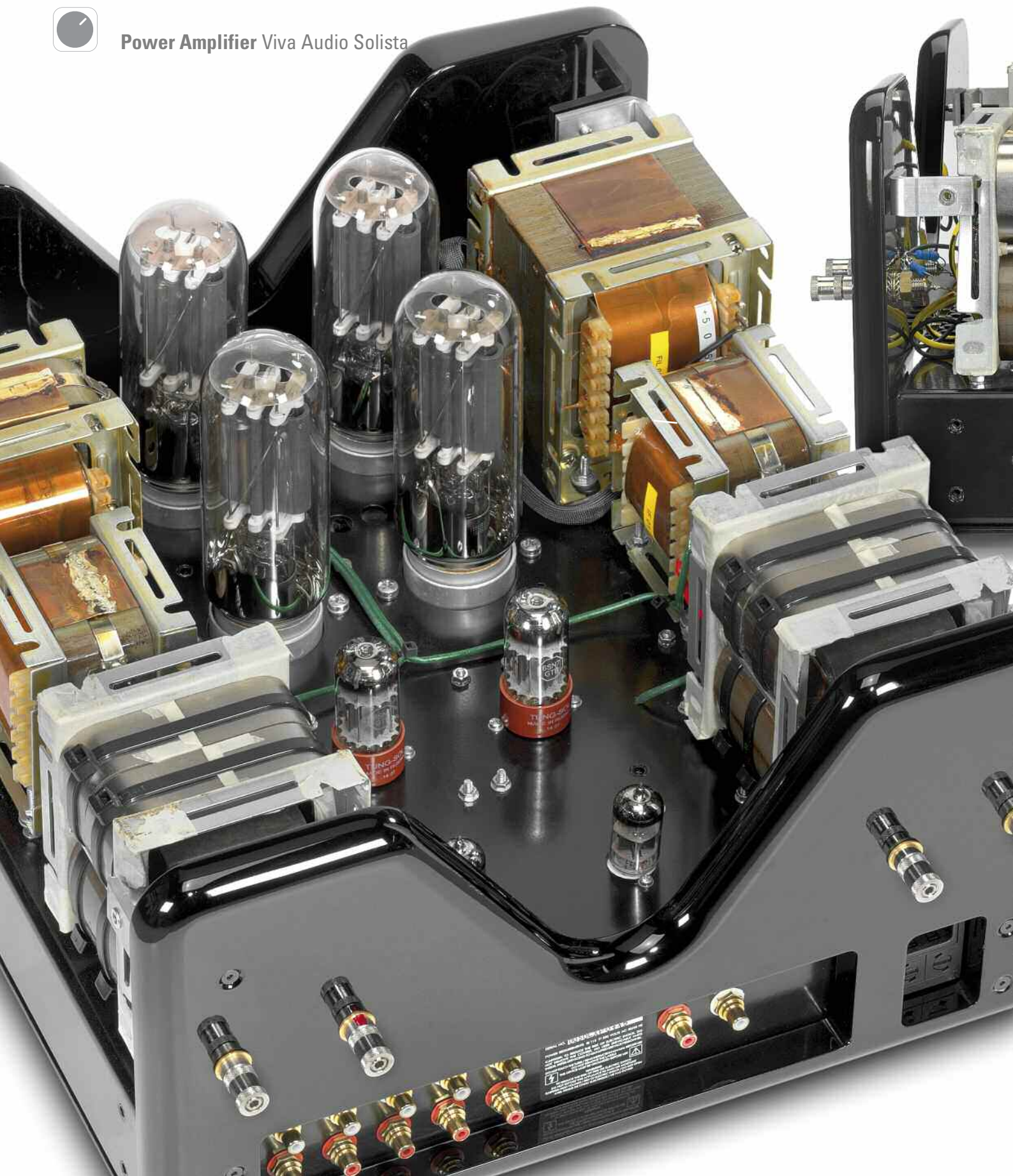


Felt-damped capacitors and specially chosen transistors support the second 845 in its duties as rectifier

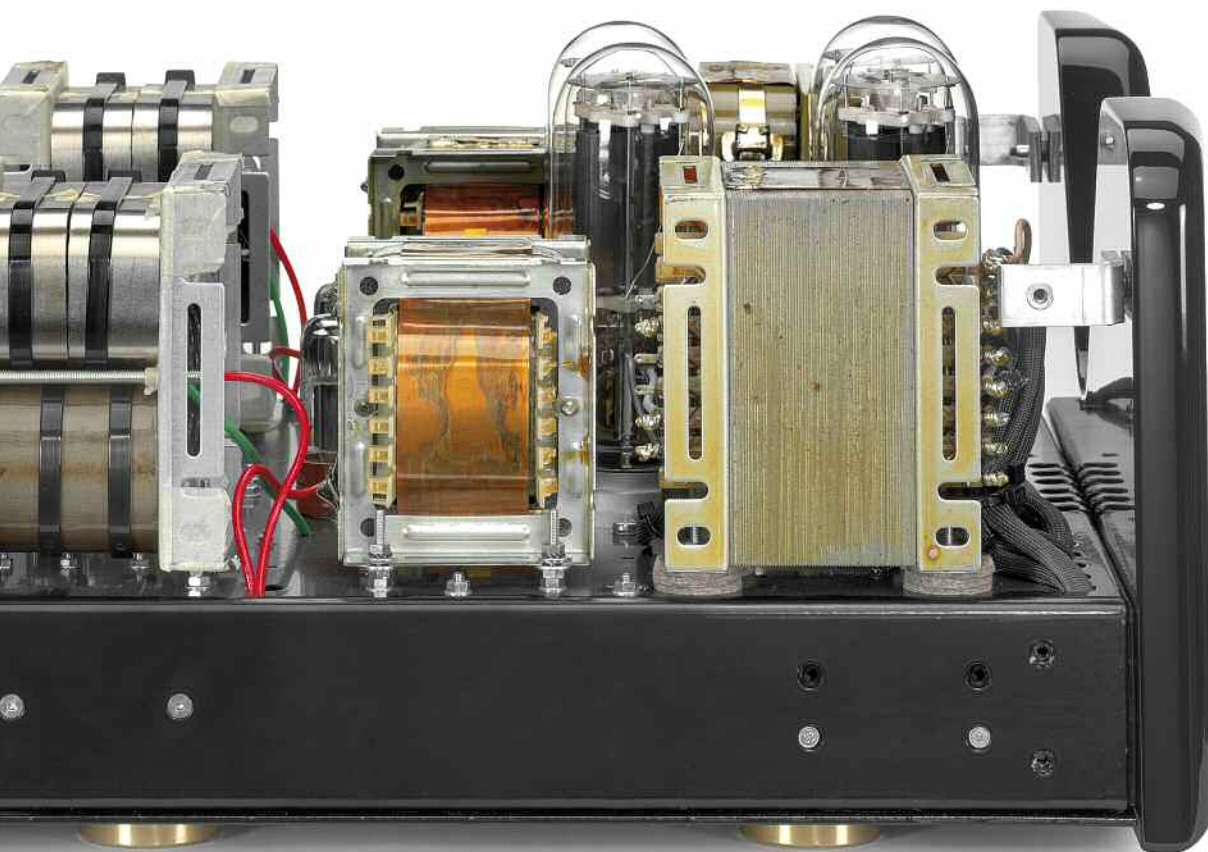
the technically sophisticated construction and elegant externals, the Schembris always take on board input from outside, including endless listening sessions and, naturally, concerts. But, as Amedeo is quoted on the beautifully designed and informative website, “Every Viva employee has to be aware of this. It is like making good wine, good whiskey, good food. The last touch is personal. More than just making a good product.” In my desire to fully understand the Solista, I conducted a very interesting conversation with Amedeo, and pressed him for details on circuitry, components and concrete decisions in the development process of the Solista. But in vain. Like an interrogation of a hyperintelligent



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suspect, he continually evaded me and gave only vague, nebulous, general responses. Amedeo is an incredibly friendly and congenial fellow, evident even before you meet him in person.

But he has his principles and will not be drawn on technical details. Firstly, because he doesn't want the competition to copy his designs, and secondly, because he wishes his products to be seen as musical facilitators rather than technical objects. As a result all I can do is state the obvious: he exclusively uses point-to-point wiring, which is absolutely maxed out, and may explain the massive energy that the Solista possesses. All his amplifiers operate in Class A with strictly no negative feedback. The transformers are all made by a Viva in-house specialist; he gives nothing away regarding core material or winding gauge but sound-improving custom solutions are guaranteed. Schembri really does appear to design his circuits through endless rounds of experiments, constantly searching for the best sound (or rather "non-sound") as will become evident. And anyone who deems a hardwired Class A zero negative feedback design to be commonplace is unde-

restimating the many challenges this apparently simple technology presents, especially when you consider the energy, the heat, the voltages and of course the vibrations that an amp like this produces. But there is no dogma surrounding valves or circuit design. If Schembri finds what he believes is a better method of amplification, (in other words more musical), he will adopt it.

Incidentally, with Viva even the apparently obvious can be deceptive: 2 x 845 triodes per channel normally means either a push-pull or parallel single-ended configuration. You'd think so, but you'd be wrong! The second 845 is used as a rectifier! To my





The three valves look a little bit like the Town Musicians of Bremen: 845, 6SN7 and 6C45Pi  
harmonious side-by-side and, more importantly, with each other

knowledge no other commercial supplier does this – if you ignore Western Electric, where a 211 served as rectifier for their 845-based cinema amplifiers simply because that is all that was available at the time. Schembri says he struggled to find a rectifier valve that could cope with the high current and voltage that the 845 demands. After several experiments and with the help of various transistors a power supply was created that sounded how he imagined it ought to. How exactly...? Yep, you got it... no comment. For the amplification, he needed a triode that would deliver high performance in a single ended configuration. In the abovementioned technical environment, the 845 proved to be the most suitable candidate. The classic 6SN7 serves as the driver valve; in the larger Aurora monos a 211 fulfills this role. The preamplification stage is not totally passive like in so many amps of

this type, but rather active, with a 6C45Pi in each channel, a small Russian high performance triode, equivalent to the legendary WE 437. Then there's a buffered direct input, via which the Solista can be used purely as a power amplifier.

When you look inside the amplifier, you are presented with an unusual view (to put it mildly!) Components, directly connected to each other, are damped, calmed, tuned with pieces of felt in a fashion that only the maker could understand. During the tuning, which is carried out by highly accomplished listeners and friends whose judgements are much valued by the Schembris, the utmost attention is paid to every small change in sound caused by changes in size, thickness and position of the material. But steady – these gentlemen might be perfectionists, but are anything but component fetishists. In other words, the audiophile component per se is of no interest. In their world there is no such thing as the best component, only a harmonious synergy of carefully chosen components optimally fulfilling their roles in the right places. And those components could perfectly well be off-the-peg. Criteria? The ears. Every decision for or against a particular solution is based around achieving the end result, which as we mentioned, is to please customers who are interested in the art form of music and not in technical fetishes. Which, on the other hand, given the flamboyant exterior of the amplifier, isn't so simple. I'm reminded of a quote by Marcello Mastroianni – “how can we expect

straightness from a woman, when her entire being is a curve?” If you compare the Solista with, say, Sophia Loren, then to some extent is it Loren 2.0, who carries out her duties with the greatest precision, while maintaining the same sex appeal: you can no more ignore the design of the Solista than you could tear your eyes away from Loren’s plunging neckline. Nor should you. This amplifier is far from being all show and no go.

Contradictions wherever you look – but not wherever you listen. The design was developed in association with the architect Joelle De Jaegher. Solid aluminium with automotive lacquers, of outstanding build quality. At first, the Schembris chose the paint purely on aesthetic grounds, but then they noticed a positive effect on the sound, resulting from the interaction between the pre-treated aluminium and the method and thickness of the paint layer. Amedeo freely admits that this was serendipity. Perhaps this is evidence of their real recipe for success – complete openness to ideas and influences coupled with unflinching clarity in their decisions which are purely sound-oriented.

So how does it sound, you ask? Good question. Next question! Why? Because this amplifier has no specific sound, no acoustic signature. It definitely doesn’t sound like a typical valve amp or a typical solid state amp. That might sound disappointing if you were expecting yet more superlatives, but far from it. At 22 Watts

it isn’t particularly powerful. But measured performance is one thing, energy is another, and this is very noticeable in the Solista’s monstrous dynamic capabilities. With my Tobian Monitor 10s (98dB/W/m efficiency) and the Silbatone DA-105 DAC it was almost overkill in my listening room. So I schlepped the Solista into the second, larger listening room, hooked it up to the larger Tobian 12s and the corresponding DAC. What can I say? This amplifier possesses such overwhelming power, an almost wiry energy, that I was reminded of the almost supernatural power that the exceptional YG Acoustics Carmel 2 loudspeaker can unleash.

Out of the huge pile of music that I’ve listened to with the Solista, for this article I have chosen pieces that particularly mean a lot to me, and the live recordings, as this is the yardstick for the Schembris. Amongst these are the classics by Creedence Clearwater Revival on Chronicle (Fantasy CCR-2, LP, USA 1976). I have never heard this music sound so direct, literally live-sounding. John Fogerty with his gruff, raw voice appears to me like a white version of the composer of I Put a Spell on You, Screamin’ Jay Hawkins. I’m rediscovering the thrilling drama-turgy and multidimensional quality of the piece anew. The Solista shows tremendous resolution without a trace of dissection. Spatial information and the interwoven juxtaposition of guitar, bass and percussion on Suzie Q leave me speechless, because it’s almost as if I’m hearing this totally personal primal music for the very first time. It’s as if another, new reality is emerging be-

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### **Test system** (image hifi listening room)

**CD Player:** Accuphase DP-720 **Loudspeakers:** Magnepan MG 1.7i **Speaker cable:** Tellurium Q Black **Interconnects:** Silent Wire AC32 Mk2 **Mains cable:** Silent Wire AC16 Mk2 **Tuning:** fastaudio, Acoustic System, Audiophile Schumann Resonance Generator

### **Test system** (author’s listening room)

**Turntable:** Garrard L Art du son 401 TR **Tonearm:** Schick 12” **Cartridge:** Decca Super Gold with Paratrace stylus and ebony body, Decca Mono, Grace F-8c, ZYX R100 Yatra H **CD Transport:** Philius CDM 4/19 modified **DAC:** Tobian DAC, Silbatone DA-105 **Integrated amplifier:** Tobian VR40 **Preamplifier:** Croft Micro 25 “R” **Power amplifier:** Eastern Electric MiniMax, Quad 303 **Loudspeakers:** Tobian Monitor 10, Tobian Monitor 12, Suesskind Audio Puls **Cables:** Speaker cable: Bel-den 9497, Interconnects: Audio Consulting, Jupiter, Funk Tonstudioteknik **Mains:** Kreder Audio Tuning **Tuning:** bFly-audio, Kryna, Acoustic Revive

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fore my ears. Similarly with the magnificent new release Big Bands Live – Duke Ellington Orchestra – Liederhalle Stuttgart March 6, 1967 (JAZZ-HAUS/SWR Music, 101722, 2013, LP). “Knob Hill” starts with a piano trio and once again showcases the minimalist funky groove of the wonderful pianist Duke Ellington. After a while this is overlaid with ever increasing accents of wind instruments until finally Paul Gonsalves stands up – believe me, he really does stand up – and plays his rich, passionate tenor sax solo. In between, Ellington suddenly claps his hands, seemingly from nowhere, and every time I flinch. Another example? My favourite pianist,

Hampton Hawes, is the last to appear. He became famous with the All Night Sessions of 1956. These quartet recordings were made in one take, live in the studio, which for the first time captured the whole genius of the musicians and the spontaneity of West Coast Jazz. Hawes extended his trio with the inclusion of the guitarist Jim Hall, which allowed him greater rhythmical freedom. This can be clearly heard on, for example Will You Still Be Mine from Volume 2 (Contemporary Records, S 7546/LKS 236, ca. 1970, USA, LP). How subtle and clearly articulate the piano and guitar sound, how intimate, direct and spirited, how the keyboard swings in and out, and how the guitar body resonates, how cleanly the dynamic leaps unfold – can that really be true? Did I really just hear that?

So what makes the Solista so special? Is it the design? Could it be the technical solutions? The tuning perhaps? Naturally there’s no such simple answer. It’s a quality that transcends all the above, and actually makes you forget the striking appearance of the object itself. It’s what Amedeo Schembri had in mind when he connected a particular valve in a particular circuit, how he created the power supply and its housing, how the components were chosen, and how he tuned and harmonized it all together. The Solista really does appear not to stamp its mark on the music, it simply waves it through. I actually fail to understand how such a cleverly constructed bit of kit appears to act like the oft-mentioned “wire with gain”: how difficult is it really, to develop an amplifier, that has the ability to pull back so much of that which is lost between the actual musical event and its reproduction, that a believable musical reality is created, which hardly differs from the original? The Solista does exactly that. □



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### Viva Audio Solista Integrated Amplifier

**Functional principle:** Integrated valve amplifier **Output performance:** 22 W per channel (8 Ohm) **Inputs:** 4 x Line inputs, 1 direct input **Valve complement:** 2 x 6C45Pi; 2 x 6SN7GT; 4 x 845 **Special features:** Hand-wound transformers, point-to-point wiring **Finish:** Black, blue metallic, other colours available on request **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 43/25/52 cm **Weight:** 35 kg **Guarantee period:** 2 years **Price:** €15.990

**Contact:** [www.ibex-audio.de](http://www.ibex-audio.de), [www.vivaaudio.com](http://www.vivaaudio.com)

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