

# Mystère ia21 Integrated Amplifier

## Preface

I'm not fond of prose. Too many words, proletarian overdose of tasteless details and some kind of narcissism, or maybe euphoria, which blinds the writer to believe the reader is truly interested with the endless struggles of his dreary characters. Give me poetry. Use few words to achieve what a thick novel could never. I therefore like integrated amplifiers. A matter of minimalism, not space and means.

Obviously, beyond the "clean" look of an audio system based on an integrated design, this type of amplifier, if well designed, should sound more balanced, harmonic, natural and musical than audio 'separates'. This is due to the short signal path and optimal synergy between components, as well as the fact that interconnects are not required. The big problem is that most of these amplifiers are designed for "beginners" or for someone who is reluctant to invest much on amplification. Hence their design and build. The greatest challenge for designers, as I see it, is to design a decent integrated amplifier that consists of a preamplifier with two mono blocks in the same chassis. Probably this is what Mr. Hiroyasu Kondo had in mind when building his masterpiece, Kondo Ungaku, a valve integrated amplifier with 27 watt per channel and price tag of – no, no mistake - \$80,000!

In this review I will focus on an amplifier which, like the Ungaku, is integrated and valve based, but with a price tag of only 2,500 Euro. At this price, you should be able to read this review with a less terrified and more relaxed state of mind!

Mystère is a daughter company of Durob Audio, who is also responsible for the successful PrimaLuna valve amplifiers. Designed in the Netherlands by Durob's engineers, it is manufactured in China (like many other western high end companies) under the firm and strict control of Durob Audio's Herman van den Dungen.

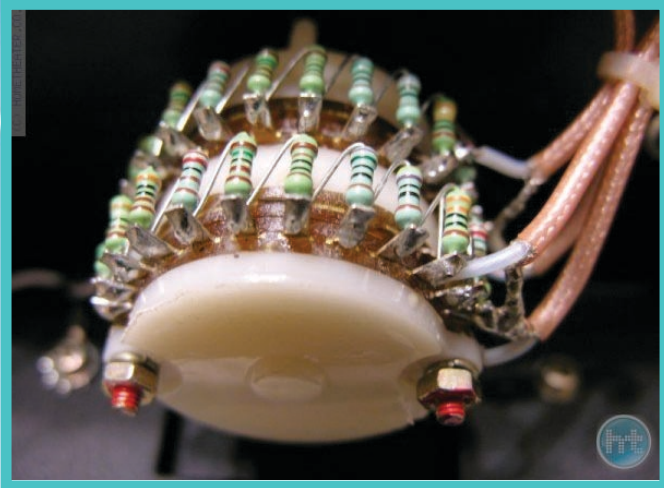
The Mystère product line currently has two integrated amplifiers and the ia21 is the more powerful of the two, producing 50 watts per channel in pentode mode.



Mystère ia21 with EL34 tubes

The first thing I noticed when pulling this amp out of its double packaging is its weight - 27 Kg - which reminded me of my increasing age and general decline of physical fitness! After placing the amp on the right shelf (separate from the audio rack of course), I stood back and uttered a loud "pssssss" in admiration, followed by a "Wow"! Yes, this is one of the most beautiful amps I have ever seen and no photo can properly convey this beauty. It is rare to find this level of paint and finish in any product. A few days after it arrived, two of my friends came over for a visit. These 'plastic art lovers' know as much about audio as I do about the screen in front of me (and by that I mean 'not very much!') They entered the room and approached the amplifier with trepidation. "Pssssss" they uttered! After a second and with their eyes fixed on the amplifier, they said: "lovely composition", "who created it?" and "what is it, actually?" Since that time the repertoire of reactions has been quite varied but were all essentially saying the same thing. Every visitor admires the beauty and precious look of the 'black delight'. I assume size also contributes to this: it is a big amplifier (43 x 20 x 41.5 cm) but it is not monstrous. Removing the covers and examining the insides only reinforces this impression: superb build quality in all respects. The high quality transformers – the heart and soul of any valve amplifier – all have good specifications (4Hz – 80 KHz), smart point-to-point circuit with high quality parts are used throughout. The amplifier also features

a handmade stepped attenuator volume control with 24 steps. This is a component that is to be found only in very expensive preamps and integrated amplifiers. All this hardware is supported on three aluminium cones, which are firmly fixed to the amplifier's base. I found it almost as effective as BDR cones – in fact, due to the overall stability, I preferred the original cones to the BDR ones!



On the front panel there are only two knobs: to the right is the stepped attenuator volume control, with its characteristic “click” stops, rather than a smooth rotation. The left knob is the input selector. It turns easy, which makes me think of ‘power steering’! Overall, the knobs convey a luxury feel. In the centre of the thick and well designed front panel is a small hole housing a blue LED as the power indicator. On the back of the unit there are four pairs of high quality RCA input sockets, 4/8 ohm speaker terminations and the IEC mains socket. There is enough space to accommodate thick wires without any risk of them touching each other.

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A look from behind – notice the high quality connectors

To the right of the unit, near the front, there is the power switch. To the left there is a “magic” switch to select the output tube type. I will explain the term “magic” later, but first I would like to emphasize that I’m a keen supporter of valve amplification. I believe that, in spite of some problems involved with tube amplification, this is the only way to produce a convincing natural sound, not at all mechanical, with a rich texture. For me, this sound is the basis for every music system. In the Mystère ia21, there are four KT88 output tubes and four 6SN7 driver tubes (I presume that this is a Shuguang product and therefore it seems reasonable to compare a range of modern tubes). I like the 6SN7 sound. This is one type of tube that does not require you to consider using expensive NOS tubes to obtain a full and rich sound (this is not the case with, for example, 12AX7 and 12AU7 tubes). Now back to the “magic” switch. This is a switch to select the optimal bias for two tube families: KT88 (and its relatives 6550 and KT90) and EL34 (and the other members of its family: 6L6, KT77, KT66, CA76 etc.). This means you can have one amplifier and enjoy two worlds of sound: the KT88 family (better bass, highs and dynamics) and EL34 family (richer mid, more intimate and

better palpability). After all, a little variety doesn’t hurt, does it? (I used the excellent Tube Depot Black Sable EL34 tubes for most of the tests).

The amplifier is supplied with a massive black cover for the tubes, but it is better to take it off while playing to prevent overheating.

With regard to heating: those who seek a valve amplifier to heat their house in the winter time should look elsewhere! In any case, as we do not live at the North Pole, I assume you would be quite happy to find the amplifier is only just warm after running for 24 hours. This will therefore increase the life of the amplifier components.

Another important detail – the amplifier is very silent and generates no internal noise. When I place my ear close to my very sensitive tweeters, all I can hear is a very faint hiss. This is certainly not the case with the other amplifiers I have tried (see following) – they all produce a noticeable hiss, even at a normal listening distance from the tweeters.

The test lasted for two months with mainly “classical” music, mostly baroque. Also some jazz (50s and 60s) and South American folk music. The listening room is an asymmetrical domestic living room of about 22 square metres in area, loaded with furniture and books. The ceiling is 260 cm high.

## How does it sound?

**Imagine a world with only one object. How can we define this object if we don't have any reference? It's not easy, is it? The same goes for this amplifier listening tests. To the question “how does it sound?” we have to add “compared to what?” The answer is:**

1. Compared to the recorded event (but since we were not actually there, it has to be compared to live music in general)
2. Compared to other amplifiers, both cheaper and more expensive, but preferably within the same price range.

### *Well, we'll start with Point 1.*

Since an audio system arbitrates between the real event and our ears, then by its nature – an arbitrator - it can't deliver the real thing. Although this is simple and obvious to us all, so what are we actually after? The further the illusion is from reality, the more we need to use our imagination. If this is the case, then audiophilia is characterized by losing imagination. Why is this so? The answer is that the less we use our imagination, the more we need a better illusion. In other words, we need a better sophisticated system in order to obtain the emotional and intellectual satisfaction that we used to get out of our old compact integrated systems, in the days when our imagination flourished. Does it have anything to do with the fact that the audiophilia bug mostly starts at the end of the patient's 20s or early 30s? Probably!

Back to business. It seems the Mystère ia21 is an amplifier for the audiophile as he starts his journey into experiencing the most sophisticated equipment. I should probably explain myself, but before I do, I must mention that in order for the amplifier to sound its best, I run it for at least 100 hours before a first serious listen (I also found a slight improvement within the next 250-300 hours, after which the amplifier had stabilized). After this period, the 'illusion' this amplifier supplies in many areas certainly does not challenge one's 'imagination'. There is a sense that things happen right here in the room where there is a sheer delight of a mostly spine-tingling and even scary nature! You feel like asking “Who opened the door?” “Who has just entered the room?” “Mother! - Help!” I guess the main component responsible for this scary transparency is the stepped attenuator where the resistors allow the signal to flow without it becoming castrated. Another wonderful trait is the excellent synergy between frequencies, where the area between mid-high and mid-bass is most persuasive in its naturalness. The ability of this amplifier to create a deep, wide, high, organized, precise and airy soundstage is truly exceptional. These qualities come to phenomenal realization in the Carl Orf 'Carmina Burana' recording (Eugen Jochum, DG LP). This lovely work, which combines a big orchestra, a choir and three soloists, incessantly moves from piano pianissimo to forte fortissimo, from juicy student songs to angelic singing or mighty blows on the tympani. The amplifier transfers it all with elegant control and appropriate rhythm, without even 'panting' but also without falling into coma! Yes, this amplifier reminds me of a true leader: it doesn't require much noise and effort to realize what he wants to achieve and all he wants to achieve. And it does it with a calm dignity, digging into every detail without shouting about it and with a pleasant and fine tone.



Testing system

So, how does it sound compared to other amplifiers? Today, the Israeli market offers an impressive variety of integrated valve amplification in (more or less) the same price range and power of the reviewed amplifier (30 to 50 watt). Most of those I listened to and checked before include Unison Research S6, Cary SLI 80, Audio Research VS155, Manley Stingray and PrimaLuna Dialogue Two. Well, I'll say it simply: the musical qualities of the Mystère ia21, along with versatility (KT88 or EL34), beauty and fantastic finish, easily place it in a much higher price bracket than these other amplifiers, some of which are actually priced higher than the ia21!

In direct comparison, my previous amplifier, PrimaLuna ProLogue Two, an integrated amplifier better than any other amplifier in its price range (1650 euro), including pricier amplifiers like the Pathos Classic One Mk II, was inferior to the ia21 in every aspect: mainly in sound quality, which was an upgrade from 'butler' status to 'Duke'. The soundstage was thickened, cleaned and purified – altogether more airy and effortless.

The Cary SLI-80, a veteran amplifier, which came over to my listening room for a short time, departed deeply offended and running for its life! One could understand it - although it produces 80 watt in ultra linear mode, it seemed it got its knees-knocking in front of the Mystère ia21 powerful 50 watts! In comparison, the Cary sounded soft, without frequency extension, without details, without drama and with a somewhat glassy sound and lack of tonal richness.

The Unison Research S6 sounded more interesting and complicated than the Cary, but compare to the Mystère ia21 it sounded dim, thin, with less big and high soundstage and with – how should I put it – a cheaper sound! But it seems to me these comparisons are not fair; somehow, the Mystère ia21 price tag is a mistake. A blessed mistake for us - the consumers. A similar amplifier manufactured to exactly the same level in Europe or the US (say in Audio Research facilities, assuming they could reach this level of finish) would not have been sold one cent less than \$6,000 - and this is a conservative estimate!

Another thing - in many systems I have listened to, the silent sections (such as in orchestral works) are indeed silent, but it is an artificial electronic silence where you should at least be able to hear the conductor's chair screeching on the floor or the turning of a score page. With the Mystère ia21, the silence becomes alive. You can hear the concert hall, the event, the atmosphere, including all those tiny movements and it all adds up to an experience close to that of a live musical event. A wonderful example is the Rodrigo's joyful harp concert with Nicanor Zabaleta playing the harp, with Ernst Marzendorfer conducting (on a DG vinyl). I have no



doubt that everybody - the orchestra, the conductor, the harpist, the sound engineers, the producers and the tea boy, arrived to this session in a splendid mood and with great enthusiasm - you can hear all this not only through the playing, but also in the concert hall ambience and in the almost palpable atmosphere.

## A few words about power

A well known issue, but not usually implemented in music systems, is good matching between amplifier power and speaker efficiency. When the amplifier is not powerful enough to drive the speakers, it works too hard and sounds screeching or choked and clipping. Ironically, inexperienced ears will interpret this clipping incorrectly as the reverse problem of "too strong an amplifier for the speakers", or as if the problem is somewhere else in the system. At this point, there usually ensues a witch-hunt of wild purchases and endless frustrations in a futile attempt to stop the right hand from bleeding by bandaging the left hand! What actually happens is that the speakers "scream" or simply sound "closed-in". When the amplifier controls the speakers well – the speakers "disappear" and the sound stage becomes three dimensional, the sounds deepen and everything sounds more natural, precise and relaxed with tight basses and clear highs (for a decent discussion of this issue go to Musical Fidelity website, where it is claimed that speakers with 87db efficiency require a 500 watt amplifier at least in order to sound precise and realistic!)

As previously said, the matter above is well known but not truly implemented. In almost every system I have listened to, the amplification was too weak for the speakers. Nowadays, modern speakers are not too efficient and the powerful amplifiers they require are not a good recipe for natural sound and exceptional musicality.



The reason I delve into this is that when I read a review, the first two questions I ask are:

- What kind of music does the reviewer listen to?
- How well do the amplifier and speakers match in his system?

One reviewer who wrote about the ia21 tested it with 88db full range speakers. He can't have been serious! Undoubtedly the amplifier can move stiff electrostatic speakers, but can it make them 'disappear'? Obviously not! In order to delve deep into testing the abilities of a 50 watt amplifier, even fitted with big and fine transformers like the ia21, one

has to plug it to suitable speakers (according to Musical Fidelity efficiency table they should have a sensitivity of at least 93db). The buyer should also follow this rule, either with this or any other amplifier of similar power. Having said all that, I played the amplifier for a short while with some Duevel Planets speakers that have an 85db efficiency. The big surprise was (and I don't know if it was because they are small or because I am just not an expert with numbers) the speakers simply 'disappeared'. Only the God of decibels knows why!

### **The relation between Ohms and Fixation**

I once read about one big company's president who had an original method to examine final candidates for the senior positions in his organisation. He used to invite the candidate for a private conversation in a restaurant which served 'unconventional' courses for the meal! During the meal and while the candidate was clearly speaking to impress the president, he formed his opinion based on something completely different - did the candidate salt his dish before or after tasting it? In the president opinion, if the candidate salted his dish before tasting it, he concluded that the candidate has rigid views and lacks curiosity; if he salted after tasting – then the opposite was true.

Indeed, a salty anecdote! But what does it have to do with ohms? Lots of tube amplifier owners automatically match the speakers impedance to that of the amplifier (there is no need to do this with solid state amps). For example, if the stated speakers' impedance is 8 ohm, they will automatically connect the speakers to the amplifier's 8 ohm outputs - end of story. Sometimes luck is on their side and sometimes they have no idea what they're missing. I have to include myself in this! My efficient (97db) speakers' impedance does not fall below 10 ohm and so, when I first received my amplifier, I automatically plugged the speaker cables into the 8 ohm outputs. Obvious, isn't it? Indeed, for two months I auditioned the amplifier connected in this way and then wrote this review. A few days later, I remembered that I hadn't mentioned how it sounded on the 4 ohm outputs. No wonder - I had not checked! I then switched the speaker cables from 8 to 4 ohm, and Gentlemen, everything that you have read above are true from the time I emerged from the 8 ohm 'darkness'. Here

are the differences when switching from the 8 to the 4 ohm outputs:

- The amplifier controls the speakers better
- Better dynamics
- Wider frequency range - that is, more highs and lows (but not at the expense of the midrange!)
- Better precision, definition and resolution
- More focus and tightness (and therefore better organized sound stage)
- Musical drama conveyed in a more exciting manner

To sum up the differences in one sentence, the system got a shot of testosterone which meant that it was difficult (or even impossible) to pull me out from the triangle between the speakers! The lesson is: whatever your speakers' impedance, try all the outputs. In other words, don't salt your dish before tasting it!



*The system and my back*

### **Conclusion**

A mixture of big and natural sound, full and rich texture with palpable presence, excellent tonal balance, impressive sound stage, accurate rhythm, exciting dynamics, serenity and sense of "everything seems to fit together like a piece of cake"! All this, together with a beautiful look and easy operation (automatic adjustment for every tube type) creates an amplifier which sets an unsurpassed level of quality when compared to other components in its price range – and a lot higher. Honestly, it is scandalously low-priced and the winners are us, the buyers. As for reliability, since Mystère is a daughter company of Durob Audio, manufacturer of the PrimaLuna line, we should expect eminent reliability here as well.

Does it have disadvantages? Obviously – what component doesn't? However, here again comes the question "compared to what?" If compared with much more costly amplifiers (I recall a \$15,000 weighty preamp and power amp combination I have just auditioned at length) you could get "more" of everything: better frequency extension, better attack, better precision, better dynamics, better control etc. But, to my best aural memory, considering I did not compare it head to head, it seems to me that, all in all, the Mystère ia21 is more musical than its weighty relative and certainly has a more natural and rich sound. Anyway, it is advisable that difference in weight between two boxers should not be too big, so let's return to amplifiers within the Mystère ia21 horizon.



- The Mystère ia21 does not have a remote control. This is the last thing that bothers me, if at all. But for those of you who can't do without it and are ready to give up the stepped attenuator, you will have to settle for an amplifier of a significantly lower quality or double your investment in order to get a similar performance. The decision is yours.
- For an amplifier costing twice as much or more, it would be appropriate to ask for better tubes (I believe that's the way it should be, but actually - and in most cases - tubes are no better sounding with the most expensive components).
- Another thing that could face a problem for some buyers – the tubes' cover is closed at the top so it is advisable to remove it while playing if you're not happy to roast your delicate fingers on it!

### System

Source: Michell GyroDec turntable with upgraded (HR) power supply, TecnoArm tonearm and Shelter 901 cartridge.

PrimaLuna ProLogue 8 CD player (for about a week)

Phonostage: EAR834P with upgraded tubes

Amplification: Mystère ia21

Speakers: Coincident Victory (97db, 10 ohm nominal)

Cables: speakers – Entreq Discovery, HiDiamond Reference Power+ I

Interconnects - Entreq Discovery, HiDiamond Reference Black Gold

Mains – Acoustic Zen Tsunami Plus

Power distribution: Transparent Bank 6

Mains sockets: SINE

Isolation: RoomTune style self built rack with SRA VR isoBases for turntable and phonostage, amplifier on external 10cm thick wooden block with BDR cones under. All cables, including power distributor placed on special Auralex acoustic sponge. Entrek Apparatus Feet.

MSRP: 2500 euro

Distributor website: [www.maestroaudio.co.il](http://www.maestroaudio.co.il)

Manufacturer website: [www.mystere-eu.com](http://www.mystere-eu.com)