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KWA 100SE

The Fantastic

Audiophile superheroes to the rescue

MODWRIGHT LS 100 AND KWA 100SE • FROM 3,990 AND 4,950
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PHOTOS: IS



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When I was a kid, Friday was the best day of the week. This was when the newest editions of Marvel's superhero comics appeared in the stores. *Spiderman*, *Superman*, *Hulk* and *The Fantastic Four* were my special favorites. It was always particularly exciting to hold the thin comics in my hand for as long as possible before opening them up and immersing myself in my heroes' next adventures.

Why did I savor this moment so much? Because reading the stories for the first time was a fantastic experience, regardless of how many times I re-read them later. Why was I so fascinated by them? It was the contrast between the gray, everyday lives of these heroes - people normally ignored by the rest of society and who had often gained their super powers as the result of an accident - and their costumed alter egos. After donning their colorful regalia they would set about freeing the world of its evils. Fundamentally, of course, these stories are recurring dreams of immortality, invincibility and justice.

When I first set my eyes on the amplifiers manufactured by the US company ModWright - it was already dark and I could clearly see the back-lit blue logos - I was instantly reminded of the superheroes of my childhood. Could it be that this fantastic duo are once again living the dream, and have been given a mission to liberate the world from bad sound?

Do it yourself

ModWright Instruments was founded by Daniel G. Wright, known as "Dan" for short, in the year 2000. With his tube output stage, Dan was able to soften the digital hardness of many a source appliance. Business was so good that he was able to fulfill his life's dream of developing his own preamplifier. And when a person is guided by his heart, he's always bound to find the right path. In 2003, Dan started selling his own preamplifier, and its exceptional musicality ensured an enthusiastic reception.

Six years later, it was followed by Dan's first power amplifier, the KWA 150. In contrast to the tubes in his preamplifiers, Wright equipped his power amplifiers with transistors, and this has become a central element of the company philosophy: preamplifiers with tubes and amplifiers with transistors – bipolar ones or MOSFETs as in the KWA 100 SE ("Signature Edition") device that I'm going to be talking about here.

Three key attributes

Almost every company flyer you pick up these days will talk about a "philosophy" or "vision" - so much so that they've become somewhat hackneyed terms. Helmut Schmidt probably got it right when he said that "anyone who has visions should probably see a doctor". I'd therefore prefer to put things in simpler terms: Dan Wright is convinced that tubes deliver optimum musicality when preamplifying audio signals. For subsequent amplification, however, transistors are the best way to provide the necessary power, energy and control. He uses three terms to describe this approach: "Elegance. Simplicity. Truth." That's just another example of "marketing speak" of course, and, as always, the "proof of the pudding is in the eating". After eating this particular "pudding", my verdict is that the ModWright appliances deliver on a superhero level!

Quality inside and outside

Dan Wright has strong views about components. If he can't find anything suitable on the market, he'll develop it himself. Many manufacturers of course talk

about outrageously expensive components that now cost 50 cents instead of 5 cents. But a glimpse of the interior of the LS 100 preamplifier soon shows that Wright is serious about it: attractive circuit boards and quality parts, many carrying the ModWright logo. If an appliance doesn't produce the right sound of course, none of that really matters. The fact is that both of these appliances do! Sorry, but I'm getting ahead of myself again!

The preamplifier has a single-ended design with two conventional 6SN7 double-triodes in the driver stage and an equally conventional 5AR4/GZ34 rectifier. (This is practically an invitation to play around with old tubes, and I have to admit I did just that. Although the handsome Sophia Electric 6SN7 reproductions are pretty good, I believe my Sylvania tubes from the 60s are even better.) This is followed by a further, simple buffer stage and that's that. "Simplicity" is a promise that's certainly kept.

The amplifier features an interesting driver stage. This was designed by Alan Kimmel whose name will be familiar to audiophiles as the creator of the "mu stage driver circuit". Kimmel has here applied his expertise to transistors (MOSFETs) and calls his creation the "Solid State Music Stage." The basic idea is to provide as much current as possible for the amplifying component (regardless of whether these are tubes or, as here, MOSFETs) so that it can just concentrate on doing its job. The intention is that KWA 100SE should unite the strengths of tubes and transistors: holographic spatial imaging and magical mid tones combined with wonderful resolution, low distortions and tight bass control. Seeing as how the preamp works solely with tubes and the power amplifier operates as if it were also using tubes, it feels as if my super hero team is three-quarters tube-powered. As a confessing tube fan, I like this a lot. Doing without dominating negative feedback, the amplifier delivers the first few watts in class A. This is a good way to send my costumed heroes forth on their musical adventures.

People say that a MOSFET output stage gives a slightly warmer music reproduction than bipolar transistors. In combination with high-efficiency or metal

high-frequency loudspeakers, this is meant to make the KWA 100SE the amplifier of choice in preference to more expensive appliances. I like this idea as well, and believe it has a lot going for it. My loudspeakers are highly efficient (around 99 dB) and also feature a metal horn with compression driver. They are able to reveal any tonal weaknesses that amplifiers may have: everything quickly sounds metallic and sterile, practically unusable. With the KWA 100SE, however, the music remains silky smooth. An impressive performance.

Made-to-measure

What I also like is that all ModWright components are made by hand on the manufacturer's own premises in Amboy, Washington state. There's no serial production and certainly no assembly line. In this era of soulless mass production, ModWright is one of that rare breed of real craft manufacturers. Dan Wright has a team of around 10 employees, most of whom have been with him for a good many years. And that's something that's immediately apparent. The aesthetic, tactile and workmanship quality of

the appliances is outstanding, and it's hard to see any areas that could be improved. There's no doubt that these devices comply fully with point 2 of the company's philosophy - "elegance" is present in abundance!

Flowing music

Dan Wright avoids giving his amplifiers any specific sound. He wants them to be used by people who are relaxing and listening to music for hours on end - and nothing else. And that's exactly what they excel at. They create a great atmosphere even at low volume and respond immediately to the control button - this is not always the case with high-power amplifiers. After all, cruising along in slow traffic is not really something you can do in a Ferrari - but you can with a ModWright!

After a concert I heard at this year's Tollwood festival in Munich, I've taken to playing some of my Calexico records - conjuring up images of dusty roads, stray dogs, blood-red sunsets, a Tequila Sunrise on the veranda ...

Relaxation comes quickly and I feel I'm surrounded by the music. There's nothing pushy or frantic about



it, simply music filling the room. When the sound is this good, you don't need a plane ticket to Mexico or Southern California.

Apart from the wonderfully relaxing but by no means sluggish musicality of these appliances, it's their rhythmic performance that impresses most. Both lively and casual at the same time - simply cool! A bit like a tattooed lady in a David-Lynch-Film ...

After several years of abstinence, I'm now enjoying listening to *Kind Of Blue* by Miles Davis again. With popular LPs of this kind, I think it's important to have a break now and again so that you can really appreciate the quality. And the ModWrights really bring back the enjoyment. In the wonderful "Flamenco Sketches", for example. From a purely technical point of view, Miles Davis may not stand comparison with Dizzy Gillespie or Fats Navarro, but he discovered how to "stroke" his trumpet and refined this to a fine art. Soft, silky tones became his trademark, another example of how you can make a virtue out of an apparent necessity. "Flamenco Sketches" is a ballad. To prevent the listener from dozing off, Miles throws in a few short, loud tones now and again. The trumpet is a brass instrument and doesn't always have to produce pleasant tones - it can also be played with a touch of abrasiveness and is sometimes used as a "wake-up call". But it should never be painful to the ear. Once the sound becomes shrill, I know that the amplifier is having a problem dealing with it. This is something I've never heard from a Mod-

ModWright KWA 100SE

Transistor power amplifier

Power output (8/4Ω): 2x100/200 Watts

Input impedance: Min. 15kΩ

Gain: 26dB

Inputs: 1 x asymmetrical Line In (cinch) and 1 x asymmetrical (XLR)

Special features: Blue back-lit lighting for logo (can be deactivated)

Dimensions (W/H/D): 45/45/14 cm

Casing: Aluminum silver or black

Weight: 22 kg

Warranty period: 5 years

Price: 4,950 €

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Wright! It can be regarded as a "silky-smooth attack" with no trace of harshness: fine and cultivated, both warm and metallic.

If you're a person who still believes the clichés about amplifiers from US manufacturers (bigger is better, with lots of PS, punch and a fat sound, etc.), forget them once and for all. The ModWright amplifiers use punch when punch is needed, but also deliver a gentle massage after sundown.

By the way, my appliance is equipped with a phono board, an optional extra that will set you back a further thousand euros. The phono board was developed particularly for MC systems. Without an output transformer it even accepts phono cartridges with only 0.3 mV of output voltage. If, as in my case, you want to connect up an MM system, you simply have to replace the second tube (an ECC83) with an ECC82, so lowering the amplification from 63dB in MC mode to 48dB. That works really well together with my Decca. You can also set DIP switches to configure for a wide range of systems.

As well as being on a Calxico and Davis trip at the moment, I'm also into Zappa again. So I put on *Zappa In New York* (Discreet 2D 2290, 1977) to hear whether the phono stage can deal with his testing dynamism and resolution. If one of the components is not up to the task, the sound quickly becomes mushy. But the verdict is again positive: the ModWright duo deliver one of the best Zappas I've ever heard.

Best of all worlds

It would seem that "truth", Dan Wright's third marketing attribute, is no empty promise either. For me, the ModWright LS 100 and KWA 100SE form a real dream team, also in combination with my small but pretty demanding JBL Monitors. Unlike "normal" superheroes, "The Fantastic ModWrights" do not lead gray and uninteresting lives during the day. But when the sun goes down, they still seem to don their superhero costumes and fly on their blue logo into the West, far outstripping the pedestrian mass of high-end devices.

I can't be certain of course that these appliances will conjure up the same feelings for you, but you can always ask a reputable dealer for a second opinion. Or simply follow my advice and give them a try! You may find yourself standing at the end of a long and dusty road, and be transported by this "Fantastic 2" on a musical journey to the stars. Hasta Luego. ■

ModWright LS 100

Tube preamplifier

Inputs:

4 x asymmetrical line in (cinch),
1 each symmetrical (XLR), Home Theater Bypass, Tape Monitor (cinch)

Outputs: 2 x asymmetrical Line Out , 1 x Tape Out (cinch), 1 x symmetrical Line Out (XLR)

Input impedance: 38kOhm

Output impedance: 300Ohm

Special features: Optional MC phono board with tubes (12AU7/ECC82, 12AX7/ECC83, also suitable for MM; 990 €), optional DAC module (USB 24/192/asynchronous and cinch; 1,840 €), back-lit blue logo (can be deactivated)

Casing:

Aluminum silver or black

Dimensions (W/H/D): 45/45/14 cm

Weight: 13.2kg

Warranty period: 5 years (6 months for tubes)

Price: 3,990 €