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MODWRIGHT INSTRUMENTS

For life!

KWA 100 Amplifier

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The lengthy run-in time required of some high-fidelity products before they can fully express their potential is usually at odds with magazine production deadlines. So it was with the new ModWright KWA 100 power amplifier that we could only present in overview in our summer issue. We logged more than 400 hours of operation before starting the listening session, but it was worth it! This amplifier lived up to the promises and our expectations, proving once again that run-in does matter and that patience pays.

PRELIMINARIES

The different approaches used to reproduce sound and music are a constant source of amazement and fascination, each new device accompanied by its share of discoveries. In fact it's much like music itself, in the same way that guitars, tube or transistor amplifiers and modulators open the doors to a world of creativity and pleasure. The sense of wonder is back again in the form of the new ModWright KWA 100 power amplifier. Based on the design of its big brother the ModWright KWA 150, the KWA 100 uses MOSFET transistors in the output stage instead of bipolar transistors as in the KWA 150. As in wine, where the Cabernet, Merlot and Sauvignon grapes impart their own particular characteristics, so it is in audio, where MOSFETs, FETs and bipolar devices determine the overall sonic flavour. MOSFETs on an output stage generally produce a sound akin to tube electronics while maintaining the "slam" in the lower bass associated with good transistor amplifiers. This approach, used by certain manufacturers such as

B & K and Perreaux (see our review of the Perreaux 150i in Vol. 10 No. 6 of the magazine), produces a delightfully warm, full, and vital sound, while maintaining a softness and naturalness that brings to mind certain tube electronics and Class A amplifiers.

MOSFETs are the transistor of choice for the manufacturer who wants to gain the best of both worlds. Operating in class AB, the KWA 100 outputs 100 watts into 8 ohms, 200 watts into 4 ohms and uses no feedback (zero feedback circuit). The KWA 100 took the place of my YBA2 HCDT power amplifier which, despite its size and lower power (70 watts into 8 ohms/140 watts into 4 ohms) proved harder to move because of its two heavy transformers, one per channel. The KWA 100 was connected to the YBA2 Delta preamplifier with its oversized external power supply and to a three-way speaker with a sensitivity of 89 dB into a 4 ohm impedance.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Although music is much more than the sum of the equipment or instruments on which it's reproduced or played, communication of musical emotion and intention depend to a great extent on the hardware. The first listening sessions with the KWA 100 revealed a smooth sound with a delicate sweetness that never became cloying, a much less chunky sound than many other transistor amplifiers.

The ModWright KWA 100 belongs to the new generation of electronics that are less about hi-fi and audiophilia than many unforgiving reference amplifiers of the 80s and 90s

that required careful upstream or downstream system matching. The ModWright KWA 100 is a flexible and versatile device dedicated to simply and effectively reproducing music no matter the genre. It managed to revive the texture and dynamics of an old Kenwood tuner when listening to jazz in the early evening on Radio-Canada's FM broadcast "Espace Musique". Using the ModWright is simplicity itself. Once run in and connected to an appropriate preamplifier, it showed itself to be a stable, strong and generous performer, its sonic character at once rich, natural and respectful of voice and instrumental tone.

Midrange and highs are silky and smooth yet do not lack resolution. The upper bass is ample, well proportioned and rich without excessive ripeness. Deep bass is solid with an impressive presence, matching very well (on a "High Bias" setting) with my speakers, which filter the low frequencies to the bass drivers from 400 Hz down. The bias adjustment, low or high, is located at the rear of the unit. Recall that, in electronics, bias is the polarization current applied to a circuit stage, such as the transistors of an amplifier.

Like any good amp, the KWA 100 deserves cables that will do it justice. Although the Pierre Gabriel ML1 silver with WBT plugs excel in detail and articulation of the lower midrange, I opted for the BIS Audio Maestro with Eichmann connectors, for their propensity to allow the generous and mellow character of the ModWright to flow freely. The ML1 cables were put into service between the CD transport and the converter where their increased definition is desirable. The compatibility of the KWA 100 with the YBA 2 preamp yielded very good results. The luminous and structured character of the YBA matched well with the warm sound of the KWA 100. Delivering 200 watts into my 89 dB (at 4 ohm) speakers, the amp bathed the listening space in a wash of sound and music with disarming ease, all for the benefit of the enraptured listeners. Note that a new

preamp, the LS-100, is currently on ModWright's drawing board, being designed as the perfect partner for the KWA 100 and, most likely, the KWA 150 as well.

AND NOW TO OUR PROGRAMME

When it comes time to choose a disc for active listening, it's important to be selective, and I opted for four of my favourite CDs and one vinyl record, whose sound and music characteristics I know well. Let's start with the recent album *Tell me...* by Stacey Kent on EMI Music, for her voice, but also the timbre of the mostly acoustic instruments in her band. The sparkling version of the old standard "Les Eaux de Mars" by Antonio Carlos Jobin, a jewel of bossa nova adapted into French by Georges Moustaki, opens the album plunging us into South American music and is masterfully rendered by the ModWright KWA 100. The double bass sounds like this instrument should, its roundness and contours clearly defined, the soprano saxophone which is often difficult to get right is reproduced naturally without any metallic edge, the typically Brazilian pinched harmonics of the acoustic guitar and the voice of Stacey Kent at once joyous and warm, are reproduced here with a solid stereo image extending well outside the speakers.

Staying in a jazz vein, instrumental this time with the Jan Lundgren Trio's *European Standards* on the ACT label. On the single "Computer Liebe" the ModWright KWA 100 highlights the piano and percussion, and picks out more clearly than usual the particular modulation effect of the double bass, a better delineation of the effect produced by a pedal altering the sound of the instrument. The KWA 100 reacts with ease to the syncopation on this disk, leaving the music to flow loosely and naturally. I caught our cat comfortably installed in the centre of the listening area blinking his eyes, all ears, captured by the purring of



the middle and lower frequencies radiating through the room. The ModWright has a wonderful ability to project a holographic sound stage image. Some prefer a detailed and transparent sound without being overly analytical; others believe that music reproduction should be natural with good harmonic density. It's all a matter of personal taste, but also of system matching. For its part, the KWA 100 brilliantly reconciles these two viewpoints. The ease with which it reproduces complex musical passages is remarkable.

Turning to folk rock with the latest album by Crowded House, *Intriguer*. This group is making a comeback on disc and on stage and I have always appreciated their melodies reminiscent of the Beatles. The voice of guitarist and singer-songwriter Neil Finn, expertly backed by the three musicians of this Australian-New Zealand group, is superbly reproduced with its characteristic flourishes. A delight for those who love this genre, the KWA 100 enlivens the performance, sounding more like a musical instrument than an electronic one.

On a classical note, Vivaldi and Geminiani's beautiful *Sonatas for violoncello and basso continuo* on the Accent Label, a favourite album that always engages me emotionally, as much by the texture of the period instruments, the rhythm, harmony, melody and dynamics as by the quality of the recording. "Music is not just to please the ear, it expresses feelings, excites the imagination, moves and governs the passions" reads the beginning of the booklet accompanying the CD. The ModWright KWA 100 delivers these sonatas with skill, generosity and all the naturalness that this music requires. We are close, very close to the enveloping warmth of tube electronics but without the stereotypes often associated with them. As a bonus: the heft and authority of the best transistor amplifiers. The respect of instrumental tone is clear, benefitting the structured melodies and evanescence of the sonatas. "A velvet glove in an iron hand" is a fitting description for this ModWright. Since the YBA2 preamp allows biamping, and the gain of the KWA 100 and the YBA2 HCDT power amps are similar, I tried this mode with the YBA2 HCDT power amp controlling the midrange and treble and the KWA 100 for everything below 400 Hz. The marriage was happy; the definition and luminosity of the mids and highs through the YBA2 associating well with the magnitude and depth of the lows through the KWA 100, the latter taking complete control of the twinned Morel 6 1/2"

bass drivers. To check on the compatibility of the KWA 100 with other speakers, we hooked up the Revelation Audio Lyra 2 reviewed in this issue. These two-and-a-half-way speakers offer a 4 ohm load that easily accommodated the generous power of the KWA 100. A music lover's speaker, the Lyra 2 are highly detailed, transparent, with a remarkable depth of field; these attributes are enhanced

by the KWA 100 which adds texture to the midrange and a level of dynamics in the bass that is surprising, considering the small dimensions of the bass drivers. An eloquent demonstration of this amplifier's capacity to successfully match with other types of speakers.

To end the listening session, only vinyl will do. Pat Metheny with Christian McBride on bass and Antonio Sanchez on drums in *Day trip Tokyo Day Trip Live* on Nonesuch Records, a triple album on 180 gram vinyl. The source: the Roksan Xerxes / Artemiz / Dynavector xx2 MK11 and Dynavector P-75 MK11 phono preamp. The single "Son on Thirteen" opens the session with Pat Metheny's guitar playing flowing and smoothly rendered with flair by the KWA 100. The spatial representation of

the trio, the separation of instruments, the tonal balance between bass, midrange and treble are in all respects exemplary, with excellent dynamics, i.e., the difference between soft and loud sounds and a lot of subtlety in the rendering of detail. It is amazing to realize how good vinyl is in showing the potential of downstream electronics. The KWA 100 is no exception displaying its full splendour when reproducing this very well recorded album.

CONCLUSION

Your first experience with the ModWright KWA 100 may well turn into a dependency, in the good sense of the term. You'll surprise yourself as you rediscover favourite records in your collection along with digital files that are now just as much a part of that collection. The work of Dan Wright and his team are to be commended. The effort devoted to this first incarnation of the ModWright Instruments KWA 100 shows eloquently and pushes the limits usually associated with an amplifier in this price category. What could be better? Well, inspired by customers who asked to see what could be done without the target price limitation, ModWright now offers a special edition of the KWA 100. The KWA 100 SE features a number of upgrades that, according to the manufacturer,



improve bass response, control and low-level detail, for overall better resolution. All existing KWA 100 can be upgraded for the difference in cost between the KWA 100 and KWA 100SE. For us though, the tonal balance, quality of tone, spatialisation and bass grip of the KWA 100, married to its wonderful ability to envelop the listener is simply enchanting. The KWA 100 delivers a high level of listening comfort. The manner in which it involves and emotionally engages the listener deserves serious consideration. It stands apart from the rest and improves with time like any fine musical instrument. The ModWright KWA 100 is a power amplifier that guarantees listening pleasure. A velvet glove in an iron hand. Discover it.

Translated by Jan-Erik Nordoen reviewer for Son & Image Magazine.

ModWright KWA 100



Evaluation compared to products in the same price range.