

# Manley Snapper Monoblock Tube Amplifier

By Aaron M. Shatzman



**M**y biggest challenge in writing about the new Snapper mono tube amplifiers from Manley Laboratories is that an honest description of my experience with them may not be credible. Who will believe a reviewer who uses only positive adjectives?



I have heard that at last year's CES the rather diminutive Snappers made quite an impression on visitors to the Manley room. In part, no doubt, the buzz related to their distinctive appearance, for the Snappers' external design is impossible to ignore. Whether a viewer finds the Snappers visually appealing (*unusual, different, distinctive, modern, post-modern, stunning*), or off-putting (*idiosyncratic, over-designed, self-indulgent, weird, funky*), no one will describe them as dull, boring, or forgettable. With their sibling, the Stingray integrated amplifier, they share not only an aquatic name, but a number of design characteristics that identify their common parentage. Like the Stingray, the chassis has a quasi-triangulated or beveled shape that is supported by four beautiful gunmetal-blue "towers" whose conical "feet" taper to sharp points where they contact the surface on which the unit rests. The tubes (1 x 12AT7, 1 x 7044, 4 x EL34 output), sit on the chassis in full display, along with the transformers and big capacitors, unhidden and unprotected by cage, cover, or screen. The surface is decorated with flawlessly applied screened text that identifies the placement of each tube and its accompanying bias points. On the rear of the chassis the designers have placed exceptionally sturdy binding posts for cables, inputs for both unbalanced RCA or balanced XLR signals, and switches

to choose between them and to adjust input impedance. Even those who find the design too busy will admit that there is nothing there that should not be there, and that the Snappers are a lot more interesting to look at than two big boxes. Over the last month, visitors to my listening room, which contains a few pretty exotic audio components, inevitably walked directly to the Snappers to take a closer look. Fair warning to prospective purchasers: the Snappers are the kind of component people, and not only children, want to *touch*.

The Snappers excelled in the biggest of all tests for an audio component—they consistently proved able to produce satisfying sound when reproducing music I had heard performed in concert the day before. Commonly, such audio sessions have left me disappointed and depressed, especially if I had come to think my system was making really good sound in the days before hearing a live performance. Yet time and again the Snappers made sound that was, though clearly reproduced, nevertheless so fulfilling that I found myself comparing performance practices or interpretations between the live and the reproduced music rather than the quality of the sound, a remarkable experience. Just after hearing Dutoit lead the Philadelphia Orchestra in the Beethoven *Fifth* in our new Kimmel Center—awful I thought; I told my wife that he thought he was conducting the *Seventh*, a dance, instead of the *Fifth*, a drama—I listened to Hans Vonk and the St. Louis in the same work [Archmedia]. Now our seats in Kimmel were a bit too close, but the Manley Snappers made sound in my home that was more reverberant, richer, warmer, darker than what I heard in Kimmel. Thrilled, I replaced Vonk /St. Louis with Kleiber/Vienna [DG] and again I heard sound that, though different from live in Kimmel or reproduced from St. Louis, was still *every bit as nourishing as what I heard live*. The DG sound, drier, harsher, more sharp-edged than the Archmedia, perfectly complemented Kleiber's fleet, impossibly dramatic performance. Interpretation and sound shared a vivid starkness that was frightening in its intensity. I am saying two things here about the Snappers. First, they produce sound that does not disappoint even when heard after attending a live concert. Second, they easily reveal acoustic differences between various sources—they do not impose their own sonic signature on the music. Lest you think this was an anomalous experience, or that a French conductor in German music was too easy a target, consider this: the day after hearing the Tchaikovsky *Fifth* live at the Mann Center, the Snappers reproduced a 42-year-old performance by Mravinsky/Leningrad [DG] so beautifully that my wife remarked that the sound was better in our home that it had been in Fairmount Park. My notes report that the old DG yielded a stage that was too big, with "cavernous" spaces between the orchestral choirs. Nevertheless, the

brass seemed so “real” that I felt I was “there.” The Manleys, I wrote, were “relentless in presenting what the source provides,” in this case, “a spectacular” even if unnaturally large stage. The following day, the third-movement dancing pizzicato strings in the *Fourth* were “eerily lifelike” with microdynamic shadings that might well have been inaudible from at a live concert. That recording also allowed the Snappers to reveal another endearing trait—no matter how wildly the decibel level shifted, sonic images held their place. No matter the source, Snapper-amplified music yields stable, solid, dimensional images.

Both the Weavers [Vanguard] and The Persuasions [Collectibles] give audio components lots of opportunities to demonstrate flaws, because all of us know what human voices sound like, and because, with only a few performers on stage, we know what to expect to hear and where the sound should be coming from. The subtle bass behind the Weavers in “Guantanamo” was not merely audible (itself laudable), but was, in fact, “there,” with body and, more important, *presence*. Though portrayal of the audience sing-along (with delay) in “Goodnight Irene” has become, over the years, a standard audio test, what struck me via the Snappers was the audience participation during “Ramblin’ Boy,” no mean feat of amplification. What impressed me about the Persuasions was less the body, presence, and impact of the performers, but the way the Manleys made sound that had an emotional impact I never sensed before—what my notes labeled a “breathless, desperate, involved, committed quality” in the singing that made it new, and better. This old recording engaged me as if for the first time. “I’m not just listening,” I wrote, “I’m involved.”

Nothing seemed able to faze the Snappers. Not a week long Beethoven *Ninth* marathon that included both the Hogwood/AAM [L’Oiseau Lyre] and the Norrington/LCP [EMI], not a weekend of Mahler that included the Barbirolli/New Philharmonia *Fifth* [EMI] and the Bernstein/BPO *Ninth* [DG]. When Bernstein ask the Vienna players to traverse the final pages, the Manleys presented not only a slow that was *really* slow, but a *pianissimo* that was so ethereally soft I held my breath. I marveled at the way the Snappers made Hogwood’s original-instrument strings, which typically sound too light or thin, instead seem both light and *corpulent*. High registers with body are supposed to be beyond the ability of normal amplifiers. Listening to the brass, with edge and bite, I smiled at what I described as “little doughballs of sound” that “pop out of the speakers at each entrance.” Bernstein’s only performance with Karajan’s orchestra allowed the Manleys to create “maybe the biggest soundspace I’ve ever heard, especially at the rear

with the horns deep left and the tympani far to the right of the right speaker somewhere beyond my room's rear wall."

Were I forced to offer a criticism, I might suggest that once or twice I thought that the Snappers might be better at *p-ppp* than at *f-fff*, though I never thought the amplifiers fell short at high volume. But they were just stunning when asked to convey music that was subtle, delicate, soft. One example: the magisterial Ashkenazy/Solti/CSO *Emperor Concerto* [London] allows both soloist and orchestra to display the full range of sound, from near-silence to cataclysmic proclamation. Ashkenazy's delicate finger strokes were palpable. I believed I could hear *into* the master tape recorded by London's engineers—that I was aware of every modulation of finger pressure on the keys.

The Manley Snapper amplifiers satisfy in ways that go beyond their amplification of an audio signal. They merit your interest because of their superb abilities in that regard, but they have provided me with more than just audible delights. Rated at 100 watts, they make enough power to drive any number of speakers without protest. They offer outstanding performance, beautiful design, and superb parts and build quality. Make a special effort to hear (and to see) these amplifiers. **AV**

#### Manufacturer's Information

##### **Manley Laboratories, Inc.**

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(909) 627-4256

[www.manleylabs.com](http://www.manleylabs.com)

**Price:** \$4,250 the pair

#### Specifications

##### **Mono Tube Amplifiers**

**Maximum Output Power:** 110 Watts into 5 ohms; 100 Watts into 8 ohms

**Dimensions:** 15" D x 13" W x 8.75" H

**Weight:** 45 pounds (each)

#### Associated Equipment

Berning TF-12 preamp,  
MM DeCAPO Reference 3A speakers; Siltech cables; Straightwire Virtuoso and Discovery interconnects; JVC XL-21050 CDPlayer