

Gold Note PA-1175 MkII solid-state stereo amplifier Review

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Enough variance to consider the PA-1175 two amps in one

Take the two extremes of the amplifier spectrum, the low power SET amp and the high power class D amp. These two classes represent the wide variance possible in terms of design and results. SET amps are known for their spacious, though sometimes weightless, character while class D is known for its opaqueness with often sterile, battering ram dynamics. Listening to them in comparison it is not hard to conclude that neither one is particularly perfect.

Now, place the alternative expressions of the PA-1175 well within the bookends of these other amplifiers' performance characteristics. The low DF performance of the Gold Note is reminiscent of the lower power SET amp, and the high DF performance is reminiscent of class D amps. In two words, the low DF opens up, while the high DF tightens up. The low DF is akin to a person who has a soft, pleasant handshake, while the high DF reminds of the iron grip handshake. When drivers are being managed similarly, you can bet the sound *will* vary accordingly. The tighter the "grip", the more taut the sound, and the looser the grip, the more slack the sound. This translates into what many would call "fast" versus "laid back", and it can roughly be compared to higher DF being characteristic of solid state amps and lower DF being characteristic of tube amps.

Relative similarity to other amps

Considering the PA-1175 to be two amps rolled into one is not a far-fetched impression, for in use it acts like two distinctly different amps sonically. I can hear in the PA-1175 characteristics of two amps I have reviewed. The high DF operation reminds me quite a bit of the Benchmark AHB2 Amplifier (Benchmark has developed its own Class AAA), and the low DF operation reminds me of the First Watt J2 Amplifier. Now, the J2 is not a tube amp, but it was designed specifically to exhibit a sonic character similar to a lower power tube amp. As such it is a reasonable product to compare to the low DF operation of the PA-1175.

If there is a most admirable characteristic of the First Watt J2 Amplifier's sound it is the "air" it makes. Does that sound like a weird description of an amp's operation? The "air" I am referring to is the amount of spatial extension to the envelope of air surrounding an instrument or voice, as well as the volume of air in the recording venue. The J2 is exquisite at rendering recording spaces and acoustic envelopes of instruments and voices larger than expected. It is a wonderful amp to consider as a companion to the VanL Speakerworks Silhouette. Better yet, get a pair of J2 amps and use them in passive bi-amp setup.

Over time the use of the J2 has presented only one preferential problem. Being accustomed to higher power amps I was not content with the downplayed macrodynamics as a result of moving from a couple hundred watts to the J2's 25 watts. The bass is less concussive and there are edges of fuzziness that begin to appear on each note. This is not a failing of the amp; it's a perceptual shift from moving to the J2 Amplifier with a Damping Factor of 20 versus one like the Belles ARIA Mono Amplifier, which has a DF of over 2,000! That is an astounding range, and all speaker drivers behave very differently on account of that design parameter. When listeners suggest the First Watt J2 sounds like a tube amp, much of that perception is a result of the amp having a loosey goosey Damping Factor of 20.

On the other end of the spectrum is the ultra-clean, ultra-quiet Benchmark AHB2 with distortion specs "off the charts". It sports a DF specification of 254 at 1kHz, 8 Ohms, a close match to the Gold Note. Here is a true sibling result in terms of "grip" on the speakers. Both the AHB2 and the PA-1175 exhibited not just more powerful but more clean and delineated bass. Vocals and instruments were better outlined against the background of the soundstage. While the J2 has terrific air, these others show the images more solidly.

What if a person could experience either of these fine amps, the First Watt J2 and the Benchmark AHB2, in one shot with the PA-1175? Well, you can! I am not prepared to say that in all setups the PA-1175 betters these amps, but it most certainly can be considered comparable to both in a typical audiophile setup.

Of two opinions

Do you wish to hear London Grammar's "Strong" with a cooler, "...down cold in the middle" vibe as the lyrics suggest? Then run the PA-1175 in high DF. Conversely, to warm up the song and the background atmospheric effect, as well as Hannah Reid's deep Alto voice, simply switch to low DF.

Detail freaks loving a "white" sound with intense resolution may not find enough of it with

the PA-1175. There is a locus of richness in the Midrange that is persistent. Gregory Porter is a rich, deep baritone whose voice showcases the high/low slant on each setting. On the extended version of the song when the high DF setting is selected, even his spoken intro to “Real Good Hands” has a touch more energy in the upper midrange ascending to the treble, while the low DF removes that effect and replaces it with an increase in the mid-bass down to the lowest frequencies. As piano enters and he begins, “Momma, don’t you worry ‘bout your daughter, ‘cause you’re leaving her in real good hands,” it is up to you whether you want Gregory Porter light, or Gregory Porter heavy.

China Forbes of Pink Martini is a semi-torchy, semi-sultry, semi-vampy, semi-pop diva. That is because Pink Martini scales the world of musical styles ethnically and plays with variants of both ethnic and pop culture hits. When I wished for her to turn out a pop diva performance I went high DF. When I desired her to be a protégé of Mary Chapin Carpenter’s school of low-key conversational singing, I went low DF.

On went the switching, sometimes several times a night – because I could! It was terrific fun to meet the needs of my mood to hear solid-state sound (high DF), or a tubed triode sound (low DF). How does one characterize the amp if not as a balancing act between these two expressions? The amp is as a top spinning, wobbling first one way, then the other, never wandering too far from the center, never carrying away the performance over the edge. After all, this is an Italian amp, which must, above all, be respectful of the heart of the music, the Midrange.

If you cannot decide, you don’t have to

Several times over the years I have been torn in regards to which direction I should go when selecting a component or speaker. High power or low power amp? Panel, dynamic, or horn speaker? Laddered DAC or NOS? Solid-state or tube amp? Well, at least with the PA-1175 you don’t have to make that last choice; it will give you both experiences.

This next point seems poor, but is true; the question of whether the PA-1175 actually sounds like a tube amp in an absolute sense is irrelevant. The bifurcated operation of the amp pulls the listener first toward classic solid-state sound, then back toward tube sound. The experience the ears enjoy is that one *has heard* both tube and solid-state amps, though the latter is a proxy performance.

There are three ways to win with the PA-1175. The low and high DF settings of one stereo unit offer commendable performances of iconic solid state and tube sound, and pursuit of an additional unit offers BTL (Mono) enhancement to these winsome states of operation. Add to that the potential to harmonize one’s choice of cabling and the PA-1175 seems a true win/win scenario, especially at the asking price. These amps, the low DF PA-1175 and the high DF PA-1175, are good partners to have in a single chassis when seeking your best sound with your favorite speaker.

In the end you may not be able to determine which is your favorite setting. You will want to hear all the music in your collection both ways *just because you can*. A solid-state amp and a tube amp in one chassis is a great idea, and practically speaking Gold Note has done it with panache by incorporating the Damping Factor feature. A double dose of recommendation is granted!

Copy editor: Dan Rubin

Associated Components:

Source: Small Green Computer sonicTransporter AP I7 4T and SONORE Signature Rendu SE; Salk Audio StreamPlayer Generation III with Roon interface

Streaming Music Service: Tidal premium

DAC: COS D1 DAC + Pre; Benchmark DAC3 DX; Exogal Comet DAC and Plus upgrade power supply; Eastern Electric Minimax DSD DAC Supreme with Burson, DEXA NewClassD and Sparkos Labs Discrete Opamp Upgrade Exogal Comet DAC and Plus upgrade power supply

Preamp: TEO Audio Liquid Preamplifier; Cambridge Audio 840E

Amps: First Watt J2 (two); Exogal Ion (PowerDAC); Benchmark Media AHB2 (two); Belles ARIA Mono Blocks; Gold Note PA-1175 (two)

Integrated: Redgum Audio Articulata

Speakers: Kings Audio Kingsound King III; Legacy Audio DSW Clarity Edition; Kings Audio King Tower omnidirectional; Vapor Audio Joule White 3; PureAudioProject Trio15 (Voxativ and Horn 1 versions)

Subwoofers: Legacy Audio XTREME HD (2)

IC's: TEO Liquid Splash-Rs and Splash-Rc; TEO Liquid Standard MkII; Clarity Cable Organic RCA/XLR; Snake River Audio Signature Series Interconnects; Silent Source "The Music Reference"

Speaker Cables: TEO Cable Standard Speaker; Clarity Cable Organic Speaker; Snake River Audio Signature Series Speaker Cables;

Digital Cables: Clarity Cable Organic Digital; Snake River Audio Boomslang; Silent Source "The Music Reference"

USB: Verastarr Nemesis; Clarity Organic

Power Cables: Clarity Cable Vortex; MIT Oracle ZIII; Snake River Audio Signature Series; Anticables Level 3 Reference Series

Power Conditioning: Wireworld Matrix Power Cord Extender; Tice Audio Solo

Manufacturer's Comment:

Dear Doug,

First of all, let me really thank you for the great review of the PA-1175 mkII you did. I would like to give special congratulations because you exactly understood the idea behind the PA-1175 that is not a foregone conclusion at all for everybody around.

When we decided to design our first power amplifier, we wanted to make something really unique, not only releasing a top performance unit at an affordable price, which is actually our fundamental goal when designing high-end audio gears, but something that could also represent an innovation for the industry. We believe the adjustable Damping Factor design fulfills that goal.

Concerning the cosmetic inlays, we'll investigate to see what we can do for future production, we're glad that you are continuing to use it in your review projects.

I understand what you say about the distance of the connectors between each other for the MONO use, unfortunately due to the real Dual Mono design of the amplifier we are forced us to keep the connectors on the side of the unit. In fact, I must admit I agree with you

about the BTL button. You got the very first PA-1175 mkII; the standard production has just launched and we modified the design by installing an easier accessible BTL switch and two LED lights to show when the amp works in Mono and Stereo. See picture attached.

Thank you so much again.

Maurizio Aterini
CEO & founder
Gold Note