

LFD Integrated LE IV \$3695

Sam Tellig - Stereophile, Januari 2011 (Sam's Space)

The LFD MK IV LE looks like a complete reworking of the MK III, but is not. It's a revision, a refinement, replete with a new chassis derived from the LFD NCSE integrated (\$6295).

Dr. Bews Richard said he worked for two years on the updates and upgrades.

The MK IV is smaller but more solid than the MK III.

A thick chassis of extruded aluminum and thick top cover, a much thicker faceplate, and three beautifully shaped knobs with segments of circles arced into them.

You can have any color you want so long as it's charcoal gray.

Richard Bews has spent the last 15 years tweaking the Mistral's circuit.

Better parts, shorter signal paths, etc.

"There is no substitute for time spent getting to know a product very well, and then find the time to evaluate the best possible part for each section of an amplifier" he told me.

"This is very time-consuming and does not make for great promotional copy, but it does deliver better sound."

Richard continued : "All LFD amplifiers are made by me, since I need to control quality.

I do not want to sell amplifiers that are 'knocked out' on a product line.

Much point-to-point wiring requires skilled workers, so it ends up with me doing the difficult work.

I require only one part-time worker."

"If we could get higher power outputs without increasing complexity, then I have no problem. However, most realizations of bigger amplifiers involve much extra complexity.

I believe that as long as the amplifier can supply good power (100 W at least) over short periods (up to 20 ms), then the amplifier should be suitable for driving real-world loudspeakers."

"What matters is the ability of the amplifier to preserve small-signal integrity in the presence of large signals ; this is what determines the subjective 'power' of an amplifier.

Continuous power ratings are of limited value, since we listen to music, not sinewaves."

Preserving small-signal integrity is what low fuzzy distortion is about, I think.

You do need a graduate degree to read Dr. Hawksford's papers.

I did not send the LFD MK IV LE to JA to blow up on this test bench.

I had already purchased the review sample to replace my LFD Integrated Zero MK III LE."

All gain is in the power amp section.

There's no preamp as such.

The fewer parts you put in, the better sound you'll get out, a lesson that seems lost on those who like to offer flexibility and convenience.

Richard Bews is particularly proud of the volume control.

The volume pot is custom-made in the Far East and based on an old carbon Alps pot, but it sounds completely different.

It is up there with the best at any price.

I asked Richard about feedback.

"The power-amplifier section employs a simple topology and uses just the right amount of feedback to give decent technical performance." He said.

"Increased feedback can give better technical performance, but often gives rise to sonic degradation.

A small feedback capacitor, formed from two different caps, achieves a richness that customers often associate with tube amplifiers."

Richard Bews knows about richness, but that might be the wrong word : it suggests coloration. Instead, I'd use the phrase purity of tone.

The LFD MK IV LE has a sweetness, openness, airiness, a way of opening up, spatially that calls to mind not only the best tube amps, but the best flea-watt tube amps.

The very-low-powered single-ended triodes.

The LFD MK IV reproduces harmonic structures correctly.

Some solid-state amplifiers make a pretty good stab at this, but few actually pull it off and none that I know of sells for anything like 2500 €.

Bews offered this wisdom about tubes vs solid-state : "I think that when tubed or solid-state topologies are optimized from a parts and layout standpoint, the sound difference between the two will be very small.

The implementation of a tube or solid-state design is the dominant factor."

He doesn't minimize the importance of good technical specs, reliable circuits, high-quality parts, and the appropriate wiring for each task.

But just throwing money at a design can take you only so far.

Bews didn't say that ; I did.

Here's what he did say : "I believe that most products are only optimized to around 30 % to 40 % of their potential, since designers have restricted time and budgets to produce products, and production limitations all conspire to deliver a suboptimal product."

Make it cheap, make it fast. Again, my words, not Richard's.

For a while ; I was thrown off.

The MK IV, with its tighter bass, seemed to have a tonal balance different from its predecessors. And it did. Maybe Richard Bews is right : "The amp has more 'richness' now.

At the beginning, though, there seemed to be less of the earlier versions, light and life, which I so loved.

I didn't hear the same illuminated-from-within quality that I heard with the MK III.

I didn't hear it for about a week, the change, when it came, was dramatic.

The amplifier opened up in all its glory, and I do mean glory.

Air, ambience, sweetness, light, extraordinary low-level resolution that has me thinking that so-called 'high-resolution' downloads are probably a waste of money.

How good can perfect sound forever get ?

I suggest that you may not know until you pair a good CD player with the LFD MK IV LE.

The LFD MK IV LE has me rethinking my preference for tubes.
Given the choice of which amplifier in the house to turn on, I usually gravitate to the LFD.
No tube tsuris (grief), no worry about or cost of replacement tubes.
I can leave the LFD on most of the time, something I can't do with tube amps.
No heat in summertime.

The LFD MK IV LE is artisanal HI-FI of the highest order, as much artistry as science.
It has the humanity that so much HI-FI lacks because it's just commerce.
The tonal balance is different from the MK III's : richer, fuller.
The sound is less lightweight than before.
There's more down below.
There's greater overall resolution.
Remember, I'd stacked the two models and was listening to both.
The MK IV offered an immediacy of sound even more astonishing than the MK III's : the palpable presence of musicians, the illusion of live.
In some so-called 'live' recordings, I could hear every cough, every sneeze, every fart pop.

There's almost no background noise with this integrated, no 'floor' of electronic hash or grunge.
This helps the amp achieve exceptional dynamic range.
There is also very deep, solid bass, but there may be a point at which you want to knock off the volume a notch or two.
Always a good idea ; you'll hear more.