



AIR TIGHT ATC-5S & ATM-1E

PREAMPLIFIER & AMPLIFIER

By K.E. Heartsong



AIR TIGHT ATC-5S & ATM-1E

My first exposure to the AIR-TIGHT ATC-1 preamplifier and the ATM-1 amplifier combo was over 20 years ago. It's easy to

so substantive—solid. And as to their diminutive size, I imagine that apartment dwellers with limited space and audiophiles with small- or medium-sized listening rooms

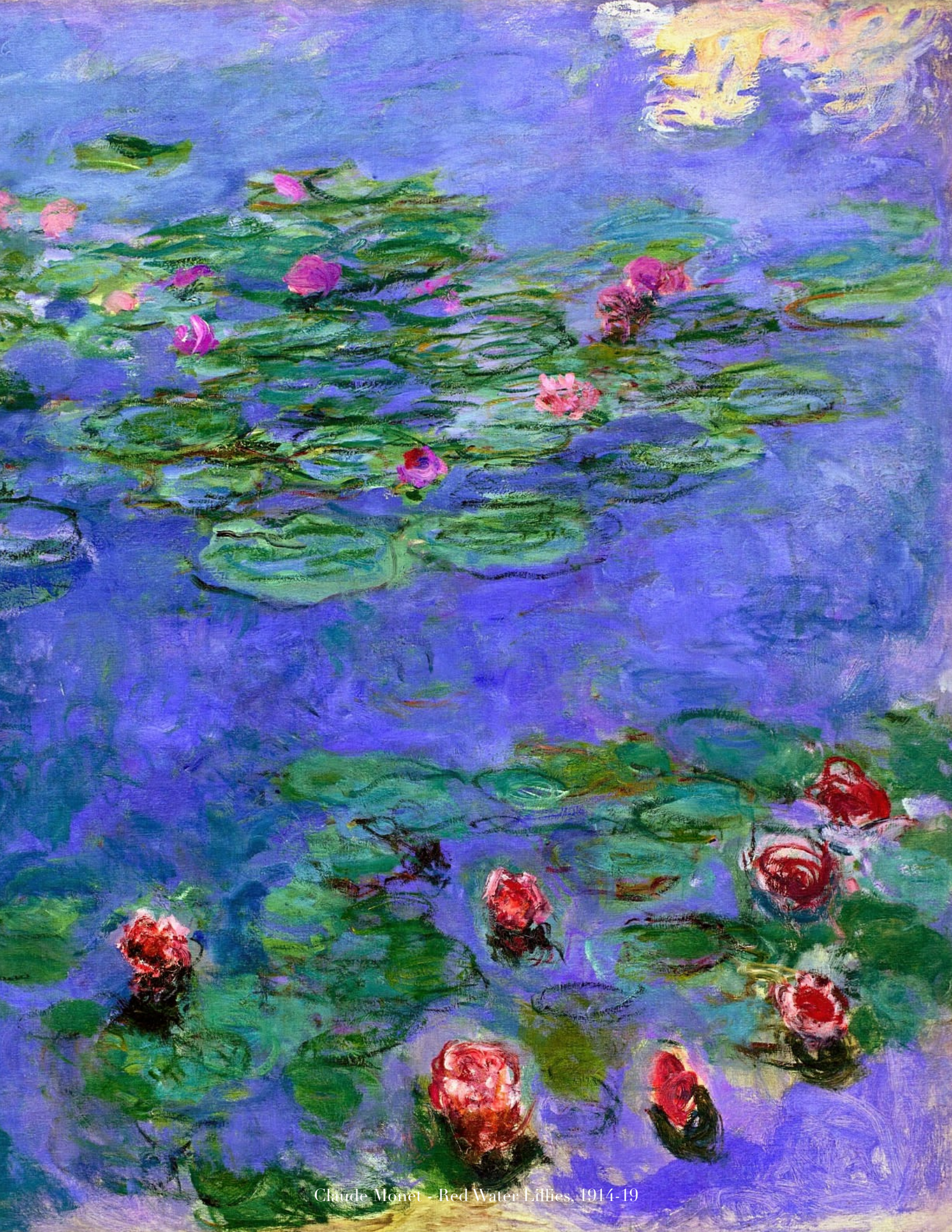


remember the exceptional artisanal design of the components, as the design has been carried forward to this day in the latest versions—the AIR-TIGHT ATC-5s preamplifier and the ATM-1E amplifier—currently under review.

Seldom have audio components been so well executed from a design perspective and

in their homes would be quite pleased with them.

A long time ago, I owned an earlier version of the AIR-TIGHT combo, and I recall that their rendering of my various albums and CDs always proved insightful and musically engaging, with a lushness that



Claude Monet - Red Water Lilies, 1914-19

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clearly belonged to the dominion of its EL34 tubes. I'm certain that the pairing components, while good, do not compare to

accoutrements, specifications, etc. Think of this review then, as a non-linear movie—*Memento, Kill Bill, Pulp Fiction, Eternal*



the “band mate”—the multiple award-winning Grimm Audio MU2 DAC/Streamer—with which the AIR-TIGHT combo will now play. I would also be equipped with a far more appropriate speaker—Fern & Roby Raven IIIs (94dB/8Ω) than I had owned then. So how did the new AIR-TIGHT combo perform?

REFRAIN: Unlike most reviews, this review will be non-sequential, as it will start with how the equipment actually sounds and not the process of physically “undressing” it and/or laying out its various

Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, The Queen’s Gambit, In the Shadow of the Moon, etc—that, likewise, starts at the end and winds its way to the beginning.

THE SETUP

After one biases the tubes of the AIR-TIGHT ATM-1E amplifier, a one- to two-minute task, the AIR-TIGHT ATC-5s preamplifier and the ATM-1E amplifier combo is plug and play.

The AIR-TIGHT combo would “sit in” with two speakers of varying sensitivity:

- Fern & Roby Raven III - 94dB/8Ω

- Franco Serblin Accordo Essence - 88dB/4Ω

With a power rating of 36 watts, only one speaker would pose a challenge for the AIR-TIGHT combo—the Franco Serblin Accordo Essence. Though it should be noted that with musical fare that was not large-scale orchestral or driving rap or acid rock or the like, the AIR-TIGHT combo worked very well with the Accordo Essence speakers. Jazz ensembles, classical chamber, choral, vocals, folk, were all beautifully served. Of course, the Raven III speakers were an optimum “band mate,” and it showed.

I would utilize the Fern & Roby Raven IIIs for the majority of the review, as the Devore Orangutans 0/96, though well broken-in, did not arrive until the final week of the review. I will, however, utilize the AIR-TIGHT combo for their review.

THE SYSTEM - TWO CHANNEL

- Grimm Audio MU2 Streamer/DAC/ Preamplifier
- AIR-TIGHT ATC - 5s Preamplifier
- AIR-TIGHT ATM - 1E Amplifier
- ACCUPHASE E-700 Integrated
- ATMA-SPHERE - GEM Integrated
- LYRIC Ti 100 Single-Ended Integrated
- Devore Audio Orangutan 0/96
- Fern & Roby Raven III Speakers

- Franco Serblin Accordo Essence
- Kubala-Sosna Interconnects (XLR, RCA), Speaker Cables, Power Cords
- Grimm Audio SQM Interconnects (XLR, RCA)
- TORUS AUDIO Power Conditioner
- RSX BEYOND, MAX Power-cords
- SEISMION Amplifier Stand (powered)

THE SOUND

The AIR-TIGHT ATC-5s preamplifier and the ATM-1E amplifier combo rendered an “old school meets new school” approach to the music, which resulted in lush and beautifully textured music with superb transparency and resolution that easily laid bare the detail across numerous recordings. And with the more efficient speakers, the AIR-TIGHT combo took hold and rendered increased dynamic realism, contrasts, and low bass power. Memories flooded back of CDs and albums spun, though I’m certain that the earlier iteration of the AIR-TIGHT combo never sounded this good, nor this exciting.

In direct comparison to the Lyric Audio Ti 100MkII (20-watts, \$9,995), a current reference here, the AIR-TIGHT combo’s additional power was evident across all recordings and gave the music a good deal more gravitas and weight that lent even more palpability to various performances. And while the Lyric Ti 100MkII provided more

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transparency and better front-to-back layering in that single-ended triode way, the AIR-TIGHT Combo, top to bottom, was more dynamic and powerful, which provided better control of the Fern & Roby Raven III and the Franco Serblin Accordo Essence speakers.

I must admit that while the Franco Serblin Accordo Essence was very good, when allied to the AIR-TIGHT combo, the Fern & Roby Raven IIIs were exceptional, given their more sensitive nature (94dB, 8-ohms) and with three superb components working in unison, the resulting music was outstanding and incredibly engaging, regardless of genre.

The AIR-TIGHT combo's volumetric cube—its soundstage—was wide and deep, with good height. Spatial recreation—horizontal positioning, layering, relative space,

air and ambiance—was on par with some of the best amplifiers that I have reviewed.

BASS

Delfeayo Marsalis, “Secret Love Affair,” (*The Last Southern Gentleman*, Troubadour Jazz Records) via the AIR-TIGHT combo brought forward a tight, deep and rousing bass (30Hz-20kHz). There was also great texture and dynamics, while the horns demonstrated exceptional timbre, tone, and bite. There was an aliveness that in truth was startling, fresh, and engaging. Had the Devore Orangutan 0/96s (96dB, 26Hz-31kHz) arrived in time for a few sets with the AIR-TIGHT combo, I’m certain that bass response would be plumbed to even greater depths and dare I say beautifully so, given the combo’s performance with the Raven IIIs, the best to date.

MIDRANGE

First up was Andy Bey's "Angel Eyes" (*American Song*, Savoy) via the AIR-TIGHT ATC-5s and the ATM-1E, which delivered a textured, in-room palpability of Andy's beautifully aged, gravel-rich voice that made listening the sole order of the day. Note-taking was quickly put aside as I just listened with a growing smile and rapt engagement. Branford Marsalis' "Gloomy Sunday" (*Eternal*, Marsalis Music) cued next, and its portrayal was rich, textured, beautifully resolved, three-dimensional, and haunting in a "gloomy Sunday" sort of way. There was no floating apparition in regard to Branford's horn, it had entered the room. Did I mention the strength of the AIR-TIGHT combo's exceptional and absolute way with regard to its portrayal of the midrange? Are "delicious" and "edible" apt descriptors here? Indeed. Bravo!

TREBLE+

My go-to pieces for "sussing out" the treble strengths of a given component's ability to resolve Joe Morello's drum kit cymbals are Dave Brubeck's "Take Five" (*Time Out*, Columbia-Legacy), or the resolution and clarity of Ysabel's castanets on Charles Mingus' "Ysabel's Table Dance" (*Tijuana Moods*, RCA-Legacy). Well, the castanets were leaping out at me, as if they were

thrown into the room with Ysabel attached and leaping in with them! Surely, this was the work of a rather potent combo, with the Grimm Audio MU2 leading the charge, but the ability of the AIR-TIGHT combo in rendering the stream of the MU2's technical and musical wherewithal presented a holographic presentation that was absolutely compelling and gorgeous. Joe Morello's drum kit and the attendant resolution was right up there with the best and better than most. Whether the Franco Serblin Accordo Essence or the Fern & Roby Raven III speakers were in play, there was great continuity, though the Accordo Essence's separate treble nicely extended the range and resolution of those "higher bits" of musical information to the heavens and above.

DESIGN LOOK AND FEEL

As mentioned earlier, the AIR-TIGHT ATC-5s preamplifier and the ATM-1E amplifier combo are beautifully designed in an artisanal fashion, where attention to detail is, well, absolute. The AIR-TIGHT combo's design has stood the test of time, not unlike Mid-Century Modern furniture—the Eames Chair, Noguchi table, Barcelona Chair, etc.—which continues to this day with great appeal.

The technical aspects of the AIR-TIGHT combo's design incorporate steel,

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aluminum, and copper metals from exterior to interior, and are finished in a grey lacquer that distinguishes them beautifully from the vast majority of competing amplifiers. This is not a skin-deep approach to design, as the amplifier is hand-wired and employs the topmost component parts—Alps potentiometers, Tamura and Hashimoto transformers, ceramic tube bases, gold-plated sockets, etc.

The AIR-TIGHT components are beautifully designed, elegant, heirloom components, that are meant to be passed down to one's family and loved ones.

CONCLUSION

The AIR-TIGHT ATC-5s preamplifier and the ATM-1E amplifier provide an “old school meets new school” approach to rendering one's music, which, as earlier mentioned, results in lush and beautifully textured music that is spatially astute, with superb transparency, resolution, detail, and brilliant musicality.

The AIR-TIGHT combo handles the entirety of the frequency range exceedingly well, though in my opinion, the combo represents midrange royalty, a music lover's dream and an audiophile's guilty pleasure. There will be no threadbare recreations, no soulless renderings of one's music, but neither will there be the honey-thick, old-timey slog through your media. The AIR-TIGHT

ATC-5s preamplifier and the ATM-1E amplifier are both musically and technically superb.

We happily award the AIR-TIGHT ATC-5s preamplifier and the ATM-1E amplifier the GOLDEN KEYNOTE AWARD for its high fidelity reproduction and engaging musicality.

Pros: Superb technical performance, musicality, and holographic-spatial recreation, texture, tone, and timbre.

Cons: Optimum performance is speaker-dependent given the power rating.

COMPANY

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AKRM





Henri Matisse - Interior with Goldfish

Henri Matisse