



Line Magnetic 211-IA

Line Magnetic Audio is a Chinese producer of audio components, many of them tube-based, and all reflecting a certain retro chic. It is perhaps best known for its valve amplifiers, which have acquired a reputation for both manufacturing quality and sonic excellence.

Founded by two brothers in Guangdong Province in 2005, the Line Magnetic business was partly inspired by vintage Western Electronics theatre and audio components, and the company still produces some wonderful looking, esoteric examples exuding an arresting steam punk aesthetic.

The Line Magnetic range is somewhat more accessible, with a line-up of integrated amplifiers that combine hand-built crafts-

manship with a level of performance hard to equate with the often modest output figures quoted on the spec sheets.

The LM-211-IA is a good case in point. The compact class AB push-pull stereo valve amplifier features an all-metal chassis with a silver hammered paint finish that finds a good compromise between function and cosmetic appeal.

It's heavy, too, thanks to a beefy power supply and two wide-bandwidth output transformers located under metal covers directly behind the two tube rows – pairs of 12AX7 and 12AU7s in the front row, and four EL34s behind them.

The bias of the EL34 output tubes can be checked and adjusted using a bias gauge to the right of the front tube row,

and adjustment screws for each EL34.

The front panel is home to two rotary controllers – satisfyingly precise volume adjustment on the left via an ALPS device, and source selection on the right. A toggle switch allows selection between triode and ultralinear playback modes.

The former is supposed to provide a purer, smoother sound, but at the expense of power output and damping factor, while the latter may suffer from greater distortion, but offers more output power and, by implication, improved pace and control – especially when the amp is partnered with loudspeakers presenting a tougher load.

The rear panel features an array of four stereo RCA input sets, while the binding posts offer a choice of 4 ohm or 8 ohm



taps. There's also an EC power socket. And the power switch? It's a rocker switch on the left-hand side of the amp – not exactly where you'd expect it to be!

A compact, solid metal remote control handset provides volume adjustment and a mute switch.

The LM-211-IA was initially partnered with our KEF R500 floorstanders, which are quite benign and efficient, but enjoy a measure of amplifier urge to show off their best. We also tried the amp with the rather more taxing B&W PM1 monitors.

Sources included Bryston's latest BDA-3 DAC fed a digital signal from our Oppo BDP-95EU universal deck, as well as the Yamaha CD-S2100 universal player/DAC reviewed in the June issue.

Starting off with Diana Krall's admittedly warm-toned *Wallflower* (Verve CD), I was instantly enamoured by the sweeping, panoramic, almost cinematic vistas created by an all-embracing soundstage that was in no way bound to the actual location of the loudspeakers, or the physical boundaries of the listening room.

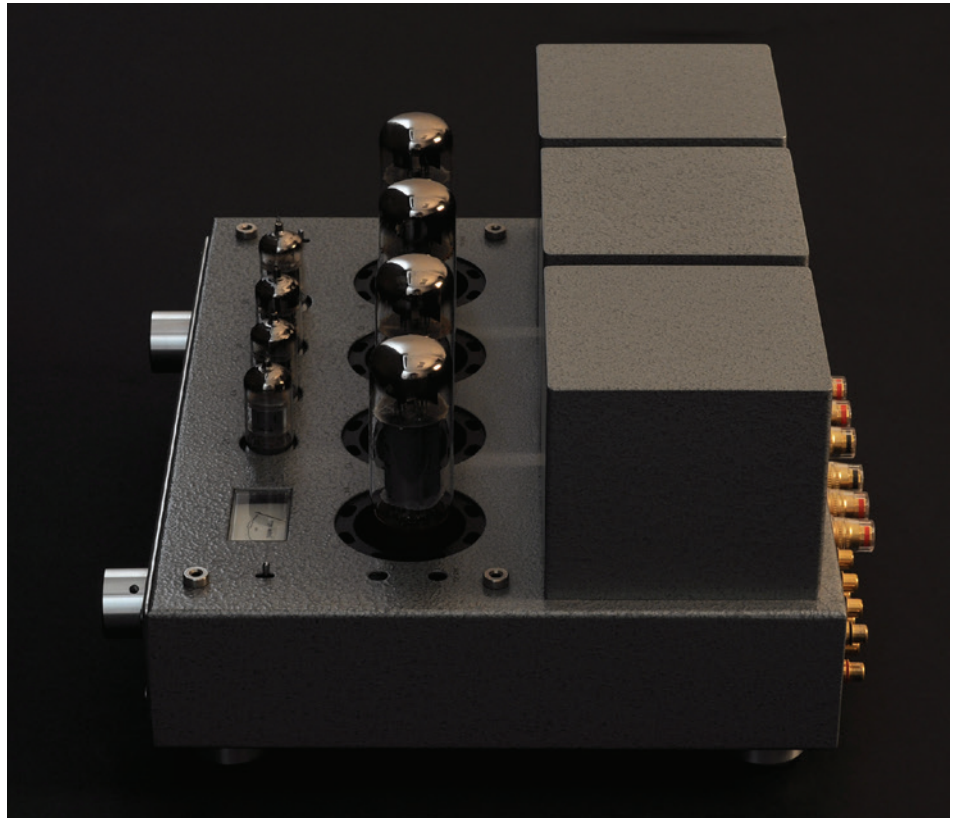
On the 10cc classic, 'I'm Not In Love', the sonic image was wide, deep and almost holographic in its ability to create the impression of three-dimensionality. The piano was delicate but incisive, providing a compelling foil to Krall's sultry, smoky vocals, while the orchestral backdrop was set wide and deep across the sonic landscape.

Given the Line Magnetic's modest output, I had expected the amp to sound mild and polite, so I wasn't prepared for its quite astonishing ability to deliver a big, bold bass.

It seemed to be able to dig out an extra octave from the KEF towers, and even if the result could sound a little overbearing and slightly flabby, there was still ample control and authority.

Nor did the 211-IA allow that propensity for low-frequency reach to weigh it down – there was an effortlessness, a sense of real pace and rhythm, that afforded the music an unimpeded flow and agility. As a result, the music was presented with an ease that was thoroughly beguiling.

The overall tonality of the amplifier also came as a revelation – again, I was



VITAL STATS

Power output	2x 15 watts RMS (triode mode) 2x 32 watts RMS (ultralinear mode)
Frequency response	10 Hz – 50 kHz (-1,5 dB)
Signal-to-noise ratio	88 dB
Input tubes	2x 12AX7, 2x 12AU7
Output tubes	4x EL34
Inputs	4x stereo RCA
Outputs	2x speaker binding post sets (4/8 ohm selectable)
Dimensions (WxHxD)	376 x 192 x 345 mm
Weight	19,6 kg

Price R25 500

Verdict

Wholesome, almost organic sound, but delivered with energy and enthusiasm. Mesmerising staging and imaging allows the music to live and to breathe. A truly exceptional amplifier.

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OUR RATING: 91 / 100





expecting the typecast warmth and glow of a valve amp. But as it turns out, that's neither typical of the genre, nor a trait of the LM-211IA.

Underpinned by that majestic bass, the midrange was smooth, yes, and nicely textured, but never oversaturated. There was ample clarity to see right into the heart of the music, without having to compromise on the grit and essence of the music. Yes, there was a sheen and an accessibility to the midrange, but only in a musically truthful sense.

And if I had expected rolled-off, warmed-up treble, I was to be disappointed again, because the Line Magnetic presented its high frequencies with poise and equanimity, revealing slivers of detail and picking out subtleties with a quiet confidence.

That propensity for clarity and revelation was at the core of its talent for those vast, sweeping sonic vistas, but again, it was also the ability of the amp to contextualise that information in a musically honest and thoroughly believable fashion that made listening to it such an intoxicating experience.

The rich, lavish recording of the Jacques Loussier Trio performing jazz

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interpretations of Antonio Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' (Telarc CD) can sound too lush on some systems, but the Line Magnetic never allowed itself to be intimidated.

It easily maintained its grip on the performance, while at the same time paying close and sympathetic attention

to the music. The electric bass reaches down almost impossibly low on the set's first concerto, 'La Primavera', stretching the KEFs to their low-frequency limits, but without running them ragged.

Loussier's sprightly piano was allowed to command centre stage, rendered with close, bright precision and presence, while the articulate percussion was spread across the stage, with each rim shot, each cymbal shimmer, each kick drum strike sounding almost eerily real.

There was a palpability to the music that augmented the three-dimensional staging, exuding a realism that made it easy to imagine the presence of the actual performers live and on stage.

Again, for all its breadth and fullness, the tonal balance was neither too warm or attenuated. The music sounded authentic and engaging, delivered with a clarity that allowed a full, glorious disclosure of every aspect of the performance.

Listening to Jan Garbarek's *Visible World* (ECM CD), the LM's ability to delicately, sympathetically extract the full, gloriously cinematic intent of the music had me spellbound.

On 'Red Wind', the layered, subtle percussion of Marilyn Mazur was spread across and through the entire sound picture, allowing a clearly defined view of the dark, menacing bass drum on the right, and the delicate shake of the tambourine on the left, while Garbarek's soprano sax was allowed to soar with an unencumbered exuberance that filled the room to the brim.

The bright, breezy hue of the saxophone – and its airy presence – was accurately, faithfully recreated, showcasing the 211-IA's ability to deliver its sonic wares with pace and grip, but without styming the music's essential flow and energy.

On Jeff Beck's *Emotion and Commotion* (Warner CD), Imelda May's stirring rendition of 'Lilac Wine' is one of many highlights. Here, the Line Magnetic allowed the chillingly powerful, emotive vocals of May to ring powerfully true.

You could feel as much as hear the raw emotion in May's voice, perfectly accompanied by the plaintive wail of

Software

Diana Krall – *Wallflower* (Verve CD)
 Jan Garbarek – *Visible World* (ECM CD)
 Jacques Loussier Trio Antonio Vivaldi: *The Four Seasons – New Jazz Arrangements* (Telarc CD)
 Jeff Beck – *Emotion and Commotion* (Warner CD)
 Calexico – *Spiritoso* (Anti/Epitaph 96/24 FLAC)
 Cassandra Wilson – *New Moon Daughter* (Blue Note 192/24 FLAC)

Associated Equipment

Yamaha CD-S2100 disc player/DAC
 Bryston BDS-3 DAC
 Oppo BDP-95EU universal player
 Naim Uniti2 integrated amp/disc player/DAC
 KEF R500 loudspeakers
 B&W PM1 loudspeakers



Beck's immaculately executed electric guitar. This was spine-tingling stuff, filled to the brim with impact and power, and the Line Magnetic had no trouble recreating the pace and dynamics of the performance.

A word about the triode vs. ultralinear setting. I did much of my listening with the 211-IA running in ultra-linear mode, which while benefiting pace and grip, didn't seem to suffer any audible consequences of harshness or distortion. The sound was smooth, articulate and detailed, generously presented on a three-dimensional stage, and embellished with lots of fine, delicate detail.

When I did switch to triode mode, there was arguably a smoother sheen to the midrange, and some gains in lucidity in the treble region, although I felt that some of the energy and flow had been compromised. Still, the facility is there, and its use will depend on individual taste, music choice and speaker selection.

There's another facet to owning a tube-driven amplifier that has been intrinsic part of their popularity: the ability to exchange one set of tubes for another. Also referred to as tube rolling, it allows valve amp owners to tweak or upgrade their devices by opting for different valves.

Some of those are new old stock (NOS),

others are modern boutique units – but all promise to allow a measure of tweaking performance to better suit personal preference.

My comments here are all based on the standard valves supplied with the Line Magnetic 211-IA, but I was also supplied with some more esoteric versions, notably PSVane 12AX7-TIIs, Sylvania 5814As (NOS units to replace the 12A7Us) and Shu Guang 6CA7-Zs to take the place of the EL34s.

It was an interesting exercise, that allowed fairly marked changes. For instance, I found that fitting the PSVanes created a slightly brighter tonality with a more engraved resolution and a more finely focussed sonic image. Yes, there was greater transparency, too.

But somehow, those differences disturbed the overall balance and integrity of the delivery. The gains in detail, resolution and transparency were marked, but the amp had lost some of its effusive magic – like an image sharpened just too much in Photoshop: you see more, but you're not sure you wanted to!

The effect of the Sylvania was less pronounced, subtly embellishing the already considerable talents of the Line Magnetic as far as three-dimensionality, palpability

and texture were concerned. They highlighted the 211-IA's articulate, expressive nature even further, but in real terms, the overall improvements were subtle.

The Shu Guang output tubes added more balls and impetus to the sound by addressing the slight flabbiness in the bass region, and showing off a greater penchant for attack. But again, there was a price to pay: the original EL34s delivered a more wholesome, more tactile sound with a greater depth of hue and texture.

Indeed, it's a case of horses for courses, and tube aficionados will almost certainly be able to improve on the standard valve complement. However, for my ears, the 211-IA sounded just great in factory spec, and I'd be loathe to swap around valves.

As a final test, I exchanged out the KEF R500s for the rather more demanding B&W PM1s, which aren't only less than efficient at 84 dB, but also present a fairly low load. But instead of revealing any shortcomings, these monitors highlighted the precision, control and grip of the amp.

There was no flagging enthusiasm, no sapping of energy – the Line Magnetic took the B&Ws in their stride. There was nothing warm or fuzzy about the sound: the inherent lucidity and transparency of the PM1s served to reveal the 211-IA's considerable abilities in that department, while highlighting a certain musical candour that only added to the overall credibility of its performance.

To say that I was astonished by the capabilities of this seemingly humble integrated amplifier would be an understatement. I've tended to favour solid state designs, simply because they appear to promise greater reliability and longevity.

I say appear, because I've been told that modern tube amps should offer extended service lives, and that tube replacements are not nearly as frequently required as I surmised.

But having experienced the sheer musical magic that the Line Magnetic 211-IA is capable of, I can understand why so many audio enthusiasts are enamoured by tube-based amplifiers. This is a spectacular little amplifier in every respect.

Deon Schoeman