

# Manley Snapper

## 100 Watt monoblocks

Manley Laboratories Inc., was founded in 1993 in Chino, California; about thirty-five miles east of Los Angeles. The company has grown over the years into a multi-million dollar corporation under the executive direction of EveAnna Manley.

Manley Labs' home audio gear is distinctively different from the rest of the pack. A glance at my *TIER* reviews of the Manley 300B Linestage (Vol. 13#3), and the massive Steelhead phonostage (Vol. 15#1) reveals that the status quo in audio is irrelevant to the designers at Manley. This isn't just a case of Detroit's longer-lower-wider syndrome. Whatever Manley Labs undertakes to produce, it will be unique and done with their own special twist: a touch of whimsy interleaved with solid engineering and superb quality materials and finish; incorporating the proven and the unheard of.

Source:  
Manley Labs

Price:  
\$4,250.00 US

Rating:

This time out we will be appraising the

Snapper monoblock amplifiers, an EveAnna Manley Production: designed in-house by Mitch Margolis and 'mastered' by Baltazar Hernandez. Presumably, the Snappers replace and improve upon the venerable VTL Compact 100 monoblocks.

Appearance:

These amps are produced as identical twins—not mirror images. Bend your knees when you pick them up: these big Snappers weigh in at an official 45 lbs. each. The faceplate and four pointed legs are anodized in an understated but elegant violet pewter. The lethal voltages are safely contained in a black, wrinkle-painted box, slightly deeper than wide, with the two front corners cut off. A back-lit Manley nameplate is proudly displayed on the front panel. A pair of input tubes and four tall capacitors run down the centerline and are flanked by two pairs of EL-34 power tubes, with plenty of cooling space

*Blair T. Roger*

between them. The power and output transformers at the back of the chassis are conventional in appearance: black, unpotted and extra large. The back panel has two surfaces: the upper one is angled at about 45°; below, it's vertical. The massive WBT speaker binding posts, RCA and XLR input jacks and a pair of miniature toggle switches for selecting balanced/unbalanced inputs are located on the upper, angled surface. A rocker switch for power on/off, and the IEC power cord socket reside on the vertical surface, side-by-side. There is no tube cage.

While the industrial/pro-gear look is ruggedly appealing, I keep thinking of creatures from David Cronenberg's version of William S. Burroughs' novel, Naked Lunch. If I had my d'ruthers, I might name these amps The Crabs. But then, who's going to boast about that?

Technology:

The Snappers use EL-34 power pentodes connected in Ultralinear or 'enhanced triode' mode. This means that the tube's screen grid is connected to a tap near 43% on the output transformer's primary. This makes the tube operate with characteristics somewhere between pentode and triode. Compared to pentode operation, power is down about 30% but harmonic distortion is greatly reduced as well. As the Snappers operate in parallel push-pull configuration, the four power tubes are said to give 100 watts per channel from 15 Hz to 40 kHz and I have no reason to doubt that.

If Ultralinear operation is the hook then the special Manley twist is differential amplification. This is a type of circuit that splits the incoming music signal into equal positive and negative waveforms. From there onward, the signals are referenced to each other, not to ground. The point of using differential amplification is this: it rejects noise that is common to both phases of the signal. Just think of adding two equal numbers, one positive and the other negative. The result must be zero.

Differential designs are usually employed in microphone pre-amps because they can reject hum picked up by long cable runs. This is important for you, the listener because differential mode means quiet amplification. Any noise common to both halves or phases of the signal is simply ignored.

The Snappers have single-ended (RCA) input jacks for those who don't have a pre-amp with balanced output, as well as true, balanced input XLR jacks. As I own the Manley 300B linestage which does not have balanced outputs, I've been using the RCA inputs with great success. That linestage, combined with my Manley Steelhead phonostage exhibit the synergy one would expect. x 13" wide x 8.75" tall.

The Sound:

I will briefly describe my current system to establish a context for the reader. Most of my listening is analog based. I spin the platters on a Garrard 401 Transcription Motor turntable equipped with an Eminent Technology ET-2 air-bearing, transverse tonearm; the whole lot resting on an Active Vibraplane from Sounds of Silence. My cartridge of reference is the new, low output moving coil Argo from Lyra Co., Ltd. of Japan. Designer Jonathan Carr has stretched the envelope again with this nude cartridge. At about US\$1,400 it far surpasses the previous entry level Lydian-β cartridge as it employs technology borrowed from the lofty Helikon. Perhaps I will be able to expand on this in the near future.

Loudspeakers, as always, are electrostatics: QUAD US Monitor 63s. Cables include Nordost SPM, NBS King/Serpent II and Purist Audio Colossus.

I had a dedicated breaker installed in our electrical panel to supply power directly to all the components in my music studio. I waited a long time to do this one and I can tell you truthfully: it's worth doing.

Stepping up from my 35 watt Jadis Orchestra amp to the 100 watt per

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channel Snapper monoblocks was a great pleasure for me. The Jadis had been my first experience with Ultralinear wired EL-34s. Used with QUAD 57s the Jadis had a sparkling and open treble like none I had heard before in my studio. I realize now that it was truly marginal at driving the big QUAD 63s.

With the Snappers in place I discovered that my system was much more dynamic and capable of revealing nuances that were previously unheard. These are quiet amps, and that lets those delicious nuances shine through. My theory on noise is this: many will say that noise measurements are meaningless because the noise in the signal will be swamped in loud passages. I disagree. To my ear, the noise just gets amplified along with the signal so it's always riding on top of your amplifier's sound signature. Take away the noise and you experience a musical moment closer to the sublime.

The music no longer 'falls apart' on loud, demanding passages as it used to with my Spica TC-50s and Dyna Stereo 70 amplifier. Now I hear music that's much more natural: pure and sweet like the real thing. I'm listening to records and CDs I once thought unplayable and I'm getting fresh enjoyment from the rest of my collection.

Take for example, the 1979 Kingsway Hall recording called *Ashkenazy Previn Rachmaninov* (London CS 7150) of Rachmaninov's **Symphonic Dances Op.45** transcribed for two pianos. This is an awesome LP with the incredible intensity of the virtuosi, Previn and Ashkenazy at the keyboards. The dynamic range of this recording astounds when played back on the Snappers. They have such an easy way of going from near silence to the full weight of both pianos over and over again. The music never sounds glazed or electronic. One hundred watts has proven to be an ideal amount of power for the QUAD 63s.

Another example: a 1983 digital recording entitled *Mozart* (Philips 412 122-1) by

Mitsuko Uchida, piano soloist, playing the **Sonata in C, KV 545** and the haunting **Rondo in A minor, KV 511**. The digital master was transferred to vinyl at a fairly low level to accommodate the dynamics of the closely-miked piano. This is an intimate recording that I can finally play at realistic levels in my studio. The compositions are deceptively simple: child's play some might say; but it takes a genius like Uchida to bring them to life like this. And the Snappers reveal everything she does at the keyboard is quite intentional.

Finally, the now classic *Eric Clapton Unplugged* was taken down from the shelf for a spin. The layering and depth are truly superb and the stereo image is wall-to-wall right out to the back corners. Clapton takes his position just right of center. The Snappers image so clearly and consistently that one can hear or feel Clapton turning around or leaning into the mike as he plays. I suspect it's the massive power supply that enables the Snappers to image like this. They are literally unperturbed as they present a dynamic and sweet sounding acoustic that is stable and Cinemascope wide.

Synopsis and Commentary:

This has been an exceptionally fortunate experience: to audition a complete system in my own music studio with major components from the same manufacturer. I can report that there is a good case to be made for the synergy between the different stages. I base this on the simple principle that the pieces are properly matched for gain and impedance. The Argo cartridge lends a hand with deep, solid bass dynamics and excellent tracking. The potent Steelhead phono stage can be adjusted for optimum gain, capacitance and cartridge loading. The 300B linestage drives the Snappers with an authoritative signal that sounds liquid and pure. The Snappers complete the picture with a sweet, natural midrange, a deep and solid bass and an exquisitely detailed treble that neither fatigues nor vexes the ear. The music seems to pool around the speakers like water from a fountain. It's a

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dramatic effect and one not easily appreciated at your local hi-fi shop.

In summary: the Snappers are a pair of powerful and exceptionally quiet monoblock tube amps from one of the top manufacturers on the North American continent. They are voiced to sound sweet and clear as rainwater, while retaining a serious dynamic punch. These amps make glorious music together. :||

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