

Lavardin Model ISx integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom



One of my last real jobs in audio was to let down what would become Lavardin. I was working in a well-known audio retailer at the time, and we already had more than our fair share of amplifiers. Although we were always interested in new designs, the chances of the store taking on a new brand (both new to the store and new to audio) were limited. I had become very good at saying ‘no’ to companies, but this prototype French integrated amplifier sang so sweetly on anything we hooked it to, ‘no’ was not in the vocabulary. Sadly, we still had no choice but to turn down Lavardin, but in fairness, it was still very much a work in progress.

Fast forward to the present, and Lavardin has built a small, but loyal, following in the audiophile community. Its Model IT, the entry Model IS, and IS Reference integrated amps are popular choices among those who listen judiciously. The preamps and power amps are excellent too, but it’s the integrated amps that justly get a lot of the credit. So, when the opportunity arose to test the latest Model ISx integrated from the brand, we jumped at the chance.

The ‘x’ circuit upgrade is the first change to the Lavardin Model IS (or the Model IT) this century. This isn’t ‘lazy designer syndrome’: Lavardin has often polled its customers regarding changes to the existing line, and the phrase “don’t change a thing!” kept coming back, and in careful listening tests, many innovations on circuit design were tried, and rejected, because no matter how good the new tech might look on paper, it didn’t live up to the hype in listening tests. The ‘x’ developments are the result of that painstaking listening protocol; they are the ones that made it.

Lavardin remains suitably gnomish about the new models, having made no announcement on its site and having virtually no information about the new product made available to the public as yet. As a result, it’s also unclear whether the ISx will push the IS Reference out of the catalogue. Given it’s taken the company decades to revise the Model IS, these points should all be addressed sometime in the next four or five years, if they do it as a rush job!

All we can glean about the new ‘x’ circuit is that the company reworked the existing Lavardin design for greater ►

▶ linearity, which improves overall transparency and micro-dynamic resolution. This goal has taken some time to roll out, because the original design so focuses its attention on ‘memory distortion’. This is an attempt to overcome the memory effect inherent to semiconductors, where a large signal leaves a small after-effect that can influence the following signal. This, Lavardin has long postulated, is one of the reasons why people like products that sound like single-ended triode amps; the memory effect is gone, and the sound is more immediate. This is a stance – unique to Lavardin – that stands very much at odds with current (no pun intended) thinking, and methods of investigating the effect on audio circuitry stand outside the normal corpus of audio measurement. So, improving linearity without falling foul of memory effect issues is the reason Lavardin has taken so long to come out with a replacement to its integrated amps. I do applaud Lavardin for taking this ‘trickle up’ instead of ‘trickle down’ approach, as the ‘x’ circuit improvements started with the integrated amps and are working their way up through the company’s pre/power range, instead of the other way round.

The other headline improvement, however, is the inclusion of a remote control. OK, so it’s not much of a remote control; the thin bar only adds volume up and down, but in Lavardin-land, that’s equivalent to the Manhattan Project! What’s more, in a move to differentiate the ISx from the Model IS, the newcomer has a small brushed aluminium front panel. The other aspects of the design – a four input, 35 Watt per channel line-level integrated amp with optional phono stage – remain the same.

The build quality remains the same, too. Where the Model IT and beyond are built ‘chunky’, the Model ISx is a lightweight. The top-plate is relatively thin and undamped. The front panel

and two chromed knobs are more substantial, but if you view audio electronics by heft and weight, look elsewhere. Lavardin is dismissive of a lot of modern audio ‘flummery’, however: while I’d normally recommend adding some kind of resonance control pad or block to stop that top plate from clanging like a cracked bell, the company recommends not to experiment with such things, and this is confirmed in the listening. Similarly, the company is unconvinced by audiophile power cords or ‘active’ loudspeaker cables, and recommends the ground-breaking approach of plugging the amplifier to the wall with a normal power cord, avoiding a power conditioner, placing the amp on a wooden shelf, and using good quality multi-strand copper speaker cables.

Aside from having one of the least accommodating IEC sockets out there, the ISx behaved faultlessly. It had already seen a little action in the field, so presumably arrived run in (Lavardin is unconvinced by the need for burning in, as it says all that has been done in the factory anyway). Instead, power it up and within five to 10 minutes, it’s sounding its best. The only precautionary tale here is if you power it down, give the ISx 10 seconds before restarting it (this is good general practice anyway).

If the Model ISx takes ten minutes to come on song, then it may take you ten and a half minutes to realise why this brand has a loyal following. The liquid way it plays music is captivating, and that accent on ‘memory distortion’ really does make the amplifier seem inherently more temporally precise and less ‘edgy’ sounding than most solid-state amplifiers. In fact, the Lavardin sound is reminiscent of classic conrad-johnson valve amps, and maybe the closest parallel in the solid-state world is something like Jeff Rowland or even Constellation Audio. So, for a small and relatively low-cost ▶



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- ▶ 35W French amplifier to already be up there with some of audio’s best loved models shows its doing something very right indeed.

I don’t want to give the impression that the Model ISx is somehow ‘lush’ or ‘soft’ sounding, though. It is far more balanced and sophisticated than that. What it does instead is provide a very even, rather than forward balance, but does it with the kind of rare temporal precision and focus that only the very best in audio electronics can muster. I’m almost loathe to point to specific musical examples here because the shock effect of being that little bit closer to the musical experience is best discovered at random. So, it wasn’t just the ‘audiophile approved’ rhythmically strong tracks – ‘Georgio by Moroder’ from Daft Punk’s *Random Access Memories* [Columbia], for example – but on more delicate, unexpected musical interludes like ‘Sleep The Clock Around’ from Belle & Sebastian’s *The Boy With The Arab Strap* [Matador], the ISx portrays that insistent, if sometimes inconsistent, drum shuffle and Stuart Murdoch’s light, almost fey vocals with a combination of accuracy, focus, and charm that makes you listen to the whole not-that-well-recorded album.

Of course, when you move on to the audiophile-grade material, the Lavardin shines, but it also shows up just how so much of the audio world is cheating in its demonstrations. Play something wonderfully recorded, but really clichéd like *Cantate Domino* [Proprius], and it sounds truly fantastic, but no more fantastic than it does on every other high-end audio system. Or, indeed, a well-rounded car radio. Because the recording is truly fantastic to begin with, which was why I was using it to demonstrate audio more than a quarter of a century ago, and it had already been in use for a decade by the time I got to it. Play something less sublime, though, and the Lavardin still shines, where others begin to dull.

That’s the joy of the Lavardin in sum. It’s not about the wide imaging, or the detail resolution, the dynamic range, the coherence, vocal articulation, solidity, or any of those other aspects we call upon to describe audio equipment. The amp does all of those things (and does them rather well), but you don’t tend to care when it makes the music sound this real. These seemingly all-important audiophile aspects become mere trivialities next to the way it makes music sound like music!

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier
Inputs: Four stereo RCA single-ended inputs
Input impedance: 10Kohms
Input sensibility: 330 millivolts
Line output: factory option
MM phono input: factory option
Input selection: sealed relays
Relay contact: gold, silver, palladium alloy
Output power: 2x45 W RMS on 8 Ohms
Output impedance: nominal 8 Ohms
Harmonic distortion: 0.005% @ max output
Finish: Black anodised and painted non magnetic high-grade aluminium
Size (WxHxD): 43x8x38cm
Weight: 6.5 Kg
Price: £3,350 (as tested), £3,999 (with MM phono)

Manufactured by: Lavardin Technologies
URL: www.lavardin.com

Distributed in the UK by: Midland Audio X-Change
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In a way, this is an amplifier that audiophiles shouldn’t like. It’s not that powerful, it’s not made from inch-thick aluminium plating that might be better placed on a tank, it doesn’t bristle with extra features, and eschews all the normal add-ons we commonly add to audio gear. Now that xenophobia’s back in fashion, there will even be some who have a problem with it coming from France. The trouble is, you won’t be able to stop yourself from thoroughly enjoying the Lavardin Model ISx. It’s a great sounding amplifier that really changes your perceptions of what’s important in good sound, and questions the need to keep pushing the audiophile price envelope. Our highest possible recommendation today, and judging at the rate Lavardin changes its products, this will still retain our highest possible reputation a dozen years from today! +