

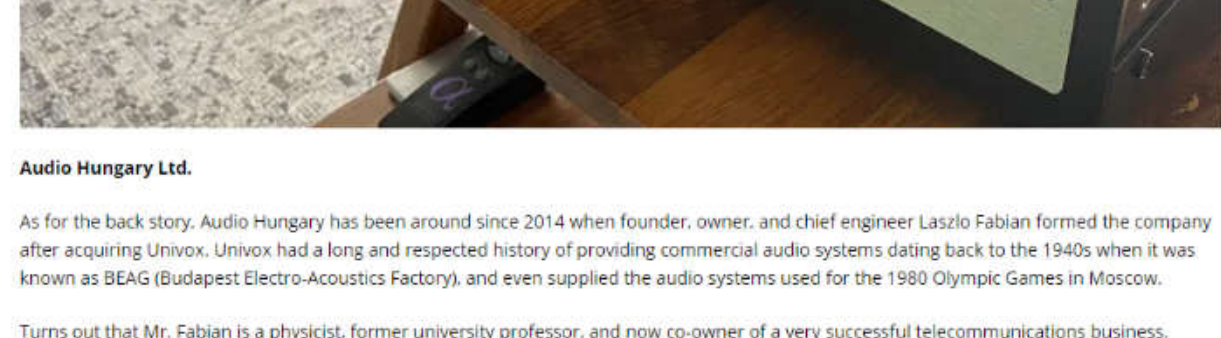
# Audio Hungary Qualiton APX 200 Vacuum Tube Stereo Power Amplifier | REVIEW

Posted on July 17, 2020 by Dove McHair in Components 0 Comments



When Mark Sossa of *Wifl Pleased AV* called about dropping off a pair of the excellent *QLN Prestige Three* speakers for me to review a few months back, he casually mentioned he might also bring along the new *Audio Hungary Qualiton APX 200*. Sure, I love hearing any audio gear that I'm not yet hip to. A tube amp? Hell yeah, bring that sucker!

Whether you're a pro audio engineer, audiophile (I like the old school term *hifi enthusiast*), or most definitely an audio reviewer, everybody loves finding something special sounding for a bargain. Major bonus points when the aforementioned gear is from a new or relatively unknown company.



**Audio Hungary Ltd.**

As for the back story, Audio Hungary has been around since 2014 when founder, owner, and chief engineer Laszlo Fabian formed the company after acquiring Univox. Univox had a long and respected history of providing commercial audio systems dating back to the 1940s when it was known as BEAG (Budapest Electro-Acoustics Factory), and even supplied the audio systems used for the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow.

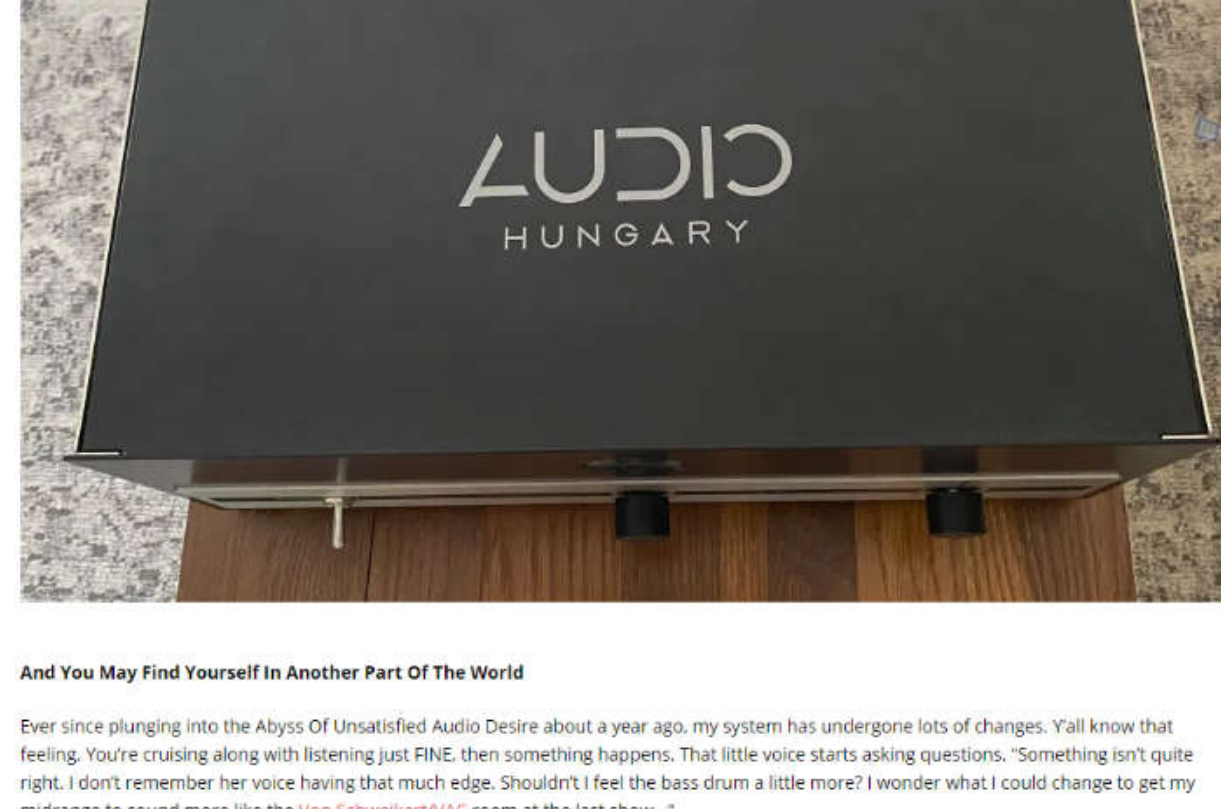
Turns out that Mr. Fabian is a physicist, former university professor, and now co-owner of a very successful telecommunications business. He also happens to be a long time audiophile with a passion for vacuum tubes. You can see where this is going – man acquires an audio company full of practical and experienced engineers and manufacturing processes, adds more young, talented, audiophile focused engineers and turns his hobby into a business.

So the mission was to design and produce high-end vacuum tube products incorporating some fresh thinking around the circuit design, not just a slight refinement of something out of the *RCA Receiving Tube Manual*. All right, so they have a lot of experience, wind their transformers in-house to meet specific design and sonic goals, and have some fresh ideas about tube design. I admit to my cynicism but damn it, I'm starting to get very interested.

Audio Hungary offers a small range of products which include 20 WPC and 50 WPC integrated amps (both being Class A in operation), a standalone preamp, phono pre, and finally the APX 200 which is their Class A/B 100 watts per channel power amp.

The look of the APX 200 preamp and APX 200 amp is much more Eastern Bloc utilitarian than the other Qualiton offerings, which have more of the currently popular simple but elegant, retro-modern industrial design aesthetic. I'm told the look of the APX Classic Series was inspired by the BEAG APX 100, which was one of the most popular Hungarian professional audio products of the late '70s (think East Euro Dyna 70) so Qualiton didn't want to change the looks too much, just the insides. The version I have for review (MK II) is the current model with a quartet of KT-90 pentodes for the power tubes plus an auto-bias circuit, improving on the Russian 6P45S power tubes and manual bias adjust on earlier models. Reportedly Qualiton rejects as many as 75% of the tested tubes before installing the select few.

OK, so the Audio Hungary Qualiton APX 200 looks like it came out of the insides of a MiG-25, or a P.A. at a high school gymnasium in Stalingrad, but what does it sound like? It sounds really, really good.

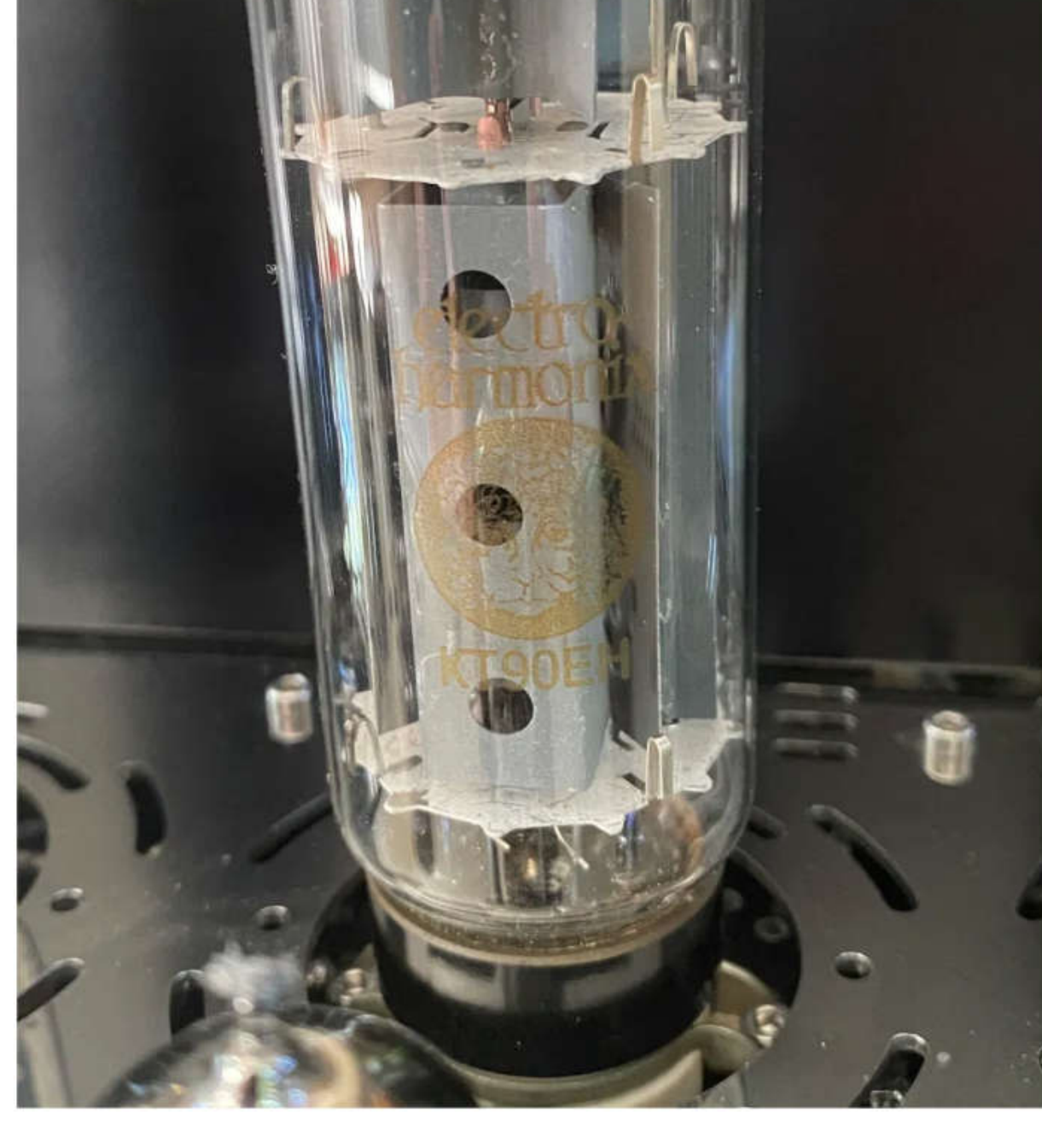


**And You May Find Yourself In Another Part Of The World**

Ever since plugging into the *Abyss Of Unsatisfied Audio Desire* about a year ago, my system has undergone lots of changes. Y'all know that feeling. You're cruising along with listening just FINE, then something happens. That little voice starts asking questions, "Something isn't quite right, I don't remember her voice having that much edge. Shouldn't I feel the bass drum a little more? I wonder what I could change to get my midrange to sound more like the *Von Schweikert/VAC* room at the last show..."

I was taught and have taken to heart the notion that putting a fine system together or upping the ante on an existing one should take a cue from classic *Lin* philosophy: start at the source and go forward. So after upgrading almost my entire analog front end to where I'm now really happy, the *Current* phase of sussing out amps has been fun and also a bit of an eye-opener.

**Scott Hull**, *Part-Time Audiophile* publisher, audio guru, and all-around *bon vivant*, lent me a pair of *Pass Labs* XA-60.8 monoblocks. These beauties exude everything there is about high-end home audio. If you look up sonic refinement in the encyclopedia there is a picture of a pair of XA-60.8s.



**And You May Find Yourself Behind the Wheel of a Large Automobile**

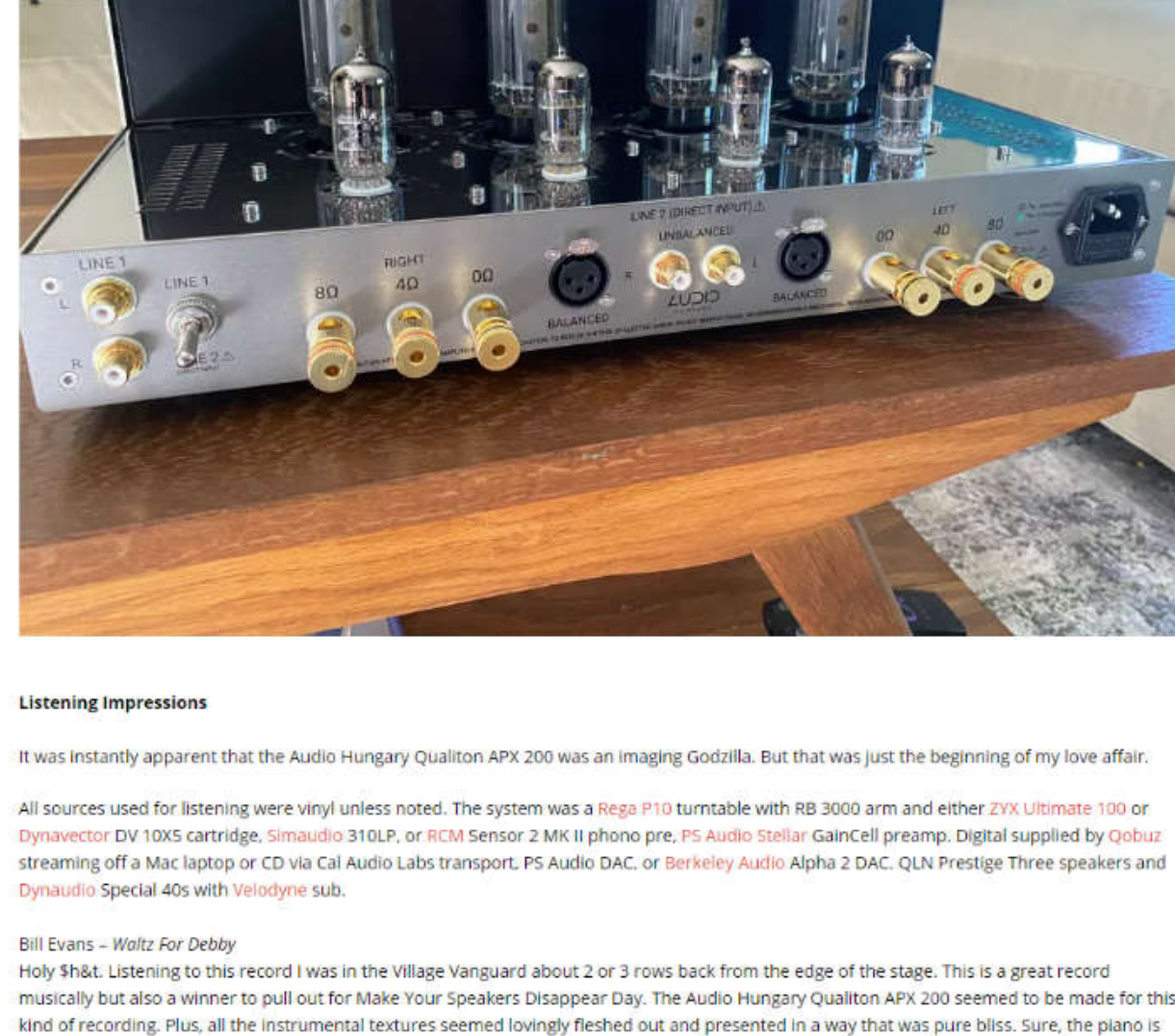
Enter *Dr. Strangelove*.

Calm down, I'm not making fun of my Cold War era looking, vacuum tubed friend, I'm just teasing and more importantly, the Audio Hungary Qualiton APX 200 sounds GREAT. Vacuum tubes how I love thee, let me count the ways. I didn't draw any serious conclusions about the amp until after it had been on for a few days, but I can tell you something special seemed to be happening even a few minutes after turn on.

Some amps sound downright UGLY when first turned on. I owned a *Krell* KSA-250 for a long time, it didn't take more than 30 mins or so after powering up to reach acceptable goodness and you could absolutely hear it snap into focus while playing music at about the 10-minute mark. My *Classé* CT-M600s in the mastering studio are kept on 24/7 cause they need about a day to come alive. The *Pass Labs* amps sounded confused for several hours until the gates of Nirvana opened.

While I acknowledge warming up amplifiers, I honestly can't say I'm a believer in burn-in or break-in for amplifiers as a thing to change the sound. Burn-in for stress testing at the factory to find any marginal components, yes. Break-in for speakers and phono cartridges, yes. Amplifiers, not so much. So sue me.

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**Listening Impressions**

It was instantly apparent that the Audio Hungary Qualiton APX 200 was an imaging Godzilla. But that was just the beginning of my love affair.

All sources used for listening were vinyl unless noted. The system was a *Rega P10* turntable with *RB 3000* arm and either *EVX Ultimate 100* or *Dynavector DV 10XS* cartridge, *Simaudio* 310LP, or *RCM* Sensor 2 MK II phono pre, *PS Audio Stellar* GainCell preamp. Digital supplied by *Qobuz* streaming off a Mac laptop or CD via *Cal Audio Labs* transport, *PS Audio DAC*, or *Berkeley Audio Alpha 2 DAC*, *QLN Prestige Three* speakers and *Dynaudio* Special 40s with *Velodyne* sub.

**Bill Evans – Waltz For Debby**  
Holy Shit. Listening to this record I was in the *Village Vanguard* about 2 or 3 rows back from the edge of the stage. This is a great record musically but also a winner to pull out for *Make Your Speakers Disappear* Day. The Audio Hungary Qualiton APX 200 seemed to be made for this kind of recording. Plus, all the instrumental textures seemed lovingly fleshed out and presented in a way that was pure bliss. Sure, the piano is almost hard right and *Scott LaFaro's* upright is hard left with *Paul Motian's* drum kit hovering in a wide arc between both speakers, but it works to create a very convincing illusion. Hyper-reality, 1962 style. I like it.

**Jeff Buckley – Grace**  
I don't consider this one an audiophile record per se, but I love the music and I consider this to be some of his best work. How a piece of gear presents some subtle aspect of personality, I'm intimately familiar with the inherent tone of most of the signal path that was used on this recording, which is separate from the excellent job *Andy Wallace* did on production and mixing. The Audio Hungary Qualiton presented the upper mid/lower treble region on Jeff's voice and drum kit cymbals with just enough of that dry and white-ish SSL mixing console and stereo bus compressor color without aggravating any additional edginess. While there is not much in the way of super-low bass information in these mixes, a good sounding component will present the bass and mid-bass information in a way that I'm familiar with. The APX 200 handled this very well and was a joy to hear.

**The Police – Synchronicity**  
I hadn't listened to this one in a minute so it was nice to hear it fresh through the Audio Hungary Qualiton APX 200. The low end on all of side 2 is huge for a recording of this era. The APX went deep and with lots of control over cuts like "Wrapped Around Your Finger" and "King Of Pain." This was also the era before a lot of mixes were compressed with a heavier hand, so things jump out of the speakers with high dynamic contrast. The amp was right there for all of it, without a hint of strain even when I had the system cranked.

**Suzanne Vega – Nine Objects Of Desire**  
I listened to the CD and it never disappoints. Engineer *Tchad Blake* is a long time fav of mine and I consider this to be some of his best work. Around the time this record was made I worked on several projects at *Sunset Sound Factory* where he and producer *Mitchell Fromm* had Studio B block booked for ages. It was always fun and educational to hang out and see some of *Tchad's* techniques for creating interesting spatial elements to his mixes. This album is a great example of that. The Audio Hungary Qualiton APX 200 rendered the super big, yet controlled low end on these mixes in a way that was almost shocking. All those layers and jedi level mix tricks were presented by the amp with a very defined arc in space. Dry things in the middle front and center, things on the slides and midpoints were fleshed out in a precise yet holographic way. This Hungarian tube creature is one of the few amps I've heard that puts space around a dry vocal that is panned up the middle. And even as the total balance on this recording skews to the warm side, there were loads of detail and texture presented.

**Tame Impala – The Slow Rush**  
*Keven Parker* sure knows how to write some nice tunes and craft sonically pleasing records that showcase LOFI/HIFI done the way I like to hear it done. This latest record is no different except possibly a hair slicker than the previous ones and IMO that's not a bad thing. Again, the Audio Hungary Qualiton presented these tunes with all the satisfying instrumental textures and image pictures I could want, I played this one moderately cranked with my morning latte. Wake up and smell the analog synth.

Over the weeks I cycled through all my usual suspects of records and a handful of CDs with a smattering of streaming. Time after time the old chestnuts gained new life from the Hungarian Tube Gods. Big, raging dynamic contrasts when that was on the recording. Intimate small scale stuff was seductive in a different way. The *Beach Boys Smile* in mono was sublime. I couldn't find a recording that didn't sound musically involving when played through the Audio Hungary Qualiton APX 200 amp. Something about the combination of textures, imaging, and dynamic contrasts hit me directly in the sweet spot. Very occasionally I wanted a slightly cleaner something to the high mid/low treble, but that was more due to a less than amazing recording, cause I pulled out a lot more than the audiophile jams.

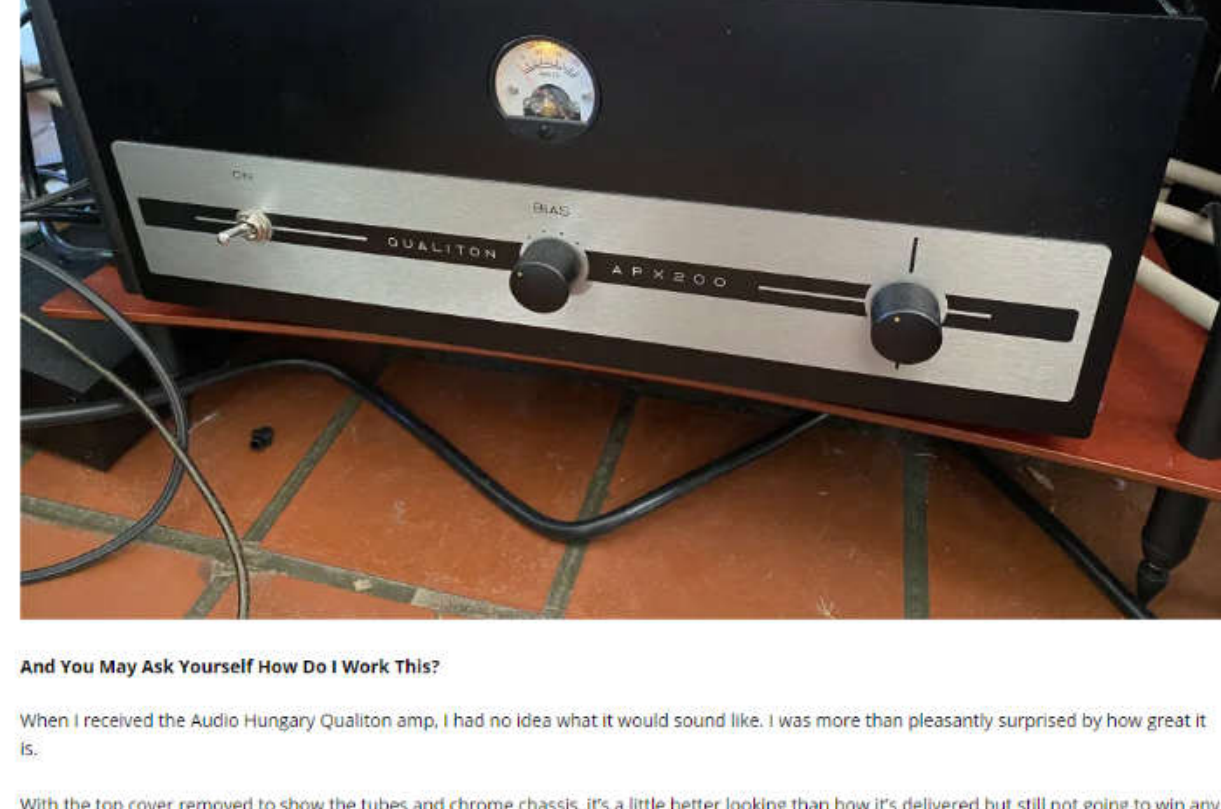
To be fair, the *Pass Labs* amps have a slight upper hand when it comes to the very lowest region of bass frequencies. Not so much as in quantity but more like a certain quality – a ruler flat response from the midbass down to the energy around the 30-40 Hertz range that audibly gives more weight to the rest of the lows. The XA-60.8s also have a slight sense of air/wing up high that lends extra detail to the sound without any additional edginess. Blacks are blacker. All that music emerges from an incredibly silent background when the *Pass* amps play music. In my book, those qualities are the very definition of refinement.

Yet the Audio Hungary Qualiton doesn't sound even slightly rolled off at either extreme, or noisy, or loose in the bass, it's just that the *Pass* amps open up that frequency window a little bit wider.

As far as the area from the mid-bass to the low treble, the Qualiton consistently presented more meat on the bones around the upper bass, but without sounding bloated or underdamped. The high-mid/low-treble area is like vividly visible wood grain on a fine piece of hand-oiled hardwood furniture. Then we have the *Pass* with its tasty, fresh sushi/mid-bass and smooth black lacquered ebony for the higher frequencies. Maybe the *Pass* is more accurate. Probably, but I can't really say. Does it even matter?

However, the XA60.8s cost more than two and a half times the price of the Audio Hungary Qualiton APX-200. I would have been shocked if the XA-60.8s didn't sound more refined in a number of areas. And they look incredibly badass, so there's that.

Everybody has different listening preferences and of course, system synergy is all-important, so taking that into account, I will say that in my system I liked the presentation of dynamics, midrange tonality, and imaging more when listening to the APX 200. I liked the low bass, the control, the detail, and the general seamless quality of the *Pass*. I could very happily live with either.



**And You May Ask Yourself How Do I Work This?**

When I received the Audio Hungary Qualiton amp, I had no idea what it would sound like. I was more than pleasantly surprised by how great it is.

With the top cover removed to show the tubes and chrome chassis, it's a little better looking than how it's delivered but still not going to win any beauty contests. I'm fine with the look and so are several of my audiophile friends. The little round meter in the front, which was previously used to set bias, now simply verifies the proper function of each power tube.

The amp seems extremely well built, has balanced and single-ended inputs, and very high-quality binding posts for both 8 ohm and 4 ohm taps on the output transformers. It has balanced and unbalanced inputs. It also has an additional unbalanced and switchable input that routes to a front panel volume pot for use in a single source system without the need for an separate preamplifier. I tried it and it sounds great being fed directly from a phono stage.

But the real news is that this is a 100 watt per channel, well designed and built, pure tube signal path design with all the revered sonic qualities of a very high-end and typically very expensive power amp, yet can be had for the asking price of about \$4,700.

Boom. You're welcome.

The Audio Hungary Qualiton APX 200 will be at home in systems with a phono cartridge or DAC costing twice its price. It's a steal. Highly recommended.

