



• Tube Headphone Amplifier Mal Valve HeadAmp Three Mk. IV



Highly electrifying!

Mal Valve is a small, sophisticated manufacturer of high-end equipment that develops and produces magnetostatic loudspeakers and headphones in addition to high-quality tube equipment. Thanks to this expertise, the HeadAmp Three Mk. IV has become something extraordinary.

If anyone in Germany knows anything about tubes and electrostats, it's Dieter Mallach. The hi-fi veteran from Essen develops and manufactures tube sculptures at the company's location in an almost rural part of Essen, high above the Ruhr River, that stand out for their well-thought-out technology, solid construction, and somewhat less for their design finesse.



- To eliminate any risk of confusion between the standard Stax connector and the adjustable polarization voltage connector, Mal Valve has placed a flap in front of the adjustable output

The HeadAmp Three Mk. IV is the fourth evolutionary stage of the „small“ headphone amplifier from Mal Valve. The HeadAmp One is a full-blown tube power amplifier with a transformer (head driver) adapted to the respective headphones and the HeadAmp Five, of which there are so far some almost production-ready prototypes. By the way, owners of older devices can always have their devices overhauled and, if necessary, brought up to date at Mal Valve. An update of the previous HeadAmp Three versions to the current Mk. IV version is possible without any problems.

Features

The HeadAmp Three Mk. IV is currently the smallest headphone amplifier in the company's portfolio. Small is relative because the device comes in a full-size format. Behind the almost half-meter wide front lies a housing crammed with electronics. Among them are eight tubes alone. Especially the four large 6V6 beam power tetrodes, which are responsible for the power amplification, take up quite a bit of space. They are mounted horizontally and are responsible for much of the dissipation heat that the amplifier produces during operation. However, the four EF 184s and the two ECC 81s that serve as the voltage amplification and driver stages also take up space and generate heat. A large area is reserved for the volume control, which Mal Valve has implemented as a relay-

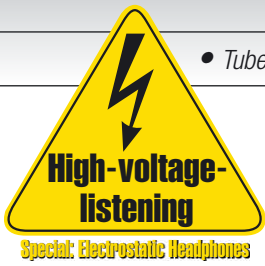


switched resistor network. Then there's the control logic for switching between inputs and outputs, a power supply with exceptionally elaborately regulated supply voltages for the individual sections, and a high-voltage cascade that can deliver a polarization voltage of 500 to 1300 volts to electrostatic headphones. Finally, there are transformers that balance asymmetrical input signals for amplification by the fully balanced circuitry, and the output transformers for supplying „normal“ headphones.

The HeadAmp Three Mk. IV offers two balanced and two unbalanced inputs for line signals. There are two balanced 4-pin XLR jacks and two unbalanced 6.3 mm stereo jacks on the rear panel for connecting headphones. There are three „Stax“ connectors for electrostatic headphones: one with fixed and one with variable polarization voltage on the front, and one with fixed polarization voltage on the rear. Mal Valve has added a flap to the variable polarization voltage port to avoid confusion with the port with the standard 580-volt polarization voltage. The arrangement of the headphone ports can also be made differently if desired.

- Besides the inputs, Mal Valve has also moved various headphone jacks to the back of the device





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• The main innovation of the Mk.IV version is the electrostatic connection with adjustable polarization voltage. The regulator sits on the back

Operation

The polarization voltage of the variable connection can be set with a rotary control on the back. The rest of the operation happens with the help of buttons and a display on the front. In addition to setting the inputs, outputs, and volume, you can also adjust the balance, the output levels for dynamic or magnetostatic headphones or adjust the display brightness here. The output levels of the connections for electrostatic headphones are fixed. You can also operate the entire device via the optionally available remote control.

Sound

I was lucky enough to hear an extensive range of headphones on the HeadAmp Three Mk. IV. What kind of sound the Mal Valve can conjure up in conjunction with well-known dynamic headphones and magnetostats is hard to describe. Somehow it seems to charge the music. Tense passages are rendered even more exciting; relaxed passages sound even more relaxed. Transients, timbres, coarse and fine dynamics are on an extremely high level. At the same time, the HeadAmp Three never gives rise to the suspicion of artificial sounding. The operation of electrostats is a chapter of its own. The Stax connection

with variable polarization voltage opens up new sonic dimensions with some models. If „Staxes“ run optimally with the intended polarization voltage of 580 volts - only with the Omega SR-007 Reference MK2 did I have the impression that a somewhat higher polarization voltage did it well and made

it sound even a shade more lively - HiFiMan Jade and Shangri-La jr. blossomed with slightly higher voltage, whereby also the headphone amplifier in itself contributed something to the better sound. Especially the Jade II shows that it is sonically under-challenged by its standard amplifier. I experienced a veritable metamorphosis with the MrSpeakers Voce, which hardly pulled me out of my chair when operated according to Stax specifications. However, with around 1200 volts at the membranes, it sounded completely different and wowed me with a fireworks display of dynamics, a sweeping groove, and an almost infinite wealth of detail.

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• The HeadAmp Three Mk. IV is built as clean as a whistle. Instead of showing off with its powerful output tubes, it hides them horizontally in the modest cabinet

Mal Valve HeadAmp Three Mk. VI

■ Price:	um 6.250 Euro
■ Distribution:	MalValve, Essen
■ Internet:	www.malvalve.de
■ Dimensions (W x H x D in mm):	483 x 100 x 315
■ Weight:	11 kg
■ Finish:	Black
■ Suitable for:	High-End
■ Connections:	
Inputs:	symmetrical 2 x XLR, asymmetrical 2 x Cinch
Headphone outputs:	2 x XLR 4-pole symmetrical, 2 x 6.3 mm stereo jack, 3 x Stax, 1 of which with adjustable polarization voltage

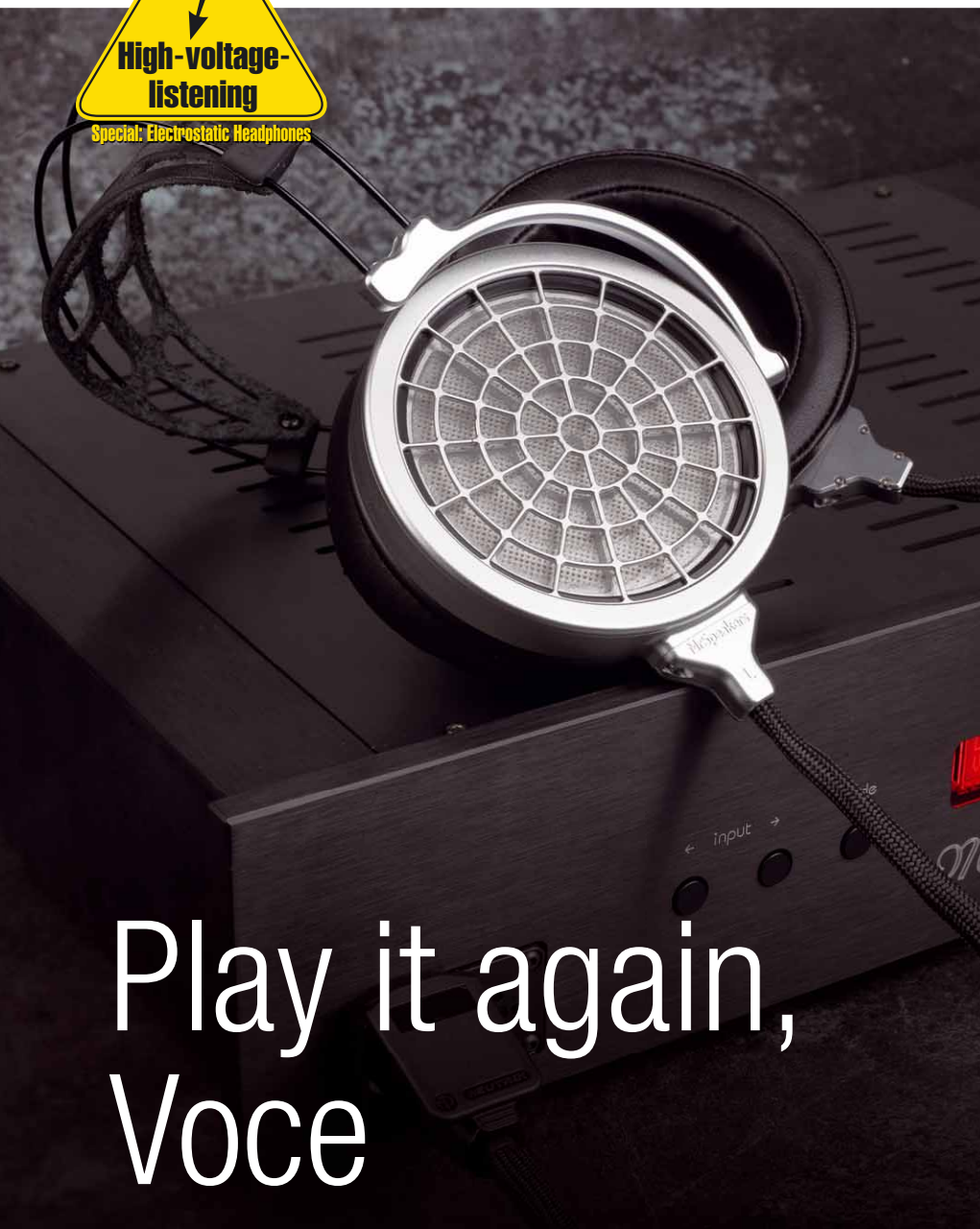
■ Rating:	Sound	70%	1+
	Equipment	15%	1,2
	Operation	15%	1,2

The Mal Valve HeadAmp Three Mk. IV is undoubtedly one of the best headphone amplifiers in the world today. For users of electrostatic headphones, it offers the unique opportunity to trim them to new heights of sonic performance thanks to the adjustable polarization voltage.

EAR IN 1/2020 **1+**
The Headphone Magazine Reference Class
Tube headphone amplifier
Price/Performance **good**



Special: Electrostatic Headphones



volts, the sound captures me in a completely different way than during the first listening test. Tonally, it remains neutral and clean but now immediately sucks me into the music with energizing dynamics and liveliness. I have the impression that it plays with even more detail, paints tonal colors even more purely, and differentiates even more cleanly in terms of subtle dynamics than in „Stax mode.“ At the Mal Valve, the Voce becomes an experience and plays on par with the world's best electrostats. I believe this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

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Play it again, Voce

The best friendships often don't get off to an easy start. That's what happened to Rick and Louis in „Casablanca.“ It was the same for MrSpeakers' Voce and me – where instead of Ilsa, the Mal Valve HeadAmp Three MkIV took over the mediating role.

Can I retest a pair of headphones because they turn out to excel under special conditions? I was torn when I heard the MrSpeakers Voce at AudioVista on the Mal Valve HeadAmp Three Mk. IV. The Voce played much better here than I remembered it from my review in EAR IN 3/2018 - and, of course, rated it accordingly. The secret is that the Voce gains in sound with a higher polarization voltage, as the Mal-Valve headphone amplifier offers on its variable Stax connector.

What to do? MrSpeakers does not provide an amplifier to drive the Voce, so it relies on the widely used Stax standard, which leaves the Voce playing below its capabilities. And now, with the HeadAmp Three Mk. IV, there is an amplifier that pushes it to the limit. I think that is worth consideration.

The MrSpeakers Voce impresses with excellent manufacturing quality and excellent fit. With a polarization voltage of about 1200

MrSpeakers Voce mit Mal Valve HeadAmp Three Mk. IV

■ Price:	3.400 Euro
■ Distribution:	AudioNext, Essen
■ Internet:	www.digital-highend.de
■ Typ:	Over-Ear
■ Connection:	Stax
■ Frequency Response:	k.A.
■ Bias:	1200 V
■ Efficiency:	k.A.
■ Construction:	open, electrostatic
■ Cable:	interchangeable
■ Cable routing:	on both sides
■ Weight:	400 g
■ suitable for:	HiFi, High End
■ Equipment:	box with headphone stand

■ Rating:	Sound	50%	1-
	Fit	20%	1,3
	Equipment	20%	1,8
	Design	10%	1,4

With a higher polarization voltage, the MrSpeakers Voce plays on another level. In combination with the Mal Valve HeadAmp Three, it belongs to the current world-class.

EAR IN 1/2020 **1,2**
 The Headphone Magazine Reference Class
Electrostatic Over-Ear Headphones
 Price/Performance **good**