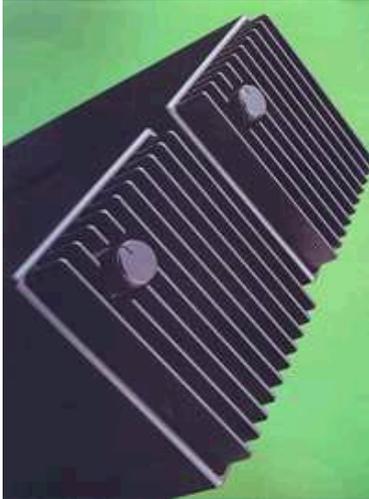


The Crimson 640 Mono Power Amplifiers

by Chris Binns

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Bad timing. I can say with some degree of conviction that my academic career did not get off to the best possible start, due in no small part to the school I was attending becoming co-educational. Am I shifting blame? I don't think so. The sudden appearance of a hundred or so girls (where previously there had been none to speak of) somewhat dented my enthusiasm for academic pursuits, particularly as it happened to coincide with the hormonal frenzy that was adolescence. Thus studying for O levels was knocked even further down the chart of teenage pursuits to a highly irresponsible number four, with music occupying the number three spot. At number two, there was a struggle between strategic planning to maximise on number one, (chasing girls) and, wait for it, hi fi. But the almost continual fascination of imagining (and of course trying to find out) what might be under Tracey Lee-Can's skirt was occasionally usurped with thoughts about amplifiers or loudspeakers, and, repeatedly, I distinctly recall, by a small add in *Wireless World* for a company called Krimson Electric.

Before I am accused of being the teenage nerd, may I just say that having the best (and certainly the loudest) hi fi system around did actually afford me an advantage in befriending girls, and lets face it - I needed all the help I could get. Listening to music became something of a religious experience in my bedroom, due in no small part to the collection of homemade amplifiers and loudspeakers sounding considerably more impressive than the average schoolboys hi fi system. Of course, having a long suffering father who was also keen on hi fi helped considerably*, as there was always the possibility that when he got a new piece of equipment I might be in line for an upgrade. And there were also numerous DIY projects on the go at any given time - a lot of my hi fi was home grown. There was also the power thing. I think that both my father and I hankered after a powerful solid state amplifier, so the Crimson advertisement got us both thinking. The company was producing amplifier modules which offered a cost effective method of achieving one hundred Watts of audio power, something of a holy grail to an unenlightened teenager, and besides, I wanted to build something a little more elegant than the collection of valve amps that I was using. I had already tried my hand at building a high power solid state amplifier from scratch, with spectacularly disastrous results. For my father, the attraction lay in having an amplifier with enough power to play 'full on' organ music at realistic levels, through a pair of inefficient IMF transmission line loudspeakers - the resident Quad 303 was struggling. Sadly, neither of us ventured down this route, and it was to be twenty five years before I finally came face to face with Crimson amplification. Still, there at the start, and still there now!

Krimson Elektrik was started by Brian Powell in the mid seventies to produce power amplifier kits, which proved popular for both hi fi and (I believe) industrial applications. The end of the decade saw the production of the first fully built (as opposed to kit) amplification with the 500 series. They also sensibly dropped the K in favour of the correct spelling. Easily distinguished by their long thin casework, the other notable feature was the battery powered pre-amplifier; together with the power amps they offered real value for money performance.

* Long suffering - I worked out that I could afford to 'buy' his old Revox G 36 at twenty five pence a month over about ten years. Quite rightly he had little faith in this argument, but I think it persuaded him that it was a good idea to keep it in the family household. I've still got it. Not to mention the various amplifiers and loudspeakers that he helped me to build.....



The 600 series continues this trend, while distribution and marketing is now handled by Virtual Reality systems who are also responsible for, amongst others, DNM products, so it is no coincidence to find slit foil capacitors and solid core cable within the 640 monoblocks reviewed here. Rated at 200 Watts into 8 Ohms with considerably more available into lower impedances, they do not look like a heavy weight contender. Aesthetically, the Crimsons are discrete and well finished, perhaps a little bit utilitarian, but have a certain degree of charm due to their compact dimensions. Retaining the long thin tube construction from the 500 series they are fronted by a finned heatsink into which the power switch is recessed, along with a status indicator. Normally green when powered up, a change of colour to orange indicates that the internal fan is running, while red means that the amplifier has shut itself down to prevent overheating. There is also further protection in the form of current and DC offset sensing rendering the units pretty much bomb proof.

Internal construction is neat and well laid out, with the main amplifier board bolted to the front, the twin toroidal transformers and reservoir caps taking up most of the remaining space. The small fan is not that efficient as it cannot vent to the outside, as to allow this would involve changing the whole casework. From what I gather, circuitry has been refined over the years but is similar to the original design from the seventies, a policy that has served, amongst others, Naim Audio well through the years. The output stage utilises two pairs of high current complementary bi-polar devices that run quite cool under quiescent conditions; no claims are made for class A operation. Back panel connections are straight forward enough with parallel phono inputs to facilitate daisy chaining, while two pairs of 4mm sockets allow bi-wiring. Mains input is via a standard IEC connection.

What with equipment coming and going for photography, I was without power amplification when the Crimsons arrived, so they were thrown in at the deep end and literally shoved into my system. Small enough to carry one in each hand, this was a blessedly simple operation that was conducted without the usual grunts and stabbing back pains that normally accompany the shifting of power amps.

Running from a valve pre-amp that does not favour the low input impedance of solid state power amps, and driving a pair of nasty 3 ohm loudspeakers (with a heavy dose of inductance thrown in for good measure) I was not expecting earth shattering results. I was also unusually cautious with the volume control, a little out of character I know, but the 640's did not look beefy enough for a 'Saturday night' session.

Well, appearances can be deceptive. The Crimsons confounded my expectations by sounding impressive from the start, and after a couple of days of running began to take control of the system. The first thing I noticed was that they seem to relish working hard, and blossomed when driving difficult loudspeakers, sounding confident and authoritative under such conditions. Possessing an almost Naim like confidence at the bottom end, they suffered little of the bloated sluggishness that powerful amps sometimes bring to the party. Rock and pop music was conveyed with good rhythmic drive and an agility that made listening exciting, particularly so with vinyl. It was a combination that I found hard to resist. The 640's make you want to turn the volume up; not to compensate for anything lacking at lower volumes, but just because they love doing it. Believe me, there's absolutely no hint of reticence here.

Normally this kind of performance does not work so well with more gentle music like string quartets, but the Crimsons have enough subtlety to make those just as enjoyable. Mid and top performance is open and sweet with good spatial presentation, and while not possessing the tactile qualities that some expensive amplifiers are capable of (the Lavardin amps spring to mind) they cover their tracks well enough, and above all avoid strangling the musical performance. There is a new Naxos disc of English String Miniatures which I bought at about the same time that the 640's arrived, and playing this proved a real pleasure. String tone was good, with plenty of the detail and vibrancy so essential for this music to work, and although the sound didn't project from the loudspeakers quite as well as it does with some of the valve amplifiers I have used, it was very satisfying to listen to. In other words, they manage to convey the spirit of the music well enough for you to forget about any minor shortcomings

I was not in any hurry to alter anything in the system, but felt that I ought to try a more representative pre-amplifier. At this stage the distributors suggested I try a DNM unit, a £2100 Primus 3c. For the record, there is a Crimson pre-amp available in the shape of the 610c, but at X450 it's probably out of its depth with the 640's. I gather there is a new model on its way in the autumn. The basic DNM option would be the 3A Start at £1300 including phono stage, which is worth bearing in mind as the Primus worked wonderfully with the Crimsons, particularly with vinyl.



I spent the best part of a day playing records varying between material that really should grace the editors 'to die from' list (Supertramp Crime Of The Century) through to Elgar string quartets. It was all very enjoyable, and I admit that I did at times get the 640's hot enough to cut out. The addition of a fan heater blowing cold air in front of them, whilst not recommended, soon sorted that particular problem out. Bear in mind though, that I was playing music at highly antisocial levels into a bastard of a load - not an every day occurrence for most people. Let's be frank - the 640's could easily hide behind thick aluminium panels with an impressive logo on the front and miles of heat-sinking, never thermally trip, and probably sound worse to boot. They could probably double the selling price as well, and still be competitive.

But that's missing the point. The 640's are great sounding amplifiers. They are adaptable enough to work well with a wide range of equipment, (just think of the possibilities in an AV system ...) and just happen to be able to drive almost anything, with enthusiasm. For me, however, their biggest attraction lies with the fact that using them was just so enjoyable. Listening was never reduced to an academic procedure to be endured in the pursuit of review copy. There are amplifiers (at a price) that can outperform the Crimsons in specific areas, but there are not many designs that can achieve the right balancing act to make listening to such a wide variety of music such fun. The fact that the 640's do it for thirteen hundred pounds a pair makes them a very attractive proposition, and something of a bargain.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Crimson 640 Mono Power Amplifiers

Power output: 200 Watts into 8 Ohms
Input sensitivity: 0.775V for full output
Frequency response: 10Hz - 40KHz +/- 1dB
Dimensions (WxHxD): 116 x 95 x 364 mm
Total Weight: 7Kg each.
Price: £650 each.

Distributor: Virtual Reality
Tel. (44)(0)1277 227355
Email. info@virtualr.demon.co.uk

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