



David Price remembers Lecson's striking cylindrical AP3 II power amp and its multi-coloured AC1 partnering pre-amp.

Hi-fi isn't just about listening to music. Of course, sounding good has to be its primary function, but it also serves an aesthetic purpose too. There's no shortage of equipment that fulfils one of these roles perfectly well, but rarely do you find something that excels in both, like Lecson's legendary AC1/AP3 II pre/power.

Back in the mid-Seventies, hi-fi design was in crisis. Most British products were utilitarian to say the least, while Japanese electronics were usually as over the top as Gary Glitter in maximum stage garb. Until the advent of the Lecson, that is. With electronics by Bob Stuart and industrial design by Allan Boothroyd, the AC1/AP3 II looked more stunning than Farah Fawcett in hot pants. Undoubtedly one of the most visually arresting designs of its time - or ever, for that matter - it predated Bang and Olufsen's famously sparse, elegant brand of modernism by several years.

While everyone else's pre-amplifier was either a dull black box with cheap looking switches or an aluminium-clad behemoth with an array of huge knobs, Lecson's AC1 dared to be different. A sleek planar design, its 11 rainbow-coloured sliders controlled volume, balance, input selection, tape monitors, bass, treble, headphones, stereo or quadrasonic operation, high and low filters and power on/off.

Inside, things were no less innovative. The five inputs were switched by FETs via reed relays, not to prevent the frequent pops and clicks that many contemporary designs made when changing input, but for longevity. As the tracks on conventional switches - even gold-plated

ones - invariably oxidise, Lecson decided to do the switching electronically. The pre-amp's flexible filtering options were also said to be designed for low transient distortion, and the tone controls were automatically by-passed when set to zero.

The AP3 II was Lecson's top of the range power amplifier, offering a claimed minimum of 100watts per side into 8ohms. Although Boothroyd's industrial design is striking by any standards, this component's beauty was more than skin deep. Its distinctive metal canister construction was ideal for dissipating heat, as Musical Fidelity's Anthony Michaelson subsequently confirmed with his X-A200 monoblocs.

Unlike most mid-Seventies transistor amps, the AP3 II was designed to be good at real-world music making rather than achieving amazing measured specifications. Whereas contemporary Japanese super-amps used shed loads of negative feedback to get massive power levels with infinitesimally low distortion, Lecson took the other route. Instead, the circuitry was designed to be as linear as possible before negative feedback was applied. This meant overall feedback levels were kept right down, making for a highly natural sound.

To help it along the way, the AP3 got an extremely beefy toroidal power transformer with unusually small smoothing capacitors, plus oversized, fuse-protected 30Amp output transistors and an internal thermostatic cooling fan. Together, these meant the amp could handle the full energy of the power supply without blowing, thus obviating the need for sound-degrading protection circuits. Yet the output stage was still protected - in the

event of a short, the transistor fuses would blow to protect it.

Together the AC1/AP3 II sound surprisingly close to a good modern transistor amplifier. Lively, open, clean and immediately musical, this combo avoids the showy, artificial feel of much Japanese transistor exotica, but still manages to do the biz as far as smoothness, detail and neutrality are concerned. While not as tuneful as, say, the latest Naim NAP250, it's far sweeter and smoother. Likewise, today's top integrations like Sonneteer's Alabaster are more transparent and refined, but not much. Indeed, for a 20-year-old design, there's a remarkable smoothness to the treble and tautness to the bass, plus a musicality that will never go out of fashion.

The Lecson family didn't stop with the AC1/AP3 II. There was the FM1 tuner too, blessed with the same stunning visuals as the AC1, which also came with the DR1, a totally out-of-space optional digital read-out module. Then there were the AP1 and AP1X power amps which had similar looks to the AP3 but lower power (the AP1 put out 50watts, the beefier AP1X 75watts). Pay £250 to £350 for a good AC1/AP3 II - a lot of money, but remember that when new back in 1977 the pair cost £440.

The Lecson team were a talented bunch who went on to even greater things. Hi-fi trainspotters may know that Allan and Bob went on to form Meridian, while Lecson's Technical Director, Stan Curtis, set the world alight (figuratively speaking) with his seminal Cambridge CD1 back in 1985 and now heads a certain 'speaker company called Wharfedale.