

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Trilogy 908/992 pre/power

by Jason Kennedy



Trilogy Audio makes great amplifiers in the UK, and puts them in world-class casework. Until recently, this meant the products made by Nic Poulson and Simon Dart were relatively expensive, but this latest combination of a half-width 908 line preamplifier and similarly sized 992 mono power amps brings the entry price down to a more sensible

level – still serious, but rather more approachable. Trilogy could have taken the traditional approach and used bent steel boxes with a slab of aluminium on the front, saving a fair amount of cost in the process. But that's not the way that the company operates; attention to detail is clearly paramount in design and execution. There's a nod to affordability with a folded cover, but the 908 and 992s have softly radiused

corners and are fashioned from solid aluminium. These pieces may not be massive, but they are built to a standard that few surpass, and the machining on the power amp especially is very classy indeed

The casework does little to give away the technology used inside these components, but in fact both have valves onboard to provide amplification. That being said, the 908 preamplifier uses only one valve to produce gain, the rest of the hybrid design is resolutely solid state. There are very few examples of completely hidden glass power in our world, but it has always been the Trilogy approach; the company takes its international safety certification *extremely* seriously.

That's not all that distinguishes Trilogy's creations; the other common factor is extensive control software, and the sheer variety of set-up options border on the confusing. Thankfully, the menus and sub-menus are all pretty straight forward once you get to grips with the multi-functional nature of the buttons and knob (encoder) on the front of the 908. You expect this sort of functionality out of brands like Linn, Meridian, and Cambridge Audio, but that a company as comparatively small as Trilogy can provide such flexibility on its entry-level preamplifier is remarkable.

Trilogy lets you alter the 908's 'home page' – the information displayed in normal use – which can be set to 'input', 'volume', 'time', or the Trilogy logo. You can set different home pages for operation and standby, too. Other options include input naming, the ability to set inputs in unity gain (film mode for mixed stereo/surround systems), timer on and off, and both maximum and start volume settings. One thing that I haven't encountered outside of the Trilogy range is PIN coding; a security system that 'bricks' the 908 in the event of theft. This is an idea taken from the computer world of course, but as your average 'tea leaf' won't spot this until he's swiped your system, it's not the sort of thing that would have me turning off the intruder alarm.

The 908 has six RCA pairs for its line inputs, plus record and main outputs using the same connectors. The rear panel also sports a pair of RJ45 sockets for dedicated 'TASLink BUS' control of attached components. These not only allow on/off switching of all attached Trilogy components with one button, but can establish the status of said components and flag up any problems. The six LEDs on the back are used by dealers for BUS-related diagnostics.

Under the lid, the preamplifier circuit is a single-ended, Class A affair without feedback. Amplification is provided by a single ECC88 triode that Trilogy considers to be good for "thousands of hours of service". There are separate transformers for control and signal and the power supplies for the audio side are shunt regulated types, an approach that's highly regarded in valve circles.

The 992 monoblock power amps produce 100 watts each and also incorporate an ECC88 in the amplification chain. Here, this double triode is used to provide voltage gain only, something that valves are particularly good at, while current is provided in two stages by solid-state devices. A FET delivers the first and most important Watt, the one you listen to most of the time, and bi-polar devices back it up when more grip is required. So it's a hybrid amp in more ways than one. The machined front panel acts as a thermal and mechanical anchor point for the output devices; its large fins getting rid of heat without vibrating along with the music.

The 992's power supply consists of a toroidal transformer based linear supply allied to a choke, which is a substantial transformer in its own right and irons out the supply to the Mundorf reservoir caps. These sit in an aluminium and stainless steel case with a single pair of speaker cable terminals and an RCA phono input socket. The only other 'furniture' on the rear are TASLink sockets and some more LEDs. The 992 is a satisfying little brick to behold, one that takes the small is beautiful ethos very much to heart.

I gave the Trilogy amps the task of driving a pair of PMC fact.8 loudspeakers with a Resolution Audio Cantata MC as the source and Townshend Audio cables for most of the connections (see more on this below). This was a task that they took to with no shortage of enthusiasm, delivering excellent musical flow regardless of material and digging out emotional expression with particular flair. On Schubert's Trout Quintet [Alfred Brendel with the Forellnquintett, Philips], the timbre of the stringed instruments is very clear, especially on violins, and the piece is well layered front to back, but it could have more weight, and the piano is a little bit distant. Oodles of detail makes up for this to an extent, but with a bit more listening it became clear that the system as a whole was not gelling. So I removed the length of Chord Sarum TA interconnect that usually sits between pre and power amps in my system and substituted another Townshend interconnect, the DCT300 version. This calmed down the presentation and brought out the muscle in the bass. It lost some scale in the process, but the balance was far more even. Now the Trilogys had excellent drive allied to the ability to bring you closer to the music. This is more than likely related to the presence of valves in the chain, but these amps do not sound 'valvey': they don't sound obviously 'transistor' either, so both elements are working together to deliver a coherent, even handed result.

The 992s power amps do not have the meatiest of low ends, but they are very strong on acoustics and precision of tempo, they never sound hurried. It's not a 'reach out and grab you' sound, but one that rewards attention; a connoisseur's presentation. It's revealing, but not analytical; on Patricia ►

▶ Barber's 'A Touch of Trash' [*Modern Cool*, Premonition], it's easy to follow the various instruments and the 'thickener' on the double bass is more obvious than usual, but you are drawn into the song and Barber's slightly over large voice recording. And when the engineers have done their best to produce a natural sounding result, the effect is powerful. This happened with Brendel's *The Complete Beethoven Sonatas* [Decca]. Here, the 'Piano Sonata No. 16 in G major, Op. 31/1: 1. Allegro vivace' was even more delightful than ever. The combination of low noise, good image depth, and a truly remarkable bit of playing revealed the full radiance of the work to a powerful degree: a tear-inducing degree to be honest. I am on even more of a Brendel tip since hearing him through the Trilogys, so you might have to get used to it!

Contrasting the 992 power amps with my Valvet A3.5 Class A monoblocks made for a big change. The latter produce a considerably bigger and softer sound, with less focus, but also sweeter highs and greater ease. As ever with this game, synergy is key, but this exercise did reveal that the Trilogy power amps have good focus and leading edge definition. In some respects they are not that well matched to the PMC speakers I use, because both elements are extremely open and it takes a decent recording to not have its shortcomings revealed. That said, as the Beethoven Sonatas demonstrate, when everything comes together, you have a recipe for musical nirvana.

My reference components are, if anything, on the cool side of neutral, and this quality was enhanced when the 908 and 992 were added to the mix. In the past I have had great results with Trilogy amps and Bowers & Wilkins 802 Diamonds but sadly they are no longer in my armoury, so I tried the ATC challenge with a pair of SCM 11 stand mount monitors. This proved to be a surprisingly happy pairing, despite the notably power-hungry nature of the speaker; the system eliciting excellent reverb from John Campbell's 'Down in the Hole' [*Howlin Mercy*, Elektra]. The sound was crisp and polished, and provided fabulous sonic vistas in which the percussion in particular made its character clear. Extension in the bass was limited, but this is not a large loudspeaker. I also became aware of how much volume control precision the 908 offers via its remote. It's easy to exact single decibel steps, which is not something you can say of all infra-red remotes.

I also tried an alternative line source – a Naim UnitiQute 2 – to see if a bit of extra warmth at the front end would balance matters. It certainly did, and was arguably a better system match than my reference Resolution Audio. Playing some Arvo Pärt, it became clear that I needed a bit more gain than the Trilogy 908 was set up to deliver (-20dB), but the menu-driven preamplifier was surprisingly intuitive, and it proved very easy to change this parameter. The manual shows all the options, which makes it seem a little daunting – but in practice, it's *almost* twerp proof. ▶





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Trilogy 908 Preamplifier

Valve complement: One ECC88 valve.

Analogue inputs: 6x single-ended RCA inputs

Analogue outputs: 1x single-ended output, 1x tape RCA

Bandwidth: 10Hz – 30kHz +/-0.5dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 78 x 220 x 385mm

Weight: 10kg (packed)

Price: £2,095

Trilogy 992 Mono Amplifier

Valve complement: One ECC88.

Analogue inputs: 1x single-ended RCA input

Analogue outputs: One pair 5-way binding posts

Power output: 100W @8 Ohms, 160W @4 Ohms.

Bandwidth: 10Hz – 30kHz +/-0.5dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 78 x 220 x 385mm

Weight: 10kg (packed)

Price: £2,395 each

Manufacturer: Trilogy Audio

URL: www.trilogyaudio.com

UK Distributor: Symmetry

Tel: +44(0)1727 865488

URL: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

▶ Getting back to Pärt [*De Profundis*, ECM], the system revealed monster bass from the organ. It's a remarkable piece of music overall; you can't beat Arvo when it comes to gothic levels of misery, and the Naim/Trilogy/ATC combo really freed up the music's inner gloom! The Naim proved to be a muscular, earthy sounding source compared to the Cantata, one that delivered a physical and engaging soundstage that sounded really excellent at full chat. Going back to the PMC speakers, the sound didn't change dramatically in character, but you could hear a lot more and the scale was greatly improved. This system added more body to the Brendel Beethoven piano mentioned earlier, but lost a little of its magic in the process; sonic transcendence is nothing to do with a comfortable balance, it would seem.

I admire these amplifiers for their combination of build quality, understated flexibility, and their ability to make the most of a great piece of music. I did ask why Trilogy built this range as monoblocks rather than a stereo power amp, and it comes down to the fact that Nic Poulson likes monophonic amplifiers, and that he feels there is a market for high quality, compact monoblocks. He may be right, but it's not an area where there's a lot of competition. Regardless of whether a big stereo or two smaller mono amps is the way to go, with this Trilogy combo, you do get remarkable transparency for the price, and even if they didn't look and sound so good, and didn't have as many bells and whistles, I'd still want to give them the little house room they require. Great things do come in small packages, after all! +