

Brian D's Naim Hi-Fi to Ella Mk1 EL34 P-P

I must thank Brian D for providing this compressive article on how he came to buy the Ella amplifier and the work he has put into writing it. And not forgetting NickG for building this kit for Brian. Many Thanks.
<David>

Introduction

I've produced this set of photographs and text to present the story of my purchase of the Ella kit valve amplifier from Diy HiFi Supply. This is a very substantial piece of audio equipment and in my humble opinion represents quite a bargain. I will describe how it sounds later, but first I will explain why and how it came about that I bought The Ella kit amplifier.

From Naim to Ella

When this all began my system was an all Naim setup (CD, CDPS, 32.5/snaps/160, SBL's). I was not happy. It all started when I realised I was not listening to music anymore. I'd owned a Naim amplifier since 1985. During the 90's this turned into an all Naim system when I changed to CD and added Naim SBL loudspeakers to the system. I realised just after Christmas 2003 that for roughly 12 months I hadn't played a CD from start to finish, I wasn't listening to music anymore. I came to the realisation that I wasn't getting much pleasure from listening to music so I decided to do something about it. My starting point was to sell my Naim CDX/CDPS to raise some extra funds, parting with this wasn't a problem because I have an old Rotel 965BX Discrete which I think is very good, and besides, I haven't been using the CDX much! My plan was to use the Rotel as a source, find a new amplifier and speakers and then upgrade the CD player last. Quite the opposite to how I have done this before. I need to get more from CD to get me listening to and enjoying music again.

Where do I start looking for a new amplifier ? Well, every time I have been at HiFi shows I have been impressed by what I have heard from systems with a valve amp at the heart of them. I decided to investigate valve amps. The research began in earnest during Feb. 2004. I started by looking around on the Internet, reading up about valve amplifiers in general. It's been an education. My first port of call, and now a regular haunt of mine, is the World Audio Design forum.

This site is frequented by people who love valve amplifiers and who are more than ready to pass on their knowledge. While posting my questions, a contributor to the forum, NickG, made it clear to me that if I buy a kit and can't build it, he would be prepared to do it for me. Even better, Nick was prepared to take on the task of teaching me how to build a valve amp, this even after I told him I can't even solder! I really am a beginner. Nick is happy to do this because he thinks it's fun! Turns out he was right. So, while I was making some progress there were many things I didn't know, I still hadn't heard a kit valve amplifier, I've only heard equipment from the likes of Papworth, De Graaf and Unison Research....all very expensive. If I was going to consider a kit I had to find out more. I approached WAD with a request regarding where I could audition a kit amplifier of theirs and the status regarding delivery times. Unfortunately, this approach to World Audio Design produced negative results regarding availability of a kit amplifier from them. This is not intended as a criticism of WAD, as I write this, WAD is in transition while moving their operation. It is just that the timing was bad because I wanted a kit amplifier faster than they could supply one. So, I'll have to look elsewhere.

Reading the very same WAD forum I'd come across many good comments about a Hong Kong based company called Diy HiFi Supply. On 22nd March I started making some enquires about this company and began to ask questions of Mr Brian Cherry, who runs Diy Hifi Supply, about his products. I'd been told on the WAD forum he was helpful and he certainly proved to be so. Now there were 2 possibilities for a kit valve amplifier, WAD and Diy HiFi Supply.

One difficult issue I had to consider was my speakers. I'm using Naim SBL's. While these aren't a difficult load for an amplifier they are after all, Naim. I didn't think they'd be an ideal match for a valve amplifier, especially low powered ones. Feeling forced to ignore the SET's meant I was restricting my choice of valve amp considerably. I asked questions about this on the WAD forum, which resulted in Nick offering to bring his WAD KEL6550 to my house for me to listen to using my speakers. So, on Monday 29th March, Nick came to my home with his amp. In short, it murdered my Naim 32.5/snaps/160 stone dead. I don't have the words to describe the difference in music using these 2 amplifiers. To say that the Naim was like a black and white TV compared to the valve amp being a colour TV will be enough to get the message across. I could have listened to music all night, but Nick had to leave and he wanted to take his amp with him, of course.

Here's where I now had a dilemma. I liked the KIT6550 but WAD couldn't sell me one and couldn't even tell me roughly when they might be able to sell me one. What do I do ? Back to Mr Brian Cherry of Diy Hifi Supply.

As I said earlier, this is a company based in Hong Kong, and there-in lies a problem for me to consider. They seem to be very highly regarded, but of course this is only chat on a forum, I've never brought anything into the UK in this way and I don't know anything about the company. I've got no idea about taxes on importing goods, how difficult it all is etc. Might they even take my money and run ? Is it a Far East scam ? At this stage I really didn't know what to do. The kits are a good price, but this is still a good few hundred quid. I needed more information about importing goods and also I needed to feel more confident about spending money with a company based in HK.

Earlier, between 22nd March and 29th March, Brian Cherry had responded informatively and quickly to 4 e-mails, giving me much information about his 40Watt integrated amplifier, the Ella. I now knew a bit more, so I decided to approach Brian again. My very first approach to Brian had been by e-mail and was a question regarding using the Basie preamp with the Ella power amp. Turned out the Ella is not a power amp at all, it is a single input integrated amp. So, off to a cracking start, Brian must have thought he was corresponding with an idiot, but his patience proved to be endless, this is a very, very helpful bloke. Brian offered details of delivery costs by both air and sea as well as descriptions of how everything is packaged for transportation. This looked fine. Brian also sent me comments regarding the degree of difficulty of build, although it's worth bearing in mind that a build service is offered for those who don't want to build the kit themselves. Pricing was provided for this and I think it's very reasonable. Brian also responded to issues I brought up about compatibility of transformers with UK dirty mains supply. I'd been told there may be a problem with imported equipment being rated at 220v because the UK is actually 230v-240v. I was happy with the answers offered to all of my questions. But time had moved on since this initial enquiry, it was now 30th March and I knew my SBL's would be good with a valve amplifier. In addition, I thought they would work with low powered valve amplifiers. So, I again approached Brian, but this time with a request for information about his low powered Joplin integrated amplifier. I also asked Brian about his 9W mono amps, the LadyDay+ together with the Basie preamplifier. I wanted to consider all of my options, not just the Ella. And why not?

An advantage of the Ella is that it has the ability to use valves other than the EL34 shown in the main web photo and item description, it can be used with the 6550 or KT88 valves for just a few quid more. Brian answered many questions I had concerning the different type of sound I'd expect from each valve type. Going for the 6550 should make it more like the WAD6550 of Nick's. Remembering that my goal is still to build a valve amplifier on my own, I was now thinking that I should ignore the mono amps and buy either the Ella or Joplin. I can learn how to build an amp on either of these, buy the mono amps later and build them alone should I still want to. Sounds good to me.

By the end of the week it was decision time. By now I wasn't finding a big deal thinking about sending money to Hong Kong, Brian Cherry was such an easy person to deal with via e-mail, and was so knowledgeable about the products I just could not see any risk in this at all. I decided on the Ella, so I e-mailed Brian about payment methods. (I believe this has now changed and he has a secure web site for ordering). I printed, completed and scanned Brian's on-line order form, scanned my photo driving licence and the front only of my credit card. I telephoned Brian in Hong Kong to confirm receipt of my order, which I sent via fax from my computer. There was no problem, he had the order on Friday 2nd April.

Due to the time difference this was the very end of Brian's working day so the charge was processed on Saturday 3rd April and the goods were packed and ready for despatch by Monday 4th April. By a coincidence the 4th April was a holiday in HK so nothing moved. The goods left Brian on Tuesday 5th April by FEDEX door to door. After a mix up caused by Business Post in Leeds, UK, 1 package arrived before Easter when it turned up on 8th April. The second package was mis-sorted and didn't arrive until 13th April. No big deal. Everything was well packaged, intact and no damage anywhere.



The large box contains the Ella, this was double boxed to increase the protection against any damage in transit. The transformers are already fitted and there are 2 small valves already fitted to the rear of the unit. There is a Main PCB and Power Supply PCB already mounted underneath. The Ella also comes complete with a mesh cage, which I'm not using.



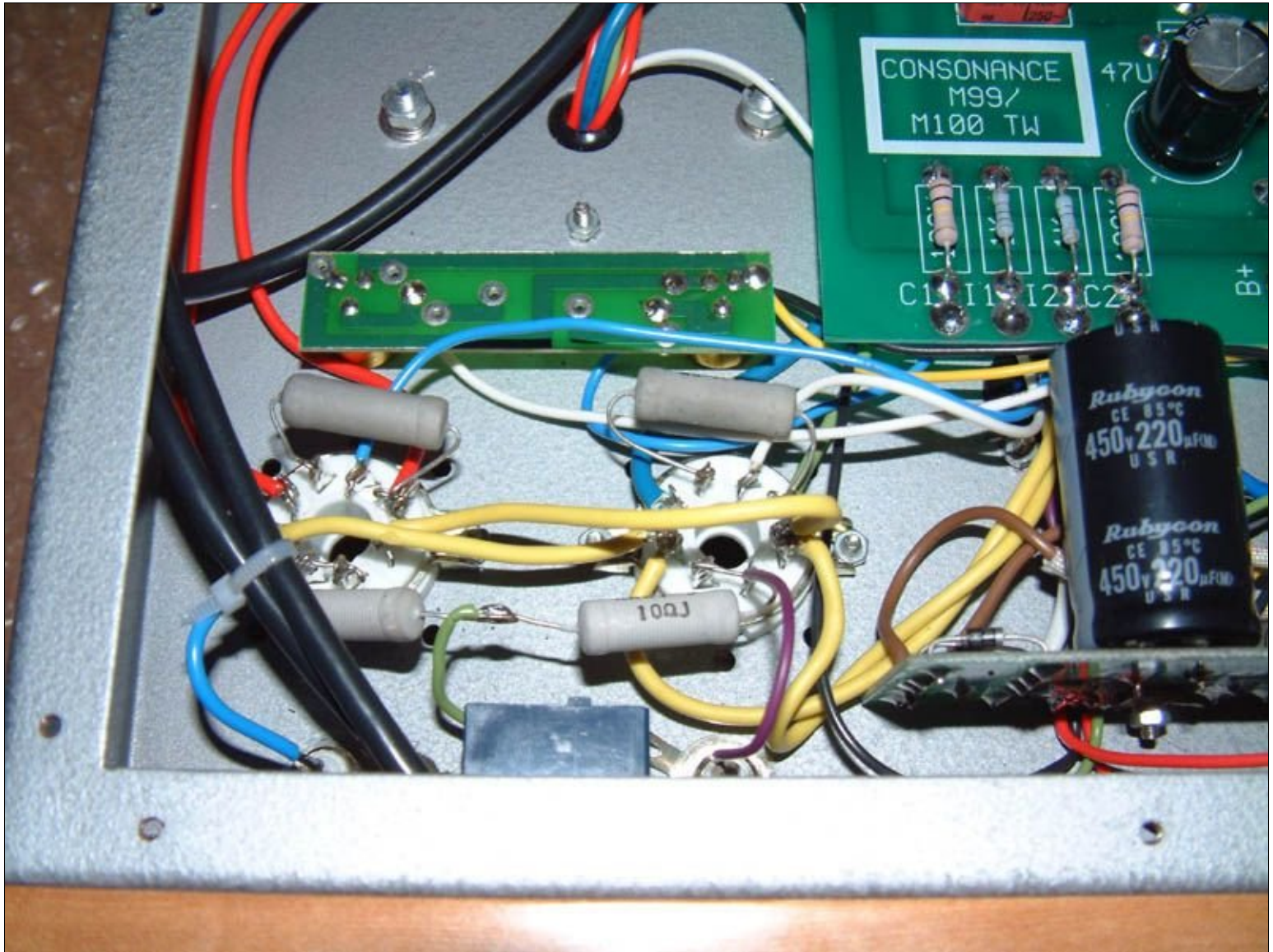
The Ella inside before construction begins. There was a bag of what appear to me to be very good quality componets. Loudspeaker binding posts, RCA sockets, the on/off switch, IEC power socket and of course, a volume knob.



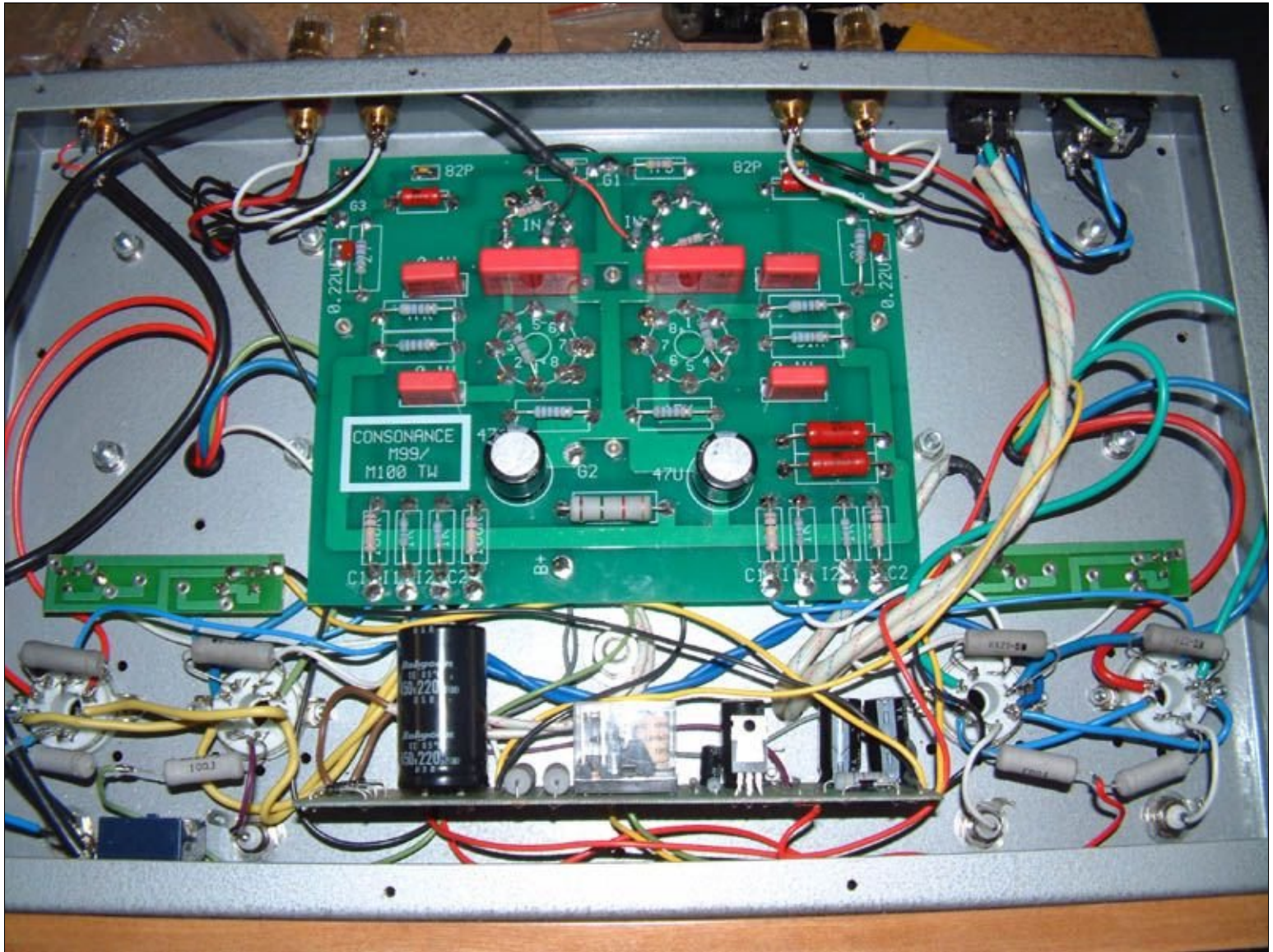
Top of Ella with the transformer covers removed. First task was to install some hardware. This was the gold plated RCA jacks, IEC connector, switch, bias pots on each of two small rectangular pcb's, 4 silver coloured RCA jacks in front of each tube socket, the 4 octal tube sockets themselves and the power switch. The instructions for fitting all of this hardware is very clear. This didn't take too long and was completed without any difficulty at all.



The next step was to make up the Mains and Power Transformer Connections. This was a big section requiring a lot of cutting of wires and a lot of soldering needed to be done at this stage. There were comprehensive instructions and diagrams for this procedure, Nick had no problems with this. The unit can be wired for 220V, 230V and 240V. The picture below shows a lot of the wires connected.



This amplifier can use different valves, the bias can be set without any need to open up the unit and is achieved by adjusting some screws on top of the unit behind the output valves. For the bias pot wiring I found the instructions for this a bit confusing and I think Nick was using his experience here as well. There was a picture and a diagram, but I think they could be improved upon.



7 hours after starting, the Ella was now built and ready for testing. The tests went without a hitch, I took it home and fired it up. Fantastic.



Sound

What does it sound like ? The short answer is...better than the Naim 32.5/snaps/160. Much better in fact. The immediate impression is that of a door opening on the sound, much more detail with everything more clearly defined, in it's own space and with a more realistic tone to musical instruments. Vocals are superb, the clarity in the midrange is difficult to describe.

This amplifier has replaced what in Naim's current range would cost well over £2500. The value for money offered by this amplifier even in this standard form is absolutely stunning. There is a presence about the vocals that makes you believe the person is present in the same room, fantastic. It's almost palpable is the feeling of being involved. I'd been for a demonstration some time ago of an up-rated Naim Audio pre-amp power supply (Hicap) and hadn't noticed any difference at all by adding this component in place of my lower rated power supply. The person conducting the dem' mentioned that in his view the vocals now had more feeling, you could almost touch the performers. Well, I went home wondering what he was on about but I know now, I've got that now from the Ella and I've got it in spades. Leading edges are much sharper now, I believe this to be one of the most important features and crucial to enjoyment of listening to music.

I'd recommend this amplifier to anyone. My original plan was to learn about valve amps from this one and buy the LadyDay+ and Basie pre-amp from Brian. I might still do that, on the other hand, how good will this amplifier sound when I fit the upgrades I've already bought ? I have 22 Kiwarne resistors, 4 x AudioNote copper capacitors, some silver cable and a choke to fit on my own. All part of my education. So far, I'm absolutely enthralled and wish I'd done this sooner. With credit to Nick G for building this for me. <Brian D>

