

VIOLECTRIC HPA V281 THE SEARCH IS OVER!

Courtesy ghostchili, published August 2015

<http://www.head-fi.org/products/vioelectric-hpa-v281/reviews/13835>

INTRO

After listening to my V281 for a few months with a variety of different headphones and reading the V281 thread, I decided to write a review of the V281's versatility. Several Headfi members wanted to know how the V281 sounds with a certain headphone, if it has enough power for headphones like the HE-6, or if it's overkill for headphones like the LCD-X. I will do my best to answer those questions. First I will fill you in on how I decided to use the V281 as my reference amp.

Over the years I've upgraded, downgraded, and sidegraded my headphone gear. (See my profile for a list) I still enjoy/enjoyed the other amp/dacs that I've had in the past but I've always craved more, I wanted an end-game one and done setup. I started reading every review I could find on amps and DACs. As for the DACs the Schiit Yggdrasil seemed like an obvious choice but it wasn't out yet and seemed over hyped. I also didn't want to leave it on 24/7 which seems to give the Yggy the best results. Instead I went for the PS Audio DirectStream DAC. The difference after a short burn-in was night and day over all of my other DACs, as it should be based on price. To say a veil was lifted is an understatement. As for the amps I wanted a versatile solid state that would play well with all of my current and future headphones. (I have 3 and 5 y.o. kids so no tube amps for a while.) I auditioned the Briston BHA-1, HiFiMan EF-6, Schiit Ragnarok, Cavallia Liquid Crimson and the Vioelectric V281. In a perfect world the DAC and Amp should be totally transparent letting you hear the music as it was recorded. Having said that, I personally like a little warmth to my music. I chose the V281 because it gave me better transparency, power, and a slight tube like warmth when compared to the competition. With all of my headphones, with the exception of the HE-6 and sometimes the HE-560, I kept the pre gain at 0db. Most of my headphone can get crazy loud at -6db but there is pitch black background at 0db so I just keep it there for my constant headphone swapping.

SETUP



MacMini using iTunes/BitPerfect ->Cardas Clear USB->PS Audio DirectStream DAC->Bellatone Reference Series XLRs-> Violectric V-281 using stock (or my DIY) 4 pin XLR cables to the headphones. Mac, DAC, and Amp plugged into PS Audio Dectet Power Center. All music was lossless. I used albums I've heard over and over with a range of genres. I will list all of the artist at the end. I just wanted to focus on the V281 so I decided to only use the PS Audio DAC for my testing due to its transparency.

Unless you are using the exact source and DAC there will be different input levels being amplified. The DirectStream DAC I used outputs 2.81 Vrms (+8dBV)/5.3 Vrms (+12dBV) if its set to MAX. If I set the DAC to Low I would probably have to keep the V281 on +6 to +12db. With other DAC's I've used if I have the V281 at the below levels my ears would bleed so YMMV. The only reason I posted the db and volume setting was strictly to compare the different volume levels vs the other headphones on my setup. Keep in mind I listen to my headphones at a rather high volume. It's also to give you guys an idea how much power is needed vs headphones you may already own or at thinking about buying.

Here are the Headphones I tested in alphabetical order.

AUDEZE LCD-2.2 pre-fazor
AUDEZE LCD-3
AUDEZE LCD-X
AUDIOQUEST Nighthawk (Missed the photo shoot due to the late arrival.)
DENON AH-D7100
HiFiMAN HE-6
HiFiMAN HE-560
HiFiMAN HE-1000
MrSpeakers Alpha Prime
MrSpeakers ETHER
SENNHEISER HD800



AUDEZE LCD-2.2 pre fazor

With the V281 set to 0db and Volume at 2 to 3 o'clock, most recordings are at a high volume. At this volume level there is no audible background noise.

The LCD 2.2s were my first good set of headphones, the fuel to my headphone addiction. Simply put the 2.2s are fantastic on the V281. The mids/vocals sound better than any other amp I've heard them on, putting them very close to the sound of the LCD-3s. I'm going to sound like a broken record with this amp but the soundstage widens, separation, and clarity are noticeably better. One of the things I like about the 2.2 is the Bass and Mid-bass. On some amps it can get a tad bloated with some spill-over into the mids. The V281 hits hard and fast but keeps everything reined in. The Bass on The Piano Guys - Cello Wars made my ears tickle. A fun song with fun headphones that made me smile. That's what it's all about!

AUDEZE LCD-3

With the V281 set to 0db and Volume at 2 o'clock, most recordings are at a high volume. At this volume level there is no audible background noise.

I loved my LCD-3s but sold them after I bought the LCD-Xs. The LCD-X edged them out ever so slightly for my taste in music. I want to thank Ray Samuels for letting me use his. The first song I tried was Fiona Apple's - O'Jays. The Bass was holy crap+strong in a good way. Even better, the vocals. The lushness of her voice made me regret selling the LCD-3s in the first place. The LCD-2.2 and 3 love the power the V281 has on tap. I feel the reason the amp never strains with the 3s helps the soundstage adding a tad more size. The treble is pretty much on par with the other higher end amps I've heard the 3s with. The treble laid back, never fatiguing. The V281 pretty much leaves the treble alone on the Audezes. The warm tilt to the V281 accentuates the dark Audeze sound I like, so if you like the Audeze house sound you will love the V281 pairing.

AUDEZE LCD-X

With the V281 set to 0db and Volume at 10 to 11 o'clock, most recordings are at a high volume. At this volume level there is no audible background noise.

As I already mentioned, I replaced my LCD-3 with these. The LCD-X has a better balance than the LCD-3s. The soundstage and separation on songs like Coldplay's Don't Panic Make the LCD-X stand out. The bass on the LCD-x is fast and tight. Try NIN The Fragile . Somewhat damaged and you'll see what I mean. Do you need the power of the V281 to drive the LCD-X? I've seen that question more than once on Head-fi. The answer is NO, not even close. You can buy a less powerful amp but it's unlikely to sound as good as the V281. If you own headphones in this price range the odds are you have or will have more than one pair. A lot of high current headphone amps will have some audible hiss on a sensitive headphone, not the V281. I love this pairing! Think of the V281 like a Bugatti, you may never use the 1000 hp but the rest of the car is better, performance wise, than the car that only has the power you need. I'm trying to decide what my favorite headphone is on the V281 LCD-X or the HE-1000. Such decisions are tough, guess I'll have to keep listening!

AUDIOQUEST Nighthawk



With the V281 set to 0db and the Volume at 10 to 11 o'clock, most recordings are at a high volume. At this volume level there is no audible background noise.

The Nighthawks, due to their recent release, have the least amount of ear time compared to the rest of the headphones tested. With the newness of the Nighthawks I will talk about the pairing with the V281 but I can't relate to how it sounds vs other amps. I will however integrate a mini review of the Nighthawks. I burned them in for 150 hours with the balanced cables per the manufactures recommendations. The real world sensitivity of the Nighthawks is close to the LCD-X, they both sound moderately loud on my iPhone 6+. That puts these in the "they don't need the power the V281 has" category. The first thing I noticed about the Nighthawks was the warmth. I just came off of an extended listening session with the LCD-X and Nighthawks made the LCD-X seem super bright. The V281 has a slight tube like warmth to start, the Nighthawks are a warm sounding headphone. The touch of warmth helps the HD800 but I don't think the Nighthawks need added warmth. The Nighthawks paired with the V281 sound really good, much better than the abundance of warmth and claustrophobia the more expensive Denons have. I would put the Nighthawks in the same class as the HE-560 but polar opposites as far as sound signature. For a \$599 headphone nothing can touch these including, in my opinion, the closed back EL-8. (I've auditioned the open-back and was supposed to test one but they never arrived.) The Nighthawk is very comfortable headphone with a very nice suspension system for sizing. I would like to thank Skylar for sending me these headphone and the balanced cable to try. I really wanted to put these up against the Audeze open-back EL-8 but that will be a different review. (On a side note, a friend of mine who knows nothing about all of these headphones but put a lot of time listening, picked the Nighthawks and LCD-X as his favorites.)

DENON AH-D7100

With the V281 set to 0db and Volume at 10 to 11 o'clock, most recordings are at a high volume. At this volume level there is no audible background noise.

The Denon AH-D7100! What the heck did he test these for? Back in the day, when these were released, my buddy worked for Denon. He got me a pair and I still have them. The Denons and the Alpha Primes are the only closed-backs tested. The good news is they are REALLY comfortable on my head. The bad news, they make me think I'm listening to a high end pair of Beats. They are so damn dark that everything has bass, they are claustrophobic, and sound very unnatural. But hey, if you love Hip Hop, the D7100 and the V281 make Ludacris . Chicken and Beer sound pretty damn good. Actually NIN -Pretty Hate Machine sounds damn good too! It reminds me of the 90s when I had 2 MTX Terminator 15+subs in the entire back seats of my Camaro!!

HiFiMAN HE-6

With the V281 set to **+12db** and Volume at 1 to 2 o'clock, most recordings are at a high volume. At this volume level there is no audible background noise.

Does the V281 have enough power to drive the HE-6? I've seen this question many times. The simple answer is YES. Grabbing the HE-6 is the only time I have to turn the V281 off, move the L and R gain switches to +12, and turn the amp back on. Takes 10 seconds not a big deal. I have the habit of turning the volume down anytime I switch headphones. A good idea if you forget your going from the HE-6 at +12 and plugging in the LCD-X. I enjoy the HE-6 but they don't get as much ear time as they used to. I've heard the HE-6 on speaker amps and on headphone amps like the Dark Star and Ragnarok. The speaker amps have too much background noise for critical listening. The Dark Star and Rag have the power and sound fantastic with the HE-6. If you only ever own the HE-6, which is unlikely, The Dark Star or Rag would be great choices. The V281 has both the power and quiet background to make the HE-6 sound great. The HE-6 is more neutral than most of the headphones here but the warm tilt of the V281 gives them a sound more to my liking. This pairing just proves the V281's versatility.

HiFiMAN HE-560

With the V281 set to 0db and the Volume at 4-5 o'clock (close to max volume) or 1-2 o'clock at +6db, most recordings are at a high volume. At this volume level there is no audible background noise. This is the only other headphone of the group, along with the HE-6, where I took the amp off of 0db.

I like the HE-560, especially at its price point. In my opinion the HE-560 shares a lot of the same sound characteristics as the Sennheiser HD 800. It should go without saying then that the HE-560 has awesome detail and soundstage, however with several amps, the HE-560 is a tad bright for me with weak low end punch. The HE-560 is also a demanding headphone power wise to make the HE-560 shine. The V281 with its transparency, power, and slight tube like warmth makes this a perfect pairing for me. It give an extremely detailed wide open sound. The bass is fast and accurate. The treble is bright but not overly so or fatiguing. The HE-560 loves the power of the V281 and turns a headphone I didn't use that often into one that I really enjoy.

HiFiMAN HE-1000

With the V281 set to 0db and Volume at 2-3 o'clock, most recordings are at a high volume. At this volume level there is no audible background noise.

The HE-1000 is a headphone I picked up from RazorDog Audio as soon as they were released. They are easy to drive as far as HiFiMan headphones go but you won't be using them with your iPhone. The V281 drives them with ease at 0db gain. The HE-1000 and the LCD-X are my favorite on the V281 and most other amps as well. The HE-1000 bass on the V281 is fantastic! Mids are just good and there is just the right amount of treble. Soundstage is also top notch. I would be happy with the V281 paired with the HE-1000 and sell the rest but the LCD-X has more detail and crispness. Compared to the LCD-X and LCD-3 the HE-1000 sounds a tad artificial because of how well they flow through the frequency changes. I think because of this the separation is not as good as the LCD-X. It's a unique sound that I like but I also like the LCD-X with the crispness. That's what is great about this hobby mixing things up. The HE-1000 with the V281 is a great % get lost in the music+combo and if you crank it up the HE-1000s slam!

MrSpeakers ETHER

With the V281 set to 0db and Volume at 12 o'clock, most recordings are at a high volume. At this volume level there is no audible background noise.

The ETHER is MrSpeakers new flagship. Dan and his team spent 2 years in the making of this open-backed Planar Headphone. The first thing you notice when you put these on is the comfort and lack of weight 370 grams. They feel like the HE-560 on my head but with better ear pads. The second thing you notice out of the V281 is the very wide Soundstage with a natural crisp, clean sound. I found the vocals forward and crystal clear. The bass is fast with good impact, no spill-over or bloat. Mid-bass is controlled and not as pronounced as the Audeze so the ETHER doesn't sound dark. The closest headphone for comparison would be the HD800 only the ETHER has less fatiguing treble and better bass. The only issue I've had with the headphones is finding the sweet spot on my head to get a proper seal. Without it, like with all planars, you lose all of the bass. The MrSpeakers ETHER pair with the V281 is a winner and this combo continues to grow on me. Time to sell the HD800.

MrSpeakers Alpha Primes

With the V281 set to 0db and Volume at 1 o'clock, most recordings are at a high volume. At this volume level there is no audible background noise.

The Alpha Primes were the Flagship headphones for MrSpeakers until the ETHER was born. They still are a fantastic closed-back headphone that takes the Fostex T50 driver to its limits. I've enjoyed listening to these with but the V281 really opens these up. Sometimes I find myself reaching up double checking to see if I still have closed-backs on. I never did that with any of my other amps. I love the bass on the Primes. The V281 makes them pound, so do my other amps, but the bass is faster and more controlled with the V281. Vocals are a tad more forward, my preference, than I'm used to with the Primes. There is a noticeable improvement with separation which is a reoccurring theme with the V281.

SENNHEISER HD800

With the V281 set to 0db and Volume at 10 to 11 o'clock, most recordings are at a high volume. At this volume level there is no audible background noise.

The HD800s and I have always had a love hate relationship. The first time I hear them was in Ray Samuels shop on his Emmeline II B-52 which is a \$5000 tube amp/pre amp. They sounded fantastic! I love how they feel on the head and how they sound with the right song and setup. The hate comes anytime I hear them on a solid state amp. The brightness makes me squint at times and they are very fatiguing. I was hoping the V281 with its slight tube like warmth would be a perfect match. The truth is the V281 helps take the edge off but it's not enough to make me want to listen to the HD800 for an extended amount of time. For me a tube amp is the only way I can enjoy the HD800. With that being said, if you have a HD800 and love how they sound on a SS amp the V281 will be a great pairing. You will hear every detail of every recording. It will give the HD800 the warmth it needs and your ears won't bleed from the brightness. To sum up the pairing, if you love your HD800 on a SS amp you will love it even more on the V281.

CONCLUSION

To me an amplifiers job is pretty straight forward, take the incoming information and amplify it with total transparency. The problem is most amplifiers change the information. Some amps change the equalization, add distortion, background noise, or just don't have to power bring out your headphones potential. The V281 is the most versatile and capable amp I've used. It's now my reference amp and will be for a long time. The V281 paired with a good DAC will let you hear what you're supposed to hear out of any headphone or earphone you can throw at it. (Except electrostatics) To answer the questions in the intro. It can handle the HE-6 with ease and is overkill power wise for the LCD-X and most other headphones for that matter but the sound quality is unmatched at this price point. It's a good feeling to know that if a new flagship headphone comes out the V281 will bring out its best. I am so impressed with the V281 that I will buy their new V850 DAC as soon as it's released to pair up with this Beast. The Lake People did their homework and knocked one out of the park with the V281. If you are in the US and have any questions call Arthur. He runs the show for Violectric in the states. Thanks for reading!!

ARTISTS AND ALBUMS USED

Radiohead . Amnesiac
Bjork . Bastards
Donald Runnicles - Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Beethoven: Symphony #9
Ludacris . Chicken & Beer
Depeche Mode . Delta Machine
Fiona Apple . Extraordinary Machine
Nine Inch Nails . Hesitation Marks & Pretty Hate Machine: 2010 Remaster
The Piano Guys . The Piano Guys
Mezzanine . Massive Attack
Henryk Gorecki . Symphony No.3
Coldplay - Parachutes

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