AVM Ovation CS 8.2 All-in-One System

Master of All Trades

Steven Stone

Historically, all-in-one audio components have been looked down upon by serious audiophiles, who typically prefer big-boy, multi-piece component systems. I suppose the category's lack of respect is due in part to not-so-pleasant flashbacks to ancient "my first stereos," such as KLH Model 11 suitcase units. But this is 2018. Some audiophiles my age have even (gasp!) downsized their abodes to something more manageable and may no longer have room for a multi-box, multi-tethered "trophy" system in their new digs. If you're one of these or if you're just tired of all the clutter, there is hope. The AVM Ovation CS 8.2 combines tubey goodness with a modular design that allows for upgrades, updates, board swaps, and selectable options, so you could even jump off the new-gear-every-year treadmill! You'll also need fewer cables, and it even plays CDs. In addition to us Old Fogeys, the AVM 8.2 should appeal to millennials, hipsters, tech geeks, start-up super-star coders, and other music lovers shoehorned into urban living spaces, who'd be substituting a great-sounding single piece of electronics for four or five separates. Especially if you know you'll be moving regularly for a while, it makes sense to have a system that can easily move with you. If you want a complete system in a box (just add loudspeakers, headphones, and some Internet or NAS sources), the AVM CS 8.2 yearns to be your all-in-one, high-performance, multi-year, multi-mode music buddy.

Technical Details

If you glance at photographs of the AVM CS 6.2, it looks almost exactly like the CS 8.2. That is because the 8.2 is basically a 6.2 with a tube rather than a solid-state linestage. Anthony H. Cordesman recently reviewed the AVM 6.2 for TAS (Issue 273), and everything that he wrote about the design and technical aspects of that unit holds true for the 8.2. I strongly encourage you to re-read his review as "preface" to this one (although that's like putting pearls in front of my own swinish prose). He did such a thorough job describing the technical intricacies of the 6.2 that I will focus on those areas where the 8.2 varies from the 6.2.

The difference between the 6.2's and the 8.2's linestage comes down to the AVM's use of proprietary 803T tubes instead of solid-state devices. This change also required a different power supply for the linestage section.

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Because AVM chose to add tubes to the preamp rather than to the power amplifier section, the power output and overall specifications of the two units are the same. The only real user-noticeable operational difference between the 6.2 and the 8.2 is that while the 6.2 wakes up instantly from pause/sleep/off modes, the 8.2 requires a warm-up period for the 803T tubes, during which the output is muted.

Aside from the valve front end, the 8.2 is the identical twin of the 6.2. If the 8.2 didn't have a glass section on its top plate (to showcase those glowing tubes), it would be impossible to tell the two units apart. Along with the front end, the only other difference between the 6.2 and the 8.2 is price: The 6.2's MSRP is $10,995, while the CS 8.2's is $12,995.

Installation and Setup

I used the CS 8.2 in three completely different systems. In all three systems the initial install was simple. Once the previous gear was removed (and in every case, it was a multi-box system), I attached cables to the speakers and the line-level output to a subwoofer, plugged in an AC cord, and the "hard" part of the install was done. After connections were made, I loaded a CD and played it to make sure that the system was functional. (OK, the first install did take longer due to the initialization of the AVM iOS app, and the need to add my NAS and Tidal account info. But the process of installing an AVM CS 8.2 was easier than that of many other units I've reviewed in the past. The only wrinkle was that you have to have the CS 8.2 connected via an Ethernet cable to your home network for the first part of the setup; after that it can operate via Wi-Fi only.)

Once the CS 8.2 is physically installed you can make adjustments to fine-tune its output, such as changing the input levels of each source so they are approximately the same, adjusting the tone controls (you can save settings for each input), and tweaking channel balance. You also have two different digital filter options (steep and smooth), and the AVM allows for up-sampling to 384kHz from lower-resolution PCM sources. As with level and tone adjustments, the CS 8.2 will store and recall filter and upsampling settings for each individual input. One feature that most high-performance preamps or receivers lack is a loudness control, which is a bass boost used when playing music softly. Many audiophiles don't care for the loudness control because that bass boost is not adjustable—one setting is all you usually get. But AVM had a better idea: The 8.2 loudness control has nine different settings to choose from.

AVM supplies three distinct ways to control the 8.2: via the front panel using its two large knobs and five control buttons, or via the iOS/Android app, or via AVM's optional universal remote control ($695). While the remote is quite serviceable, unless you don't own and never intend to buy a smartphone/iPad I would strongly recommend using the app for remote duties. Especially if you have an iPad or 64-bit Android pad, the AVM app is a pleasure to use.

As you would expect from an all-in-one-box solution, the AVM accepts a wide variety of inputs including one stereo pair of balanced XLR analog, one stereo pair of unbalanced analog RCA, FM tuner (if the FM tuner module is installed), USB-B, two TosLink optical, one SPDIF coaxial, and an external USB drive connector, in addition to built-in CD drive and NAS, Internet radio, Bluetooth, and Internet streaming capability. Outputs include one stereo pair of five-way binding posts, one pair of variable analog single-ended RCA and one pair of balanced XLR, one pair of fixed-level analog RCA, one SPDIF coaxial, one TosLink digital, and the standard ¼" headphone jack on the front panel. The headphone output is driven by a dedicated Class A amplifier. There's also an Ethernet connector, antenna connector (for the FM section, if you choose to install one), as well as a pair of 12-volt triggers on the back panel.

What does the AVM CS 8.2 lack in the way of inputs? There is no internal phono section; this being the flagship, AVM didn't want to compromise phono performance by putting the phono circuit in the same chassis as the digital circuits. For vinyl spinners, AVM suggests its P30 stand-alone phonostage to augment the CS 8.2. Either of the two analog inputs will accept the line-level output of an external phonostage. In addition, any line input can be configured as a theater pass-through, fixing the gain at unity for using the CS 8.2 in a combined two-channel music and multichannel theater system. In one of the three systems, I used my Vendetta SCP-2B phono preamplifier via the single-ended input with excellent results— no low-level hum issues and plenty of gain. Other source deficiencies with the CS 8.2

Specs & Pricing

Type: All-in-one with DAC, streaming, CD drive, FM tuner
Tube complement: 803T tubes
Power output: 2 x 500W into 4 ohms
Analog inputs: One balanced XLR and one unbalanced RCA
Digital inputs: One coaxial SPDIF, two TosLink, one LAN, USB, Wi-Fi, CD changer
Supported media server: UPnP 1.1, UPnP-AV, and DLNA-compatible server, Microsoft Windows Media Connect Server (WMDRM 10), DLNA-compatible server (NAS)
Web radio: Airable Internet Radio Service

Digital signal processing: Up to 192kHz/24-bit (USB, 32-bit/384kHz)
Input impedance: 6.8k ohms
Outputs: One balanced, one unbalanced, one line-out
Streaming formats: MP3, WMA, AAC, OGG Vorbis, FLAC (192/32 via LAN), WAV (192/32 via LAN), AIFF (192/32 via LAN), ALAC (96/24 via LAN)
Supported streaming services: Tidal, Qobuz
Upsampling frequencies: Native, 44.1, 48, 88, 96, 176, 192kHz
Dimensions: 430mm x 130mm x 370mm (17" x 5.1" x 13")
Weight: 12kg (26 lbs.)
Price: $12,995

are that it will not play SACDs, DVD-As, or anything except Red Book CDs and CDRs in its built-in drive. The CS 8.2 will decode DSD over USB up to DSD128. If you are a Roon user, the AVM does not currently support Roon or have the option to be a Roon endpoint. If you want to stream via Bluetooth from your phone, the CS 8.2 will not oblige. Finally, the current version of the 8.2 does not support MQA decoding. While higher-speed DSD playback is not something that any current or prospective AVM CS 8.2 owner should expect in the immediate future, MQA decoding (and possibly the Roon endpoint feature) could be added if enough users request it, according to AVM's president and owner Udo Besser. I would also request a Bluetooth option. AVM's modular design makes adding MQA or changing the entire DAC module a simple matter compared to most all-in-one components.

Ergonomics

As I mentioned earlier you have three ways to control the AVM CS 8.2. After a week of having it in the system I put the AVM remote away and used the iOS app exclusively. But don't assume that the two large knobs and buttons on the AVM 8.2 front panel are vestigial remnants of an earlier age; when I used the 8.2 in a nearfield setup, where the unit was within hand's reach,

manual became my primary method of control. The feel of the volume knob and its smooth response were so alluring that even when I put the CS 8.2 back into a room-based system I occasionally got up off my chair to use the volume control knob just so I could turn it. That balanced flywheel motion is so slick.

The AVM 8.2 has a small, centrally located display window. It is a one-color blue typeface that can be read easily as long as you aren't more than three feet away. If you move closer you will see that in addition to the volume level (which goes from 0 to 99 in ½dB increments), the display tells you

the current bit rate of digital sources, whether they are being upsampled, and your current input source. The five buttons below the display let you select the digital filter, choose between native and upsampling, and give you access to deeper menu options. I found AVM menu choices were logical and well designed.

Sound

The first time I turned on the AVM CS 8.2 in my upstairs "real-world" room I was aware that it sounded different from the system that had previously been in residence. My wife commented that the sound was "fuller." The system that had been in place consisted

of the Sony HAP Z1ES media player ($2000) and Moon by Simaudio HD230 DAC ($1500) connected to the Parasound P7 ($2000) feeding two Bel Canto M300 monoblock amplifiers ($2000) and an Aperion subwoofer ($399). The speakers in the system were a pair of V123 X-Statix heavily modified by Skiing Ninja. I also immediately noticed the increase in harmonic complexity in the lower midrange that the CS 8.2 brought to music. In comparison, the earlier setup sounded more mechanical and not as harmonically rich or as musically involving. I wondered if it was the tube front end that had added "juice" to the sonic picture.

Because this is a real-world room, with multiple uses, it can't be optimized for sonics. So, after a couple of weeks of learning the CS 8.2's controls, and giving the unit an opportunity to settle in, I moved it into my main reference-system room, which *has* been optimized. But before I detail my reference system and compare performance, here's a note about cost: When I first looked at the price of the CS 8.2 I thought, "Ouch." Then I compared this all-in-one's price to the sum of sources and electronics in my current reference system and found that the two systems were within $300 of each other! The PS Audio DSD Jr. ($3999) tethered to

the Parasound P7 ($2000) along with the Oppo BD-205 ($1295) connected to the Pass Labs X150.8 power amplifier ($5999) puts my reference system's total cost without speakers or cables at $13,293, which is pretty darn close to $12,995. So in reality the AVM 8.2 was very much on a par pricewise with my regular reference system, and it was a lot easier to install.

The sonic differences between my reference system and the AVM 8.2 were subtler than in the real-world room, probably because the system and the room were capable of a higher level of overall performance. In many categories the CS 8.2 and my reference system shared similar traits. Both produced a large image that filled the space between the two loudspeakers with in-phase information (out-of-phase content, such as crowd noise on live recordings, extended past the outside of the speakers). Image height between the CS 8.2 and my reference system was also similar. In stage depth, I felt that the AVM CS 8.2 was on par with the Parasound/Pass. Both did a good job of delineating the space between front-row violins and midrow woodwinds.

Although the CS 8.2 does have tubes in its preamplifier line-stage, it does not have a "tubey" harmonic balance or other tip-off to its circuit's thermionic character. It did not sound too warm or prominent in the lower midrange, and I did not notice any treble

roll-off or excessive upper-midrange emphasis. Harmonically, the CS 8.2 sounded right.

In dynamic punch and contrast I felt the AVM CS 8.2 was slightly less impactful than the Pass X150.8 power amplifier. I also found the Pass had superior mid- and low-bass control, especially on the new Studio Electric FSX full-range loudspeaker. I noticed the same effect with my Spatial M3 Turbo SE loudspeakers, but to a lesser extent—the AVM produced a warmer, bigger, but less defined mid- and low-bass response.

The AVM CS 8.2's headphone circuit has its own dedicated power amplifier that had no problems driving some of my harder-to-power 'phones. The HiFiMan HE1000 V2 had excellent dynamics and jump-factor, while only requiring a setting between 50 and 60 (out of 0 to 99) for normal listening levels. My hardest-to-drive headphones, the Beyerdynamic DT 990 600-ohm version, also had lots of headroom with similar output settings for a comfortable listening level. Sensitive in-ear monitors, such as the EarSonics S-EM9, did exhibit some low-level hiss through the CS 8.2's headphone output, however.

Imaging specificity through the AVM 8.2's headphone output was nuanced with a fine sense of spatial dimension and weight. While the CS 8.2's image focus was not quite as precise as what I hear from the Sony TA-ZH1ES, it was certainly on a par with the headphone output of my regular recording rig,

the Korg MR-1000. Bass extension through the AVM CS 8.2's headphone output was excellent.

Summary
Obviously, I have the room and cables to handle an extensive multi-box audio system. Replacing all those boxes and wires with one AVM CS 8.2 was a refreshingly musical alternative experience. I found that when pitted against a separates system with approximately the same overall price tag the CS 8.2 can deliver equally impressive sound.

For me the one elephant in the room that kept staring me in the face and sideswiping me with its trunk was: "How does the AVM CS 6.2

compare with the AVM CS 8.2?" I have never heard the 6.2, so I am not qualified to answer that question. Since these two components are identical except for the tube linestage in the 8.2, the final decision between them is something that can only be made at an AVM dealer who has both units in stock.

My opinion of the CS 8.2 comes down to this: If I retired from audio reviewing tomorrow I would be happy to live with the AVM CS 8.2, but I'm a reviewer, so in a few days I will pack this wonderful piece of kit for a trip to the next audio show, where I'm sure it will be the belle of the ball.