

hardware review

Trilogy 921 an amp for all reasons

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Trilogy 921 integrated amplifier

Trilogy have been making high quality audio electronics since 1990 and yet remain mysteriously under the radar. This is probably because they have always focused their energies on engineering and design rather than sales and marketing. Trilogy started out building valve or tube amplifiers but now has a range of electronics where transistors do the heavy lifting and in many cases tubes are to be found in the first stages of amplification, hybrids as they are known. The Trilogy 921 is not one of these, it's the company's entry level integrated amplifier and runs solid state devices throughout but this doesn't stop it incorporating many of the key tenets of the Trilogy ethos.

The 921 is an elegant, even stylish amplifier with sculpted inlets around the two control buttons and standby switch, but those two buttons access a world of features the like of which are rarely seen on purist designs. Essentially the 921 contains a processor that can be used to set a wide range of parameters including display, volume trimming per input, default input and even a pass-through input for AV. Inputs can be assigned names and internal temperature can also be viewed and this is almost the tip of the iceberg in terms of functionality. It's safe to say that few competitors offer so much control in a high end integrated. The only drawback with this degree of cleverness is that changing inputs on the unit itself requires that both 'ent' and 'esc' buttons be used, thankfully Trilogy supply a remote control that allows quick input selection and volume control.

It's worth trying the rotary control itself however, this has a lovely action, good enough to warrant getting off the couch to give it a fondle once in a while. Input wise the 921 is a purist design with only analogue inputs on single ended RCA sockets, high quality ones of course and for my money single ended is the way to go unless you need very long cables, but there are those who prefer balanced XLRs. They would be better off with the Trilogy 925 which has both types of input and more power, the 921 offers 75 Watts per channel which as they are backed

by a solid power supply is more than sufficient for most loudspeakers and most rooms, even, dare I say it, most listening habits. The sockets are arrayed horizontally rather than in vertical pairs, which is fine so long as you pay attention when connecting up, if not you can end up with just one channel but no one would be that inattentive, would they...

Sound quality

On first firing up the Trilogy 921 it displays the message 'warm up...' for 20 seconds, an unusual thing to see on a transistor amp but it comes from a brand with strong tube tendencies. Another indicator of this is that the speaker output is phase inverting, something so rare with solid state that I didn't realise until I looked more closely at the brochure. To compensate you need to reverse polarity on the speaker cables at the amp end, black to red and vice versa. It doesn't make a big difference with many recordings but is worth getting right for the few that are themselves in phase.

With a pair of PMC twenty5.26i speakers connected I was surprised to find that it sounded rather raw and exposed. Phenomenally revealing but lacking the fluidity that I have found with Trilogy products in the past, this made for high thrill power but limited relaxation and I suspected that something might be amiss. After trying various different cables and speakers I discovered that it was the DC offset that pollutes my mains power supply that was upsetting the amplifier. When I mentioned this to Nic Poulson at Trilogy he said that all of his Isol-8 power distributors and conditioners contain DC blockers and this means he had not encountered this problem before. With one of these devices in the system, a PowerLine Axis which is a mains distributor and not a conditioner, things changed for the better in fairly dramatic form.

The PMC twenty5.26i speakers have a relatively lean and fast balance that suited this Trilogy fairly well with excellent speed and dynamics alongside muscular bass. The 921 has transparency and grip and doesn't attempt to flatter the material by rounding or smoothing off



the mid or treble, as a result electric guitars sounded very convincing with superb timing and no exaggeration, the superb solo on Steely Dan's *Your Gold Teeth* (*Countdown to Ecstasy*) being a great example. With better recordings, generally those from the last 25 years or so the Trilogy can deliver a sense of realism that is very strong with solid tactile bass and open yet focused imaging that makes for a compelling musical experience.

As the big Dali Epikore 11 speakers were still in my possession it seemed like a good idea to try them with the 921. These are probably the opposite of the PMCs in tonal terms, they are relaxed and warm with an ease that makes them very easy to enjoy indeed, but they are also very revealing, enough to almost turn me into a Sinatra fan when *Fly Me to the Moon* (*Live at the Sands Hotel and Casino*) dropped on the streamer. It's really the big band that blows you away here, especially when it's reproduced with such fabulous dynamics, the sheer razzamatazz of the performance was delivered to tremendous effect, in fact it was genuinely inspiring.

A more up to date release in the form of Will Barnes Quartet's *Source of the Severn* came through open, clean, revealing the live nature of the recording and the impressive playing of the



band. There are smoother amps around at this price but one suspects that the Trilogy 921 delivers a more honest and real picture of the incoming signal. It doesn't emphasise shortcomings in the source or recording but neither does it polish them up to make everything sound a bit more pretty than it really is. Any upgrades in the source are immediately obvious as well, even quite small ones such as cables, this is clearly a very transparent amplifier.

I also tried the 921 with Acoustic Energy Corinium speakers and this proved to be a very successful pairing, more so than some of the more pricey amps that I used with this speaker in fact. The Corinium is hard to pin down in tonal terms and seems very neutral and this gelled nicely with the fact that the Trilogy is much the same, allowing Joni Mitchell, Julian Lage and Laura Marling among many others to sound sublime. The latter's *Soothing (Semper Femina)* coming through with a good balance of weight and openness that allowed the richness of the recording to be appreciated alongside the juicy bass riff and Marling's enchanting voice. This was a combination that stayed around for much longer than expected despite the presence of luxurious alternatives in the room, when you find an amp/speaker pairing that's this good it's worth hanging onto.

One of those alternatives was a pair of Børresen X2 speakers, which also worked rather well it has to be said. Here the emphasis was on tonal beauty and emotional impact, with James Taylor's *These Days* hitting a high that only Bobby Womack's version of Taylor's *Fire and Rain* could cap, that one was really powerful.

Trilogy 921 verdict

Nic Poulson has done an excellent job with the 921 integrated, it's an amplifier that is true to the music's more objective qualities of imaging and timing whilst bringing out its heart and soul. Connections are limited to single ended and headphone users will need a dedicated amp but music lovers will find that its ability to expose so many facets of the songs that they love offsets these small considerations many times over.