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McIntosh MC275 Tube Amplifier (original 1960's version)

By Anthony Nicosia

anthonynicosia@affordableaudio.org

Specifications:

Stereo or twin amplifier
 75-watts as stereo
 150-watts as monophonic
 Harmonic Distortion >0.5% at 20Hz
 through 20,000 kHz
 Noise and Hum 90db or more below
 rated output
 Voltage Amplifier-one 12AX7 tube
 (drives both amps)
 Phase Inverter-Two 12AU7 tubes
 Drive Amplifier-Two 12BH7 tubes
 Cathode Follower Drive-Two 12AT7 or
 12AZ7
 Output- Four KT88 or 6550 tubes
 Weight 67 ½ lbs
 Original price \$444

The original McIntosh MC275 stereo tube power amplifier is a thing of beauty. Looking at it one can only stare in awe at its craftsmanship and design. That alone would not be enough if it did not perform equally well to the task of reproducing music with grace and power.



Manufactured in Binghamton New York from May 1961 through July 1973, after twelve years McIntosh finally laid the original 275 to rest. McIntosh, along with many other manufactures during that time, switched over to making transistor-designed amps. The thought back then was that transistor amps produced more power for less money and you did not have to fuss with tubes. Looking back at that day in audio history, I wish Frank McIntosh and Gordon Gow would have changed their mind. If only in that final day of MC275 production they had decided to keep the 275 as well as producing transistor amps. Perhaps, like Lancelot singing to his love Guenevere in "Camelot" (1960), they might have looked at the final 275 coming off the production line and sang:

"If ever I would leave you,
 How could it be in springtime?
 Knowing how in spring I'm bewitched by you so?
 Oh, no! not in springtime!
 Summer, winter or fall!
 No, never could I leave you at all!

The MC275 certainly was a great love to many an audiophile then and now. It wasn't until 1993 that McIntosh reissued the MC275 to the delight of audiophiles worldwide. For that first run only 4500 were produced and all were pre-sold before they arrived at the dealers. Following this huge demand the reissue 275 was added to their permanent lineup. For those of you who missed the original, the reissue MC275's are still in production today. If I get the opportunity this is definitely on my short list of amps for future reviews.

At \$444, in the 60's, the original 275 was not cheap. Remember, its competitor, the Harman Kardon Citation II sold for \$159.95 in kit form or factory-wired for \$229.95. The 275 though was a stunner. All that chrome offset by three-shiny black painted transformers, the old English style lettering on the front and four KT88's had looks to die for. It was touted as being two 75-watt amplifiers in one, hence the name 275. There are no balanced inputs, no on-off switch and not even a detachable power cord, yet if you are a McIntosh lover it doesn't really matter. Today they are still very collectable in their original form. However, if you want all those amenities the new 275 has them all and then some.



For this review I have decided to go through the listening process using Electro Harmonix KT88's instead of my Genelax KT88 tubes. I did this to make this a more "affordable" review as the Genelax tubes are now hard to find and very expensive. For those who want to know, yes the Genelax's do add some further magic to the 275 and I use them whenever I sit down for serious listening. Other tubes used for this review are (2) RCA 5814A's (2) RCA 12BH7A's (2) Telefunken ECC801S's and (1) Amperex 12AX7. The Telefunken's, being the most expensive tubes used in the amp, were in excellent condition at \$133 delivered to my door. My

275 was just recently gone through by a very competent McIntosh authorized repair center where some minor work was done to make sure it was up to standard. I used wire connectors that attach to the 275's speaker terminals and then to my large spade terminated speaker wires. Like most vintage equipment of that era it is set up for use with only very small spades, not our larger modern ones, so adaptation is mandatory. Remember this amp was made way before exotic cable manufacturers existed. Bare wired lamp cord style wires were most common then.

My listening room is 18' 8" long by 13' wide. The room has a cathedral ceiling that starts at 8' high and slopes upward to 13' at its peak in the middle. I have a fireplace on the long wall, with an opening opposite it that leads to a hallway. On the short wall opposite my equipment is another opening going to the dining room. Tucked away in the corners of the short wall is a pair of 1989 Klipsch Klipschorn speakers. The Legacy Focus 20/20's, which are being used for this review, are about 6 ½ feet from the rear wall to the front of the speakers. They Focus are placed 11 feet apart (from the center of both tweeters), and only slightly angled in towards the listening position, which is 12 feet away. Behind me is an opening to another room, no doors.

The Legacy Focus 20/20's are each a 5 way 7 driver speaker weighing in at 185 lbs apiece. Each speaker consists of (2) 12" subwoofers and (1) 12" "transition driver", (2) 7" Kevlar midwoofers (1) 1.25" Dome and one ribbon tweeter. They are ported in the rear and have a rated sensitivity of 95db @ 2.83V with an impedance of 4 ohms. According to Legacy these 20/20's can be used with amps ranging from 10-400 watts per channel. The McIntosh MC275 falls toward the lower end of that range, but I wanted to challenge the 275. The Threshold 800A, reviewed by me in the April edition of "Affordable Audio", really grabbed hold of these 3 12" drivers. So now lets see what a 75-watt tube amplifier from the 60's can do.

I used a Sony DVP-S7700 CD player with co-axial out to a modified Monarchy Audio DAC player to play the CD's. I listened to Willie Nelson, Norah Jones, Eric Clapton, Nate King Cole, Tom Petty and James Blunt before I decided to spin the vinyl on my Oracle Delphi Turntable.

I had heard Willie Nelson perform at a small outdoor concert in a California winery two or three years ago. I sat ten rows from the stage and was treated to a good taste of what Willie sounds like live. On a personal note the concert was incredible and both my wife and I loved it. First I put on the Willie Nelson (Super Hits) CD and started my listening session with "The Rain". The 275 announced his voice strong and clear. Individual guitar notes were clearly por-

trayed with all its intimacy and the soundstage was wide. With the 275 you could clearly hear the beautiful intonations in Willie's voice.

Slipping into something a little different from country western, I put on a Norah Jones CD (Feels Like Home). "Those Sweet Words" sounded, well sweet. There was a definite air around both her voice and the individual piano notes. I had the feeling of being in a small club listening to a live performance. There was a very holographic tone to her voice, which was very SET (single ended triode) like. This song really made me sit up and take notice. Again the soundstage was wide and individual instruments were easy to find within it.

Switching over to Eric Clapton (Reptile), I listened to "Come Back Baby". Eric does a very soulful rendition of this song that you could feel deep down inside you. This CD however did expose the 275's weakness in the very low bass region. A powerful solid-state amp, like the Threshold 800A(200-watt s in Class A), just does it better in that department. Again soundstage and midrange magic was all there. When I put on "Broken Down", one of my favorites, you could feel the upper mid bass right in front of your chest. It's just that last few octaves the 275 has trouble with, but remember it is a tube amp. As I said before, 75-watts is not a lot for these Legacy Focus speakers but I wanted to test the 275 with a difficult load to see what it was made of.

Now moving to one of my all time favorite Nate King Cole songs on, The Best Of CD, I played "Unforgettable". Although a slight edge was noticeable in the string section, his voice was clearer than I have heard before. You could hear Nates voice rise and fall through the musical scale as his sings his way through the verses of this song. This, like the Norah Jones song "Those Sweet Words", really caught my attention. The air around his voice was mesmerizing. It was like I was hearing it for the first time.

Two other songs particularly brought forth the 275's strong points. First was Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers CD (Anthology Throughout The Years), the "Free Fallin'" track, which threw an expansive soundstage before me. The sound opened up in front of me as if there were no speakers in the room. Music was everywhere and the opening guitar notes seemed to hang for softly in the air.

Finally, listening to James Blunts Back To Bedlam CD, I was particularly taken by "Goodbye My Lover". The emotion coming from James's singing of this song really touched me. This was another, "Wow" moment.

Ok, here we go lets play some vinyl. Tubes with vinyl what a heavenly combination. Those of you who have not yet heard Nate King Cole on vinyl in a really long time should stop right now and go listen. Those who do not have a turntable, even an inexpensive one, should look to purchase one. Old vinyl records can easily be found for very little money and cleaned up with modern record cleaning machines to be enjoyed once again. I went to the garage to find an old copy of, "Nature Boy" and played the title song right off the bat. This song has it all, violins, piano, flute and Nate himself. The 275 lets you hear an expansive soundstage within which all the instruments can clearly be heard.

Moving on to Steely Dans Gaucho album you must play "Gaucho" and if you have not yet heard it "Time Out Of Mind". "Gaucho" uses a beautiful combination of trumpets, horns and drums with a nicely rhythmic beat. Our 275 gets this right as the bass does not go too low allowing the 275 to really shine. Again the mid to upper midbass in "Time Out Of Mind" shows off the amps strong points. When the four backup singers chime in you can hear them all as four distinct voices.

I cannot review an amp like the McIntosh MC275 without listening to Joni Mitchell on vinyl. If you can find a copy of "Clouds" this is a must listen record. Hearing Joni sing "Chelsea Morning" through the 275 sounds so delicate and clear. The natural ease of her voice coupled with the resonance from her guitar provides the listener with an understanding of why Joni was so popular in the 70's and beyond.



In summary the McIntosh MC275 puts forth a very romanticized sound. It has that special ability to make pleasantly alluring music emerge from it. More than once I found myself enveloped in the performance and constantly thinking of the musical experience not the equipment playing it. It is best with vocals and small ensembles where its strengths in the midrange and upper bass truly work its magic.

The MC275 was advertised in the 60's as being well behaved. You just sit it down, plug it in, and play. You did not have to adjust anything. Reviewing the Harman Kardon Citation II Tube Amplifier (May issue of Affordable Audio) I had to adjust the bias and set the AC balance adjustments. Actually it was fun to do and I have no complaints about that. It does though take a solid hour to do because of the warm up time necessary before adjustments can be made. If you like to tube roll like me this is a definite plus for the 275. Hey, if I can save an hour's time that can be put to more listening sessions than I'm all for it.

Ok, now for the big question. Since I have reviewed both the Harman Kardon Citation II and McIntosh MC275 tube amplifiers which do I prefer? I could easily say both and leave it that way but I am not one to just sit on the fence. The Citation wins in portraying musical passages as they were actually recorded. Looks however go hands down to the McIntosh. Nothing can beat all that chrome, shiny black paint and old English style lettering. A McIntosh is made for display and not to sit inside an audio rack tucked away behind screen doors. Easy of use, again the McIntosh wins, as there are no bias or AC balance adjustments to be made. So far McIntosh 2 Citation 1. When talking of pricing for a used one today or even back when they were both new I would say the Citation wins. The McIntosh was almost twice the price of the Citation new in the 60's (McIntosh \$444 to \$229.95 factory assembled for the Citation) and now can be found for about \$3000 used versus \$1500 for a Citation (rough estimates based on condition and tubes). Ok so what will the tiebreaker be? I cannot tell you what you should do, but for me it was the musicality of the McIntosh MC275 that won me over. I really liked both amps and I am searching for a used Citation II amp to purchase as I foolishly sold mine years ago (yes I want both the MC275 and the Citation II). However my 275 is a fun amplifier that lets me enjoy the music the way I like to hear it and I have no plans to sell mine. There are certain songs and times when the Citation's sound for being ruthlessly revealing of music was a great joy for me, but in the longer run I wanted the McIntosh.

The 275, for a tube design, is a very quiet amp. When there was no music playing it was silent unless you place your ear right up on the speaker and that is not what a good audiophile should ever do. We listen for music not specs of noise that cannot be heard from the listening position or when music is playing. The 275 is a fun amp, big emphasis on the word FUN. It has the ability to make you feel the performance much like a good SET amp. No wonder people all over the world collect it. Talk to McIntosh owners and they speak of their LOVE for the equipment they own. The 275 has a way of making you fall for it even with its shortcomings in the very high and very low regions. Perhaps you will find, like me, that you do not need to hear it all but rather that you must ENJOY what you hear.

Just because audio equipment is old does not make it worth collecting. To be collectible it must withstand the test of time and still be functional in today's home environment. The true test of a vintage piece is that over 40 years later it can still compare favorably with today's equipment. I find the McIntosh MC275 to be such an amplifier. Never did I feel that it would be embarrassed by modern day designs and it certainly was better than many. You know how you go back to your high school class reunion, seeing old friends and lovers, only to be disappointed at how the passage of time has treated them. Well I went back to my reunion with the McIntosh MC275 and found her still alive, vibrant and just as wonderful as I had left her. This is one first class Amplifier.

Equipment used in review:

Placette Passive Preamplifier, Sony DVP-S7700 CD player, Monarchy Audio DAC (modified by Monarchy Audio)
 Oracle Delphi MK1 turntable with Grace 707 tonearm and Denon 301 II MC cartridge with custom cord from turntable to Phono Stage, VPI 16.5 Record Clean Machine, Whest PhonoStage.20 + MsU.20 power supply, Legacy Focus 20/20 speakers
 Monarchy Audio AC-1 Power Cord, Blue Circle BC86 MKIII Power Line Pillows (2)
 Monster HTS-2000 Power Conditioner, PS Audio UPC-200 Power Center
 PS Audio Lab II Power Cable, Canare 4S11 Speaker Cables terminated with Monster spades on both ends (two 10' lengths)
 PS Audio Transcendent (solid silver series) from the xStream Audio Series
 Tek LineTL-500-S (silver) Interconnects
 Kimber Kable PBJ Interconnects, Mr_CABLE Musician Power Cord

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