

Review of the FELIKS AUDIO ENVY on Musicalhead

Here I am again. And today I'm reviewing the latest headphone amplifier from the tube manufacturer from Lubliniec - the brand new FELIKS AUDIO ENVY.

The single-ended Class-A Beau of the Polish manufacture is due to its now transformer-coupled output stages according to Feliks Audio not only able to drive any (ortho) dynamic headphones on this planet effortlessly, but should also have outstanding musical qualities. Which of course would still have to be proven.

Already more than 3 years ago I discussed with Lukasz Feliks on the High-End fair in Munich regarding the constructive design of a new SE tube amplifier with superior performance values and as a result I was looking forward to the moment when I could finally put Henryk Feliks' new potential masterpiece to the musical test.

Especially since in the new FELIKS ENVY for the first time the direct heated 300B power amplifier tubes are used, which have been an insider tip among tube fans for many years, whereby a specifically designed circuit layout necessarily separates the "tube heating" from the separate power supply of the audio path.

The previous headphone amplifiers from Feliks Audio, such as the FELIKS EUFORIA 20th Anniversary Edition, operating purely on the output transformer-less (OTL) principle, were in the past, due to their rather manageable power values, only suitable to a limited extent to play power-hungry ear speakers adequately in dynamic terms.

Highly musical tube upgrade

The proven OTL amplifiers from Lubliniec therefore generally require high-efficiency headphones in order to fully shine in terms of sound quality. The ENVY, on the other hand, relies on two pair-selected 300B power tubes for power amplification, which can provide up to 2 x 8 tube watts (THD >5%) at an impedance of 16 ohms at both headphone outputs.

Incidentally, for the applied anode voltages, the power supply is solid-state based with MosFet transistors and uses low-noise current sources for this purpose. In addition to a zero-feedback design circuit, the Polish headphone amplifier also features automatic bias biasing, which completely eliminates the need for tedious tube readjustment after a swap.

Furthermore, all tubes can be changed without any problems, especially since the sockets also meet the highest quality standards. The ENVY is thus open to a fundamental willingness to experiment on the part of the proud owner with regard to the often practiced "tube rolling".

However, it might not be easy to surpass the musical qualities of the original preamp tubes - because the gray matt PsVane CV181 MK2 driver tubes, even more so in the excellent gold version, are sonically a power and were already responsible for an outstanding acoustic performance in the EUFORIA 20th (AE).

And Lukasz Feliks, whom I would like to thank once again for the timely provision of the ENVY, has of course also left nothing to chance via the optional 300B tube upgrade of the brand FullMusic and presumably created the best possible conditions for the new TOTL tube amplifier of the Polish HiFi forge in the sound test perfectly in scene.

Processing & Equipment

All tube amplifiers from Feliks Audio are carefully handcrafted and the ENVY is of course no exception. In particular, the exquisite choice of materials used in the woods and their high quality workmanship impresses already at the first inspection, which makes my wife carelessly to the benevolent comment: „But THAT is beautiful.“

A serious tactical mistake. Because as a long-time experienced grail knight of the sound, I of course immediately know about the high probability of a potential release of our monetary budget reserves. The optical card thus remains silently in the back of my hand for the time being.

The new FELIKS ENVY is actually based on a solid metal chassis and is merely clad in oiled wood, optionally in oak or American maple, fitting and shapely and consequently visually extremely appealing. Just a real cream puff in the tube world.

But also first-class mechanical and electronic components such as an Alps RK27 rotary potentiometer, Jantzen Superior Z-Caps as well as custom-made power supply and output transformers by Edis Ogonowski testify to much attention to detail. The ENVY is also fully wired using "point-to-point" technology - all signal connections are UPOCC single crystal copper with Teflon insulations in the performance version for this purpose.

In addition to the central volume control, the front of the ENVY houses two selector switches for impedance and for 3 different audio sources, as well as the two previously mentioned headphone outputs - the obligatory 6.3 mm jack connector and a balanced 4-pin XLR output.

Furthermore, a touch-sensitive standby button on the top of the tube amplifier indicates general operational readiness via a white LED diode. The toggle switch for the actual start-up of the device, on the other hand, is located on the back of the ENVY in the immediate vicinity of the mains connection.

Up to 16 volts output voltage

The audio source selector switch allows the use of two pairs of gold-plated RCA jacks as well as a balanced XLR connection, using selected Lundahl transformers. The audio sources are selected via high-end relays, which are placed directly behind the connectors to effectively eliminate interference and noise.

The previously described impedance selector switch can be adjusted in three stages for the playing partner used. While in the "Low" position mainly headphones should be operated in a range of 16-60 ohms, the Polish tube manufacturer recommends the "Mid" and "High" settings for ear speakers in the range of 60-300 ohms and 300-600 ohms, respectively.

However, according to Feliks Audio, these basic setting recommendations only apply to dynamic headphones, which generally rely on a lower voltage. This is because the selector switch primarily regulates the output voltage of the ENVY, which is limited to 2 volts in the "Low" position, 9 volts in the "Mid" position, and 16 volts in the "High" position to protect the connected transducer.

For operation with power-hungry orthodynamic headphones, the Polish manufacturer primarily favors the "High" position, even if the respective subject has a lower impedance. This is because the impedance selector switch primarily functions as a voltage limiter when a corresponding ear speaker is connected.

However, with a footprint of 350 mm x 330 mm and a height of 245 mm (including tubes), the ENVY requires sufficient space for acoustic development, especially since its own weight of 15 kg should not be underestimated when placing it within the four walls at home. And the not insignificant heat development of the tubes should also be taken into account.

Feliks Audio grants a warranty of 3 years on the ENVY, which is finalized via the enclosed warranty card from the date of purchase. The obligatory power cord and a detailed user manual complete the manageable equipment list.

Preparation

While the previous headphone amplifiers of the Polish manufacturer found their primary musical purpose mainly in high-impedance or also high-efficiency ear speakers, the new FELIKS ENVY is now quite unabashedly to offer the assembled world elite sonically the forehead. Or even to surpass them.

For this reason, not only the new MEZE ELITE and the FINAL D8000 Pro Edition get extensive playing time on the Polish Beau - the HIFIMAN SUSVARA also puts the ENVY's coarse dynamic qualities in particular to a serious test. Of course, the question is whether the performance values offered by Feliks Audio are actually sufficient to fully cover the dynamic requirements of the HIFIMAN.

While the first two find a jack connection to the Polish tube amplifier, the HIFIMAN is wired via the XLR socket of the ENVY. The ELITE and D8000 Pro Edition also use the optional and silver-coated copper cables of their respective manufacturers, while the HIFIMAN, meanwhile, relies on high-quality CLEAR copper stripping from the American noble manufacturer CARDAS AUDIO.

As a source for my review of the FELIKS ENVY serves me my proven APPLE iMAC, which was sonically optimized by means of Audirvana+ software. The same then forwards the digital food to the CHORD DAVE, a SIGNATURE USB cable from CHORD CABLE provides a coherent connection. SIGNATURE XLR-strips of the same brand finally forward the accordingly processed - and now analog - signals to my today's test subject.

Once again, the usual suspects from classical, jazz, blues, pop and rock serve as musical material. The digital data in High-Res resolution are either streamed directly via QOBUZ or retrieved directly from the internal/external hard disks of the iMAC. For more information and technical data on the new FELIKS ENVY, please visit the Polish manufacturer's website at: feliksaudio.pl

Sound test

Experience shows that the eye always eats with the body. And the FELIKS ENVY is without a doubt one of the most beautiful tube amplifiers I have reviewed on Musicalhead so far. For this reason, in my opinion, it is advisable to always allow a certain amount of time for visual acclimation to pass with such equipment, in order to minimize any unwanted influence on the assessment of the acoustic performance.

Furthermore, the tubes need a burn-in period of an estimated 150 hours to unfold their full sonic potential, so the Polish headphone amplifier will initially linger in our conservatory for a few days (power-hungry) and thus successively transmute into an integral part of our domestic living ambience. That's the plan, anyway. What with the hindquarters and all.

And what the new wonder from Lubliniec finally reveals in the sound test in terms of musical qualities is in no way inferior to the visual impression - quite the opposite. To be frank, the FELIKS ENVY is one of the best tube amplifiers for headphone playback that money can buy at the moment, even when our eyes are closed. And this is completely independent of the respective selected ear speaker - the mouse does not bite off a thread.

However, the ENVY is priced at a rather ambitious price, especially in direct comparison to the other offerings of the Polish manufacturer. Due to

the implemented tube upgrade along with noble cabling, the purchase price of my test specimen adds up to a whole 6.999 Euros - and this could of course provide a weighty counter-argument in the upcoming discussion with my wife. Damn.

On the other hand it should not be concealed at this point that the FELIKS ENVY acts sonically effortlessly on eye level with a TRAFOMATIC PRIMAVERA. And the Serbian top model is traded at present for 11.999 Euros. And admittedly the Polish tube amplifier moves even my RIVIERA AIC10 already dangerously close on the acoustic fur.

The ENVY convinces with a high degree of authenticity in the reproduction of musical works of all kinds due to the extremely natural sound colors. And although the legendary 300B power tubes from FullMusic provide more than enough power at the two headphone outputs at any time, the FELIKS amplifier always maintains the light-footedness typical of the Polish valuables with regard to a nuanced and at the same time airy sound image.

As a result, the FELIKS ENVY in the 300B setup plays much more neutral than expected, although it always gives the sound events enough fundamental warmth and plasticity. The new TOTL amplifier from the Polish manufacturer presents itself as a musical counterpart to the FELIKS EUFORIA 20th AE, with which it shares the same tube configuration in the preamp section.

Hifiman Susvara

With the significant difference that the ENVY itself does not shy away from a longer-term liaison with the HIFIMAN SUSVARA. And it virtually celebrates its acoustic qualities - in the "High" position prioritized by Feliks Audio - in congenial interaction with the orthodynamic masterpiece by Dr. Fang Bian.

The bass reproduction through the FELIKS tube amplifier is by no means too dominant, but rather of a slim nature, without ever missing the necessary pressure in the frequency basement. The bass is excellently structured and convinces with excellent contour and exemplary impulse fidelity.

The midrange of this great connection is a veritable dream for every grail knight of the fine tones. In particular, voices and instruments are reproduced via the ENVY at world-class level and not only provided with a credible body at all times, but as it were razor-sharp modified and placed in the spatial context highly transparent in the right proportion.

The FELIKS ENVY simply combines plasticity and airiness in a perfect manner and thus creates a spatial three-dimensional representation of the absolute top class. The SUSVARA benefits in particular in the form of a surprisingly generous stage imaging, as well as an impressively precise and at the same time locally sharp depth gradation.

The detail work of this dynamic duo in the high frequencies is also striking and quite blatantly scratches the resolution of the best electrostatic ear loudspeakers. Even the smallest sonic ramifications are reproduced without sharpness and provided with delicate tube melting - finely detailed reverberation tails also precisely define the respective room size.

The ENVY is thus undoubtedly capable of fully exploiting the superior sonic capabilities of the HIFIMAN. So, only light and no shadow in combination with the proven diva of headphone construction?

Well, this probably depends significantly on the personal demands of each Knight of the Grail. The power reserves of the ENVY were more than generously measured by Feliks Audio from my point of view and are completely sufficient even for the interaction with the SUSVARA up to absurd level settings in my opinion.

But as we all know, there is no substitute for performance. And so it is conceivable that one or the other lover of excessive dynamics prefers the connection via the loudspeaker outputs of a suitable integrated amplifier in order to feed the HIFIMAN surface radiator with double-digit wattages. This is not detrimental to the coarse dynamics of the headphones (up to a certain point).

However, the ambitious knight should pay attention to the fact that the amplifier of choice has at least equivalent sonic qualities as the FELIKS ENVY - which in my view may require a not inconsiderable monetary investment in the five-digit range.

Or the performance fanatic who likes to experiment may reach for a RIVIERA AIC10, which undoubtedly surpasses the Polish high-flyer in terms of dynamic attack. At a special offer of 14.990 euros, mind you.

Final D8000 Pro Edition & Meze Elite

Cardinal question - can the FELIKS ENVY easily repeat the musical feat on the other two candidates?

It can. Especially in combination with the FINAL D8000 Pro Edition, the headphone amplifier from Lubliniec puts on a dynamic fireworks display right from the start that is unparalleled in the tube segment. Because of the considerably better efficiency of the Japanese ear speaker, any performance discussions are of course unnecessary.

Especially the "highly explosive" bass range is an acoustic experience in itself - the bone-dry attack in connection with a lightning-fast impulse reproduction conjure a satisfied smile in my face not only once. However, the new team also proves to have a sense for rhythm and timing and consequently inspires with an exemplary transient reproduction.

However, the sound reproduction is free of a flowery play of colors. Instead of painting with a thick brush stroke, the ENVY draws with a fine pencil, even in combination with the D8000 Pro Edition. The Japanese ear speaker also acts more analytically than the SUSVARA, although it maintains musical integrity at all times and coherently brings together all sonic events.

Only in terms of spatial imaging, the FINAL headphones have to make minimal concessions compared to the SUSVARA in terms of the maximum stage base width that can be achieved. And also in the high frequency range, the Japanese does not quite reach the sensational resolving power of the HIFIMAN, but this can certainly be forgiven in view of a significantly lower purchase price.

The last pairing in my today's listening test proves to be a stroke of luck - because especially the MEZE ELITE seems to be almost made for the FELIKS ENVY. The slightly warm tonal orientation of the Romanian headphones correlates almost ideally with the slightly bright tonality of the

Polish tube amplifier, which culminates in a magnificent synergy of the two playing partners.

The tight yet finely differentiated bass range with a convincing low end goes hand in hand with the slightly earthy fundamental tone, a wonderful richness of tone color in the midrange as well as the absolutely long-lasting, because silky high-frequency reproduction with nevertheless first-class detail resolution.

The FELIKS ENVY also understands like no other how to impressively stage the musical qualities of the ELITE with regard to the highly emotional reproduction of voices and instruments. And to expand the often slightly compressed, spatial reproduction of the MEZE masterfully by separating the sound events in an exemplary manner with extraordinarily high edge sharpness. Really great class.

My conclusion

Lukasz Feliks did not promise too much. The new FELIKS AUDIO ENVY is without a doubt one of the best headphone amplifiers in the world. The Polish high-end manufacturer has also perfectly understood how to preserve the brand-typical sound signature of its OTL tube devices and to transfer it to its current top model in a dynamically profitable way. An audiophile masterpiece.

In addition to its outstanding acoustic qualities, the FELIKS ENVY also impresses visually. Which should create perfect conditions for future negotiations with my wife. Henryk Feliks' latest coup is not only a feast for the eyes of every grail knight of fine tones, but also acts as a musical wonder weapon in its price segment and far beyond.

With the FELIKS ENVY, the self-confessed sound gourmet acquires a tube device of the very highest quality in an exquisite dress, which sometimes puts the fear of God into even considerably more expensive amplifier bolides. Like an exquisite wine, the new FELIKS ENVY is a high-fidelity pearl with tonal colour, silky sheen, musical density and analytical clarity - matured over many years. Please be sure to taste it.

My rating

Sound quality (60%) : 5 out of 5 ears

Equipment (20%) : 3 out of 5 ears

Workmanship (20%) : 5 out of 5 ears



Yours Fidelio

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