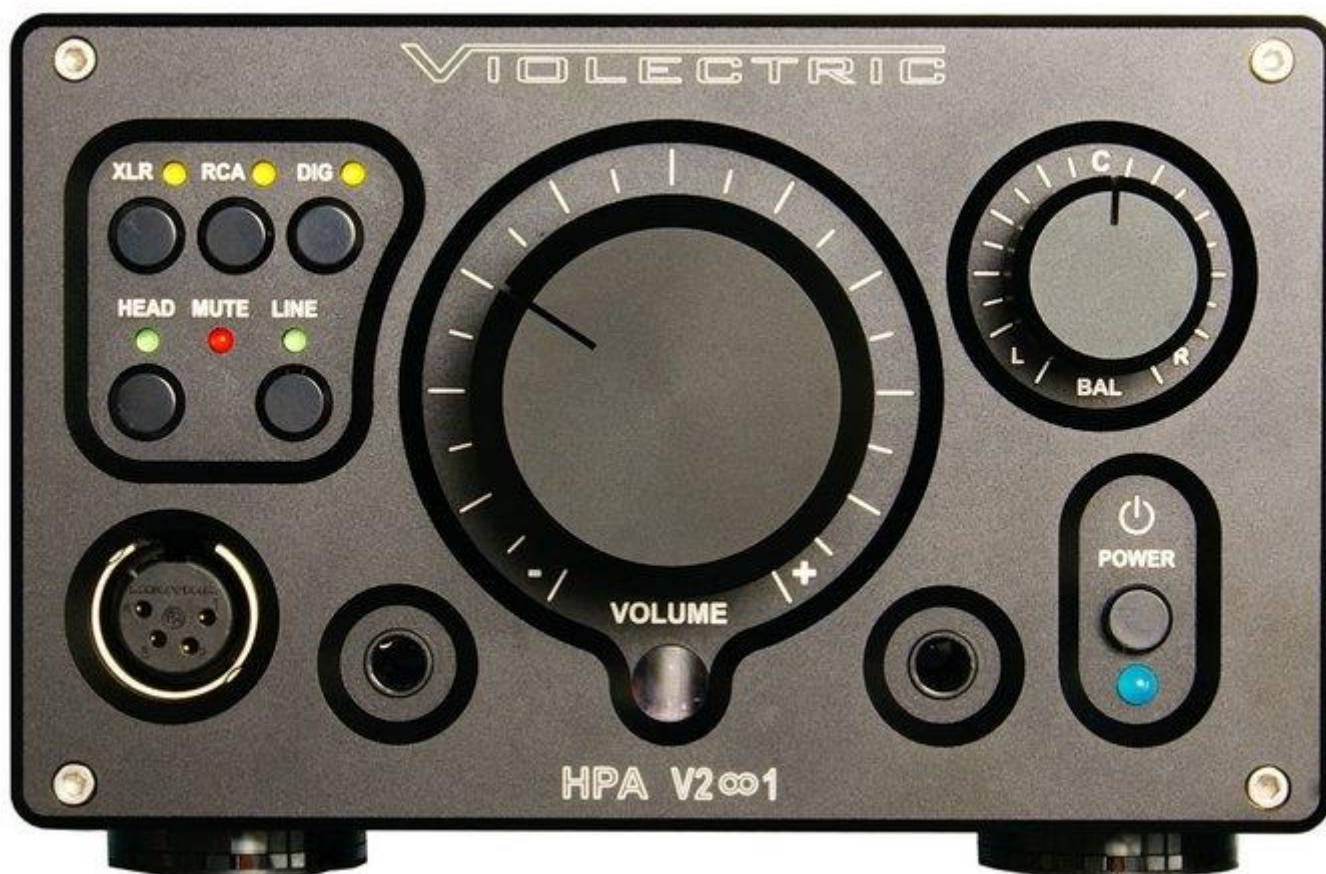


Taken from: <http://www.headfonia.com/vioelectric-v281-masterpiece>

VIOLECTRIC V281: A Masterpiece



Disclaimer: Fried sent us the Vioelectric V281 for the purpose of this review. I was supposed to send it backō I would advise reading our earlier Vioelectric reviews first as some of the basics, like the gain settings, have been skipped.



Lieven is living in Europe and is a full time Headfonia writer and the leader of the gang. Coming from a musical family he's always been interested in good sound. Unlike his family members the only musical instruments he plays are amps and DACs. He loves playing with old tubes and discovering new products while staying faithful to the good old Sennheiser HD650. Taking pictures is a real challenge but seeing happy readers in the end is what it's all about for him.

Vioelectric. Again?

Long time Headfonia readers know we're a bit of Vioelectric/LakePeople fans here. I myself have reviewed the [V100](#), [V200](#) and [V800](#). Mike compared them against the [Burson Conductor](#) and Dave checked out the [G109S](#). We loved them all. Vioelectric's popularity has only increased in the last few years and it showed at their boot at Canjam Europe as their demo units were always hard solicited.

I first reviewed a Vioelectric unit back in November 2011, the V100 was so good I immediately bought it from Fried, Vioelectric CEO. One and a half year later I reviewed its bigger brother the V200 and surely enough, I bought the unit. I can't remember who I sold the V100 to but I'm convinced someone is still enjoying the hell out of it. We are now January 2015, 4 months after Canjam and the V281 hasn't left me yet. I really should apologize to Fried for this way overdue review but what I really want to say is that I, again, have bought the review sample. Sorry for spoiling it to you already but it simply performs so well with my favorite headphones, I just couldn't send it back to Germany. After this review I will be putting up my beloved V200 for sale so that someone else can give it the love it deserves.

The Mighty V281

The V281 with the infinity sign in the logo, is available in a [couple of versions](#). The version I have here is the black one with silver feet and a motor Remote Control. Like with all Vioelectric amps you could integrate a DAC inside the amp but my version does not have that. The V281 is also available in silver and you can also choose black or gold feet. I have to admit I haven't even unpacked the remote control as the amp is always sitting right behind or next to me when listening. I however can see where this would come in handy, especially because the V281 can also be used as a pre amp in a speaker system in example. Build quality, as usual, is superb. These things are tanks!

Going over Vioelectric's new website we can read this: "The HPA V281 was developed with the target to enable ultimate transmission quality for low-, medium- and high-impedance headphones. Due to its specific, variable, low-noise and low-distortion circuit design especially optimized for dynamic headphones, the HPA V281 fulfills even most sophisticated demands. HPA V281 is one of the few headphones amps made in Germany offering a balanced headphone output!! Furthermore HPA V281 offers selectable inputs and an output management."

The funny thing is that a lot of people, like me, buy Vioelectric amps for their excellent synergy with orthodynamic headphones. The dynamic HD650 does sound pretty good on it though, and you all know I always insist to use an OTL tube amp with those. A friend of mine really doesn't like the HD650 and Vioelectric combo, but I think his issue is with the HD650 more. I told Fried, and promised myself, I wouldn't make this review too technical but if you go over the [list of specs](#) on the site, you will understand this is not just another amplifier. (Like the large 36.000 uF filtering capacitors in the power supply)

Features Anyone?

The V281 features balanced (XLR) and unbalanced inputs (RCA) but also balanced (XLR) and unbalanced outputs. Like with the V100 and V200 the gain switches are on the back but I haven't felt the need to add or decrease gain just yet. I've always found the V281 to deliver more than enough power and the ALPS RK27 volume dial has more than enough margin to play with.

On the front you will find the input selectors, balance control (never used), volume dial, two silver plated SE headphone outs and one balanced gold plated 4-pin XLR output. The V281 actually uses four amplifiers to get the true balanced headphone output. So basically the V281 incorporates four times the famous 8-transistor (per channel) amps of the V200 to get that smooth and relaxed sound

stage and true balanced headphone out. I'd be telling all about the sound part in a bit but I have to say it's especially this balanced output that makes this V281 so special.

The Mighty V281 looks like a beast. Is it beautiful? To me, not really. With its 170 x 112 x 320 mm (B x H x D) you can't really call the V281 elegantly designed. On the other hand it has been sitting in my living room for quite a while now and neither my uninterested cat or my lovely girlfriend (or is it the other way round?) have complained about it sitting there where everyone can see it. And see it you can, it doesn't hide as well as the V100 and V200 did. But sound before looks, right?

The Important Part

The V281 is quite powerful and in balanced mode delivers 2.8w/channel @32Ohm and even 5.6w/channel at 100Ohm. I have especially used the V281 as a dedicated headphone amp for this review (with all kind of DACs). I do plan on using it as a pre-amp for some of my tube amps once I move it up to my office and start on the Beyerdynamic A2 review (also a preamp).

The big distinction to make while talking about the V281's sound is which output was used. Yes there is quite a difference between the balanced and the single ended output and for almost all my headphones I prefer the balanced output. Both have their advantages however. Headphones used for testing were the Audeze LCD-2, Audeze LCD-XC, Hifiman HE-400i, Hifiman HE-560, Hifiman HE-500, Sennheiser HD650, Beyerdynamic T90 and my whole collection of custom IEMs. Cables used were the stock Audeze balanced and SE cable together with Forza Audio and Charleston balanced and SE cables for the Hifiman and Audeze units. All the other used either the original cables, Effect Audio cables or Linum cables.

Single Ended Out

When I upgraded from the V100 to the V200 there was a significant change in sound. With the upgrade to the V281 there was and there wasn't. What I mean is that if you only need a headphone amp, you already own a V200 and you won't be using the Balanced Out: you might just be as happy with the V200. On the other hand, the V281 does have its advantages over the V200: Remote Control, switchable inputs and separately to active line and headphone outputs. Especially these features make the amp attractive for users who want to have an amp with a sophisticated input-output architecture for line signals. It's a very compact solution for those who want to listen to premium unbalanced headphones (AKG K812) and control their set of amp ->speakers or active speakers.

When I asked Fried which unit he wanted me to review he said: "the V281 of course, the balanced one is the one to hear". After having listened to it for a couple of months I can only say he was right, the balanced output is sublime.

Sound

The Vioelectric house sound is still here and the new V281 has more power than ever before. It delivers your music without any effort no matter what pair of cans you're using. With the V200 I regularly switched the gain settings on the back but with the V281 they have been left untouched.

Back in 2012 I described the V200 ([read this first](#)) to be precise and very dynamic, powerful sounding with good body, with great tonal balance and a black background. On top of that the sound is never harsh and is always smooth and musical. The V200 has deep bass extension and the bass overall is tight and punchy. The mid section is smooth, warm and laid back but not overly warm, it's a very balanced amp but it isn't as neutral sounding as the V100 and does make you think of the tube sound even more, of course that depends on your definition of neutral. The treble on the V200 like everything

else is smooth too, it's never harsh and at the same time it is slightly rolled off. Its bass is further extended as the treble, something I can appreciate.

I can pretty much say the same things for the Single Ended output of the V281 right now. It's darn good but the thing with the V281 is that the balanced out is so much better. Sound stage is quite a bit wider and has more air. Detail and timbre have been added to the mids section and while pure bass body might be a bit less it makes more than up for it with extra detail and timbre. The bass on the balanced out is superb: Layering, depth, timbre, body and punch. It's all there, yet not as bodied as on the SE out. You still get that pitch black back ground and these amps are dead silent. Lovely!

Overall the amp, when used in balanced mode, has improved and I absolutely love it with all my head and earphones. I do think the new V281 is more neutrally tuned than the warmer and maybe more aggressive sounding V200 was. Yet Fried has managed to keep the musicality, transparency and smooth flow in there. That, added up with the extra detail, sound stage, air and timbre, makes this balanced V281 an incredible headphone amplifier that you can keep listening to for hours and hours. Listening fatigue? Never heard of it.

Headphones

We all know by now that the Orthodynamic headphones from Audeze and Hifiman sound awesome with the Vioelectric brand and it is no different this time. Some might remember Mike saying the HE-500 and V200 combo was one of the best he had heard; well I can tell you now the V281 makes it sound even better. So good in fact that I spent several hours with it while I should have been testing other headphones. My good old HE-500 had been getting very little head time since the HE-560 arrived but now it's back, and it's here to stay.

The Hifiman HE-400i and HE-560 both sound great on the balanced and single ended out (depending on what you prefer) but I did find myself switching them to the SE mode regularly just to get that extra bit of bass in them (more so on the 560). The Vioelectric and Audeze combo just creates this magic synergy when combined but with the Hifiman's, although they sound very good, that magic just isn't there as much. Except for the HE-500, as I just mentioned. Ever since the V281 arrived I haven't listened to many other amps I have to admit. Well, that was until the brand new Bakoon International HPA-01M arrived, but that's a whole other story for a next review.

Not only the planars work well with the Vioelectric amps. 300Ohm Sennheiser? Super. 250Ohm Beyerdynamic T90? Even better! Sensitive CIEMs like my CustomArt Harmony Pro 8 and the Cosmic Ears CE6E? Dead silent, incredible sound. I even used my Koss PortaPro with it, and yes, it rocked.

Amplifiers

The four main solid state amplifiers I have been using the last year are the Beyerdynamic A20 (Office), the V281 (Living room), the Beyerdynamic A2 and Vioelectric V200 (Listening room).

Like I said the V200 and V281 in single ended out mode are comparable sound wise. The A20 amp is playing a few levels lower and has a much darker and warmer sound signature with added bass and very smooth treble. It's also not recommended for orthodynamic headphones. The Beyerdynamic A2 on the other hand is an amp that has stayed under the radar so far and that's quite a shame. Its clarity and sound stage is huge and there is heaps of detail as well. The main difference with the V281 is that the A2's mids don't have the same amount of body, that treble is further extended on the Beyerdynamic and that the A2's bass doesn't have the same impact. The A2 like the V281 can be used as a pre-amp but it ~~only~~ has two single ended headphone out. The orthodynamic headphones, even while the amp wasn't made for them, also sound great on the A2.

Conclusion

If you're looking for a top class solid state amplifier that offers dual Single Ended headphone outs and one 4 pin XLR Balanced out, this could be just the amp for you. But there's more: there's an optional remote control and the V281 can serve as a pre-amp too. It maybe isn't the most elegant looking piece of hardware like the V200 was, but once you've listened to the superb balanced out, you'll be hooked. I'm even changing my non balanced headphones to balanced ones. Do I need to say more?

Another advantage, besides excellent sound, is that the V281 can drive most of the headphones on the market and that Violectric offers 5 years of warranty on all their devices. That means they stand behind their products and to me that is worth a lot.

I don't often buy reviewed gear I like, I'd be bankrupt if I did, but as said in the beginning: the V281 is not leaving my house again. The V281 can be gotten directly from [Violectric](#) in Germany and prices start at 1900" inside Europe and just under 1600" for the rest of the world. It's not cheap, I agree, but quality comes at a price. I for one am willing to pay this price for the superb build and sound quality I'm getting in return from the balanced out. This amp surely gets my recommendation and if I had a wall of fame, I'd put it on there immediately.