

Home Audio Equipment Review



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Audion Sterling ETSE EL34 Integrated Amplifier

by John Potis

If the Audion name is new to you, you are probably not alone. Were it not for *SoundStage!* show coverage, I wouldn't have any familiarity with this French manufacturer's products. But Audion is not a new company; they've been around since 1987. Originally a British concern, Audion moved to France in 2001 when it was taken over by new (still British) ownership. Erik Andersson, one of the company founders as well as the company manager and chief designer, has been retained in the capacity of chief designer. Co-proprietor Dave Gough, who has been with Audion since 1993, tells me that he and Andersson have big plans for Audion, which now makes its manufacturing home in a 250-year-old French farmhouse about half an hour northeast of Bordeaux. With such headquarters, you just *know* that Audion produces tube gear.

The \$2125-USD Audion Sterling ETSE EL34 is a remote-controlled tube integrated amplifier (a non-remote version is available for \$400 less). Specifically, it is a valve power amplifier

preceded by a passive line stage

utilizing a quality Alps Blue Velvet potentiometer. It utilizes dual EL34 or KT90 output tubes, a single E88CC/6922, and a single 5687 to produce 12Wpc. Audion calls the Sterling ETSE EL34 "an extended triode single-ended amplifier with class-A circuitry from input to output." Also specified are the two voltage-gain stages culminating in a pentode in an "extended triode mode" output stage, which denotes a pentode (the EL34 or KT90) operating with triode-like characteristics and with extended output due to a distributed load on the output primary. What this means, according to Audion, is that the Sterling ETSE EL34 will switch into ultralinear mode for peaks but is otherwise purely single ended.



Review Summary

Sound "Very round, smooth and toasty," but "well capable of enough resolution to easily distinguish Red Book CDs from their SACD cousins"; the midrange is "smooth and luxurious," but the bass has "neither the detailed control nor the slam of any solid-state integrated in [the Sterling ETSE EL34's] price range" -- no surprise.

Features "Utilizes dual EL34 or KT90 output tubes, a single ECC88/6922, and a single 5687 to produce 12Wpc"; reportedly "switches into ultralinear mode for peaks but is otherwise purely single ended"; remote controlled, but non-remote version is available for \$400 less.

Use Needs a speaker 90dB sensitive or greater and preferably one that's more neutral or incisive than laid-back.

Value "Fully capable of refined tube splendor that's unanticipated at its price level."

Audion suggests that the output tubes should provide a minimum of 2000 hours of life or approximately two years in general use. They also suggest an initial burn-in period of two to three days and a warm-up period of 15 minutes -- both of which I was able to verify. Conveniently unimposing in stature, the Sterling ETSE EL34 stands 7"H x by 9 1/4"W x 15 1/2"D and tips the scales at slightly less than 20 pounds.

With a polished chrome faceplate and enclosed transformers, the Sterling ETSE EL34 has a finished look that will never be accused of being overly flashy. A relatively large motorized volume control to the left, five red LEDs indicating input selection, three flush push buttons (two that select source, one to activate the record output), another red LED indicating that the unit is powered, and a remote sensor complete the front-panel adornment. Presumably in order to maintain as short a signal path as possible, the five pairs of RCA inputs and single pair of RCA tape outputs are located on the side of the amplifier and to the left front. At the rear is the IEC power input, a large rocker power switch, and two pairs of binding posts, which will accept spades, wires, pins and bananas. Supporting the amp were four large and compliant sorbothane-like feet -- a nice touch.

At the Sterling ETSE EL34's asking price, you can't reasonably expect tank-like build quality, but two things about the unit's construction gave me pause. First, the binding posts twist and flex when I bore down on them even with my bare hands. Second, the RCA jacks are of the cheaper PCB-board-mounted type that you encounter on mass-market receivers. If you have interconnects with a tight grip, both inserting and removing will cause the RCA input to bend and flex. I fear that after repeated plugging/unplugging that the RCA shell may separate from the board altogether, as has happened to me in the past. Users will want to connect their most often used source to input 3 as upon power up the Sterling ETSE EL34 defaults to that input *every* time.

I do want to keep my structural caveats in perspective, however. Many of today's receivers that use the same input hardware cost well in excess of the Audion's asking price. The speaker binding posts on those receivers are usually a complete joke too. The average audiophile does nowhere near the amount of connecting and disconnecting that we reviewers do, and I expect that few of them will ever encounter a problem with the Sterling ETSE EL34.

Use

The Sterling ETSE EL34 came with something that I haven't seen in quite some time -- a remote control. Hot diggedy! I gather that this remote also serves other products in the Audio line as I found several buttons that served no use with the Sterling ETSE EL34. But from my seat I was able to adjust volume (the balance controls were inoperative), mute, source selection (though the buttons were unmarked) and the record output. All in all, I had as much control over my system as I would likely need.

Although the Sterling ETSE EL34 uses only two output tubes, it develops a surprising amount of heat and raised the temperature of my small listening room noticeably. The chassis is prone to getting pretty warm, and even the volume control was warm to the touch. Audion warns that the heat produced is equivalent to that of a 25W-50W light bulb and prescribes against the tubes being touched -- good advice with any tube amp.

The Sterling ETSE EL34 was used primarily with three sets of speakers: Zu Cable Druid, Silverline Sonata Mk II, and JMLab Mini Utopia -- with 101dB, 95dB and 90.5dB claimed respective sensitivities. Sources were a Pioneer DV-535 DVD player as transport to feed the Bel Canto

DAC1.1, and a Sony SCD-CE775 for SACD playback. Interconnects and speaker cables were JPS Labs Ultra Conductor, and the Sterling ETSE EL34 was plugged into an Audio Magic Stealth power purifier.

Sound

The Sterling ETSE EL34 was an easy integrated amplifier to listen to, but it was somewhat difficult to write about. That's not to say that the Sterling ETSE EL34 doesn't have a readily recognizable character -- it most certainly does. First and foremost, the Sterling ETSE EL34 is *warm*. The Sterling ETSE EL34 has a very round, smooth and toasty demeanor that at first listen sounds more musical and less ultimately detailed than that of other amps -- although I eventually found that this wasn't so, which was the difficult part. More on this in a bit.

I did a lot of listening with the Zu Cable Druid loudspeaker. The Druid has a very exciting and up-front presentation that I thought complemented the Sterling ETSE EL34, which in turn didn't sweeten the Druids too much. I found that the Druids responded well to the slight relaxation prescribed by the Sterling ETSE EL34. On the other hand, I also did some listening to the Sterling ETSE EL34 on the Silverline Sonata Mk II, and while the combo didn't sound bad -- they made a lot of music together, believe me -- the mostly neutral Silverlines and the Sterling ETSE EL34 were almost too much of a good thing. Smooth and sweet, the combo pushed the envelope almost too far, just missing dark and syrupy territory. The JMLab Mini Utopia was *just right*. To a degree that surprised even me, in my listening room the JMLab speakers made the very most of the Sterling ETSE EL34's 12 watts. The combo played as loudly as I desired.

But what really came as a surprise to me was that the ultra-revealing Mini Utopia monitors suffered no significant loss of musical insight at the hands of the far less expensive Sterling ETSE EL34. I listened for days and days to this combo without ever picking up a pencil to jot down notes. I've been listening a lot to Harry Belafonte's *Belafonte At Carnegie Hall* [RCA LSOCD 6006], and I could plainly hear the effect of the noise reduction used on the CD mastering. During speaking parts (fortunately, it didn't have the same effect while the music was playing), I heard the soundstage expanding and contracting around Belafonte's every word as the noise-reduction circuitry filtered out the original tape hiss between syllables. Musically significant? Of course not, but just an example of how the combo brought to light details that I've never heard before and evidence that nothing was being stripped from the music.

The Audion integrated was also well capable of enough resolution to easily distinguish Red Book CDs from their SACD cousins. For instance, comparing James Taylor's *Hourglass* CD [Columbia CK67912] to the SACD version [Columbia ACS 67192] showed the SACD to have better bass *growl* for starters. It also exhibited a more transparent and open midrange, which revealed better delineated images emerging from a blacker and quieter backdrop. Soundstaging and dimensionality, in particular, were also bettered by the SACD, and it all came shining through with the Sterling ETSE EL34.

When dissecting the Sterling ETSE EL34's performance into different parts of the musical spectrum, I suppose the place to start the discussion is with regard to the bass. I don't suppose I'll shock too many people when I say that the lowest octave is the Sterling ETSE EL34's weakest link. While reasonably extended, the Audion integrated had neither the detailed control nor the slam of any solid-state integrated in its price range. It couldn't compare to the same octave as produced by the recently reviewed Audio Research VS55 either. But the bass wasn't bad either. Over the Druids

and the Mini Utopias (with claimed bass extension of about 45Hz and 50Hz respectively) the Sterling ETSE EL34 sounded *remarkably* good. In fact, with the Mini Utopias, which are still *very* strong down to their -3dB point, the Audion integrated amp sounded first-rate. Bass drums sounded powerful while basses and violas sounded splendid, with marvelous warmth, body and purity.

On the Silverline Sonata Mk IIs, with their greater bass extension, I was aware of a slight loosening of Sterling's bass region. It actually gripes me a bit to have to report this on an integrated amplifier in the Sterling ETSE EL34's price class because it didn't fall much behind some other seriously good amplifiers I've had through here -- most of which sell for much more than the Audion integrated. I guess it's true -- there's no such thing as a free lunch.

Ah, but then there's the inspired midrange, that smooth and luxurious midrange. Once again I'm not really surprised -- I've yet to hear an EL34 tube amp that didn't find the near-perfect balance between detail and musicality. The EL34 is a great tube, and the Audion integrated makes great use of it. While I have heard greater transparency, the Sterling ETSE EL34 has a remarkable *not-there* quality to its midrange. Only in direct comparison to pricier SETs does the Sterling ETSE EL34 not sound quite as open and unfettered, but neither are there any obvious veils obscuring the music.

The treble is very sweet and just a touch soft to my ears. I wonder if the midrange transparency wouldn't open up even a bit more if the treble were just a touch more decisive. Or maybe the slight sweetening of the treble is partly responsible for the subjectively extremely well-mannered midrange. I can't say for sure. What is for sure is that the treble sweetening is responsible for a presentation that is generally forgiving and always listenable.

Well, almost always. Late in the review period I teamed the Sterling ETSE EL34 with the JMLab speakers and pitted them against Sugar Ray's *14:59* [Lava/Atlantic 83151-2] and realized, for better or worse, just exactly how far into the recording the combo allowed me. It was an informative experience, but not a musically involving one. It didn't matter the cut -- it was all the same. Easily perceptible was the multi-tracking/layering as well as the direct-feed instruments. Nothing from live music sounds like *this*. Too incisive, too clean, too distinct, too sterile and too exaggerated was what I heard, but it all served to highlight how honest the Audion Sterling ETSE EL34 could be when asked, and I certainly couldn't lay blame at its feet.

No matter the speakers, nothing showed off the strengths of the Sterling ETSE EL34 better than *The Complete Louis Armstrong & Duke Ellington Sessions* [Roulette/Capitol CDP 593844], so much so that I referenced this disc in the review of the Zu Cable Druids too. The Audion integrated had no problem reproducing the acoustic bass on "Don't Mean A Thing" with lots of woody tonality as well as power. Bass was clean and pronounced. Emanating from the rear of the stage were those cymbals, and Armstrong's voice was clearly and sharply located at center stage. The Sterling ETSE EL34 did nothing to curtail or artificially expand on the soundstaging of this dated and somewhat constricted recording. It was as bunched up in the center as I've heard it, but still the instruments managed to maintain excellent delineation and clarity.

Comparison

Finding something with which to compare the Audion Sterling ETSE EL34 was a problem. I haven't had in my possession a preamplifier/amplifier combination in a similar price range for quite some time. Even my October 2000 review of the 60-watt (also EL34 based) JoLida JD-302, which

retailed for less than \$1000, is a fairly distant memory. The only JoLida/Audion comparison I can make would be with respect to overall character. The JoLida was perhaps the more linear integrated amplifier, while the Audion has a more romantic persona. Those who find the JoLida a bit austere would want to consider the Audion.

The recently reviewed Conrad-Johnson MV60, though a power amp and still in excess of the Audion's price, begs for a comparison. The C-J costs more and gives you more in terms of neutrality (unless you are looking for some added sweetness) transparency and power. Both amps are sweet, forgiving and musical. The C-J trades extra power and an added measure of bass control for a remote-controlled preamp section -- not a bad thing for those on a budget looking for some audio refinement.

Conclusion

I find it very difficult to be critical of the Audion Sterling ETSE EL34 integrated amplifier as I had a lot of fun with it. Nobody will confuse its build quality for something from Krell, and its 12Wpc won't do justice to the vast majority of speakers out there -- though it may surprise you on ones with a relatively benign impedance and a sensitivity of at least 90dB. Its warmish tonal signature will mandate careful system matching; it worked splendidly with my (French) JMLab speakers. And I keep thinking about what a wonderful combination the Audion integrated would make with the inexpensive Triangle line of speakers (also French -- is there a trend here?).

What all this boils down to is that the Sterling ETSE EL34 is fully capable of refined tube splendor that's unanticipated at its price level.

...*John Potis*

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